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The real reasons for hunger

Leading Indian ecological activist **Vandana Shiva** disagrees with Amartya Sen's analysis of global hunger and argues that famine has returned to democratic India.

[Observer Worldview](#)

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Amartya Sen is the world's leading expert on the causes of famine. But he is wrong in his analysis of contemporary famine. His analysis ignores trade liberalization and globalization as a cause for why people are hungry today. In offering free trade solutions to hunger, he is offering the disease as a cure.

Amartya Sen's article in last week's Observer - [Why half the planet is hungry](#) - argues that no famine can occur in a democracy, and cites India as an example of the elimination of famines. It is true that famines disappeared immediately in 1947, with independence and multiparty elections. But famine is making a comeback in India. As Mulayam Singh Yada, the leader of a major political party, stated in Parliament:

"There is famine in Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bihar, Gujarat. This is a serious matter. The tragedy is that while people starve, the godowns are overflowing. 300 to 400 million Rupees are being spent daily to stock food of which 35% is rotting. What was the reason that the government under pressure of rich countries, decided to let the people starve merely in order to reduce the budget?"

Eight hundred tribal children have died of starvation in Maharashtra. Four starving women from Orissa tried to sell her child for 300 Rupees in Calcutta. In the famine stricken regions of Orissa, children are being sold for a few thousand rupees because of starvation. Wives are being sold into bondage".

People are starving because the policy structures that defended rural livelihoods, and access to resources and markets, and hence entitlements and incomes, are being

systematically dismantled by structural adjustment programmes, driven by the World Bank, and by WTO rules imposing trade liberalization.

After the Great Bengal Famine of 1942 which killed more than 2 million people, India's policies after independence put livelihoods and food security first, rather than trade and commerce. Land reform put land back in the hands of the peasants and cultivators, thus removing a root cause of poverty. The economic "reforms" under globalization reverse these reforms by corporatizing agriculture, displacing small peasants, and removing limits on land ownership. Displaced peasants cannot have incomes or entitlements. They are among those who go hungry. Amartya Sen does not refer anywhere to issues of land reform as central to the issue of hunger and poverty, or to the high costs of seeds and chemicals which are pushing Indian peasants to suicide. Without people's rights to resources, there is no lasting solution to hunger.

When "democracy" fails to prevent famine

Sen's assumption that democracy can prevent famines in our times is also conceptually flawed because it fails to address the fact that trade liberalization and globalization policies empty democracy of economic content, and remove basic decisions from the democratic influence of a country's people.

Political democracy divorced from economic democracy allows governments to bid for votes on the basis of hate, fear and exclusion. The failure of the ruling party in India in recent regional elections was due to the destitution of farmers - caused by the implementation of trade liberalization policies for seeds, subsidies and imports under WTO rules. Instead of addressing the issue of rural poverty and hunger, the government pulled out the card of communal frenzy in Gujarat and war hysteria over Kashmir to divert the public and create new fundamentalist agendas to electioneer with. Governments can survive famines if they can inflame fundamentalist forces as a diversion. People die of both hunger and wars. Strengthening food sovereignty, food rights and food security requires changes in trade rules. We should understand that this is also a condition for peace in our violent and brutal times.

Deregulated imports mean importing hunger and unemployment

Sen describes food sovereignty and self sufficiency as "obtuse" and "fetishist", and recommends dependence on imports. However, deregulated imports are a major cause of poverty and famine in countries like India. Globalization has dismantled the systems which guaranteed domestic market access for farmers, a system which brought food security to the poor. Meanwhile rich countries subsidise their agricultural production by \$1 billion every day, making it inevitable that exports will be dumped on the poor.

The only way to protect incomes and entitlements in poor countries is to bring back controls on imports. As India has opened trade, its agricultural imports have quadrupled, rising from \$1 billion (50,000 million Rupees) in 1995 to over \$4 billion (200,000 million Rupees) by 2000. Many of these imports come from rich countries such as the United

States and Europe. The United States is now planning to spend more than £130 billion over the next ten years to support 2 million farmers: more than two-thirds of this money which will go to the largest 10 per cent of farmers. This process results in huge surpluses which are dumped on the global market. They bring down prices worldwide and destroy the livelihoods of millions of peasants. Prices of coconuts have fallen 80 per cent, coffee prices have collapsed by over 60 per cent, pepper prices have fallen 45 per cent in India since the WTO declared, in 2000, that India must reduce import barriers.

The most dramatic effect has been on edible oil. India's domestic production has been effectively wiped out as highly subsidized soya from the U.S. and palm oil from Malaysia flood the market, due to lack of adequate import controls. Imports now account for 70 per cent of the domestic consumption of edible oil. This has resulted in coconut farmers in Kerala blockading their local harbor to protest against such imports. Groundnut farmers and soya bean farmers in a number of areas mounted demonstrations against this attack on their livelihood. As a result, they were shot at.

It is little wonder that Indian activists, peoples movements and some politicians are calling for the reintroduction of import controls. More than 100,000 peasants and workers attended a rally ahead of last year's Doha meeting of the WTO. This democratic demand would prevent famine. Yet nowhere in his article does Amartya Sen identify the destruction of livelihoods and incomes of the small rural producers as the reason for increased endemic hunger, and indeed famine, in India.

Deregulated exports: a recipe for hunger

On the contrary, Sen recommends further trade liberalization and increased exports as the solution to hunger in the Third World. Yet export-oriented agriculture robs the poor of their land, their water and their livelihoods. There is an inverse relation between increasing agricultural exports and declining food consumption locally and nationally. When countries grow flowers and vegetables for exports, they also sow the seeds of hunger.

Yet India promotes exports of flowers and meat. Yet India spent \$27 million (1.37 billion Rupees) as foreign exchange for promoting floriculture exports earning a mere \$6.4 million (0.32 billion Rupees) as a result. India can buy only a quarter of the food it could otherwise have grown with the export earnings from floriculture.

In the case of meat exports, for every dollar earned, our research has shown that India is destroying fifteen dollars worth of ecological functions performed by farm animals for sustainable agriculture. Thus, as a society, India is paying more in terms of food insecurity and ecological destruction than it is earning through exports of luxury crops such as flowers and meat. Putting resources in people's hands, and guaranteeing small producers access to local markets is a far more secure, sustainable and inclusive way to remove poverty.

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