

# Lessons on Food and Hunger

## Pedagogy of Empathy for Democracy

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This paper is based on critical policy analysis and reflection on curricular documents, including syllabi and textbooks, and also the Midday Meal programme. Using written and oral narratives, mostly from studies on hunger, the MDM programme and its implementation, it attempts to examine the lived experiences of children in and outside school. It explores the theme of food and hunger as it plays out in young children's lives, in the community and in the school. Using academic, activist and administrative perspectives, this article tries to provide inputs for a new pedagogy.

The experience of chronic hunger in distant villages of India, as much as on its city streets, is one of intense avoidable suffering: of self-denial; of learning to live with far less than the body needs; of minds and bodies stymied in their growth. It is one of agony of helplessly watching one's loved ones – most heartbreakingly, children – in hopeless torment; of unpaid, arduous devalued work; of shame, humiliation and bondage; of the defeat and also the triumph of the human spirit.

After several years of drafting and debating, a National Food Security Bill is finally being tabled in Parliament. There are still questions about the extent of coverage and entitlements, especially for children, yet this is the first law that will ensure the right to food as part of the right to life. Public policy – and even much of civic action and mainstream academia – has generally failed to address the unconscionable reality of the unrelentingly precarious, lonely, humiliating and uncertain existence of those who grapple with critical hunger, chronic food denials and starvation as a part of their lived everyday experience. With the unprecedented stocks of food-grains, the paradox of high levels of hunger and malnutrition in times of abundance (Jha and Acharya 2013) has raised serious concerns about policy discourse and public perceptions that shape it. This paper looks at attempts to engage with issues about food and hunger at the earliest stage, in the primary school curriculum, through the process of critical pedagogy, where children first learn to address difference (Giroux 1989) through empathy and shared knowledge of diverse cultural and social realities.

Gandhi had offered a talisman, to recall the face of the poorest, most defenceless person, and ask whether what we are attempting does help touch her life with dignity and worth. If it does, he suggested it must be the right thing to do – in policy and in practice. This talisman, for long inscribed on the first page of every National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) school textbook, must also inspire critical reflection on often contested issues that differentially affect our children – rural or urban, poor or privileged, boys or girls – while forging a democratic and just space in the classroom.

### Some Food for Thought

In April 2010, just as the historic Right to Education Act was implemented, several media reports had carried alarming visuals of children, titled “Not enough food, so children

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learn to eat mud laced with silica” or “Hot rod horror brands children in Jharkhand: A collapsing health system allows a deadly fix for protruding bellies”. The latter referred to the plunging of hot iron rods into distended bellies of malnourished children by poor indigenous tribes as a misguided cure. The report incidentally noted the complex relationship between food and social security in the state, saying that “17 out of 24 of its districts are simultaneously classified by its own government as ‘food insecure’ and ‘highly affected’ by the Maoist rebellion” (*Hindustan Times*, 20 April 2010, p 1).

India has been in the “alarming” category of the Global Hunger Index (IFPRI 2012), and is home to one-fourth of the world’s hungry. Hunger is related to impoverishment, while other factors such as access to education and health also have a significant impact on the status of nutrition. A major link in the cycle of impoverishment is the low status of women, as underscored by the National Family Health Survey 2009; half of women in the age group of 15-49 years suffer from a dual burden of malnutrition; low levels of nutrition and education among women lead to malnutrition among children. Undernourishment seriously affects school participation and is linked to lower cognitive growth and poor school performance, leading to school drop-outs. More significantly, while early undernutrition and cognitive-social impairment is preventable, it is irreversible after the age of two years. The National Family Health Survey (Arnold et al 2009) showed that young children in India suffer from the highest levels of stunting, underweight and wasting observed in any country of the world; while seven out of every 10 are anaemic, almost every second child under-five is malnourished and stunted, and a quarter suffer from extreme nutritional deprivation. Nutritional deficiencies are widespread even in households that are economically well off, while for the poorest, stunting rates are over 70%.

A child’s right to education is linked to several factors that affect her basic nutritional status and allow effective participation and performance in school. The issue of nutrition and hunger is indeed complex and deeply multilayered, with amorphous links to culture, patterns of consumption and production, to the social and political response to gender inequality, and also to the larger implications of land reforms and governance. In fact, recent studies suggest the need to examine the poor as an internally differentiated and large fluid collection of individuals moving in and out of poverty at the same point of time, and stress that policies that promote education, irrigation, job creation, etc, to help lift people out of it, must simultaneously have parallel components to prevent descents into poverty, through food and health security (Krishna 2009). However, experts often tend to focus on specific interventions that deal with deficiencies, using conceptual frameworks that equate nutrition with food security, sanitation or behaviour change, rather than highlighting the interaction of a complex set of sociopolitical causes. In order to build a sustained cross-disciplinary dialogue on partnerships for empowerment, the education community will need

to forge broader links with cross-cutting themes in policy-making, as well as to critically address these in the curriculum for schooling.

In this paper we look at the theme of food and hunger as it plays out in young children’s lives, in the community and in school, from what they encounter in their curriculum or through school feeding programmes, through interrelated perspectives spanning academic, administrative and activist arenas that constitute our own backgrounds. The paper is based on critical policy analyses and reflection on curricular documents, including syllabi and textbooks, and also the MDM programme. Using written and oral narratives, mostly from studies on hunger, the MDM programme and its implementation, it attempts to examine the lived experiences of children in and outside school. Some of these narratives are from a participatory study coordinated by one of us, and documented by community researchers who themselves belonged to the food insecure and dispossessed groups, with recourse to a “methodology founded on the principles of empathy and respect” (Mander 2008, 2012).

### Lessons from Life, and at School

The earliest lesson half our children learn from life is to live with hunger, yet schools seem oblivious to this, as they righteously subject them to their own. Natural and intimate narratives of food and hunger, reflecting the lives of a majority of children, are generally absent from the discourse of education. What can be found, instead, are clinical and insensitive descriptions of what constitutes a healthy diet, often illustrated with visuals of food far beyond the reach of most children.

Musahar women, who forage in furrows for grains hidden by rats (and get their community name from there, as “rat eaters”), narrate that the most painful experience of their lives is to see their small children fitful with hunger:

Half the week we are able to eat *roti* or rice with either vegetable or *dal*. The other half, it is just *roti* or rice boiled with salt and turmeric. But there are four or five days a month when there is just no food, and we have no option but to fast. If there is any food at all on such days, we give it to our children, adding a lot of water so as to fill their stomachs. Any additional food goes to our men folk, because we women are used to staying hungry.

...When the wailing of the infants gets too much, we lace our fingertips with tobacco or natural intoxicants and give our fingers to the babies to suck. We give them cannabis, or ‘*khaina*’ (local tobacco for chewing), or cheap country liquor. It helps them sleep even with nothing in their stomachs. If they are small, we sometimes beat them until they sleep. But as they grow older, we try to teach them how to live with hunger. We tell them this lesson will equip them for a lifetime; we know hunger will always be with them... (Mander 2012: 5-6).

Schools routinely deal with descriptions of “picnics” through textbook chapters and children’s own essays, which tend to remain contrived and disconnected from their real life observations. A moving narrative of dispossessed childhoods that in many ways resonates with the experiences of children and has helped raise similar issues at school is from Limbale’s autobiography *Akkarmashi* (2003). It begins with

the memories of a school picnic to a forest near his village. The dalit children play and eat separately, embarrassed in front of their upper-caste classmates by their stale dry rotis, chutney and dried fish. They can smell the delicacies from the other group: fried *paranthas*, delicious *laddoos*, fresh spiced vegetables, *gujiyas* and so much else. When they have eaten, the teacher asks the dalit boys to collect the leftovers, which they attack as soon as their classmates have walked ahead. When Limbale returns home he is rebuked sourly by his mother for not bringing some of the leftovers for the rest of the family to taste. On many days his sisters sleep hungry. His mother makes do with water, his grandfather with puffs of tobacco. They all await his grandmother Santhama, who goes from house to house to beg, with her sari humbly outstretched for people to throw their stale or half-eaten leftovers in. She also gathers cow dung to sell, looking for undigested pieces of grain in it, which she washes, dries in the sun, grinds into flour and kneads into rotis that she roasts only for herself, while she feeds the family with millet rotis. The little boy suspects his grandmother to be eating something special, and snatching a piece from her plate one evening, bites into it but immediately retches. It tastes like cowdung. That is a poignant moment, as he wonders how his grandmother could calmly eat the cow dung rotis every evening.

A dalit feminist poem titled *Mother (Aai, in Marathi)* connects with many a child raised with dignity and pride amidst hunger and self-denial (by Lanjewar 1981):

*I have seen you  
turning back the tide of tears  
trying to ignore your stomach's growl  
Suffering parched throat and lips  
Building a dam on a lake...*

*I have seen you  
sitting in front of the stove  
burning your very bones  
to make coarse bread and a little something  
to feed everybody, but half-feed yourself  
so there'd be a bit in the morning...*

*I have seen you  
washing clothes and cleaning pots  
in different households  
rejecting the scraps of food offered  
with pride...*

Such narratives resonate with the pain and dilemmas of many households condemned to live routinely with hunger, where parents are compelled to take children out of school into work. Even more harrowing for them is to send a child into debt bondage. Hunger in the household often makes children themselves take painfully adult decisions about their lives. Our work with a large number of street children in metro cities shows that they resort to begging, rag picking or even petty crimes, to feed themselves or at times also their families. The hunger of city streets, camouflaged in the glare of street lights, is often the most lonely, because on these streets live people ruptured from the protection of their families. We have met on Delhi's freezing winter streets children high on smack or "solution". It is all that makes the

cold, the hunger, the brutality and the loneliness of life on the streets bearable.

And yet, these voices do not normally find a place in school. Conventional syllabi view food through a clinical "scientific" lens, devoid of the sensory subjectivities of lived experiences – the smells, taste or growls, most certainly the growls – thus sanitised from any uncomfortable associations of deprivation. The primary school child is, instead, authoritatively informed that food is made up of carbohydrates, proteins, fat, etc, that can be sourced from rice, fish, eggs, milk or butter – which, in any case, does not make the concept, or the edible item, in any way more accessible for her. She is forced to spout eulogies to the curious bodybuilding functions of these virtuous entities. The teacher unquestioningly transmits such information, with no attempt to contextualise so that the learner, well-fed or hungry, can make some sense of it.

### Digesting a Message

Traditional textbooks (and also messages in popular media) unabashedly pontificate on what they – the poor and the hungry – must do to keep themselves free of disease. In addition, there has been an implicit belief that while education must inform "those backward" children on how to conduct their lives "properly", it should project only happy and "positive" situations to protect the "innocence" of the privileged. Such textbooks, including those by NCERT before National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, contained highly prescriptive and moralistic lessons (about hygiene, cleanliness, hard work, etc) together with naive generalisations about the perceived needs of the poor (Rampal 2007, 2010).

A state Class IV textbook on Environmental Studies (EVS) (J&K SBE 2003) begins its chapter on internal organs with statements such as "we eat food two or three times a day", and describes the stomach as a "muscular bag" which for a normal adult can hold about three kilograms of food and water at a time. It warns that

if we overeat or swallow food without chewing it properly, our digestion is affected; it can lead to a stomach ache...We must avoid overeating. If we eat uncovered or stale food, it can upset the stomach (pp 12-13).

To ensure that this message is digested and properly regurgitated, it is immediately followed by a question (intended to be answered in the given blank space of four lines): "Give reasons that cause a stomach ache" (p 14). There is clearly no space here to interrogate the cultural connotations of stale food or even overeating. In fact, the moralising and information giving agenda continues to influence the new state textbooks meant to be based on NCF 2005 (NCERT 2005), where though many chapters are taken from the new NCERT books, some remain in the conventional mode. For example, the Class IV chapter "Food and Fun" (where the significance of the latter is hard to find) consists of dry and questionable definitions about food, uses of food and types of food (proteins, carbohydrates and minerals and vitamins). Curiously, for its first exercise "What is food?" the answer it provides is: "those products people enjoy eating" (J&K SBSE 2010: 100).

An EVS textbook for Class v by a private publisher (Cordova Publications, year not mentioned) and used by private schools in Delhi, claims to be based on the latest NCERT syllabus in accordance with the NCF 2005, and asks the following questions as part of its “Summative Assessment based on CCE”:

Tick the correct answer:

*When the abdomen of a child gets swollen and bulges out, he is suffering from*

*i) marasmus ii) anaemia iii) kwashiorkor*

(Write) Very short answers:

1. *What is meant by famine?*

2. *What are the natural causes of famine?* (p 35).

This book states that “the condition when people do not get enough food to eat over a long period of time is called famine” (p 32). It indicates that natural calamities such as lack of rain, excessive rainfall, earthquakes, plant diseases and volcanic eruptions cause damage to crops and lead to food shortage.

It is a matter of great concern and there have been several deliberations on the fact that there exists no robust regulatory mechanism to whet textbooks for inaccurate, inappropriate or even crassly insensitive material. The issue again came up recently when the electronic media reported that a Class vi textbook (New Healthway) by a known publisher S Chand, crudely castigated non-vegetarians, holding that they cheat, tell lies, forget promises, are dishonest and tell bad words, steal, fight and turn to violence and commit sex crimes. However, after sporadic expressions of alarm, or a knee-jerk demand to delete the offensive lines, the larger issue remains unaddressed, in the absence of a broad academic forum with requisite powers to systematically review and regulate school texts.

Such disconcerting depictions are not casual errors, but indicate deep-rooted prejudices and bias, which also need to be addressed as part of the process of education. There lies the challenge, which NCF 2005 attempts to address – to foster values of democratic citizenship, through an empathetic pedagogy that exposes children and teachers to the other, not simply celebrating diversity but also contending with difference (Giroux 1989). Critical educators acknowledge that

If there is a new lesson facing educational systems everywhere, it is that teachers, students, teacher educators, and researchers in schools and classrooms must struggle with, argue over, and begin to deal with *difference*, both within and across nations, regions, and genders (Nozaki et al 2005: 4).

### Critical Pedagogy for Democracy

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 (NCERT 2005) recommends a shift to a humanist and social constructivist approach to learning, using critical pedagogy to nurture values for a democratic and just society. It calls for an empathetic approach where

issues related to human rights, caste, religion and gender can be critically reflected on by children in order to see how these are connected to their everyday experiences, and also how different forms of inequalities become compounded and are perpetuated (p 23).

The social democratic vision of the National Policy on Education (Government of India 1986), which translated into NCF

2005, is even more significant today in the larger context of concern worldwide about neoconservative policies that resort to greater control and standardisation, through managerial modes of monitoring schools and testing achievement outcomes (Apple 2001).

The new Environmental Studies syllabus (NCERT 2006a) developed as part of the NCF 2005, encourages questioning of power relations that continue to subordinate the disadvantaged, and at the primary level it forges integration between science and social studies. Transcending rigid disciplinary boundaries, the syllabus delineates themes such as food, water, shelter, family and friends that allow for a connected and interrelated approach in consonance with children’s learning. It begins with key questions, framed in a language that can stimulate and scaffold the thinking of children that age, and then indicates the related key concepts.

With a focus on those who are most vulnerable to be pushed out and, unlike the “culture of silence” and evasion in school, some key questions address issues of inequality and difference, encouraging children to reflect on their experiences, with empathy for those who lead other lives. Moreover, in the EVS syllabus and textbooks, the natural world is not viewed as a repository of resources to be exploited or conserved by “us” (either used anthropomorphically, to assert the unquestionable right of humans over all else on the planet, or, worse, as a connotation for its privileged urban inhabitants). Instead, it exposes children to other perspectives of sustainable commons, from those whose lives have been intimately connected to nature, in forests, along the sea, on the mountains, etc. The forest is thus seen as the community’s collective bank in the true narrative of a woman who struggles to save it, while in a chapter from the Mathematics textbook (NCERT 2008b, p 9) fisherfolk are worried about indiscriminate fishing by large trawlers, as they have for hundreds of years cared for the sea, “fishing only a little to eat and sell”.

The challenges are tremendous – for one, the spectrum of lived experiences of children being immensely disparate, often calls for extending the imagination of the child, well beyond the familiar, or even the believable. Just as those in a desert would think differently about water from those whose houses get annually deluged by rivers in spate, the concept of food often requires empathetic relocation within different contexts to understand its import for others. Humanistic pedagogies undertake to do this dialogically – through the syllabus, textbooks, classroom discussion, debates, projects, neighbourhood surveys, and everyday observations, including through the eyes of significant others.

The NCERT syllabus for classes III-V begins the theme on food with cooking and eating in the family, encouraging observations about gendered roles, while key questions focus on food as a deeply cultural construct. It moves on to how food is grown, how it reaches the city, who grows it, and the hardships farmers may face, while staying grounded to one’s own subjective pangs of hunger to relate to the plight of those who do not get food. Changes in food habits and crop patterns are analysed by revisiting and understanding the experiences

of elders/grandparents, not just from what the teacher or textbook says.

A chapter from the Class III textbook (NCERT 2006b) based on this syllabus opens with a group of children describing what they ate the previous night, while one child states that in her house no food was cooked. Attention is drawn to this fact, asking what could be the reasons, with the possibility for a discussion on why some children might have to sleep hungry. The authors had also planned to include in this chapter an excerpt from a moving true life story about a boy named Kali (Whitaker 2006) from the indigenous Irula tribe of snake catchers (and venom extractors) in Tamil Nadu. The purpose was to sensitise children to different cultures, while dispelling popular myths about what is or is not food.

The story by Zai Whitaker, who worked with the Irulas, and whose young son was a friend of Kali, is about the boy alienated from the culture of school and his fellow classmates. Scared of being rebuked, he is reluctant to open his tiffin-box with his favourite dish of fried termites. However, things dramatically change when one day a snake accidentally enters the classroom, causing havoc to break loose. Kali effortlessly catches and throws out the snake, as he has watched his community do, and instantly becomes the hero of his class. However the story was not included when some officials from the state expressed reservations, on grounds of it showing Tamil Nadu in poor light. The hegemony of the knowledge of the “civilised” middle class, as usually happens, decided whose food could find a place in the textbook. Moreover, the stigma of being “savage ant eaters” seemed to threaten to reinforce the stereotyped image of tribal children. The authors therefore chose a creative option to subvert this – instead of the Kali story a collage of blurbs of different children’s favourite foods was included, with one about a girl from an upmarket urban family of snake eaters in Hong Kong. Interestingly, struggles over textbook representations of indigenous people have also resulted in a dominant upmarket image, representing a particular “global” brand of ethnicity and difference, to mirror the new middle classes among them, largely in management and corporate positions (Openshaw 2005).

### Good to Eat

Lessons in understanding others’ food preferences can indeed be challenging, as humorously described by the anthropologist Harris, who recounts how he tried to get his college students to think of cultural differences by passing around cans of Japanese fried grasshoppers. He was confronted with groans of disgust and hostile stares, with protests such as: “Anyone who would eat these things isn’t normal. It’s unnatural to want to eat insects!” In a chapter devoted exclusively to these “small things”, he argues that insects offer rich and wholesome source of proteins and fats, and a majority of the world’s cultures, including “sophisticated civilisations” of China and south-east Asia, do not share this loathing. “The reason we don’t eat them is not that they are dirty and loathsome; rather, they are dirty and

loathsome because we don’t eat them” (Harris 1986: 154). He laments that

the loathing by which insectivory is held by Europeans and Americans has been communicated to the food experts of less developed countries, and this has made them reluctant to study the contribution of insects to national diet, or even to admit that their compatriots eat any insects at all (ibid: 160).

The following excerpt from the Class v syllabus for Environmental Studies (NCERT 2006a) attempts to make children (and their teachers) reflect about “hunger”:

#### When people do not get food

Do you know of times when many people do not get enough food to eat? Are people hungry because there isn’t enough food to feed them? How do you know when you are hungry? Do you know of people who get ill because they do not have enough to eat?

The Class v textbook chapter “Tasting to Digesting” addresses the above issues, while dealing with the sense of taste, and how the process of digestion begins in the mouth. It also includes the fascinating historical account of a French scientist Beaumont, who first learnt about the chemistry of digestion by inserting bits of food through a hole in a young man’s bullet-struck stomach (Harre 1983).

In a section titled “Straight from the Heart” the textbook invokes children’s intuitive ideas, asking them to imagine and draw how food gets digested and where it travels in the body, without yet burdening them with the details of the “digestive system” that cannot be understood at this age. It then follows up with a candid discussion on their subjective feelings of hunger, as seen in the following excerpt (NCERT 2008a: 27):

#### Straight from the heart

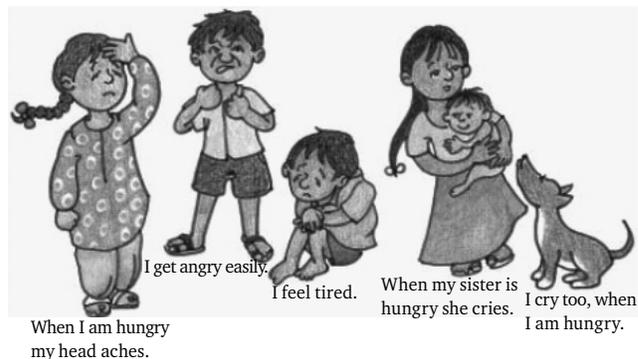
Where do you think the food must be going after you put it in your mouth and swallow it? In the picture here, draw the path of the food through your body. Share your picture with your friends. Do all of you have similar pictures?

#### Discuss

How do you feel when you are very hungry? How would you describe it? For example, sometimes we jokingly say, “I am so hungry I could eat an elephant!”

How do you come to know that you are hungry?

Think what would happen if you did not eat anything for two days?



Malnutrition is introduced through the case of two children who have both been unwell and have been told by the doctor that they need “proper” food.

**Rashmi (5 years):** She looks about 3 years old. She has very thin arms and legs and a pot belly (stomach like a balloon). She often falls sick. She always feels tired and cannot go to school regularly. She is lucky if she can get a little rice or one roti in the whole day.

**Kailash (7 years):** He looks older than his age. His body is fat and flabby. He is not very active. He goes to school by bus and spends many hours watching TV. He does not like home-cooked food. The only thing he finds tasty are chips, burger, pizzas and soft drinks from the market.

**Proper food – every child’s right?**

You have read about two children. ...About half the children in our country are like Rashmi. They do not get enough food that they need to grow and develop properly. These children are weak and sickly. But it is the right of every child to get proper food.

**Discuss:**

What do you understand by ‘proper’ food?

Why do you think that the food of Rashmi and Kailash was not proper?

**Find Out:** Talk with your grandparents or elderly people and find out what they ate and what work they did when they were your age. Now think about yourself – your daily activities and daily diet. Are these similar or different from what your grandparents did and ate? (p 33).

These are often complex issues and no straight answers are expected. Such situations are also meant to challenge teachers to interrogate their own concepts, instead of offering sterile information or moral messages about health or hygiene. When the chapter asks children how they know when they are hungry, clearly, the purpose of exposing them to their own and others’ subjective experiences can be lost if teachers expect the question to have one canonical correct answer. Teachers, who are usually socialised in the behavioural tradition of teaching, do not expect children to construct knowledge themselves, but feel compelled to provide scientific information that must be memorised. In fact, there is generally little appreciation of how science and social studies need to be integrated, and elite private schools brazenly prescribe textbooks that not only flout the syllabus, but also use abstract advanced concepts (to flaunt their “advanced” status) from each of these subject domains, with no consideration of the children’s ability to comprehend. On the other hand, we have seen that appropriate teacher education that builds on critical engagement for reflective practice, enhances their confidence in addressing and deepening the learning of children from different sociocultural backgrounds. To achieve this however is a major task, since large numbers of teachers are yet to be effectively trained, and most training institutions continue to remain entrenched in traditional and outdated paradigms of teaching and learning.

**Cross-Cultural Dialogues on Food**

Just as it is important to question the hegemony of what is and what is not food, there are similar issues in the NCERT EVS textbook relating to what is indigenous or what has come through historical cross-cultural exchanges. This is meant to help rethink chauvinistic notions of purity and superiority, of certain kinds of foods consumed by the dominant social groups, and also see how it is influenced by other cultures. The following extract is an example from the chapter “Seeds and Seeds” of the same Class V textbook (NCERT 2008a, p 49):

**Who Came from Where?**

We too carry seeds from one place to another, knowingly or unknowingly. We bring the seeds of plants that we find beautiful or useful, to grow them in our garden. Many years later people may not even remember

that these plants did not grow here, but were brought from somewhere else. Do you know from where chillies came to our country? These were brought to India by traders coming from South America. Today we cannot think of food without chillies!

To know which plant came from where, read this poem (translated from a popular children’s song in Hindi, first published in the children’s magazine Chakmak)

Did you know this?  
From South America  
long ago,  
came a tomato,  
a potato,  
and a green chilly.  
Do you know this?

A cabbage came  
from Europe,  
and also a pea.  
From Africa  
came a coffee bean,  
and a green bhindi.

They crossed the land.  
They crossed the sea.  
Did you know this?

The EVS textbooks have thus incorporated true narratives of farmers opting for organic farming, or villages that have improved crop yields through collective water harvesting. Institutional or cultural practices to collectively cook and offer food to the needy through the Sikh *langar* or as part of the festival of Bihu are also described. Some chapters touch upon related themes of coping with hunger, such as migration, that places intolerable burdens on family ties. Across the three years of EVS in Classes III-V, along with the primary school language and mathematics textbooks of NCERT, an attempt is made to explore several strands of the syllabus to address issues of food and hunger.

**Realistic Learning with Small Things**

Notwithstanding the attempts, there are however several challenges for teachers and curriculum developers, especially at the higher classes, of dealing with complex dimensions of hunger and food, beyond the minimalist calculus of calorie intake and physiological indicators of malnutrition. In fact, countering such minimalist definitions Saith (2005) wonders whether the poor are permitted to have palates and preferences, even perhaps a sweet tooth? He asks if poor children are entitled to eat “junk fast food occasionally – not often enough to get obese, but occasionally at least to know how the other half thrives, and to harbour the illusion that they belong to the same universe as other children?” Are only poor people entitled to making “good and wise” choices, whereas even mildly wicked indulgences remain only the rightful preserve of those who are privileged?

These are indeed difficult questions and school curricula have not necessarily engaged with issues of poverty through such dilemmas. Even among experts poverty lines are contested on grounds of being constructed around minimalist premises, of the least amount of money required by an average man or woman to buy the cheapest food that, when eaten,

would metabolise into the minimum calories required to lead an active and healthy life. The required daily allowance (RDA) of energy has been pegged by Indian planners at 2,100 kilocalories for urban and 2,400 for rural persons per day for normal work. Yet studies have shown that poor labouring people doing work such as earth cutting, carrying headloads, etc, require even higher food fuel for the body, close to 3,550 kilocalories. Moreover, the minimalist poverty-level expenditures also neglect necessary expenditures by poor families on clothing, shelter, public transport, fuel, water, lighting, etc, and the longings for freedom, security, treatment with dignity, and living with one's family in one's homeland.

An experiment with realistic pedagogy of small things was witnessed on a hot midsummer afternoon in May 2011, as one of us joined an unusual protest outside India's Planning Commission, displaying placards, raising animated slogans, and also carrying "gifts" for its members. The protest was against the report of the expert group appointed by the Planning Commission to estimate levels of poverty and the small gifts from the Right to Food Campaign were cardboard boxes filled with what could be bought for 29 rupees a day in Delhi, the ceiling to qualify within the government's definition of poverty. One box had just two bus tickets of Rs 15 each, the cost of travel to and from work. This would leave nothing for food or any other essentials. Another box contained half a pencil, 25 grams of *rajma* beans, four pieces of *bhindi* (okra), 25 grams of flour, and one arm of a shirt. In another were stuffed 50 grams of masoor dal, half a shirt for a child, beans for one meal and 50 grams of washing powder. One more box had half a soap bar, half a banana, five pieces of *bhindi*, half a notebook, and half a toothbrush.

Even more stark were the placards:

*'Poor person allowed to eat only half a katori of dal everyday.'*

*'Fruits poor people can eat every month – 2 bananas.'*

*'2 shirts and 2 pants – all that a poor person can buy every year – what about warm clothes?'*

*'Poor person allowed to spend on footwear – Rs 72. Cost of a cheap pair of shoes – Rs 90.'*

*'Poor family allowed to spend on conveyance – Rs 50/month; minimum daily bus fare – Rs 10.'*

*'Poor family allowed Rs 100/month on rent. Cheapest – Rs 800/month. Viable option – footpath.'*

This creative protest illuminated – with wry gentle humour – the absurd assumptions on which official poverty lines are fixed. An enormous chasm separates planners and economists, and indeed the middle classes, from the lived realities of impoverished people in India. The concrete and visual methods adopted also suggest pedagogical approaches that could be used in a classroom debate. How do poor people survive with small amounts of money? What indeed do rich people do with enormous sums of money? These can be practical learning exercises, to teach many things – economics, budgeting and, more importantly, empathy.

### The MDM Programme

In 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCIL), Rajasthan had filed a case in the Supreme Court, demanding that the right to food should be recognised as a legal right of every

person. The Supreme Court accepted the petition with the observations (made on July 23, 2001; accessed from [www.righttofoodindia.org](http://www.righttofoodindia.org)) that:

In our opinion, what is of utmost importance is to see that food is provided to the aged, infirm, disabled, destitute women, destitute men who are in danger of starvation, pregnant and lactating women and destitute children, especially in cases where they or members of their family do not have sufficient funds to provide food for them. In case of famine, there may be shortage of food, but here the situation is that *amongst plenty there is scarcity* (emphasis added).

The Supreme Court converted food, livelihood and social security schemes into entitlements or rights and established its own monitoring mechanisms through its independent commissioners. It ruled that school mid-day meals should be locally produced, hot and cooked (and not dry snacks or grain which many governments distributed until then), hygienic, nutritious (of a prescribed minimum caloric level) and with varied menus for every day of the week. Significantly, it also recognised that school meals are an instrument for social equality, and therefore ruled that preference be given to dalit cooks. The MDM benefits 140 million school children daily, making it the largest school feeding programme in the world. When the executive had to find ways to raise the revenues needed to operationalise the universalised entitlements, and to finance mid-day meals, it even imposed a special education cess of 2% on all federal taxes.

In the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), the court banned contractors from supplying ready to eat food to pre-school children, and again required hot cooked meals. This was a blow against centralised procurement and the possibilities of large-scale corruption. The powerful biscuit-manufacturers lobby saw an enormous opportunity for profit in the court-expanded programme and lobbied through Members of Parliament across party lines to demand that locally produced and monitored hot meals be replaced by biscuits. This proposal was fought by an informal alliance of conscientious public servants, the national media, and the court commissioners, and court orders for decentralised hot cooked meals have for now prevailed in the best interests of millions of young malnourished children.

The MDM programme in schools has had significant progress in bringing the underprivileged children into the fold of primary schooling, to enhance child attendance, foster egalitarian social norms, provide employment to poor women, and act as a form of nutrition education. Studies in West Bengal show that the MDM has exerted a positive influence on universalisation of elementary education through eliminating classroom hunger and reducing the gender gap in education. It has played a major role in reducing the gap of social distance among children and in many cases children have been seen to defy the mandate of their parents to share food together. However, the coverage is poor in urban areas owing to problems with space for constructing kitchen sheds (Pratichi 2010).

A major problem with the programme had to do with issues related to caste discrimination of children and the dalit women hired as cooks. Where a dalit cook had been hired, dominant caste parents forbade their children to take the MDM. Studies

and initial fact-finding reports found that teachers also used other forms of discrimination, such as segregated seating during the meal, or in a few villages dalits and dominant caste children were served separate meals altogether (Thorat 2005). Dominant caste opposition to dalit women being employed as cooks also represents a power struggle over livelihood rights. Significantly, it was found that cases of such opposition were reported less in states where the percentage of dalits engaged for MDM was high, such as in Andhra Pradesh, which had the highest percentage of dalit cooks, organisers and MDM centres located in dalit localities. Conversely, Rajasthan, which had the lowest percentage of dalit functionaries and MDM centres in dalit colonies, had the highest rate of reported caste discrimination. It was also seen that the success of MDM could be attributed to the Andhra Pradesh government's willingness to partner with civil society initiatives in implementing its programmes, combined with sustained mass action by people's movements. In fact, the state government's implementation of the MDM programme through local women's groups (DWCRA or Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) appears to have increased the chances of ensuring their children's equal access to the right to food and the right to education, as

well as their own right to employment (as cooks, organisers or teachers).

Finally, the National Food Security Bill, when passed, will usher in a major initiative to converge with the Right to Education Act to address crucial issues for children's basic entitlements. These commitments urgently need to be made across political affiliations, to strengthen the social fabric of Indian democracy. Challenges will however need to be addressed through sustained participative engagement with the system, from within and without, as has been done by several alliances, to ensure that the rights of children become entitlements through transformative justice. Instituting an equitable public education system, with provisions for basic health and nutrition, restructuring curricula and ensuring effective recruitment and orientation of teachers, are some of the immediate tasks before the system to provide quality education to every child, in a shared ethos of democratic participation. India, at this point of time, is eminently placed to provide all its children wholesome opportunities for just and meaningful lessons, of hope and creative agency, rather than being inhumanly forced to learn to live with hunger, wasting and debilitating malnutrition.

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## Survey

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## Revisiting Communalism and Fundamentalism in India

by

Surya Prakash Upadhyay, Rowena Robinson

This comprehensive review of the literature on communalism – and its virulent offshoot, fundamentalism – in India considers the various perspectives from which the issue has sought to be understood, from precolonial and colonial times to the post-Independence period. The writings indicate that communalism is an outcome of the competitive aspirations of domination and counter-domination that began in colonial times. Cynical distortions of the democratic process and the politicisation of religion in the early decades of Independence intensified it. In recent years, economic liberalisation, the growth of opportunities and a multiplying middle class have further aggravated it. More alarmingly, since the 1980s, Hindu communalism has morphed into fundamentalism, with the Sangh parivar and its cultural politics of Hindutva playing ominous roles.

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