

FREEDOM FROM HUNGER CAMPAIGN LAUNCH
&
INAUGURAL FREEDOM FROM HUNGER LECTURE

The Centre for Environment and Food Security (CEFS) has launched a Freedom from Hunger Campaign to make India a 'Hunger-Free Country'. This Campaign was launched on 10th February 2005 at India International Centre, New Delhi in the presence of over 200 activists, scientists, intellectuals, government officials, policy makers, farmers' leaders, members of diplomatic missions and various international and UN agencies. The Campaign was jointly launched by Magsaysay Awardee Social activist **Aruna Roy** and **Susan George** (author of landmark book on hunger "**How the Other Half Dies**").

Parshuram Rai, director of CEFS said in his introductory speech, "more than 24,000 people die of hunger every day, nearly 78 per cent of them women and children. More than 1.4 billion people in the world face chronic hunger and over 13 million die of hunger every year. They die of hunger not because world does not have enough food for the entire population of the world, but because of an insensitive and callous world where profit of market seems to be the final arbiter of human destiny. The number of people who fell prey to Hitler's insanity was 6 million and the "silent holocaust of hunger" is killing over 13 million people every year. Every year more than two genocides of Nazi proportions. But unlike the victims of Nazi gas chambers, the victims of hunger die unnoticed, unmourned and in the backyards of vibrant democracies. If we believe in Gandhian dictum that poverty is the worst form of violence, then we are still inflicting this crime on over 1.4 billion poorest people of the world. While the U S can spend over \$ 80 billion per year in Iraq alone, the entire wealth and generosity of the world can not generate just 13 billion dollars which is the only amount required to prevent the "hidden genocide by hunger".

Speaking about the level of hunger in India, Rai further said, "more than 340 million of Indians still go to bed without food every night and over 10,000 die of hunger every day. Every third hungry person in the world is an Indian and every third Indian goes to bed without food. The number of hungry people in India is always more than the number of people below official poverty line. While around 37per cent of rural households were below the poverty line in 1993-94, 80 per cent of households suffered undernutrition. Evidence on the consumption of food, on calorie-intake and on nutritional outcomes clearly prove that chronic hunger persists on a mass scale in India."

Explaining the main aims and objectives of Freedom from Hunger Campaign, Parshuram Rai said that "The Freedom from Hunger Campaign is a humble initiative to create awareness and understanding, and to kickoff a national debate on the political economy of hunger. Debate not for the sake of debate but to facilitate enabling legislation and public action to banish the scourge of hunger from our motherland. This Campaign is a tiny effort to bring back the issue of hunger and poverty in mainstream intellectual discourse, at the centre of public policy and on the conscience radar of the nation. Since hunger is essentially a political condition, the key to banish hunger is to change the politics of hunger. And to change the politics of hunger, we need to bring the issue of hunger in mainstream electoral politics. Freedom from Hunger Campaign is a very modest attempt to politicize hunger in India".

As part of this campaign, CEFS will hold lectures, workshops, seminars, conferences and public hearings all over India. Apart from doing research and advocacy for a hunger-free India, this NGO also plans to bring out a series of "Citizens' Reports" especially from the "hunger hot-spots" of the country. The First Phase of Campaign will conclude on 15th August 2007 to coincide with the Platinum Jubilee celebrations of our Independence.

Comments by Susan George (Chairperson)

It's a great honour for me to have been asked to chair this meeting. I said this is an extremely happy but in some way very sad occasion too. The happy part is of course that this campaign is being launched. That you are going to have a remarkable series of lectures. But of course, no one can rejoice the reason for this campaign being necessary. And in French we have a saying "the more things change, the more they remain the same ". And indeed thirty years ago when I was working on my first book (**HOW THE OTHER HALF DIES**), it was even then the same question. And I had ended introduction much as Parshuram Rai has ended and said in his introductory address, "it will take you six hours to read this book (HOW THE OTHER HALF DIES)." Somewhere in the world, 2500 people would have died of hunger or hunger related illness by the time you finish this book. And now the figure is even greater per hour. That's enough not to rejoice about. And then the more things change, more they remain the same. Thirty years ago, again it was a recommendation that hunger would be fixed by the technology. So, get the technological fix right and there will be no more hungry people.

Yesterday the technological fix was green revolution that really improved the situation in quantitative terms. But now it is GMOs and once more no one is paying any attention to the environment. And no one has studied or noticed the social impact of GMO or its environmental impacts. They certainly haven't in the US and I doubt they have noticed here that once you give your food supply over to the producers of GMO seeds, you are giving away your life to the transnational Corporations. Of 100 authorizations by the US department of agriculture for GMO seeds over the past decade, over 50 belong to Monsanto or to companies which have been purchased by Monsanto. And if you take the top three companies, they own over 80per cent of the patents and top-5 companies own over 90per cent of the patents.

So I don't think it's very good idea to give over one's food supply to Corporations which have no interest in anything without profit. They are totally uninterested in

who eats and who doesn't, so long as they can force farmers to continue to buy their seeds. And they can force because once you have accepted those seeds, the problems of contamination are such that you'll always have traces in your fields. There is this famous legal case in Canada where Monsanto had forced a poor farmer to pay them about \$140,000 dollars. The farmer had never planted GMO seeds in his field, but his land had been contaminated by neighbours who had planted GMO seeds in their fields. And he has been the victim of the Monsanto police who go out and make samplings in the fields. And then they use that as the basis for legally demanding the farmer to continue to pay.

And no one is examining the environmental impact of these seeds and science is extraordinarily crude. They only want two characteristics. Which are either herbicide resistance or that the plant release its own pesticide. But there is no examination whatsoever of the impact on the soil, on the earth worms, on the lands and on the animals. And there is no examination of the living systems that make up any farming systems. It is extremely crude science.

So, that is the technology which you are being asked to swallow in all senses. And so, more things change, more they stay the same. A remarkable British Botanist who was Imperial Botanist in this country in 1905 called Albert Howard. He wrote a remarkable book titled 'An Agricultural Testament' and showed how much yields could be improved and how much people's livelihoods could be improved through cost-free technology. He was an ecologist before the word had gained much currency.

And I think that really what we have to re-visit and technology is not going to do the trick for the hungry. The problem of the hungry is the one that always has been the same. Either not enough land to grow one's own food, or not enough money to purchase it. I hope at least that came through from my work and the work of other people.

I also want to point out that there have been several studies showing that the World Bank's statistics are not correct. That is on how many people are living on less than a dollar-a-day, or how many people are actually going hungry are probably wrong by a factor of anything up to 60 per cent, unless that is on the lower side by a factor of up to 60 per cent. This has been shown by various scholars including two of Columbia University who have torn World Bank's methodological statistical analysis to shreds.

And I think the problem is undoubtedly worse than the official 800 million people who are said to be hungry. And I see Parshuram Rai in his brief introduction put the figures at 1.3 billion and it seems to me to be much more accurate. So, here we are still in the situation and the only answer to it as far as I can see is political. The only answer is organization, the only answer is concerned citizenry who mobilize against this inexcusable scourge which is hunger.

Your telecom billionaire Mr. Mittal was interviewed in The Financial Times last weekend. And he says, next thing he is going to invest in is agro-business in India. Because it could be source of tremendous profits, because you have got sun on your land round the year and you could grow three-four harvests a year. And he wants India to become not the 'bread basket' but the 'vegetable basket' of the world and export off-season vegetables to the western markets. But it is already having quite a lot of competition. I mean Mexico, Central America, Kenya and various other countries have already thought it that way. But that's where lot of your agricultural land is apparently going to be turned over to sow more and more export crops.

And all I can offer you as a part of remark before giving the floor to our distinguished speaker is that really if people do not consider themselves personally concerned, if in their organizations they do not decide, things would remain same. Now you must make coalitions around the subject of 'hunger', the people who perhaps never had either the opportunity or the idea of working

together before must learn to work together now. And by that I mean farmers' organizations, but also organizations of people in the city, Environmentalists, Trade Unions and women's organizations. Because **women as usual are the first victims of hunger**. If these coalitions cannot be made, we will not be able to move our governments.

Our governments have very short memory and they have very short time span in front of them. One has to keep their attention drawn to these questions and the only thing that draws their attention is the large group of citizens representing many organizations. And also elected officials, the people who are into these coalitions. And so, I hope that the launch of this **Freedom from Hunger Campaign** this evening is going to be wonderful sign of things to come. And I particularly like the name of this organization because it brings together the environment and food and security. It brings together human beings, society, the basis of life itself and our natural sphere. So, without any further remarks from me, I've the great honour to give the floor to Aruna Roy for delivering her **inaugural Freedom from Hunger Lecture**.

Summary of First Freedom from Hunger Lecture by Aruna Roy

I want to begin by saying that I'm indeed glad to be here and feel really honoured not only to have a chairperson like Susan George, but also being invited to launch the series of lectures on a topic very close to my heart. I have a deep concern over the issue of hunger, poverty and deprivation of hundreds and thousands of people amongst whom I've lived for over 30 years.

I've titled this lecture as "**The Capital of Labour and the Cost of Deprivation.**" I don't know if it sounds a bit vague to people today. But what I really wanted to say is that there is tremendous potential strength, energy and richness in the people whom we consider poor and deprived and on the margin. And the people whom

we think are rich today are rich in what? Perhaps it's philosophical question. But it is something which we have to think of.

This lecture is response also to the economists who've arrogated to themselves burden of carrying the universe on their figures. Whenever you begin a debate, their figures decimate you. You might have logic on your side, you might have justice on your side but some figures are always brought in to kill us. And especially so with the poor.

If everything in a democracy is for people, then why are they still hungry? Then why are they still on the margins? And why today in the year 2005 are we still talking about freedom from hunger? Why in India we are exporting food grains? Why don't we have space to store the grains? Even today if you look at FCI godowns, most of the foodgrains are lying outside. They're rotting and rats are eating them away. They are lying outside the railway stations and you see them covered by tarpaulins.

In the mid 70s I also read a book – I'm sorry that I am also going to mention the same book that people in India mention, Susan George over and over again. I read "**How the other half dies**". It deepened my understanding of international manipulations. And I'm really honoured that Susan George is here to chair this meeting today.

Two of the major legislations that have been borne out of this massive campaign that has been going on in Rajasthan and in other parts of India are Employment Guarantee Act and The Right to Information Act. They both have been tabled in the Parliament and in the course of today's talk we'll hear a little more about it.

So long as human beings are deprived of food, there will be storm on this Earth. We have said it over and over again that hunger, deprivation, poverty and unemployment are terrible things. And whenever I come to Delhi and talk to

people, it is always the cost of Employment Program. “How can we give you 2per cent of the GDP and it is too much.” Whenever we talk anything related to the poor, corruption becomes big issue. So let us talk about the corruption and let us find out why there is corruption. But let us not dismiss things because there might be corruption. The Employment Guarantee Bill is one of the most discussed bills in recent times. It was talked about in the newspapers, there were public discussions, and also talked outside the Parliament and inside the Parliament. And also inside councils and outside councils. In states, there have been signatures campaigns.

Some people asked me, “do you think the Finance Commission’s recommendations will not be implemented for civil servants if there is Employment Guarantee Act.” So whenever there is an issue of any amount of money, even small amount of money or 2per cent of GDP going to the poor people, we get into a state of great unrest. But do we realize that in a democracy 60-70per cent of people who elect the government to power in this country are not the middle class people, they are poor people. And when there is commitment by politicians accidentally or otherwise intentionally, they will have to keep their commitment and there will have to be an Employment Guarantee Bill. No matter whether they like it or not, whether they have seconded it or not today, there will have to be Employment Guarantee Bill.

The other issue which we’ve been extremely agitated about is the fact that there is so much foodgrains lying in our godowns and yet we don’t get our belly -full food and nothing comes to us. So we have another slogan, “Deprived stomachs, godowns full of grains, it is unjust and offensive.” It is actually a crime to have FCI godowns full of grains but people dying of hunger in Baran (Rajasthan) and Orissa. Grains not reaching the ration shops, grains not reaching people, and so what are we democratic for? What are we free country for? And why do we have national and state governments? If grains cannot be reached then what will be the

status of the deprived people? No, you have to reformulate your policies and reformulate your channels of procuring grains.

What stops government from giving grain to people. Are we still slaves and is there any division or demarcation between citizens and subjects in India? Still two India as Prof. Upendra Baxi is fond of saying- there is one India which is full of citizens and one **Bharath which is full of slaves**. Are we those two countries and we still exist like that? So what are we as members of civil society doing? Because there are umpteen number of people and there is civil society in India and civil society is not one big map. If you want to enter a five star hotel or India International Centre and if you are not dressed well, you cannot enter.

“The empty (hungry) stomachs and stock-piled godowns” is a big rallying slogan for people all over the country. In Rajasthan it began with the five-year drought and we had no food. We had no employment and we had no water, and every time we approached the State government and asked for food and employment, they replied that they had no money. Then we told them to forget about money but demanded for releasing foodgrains. To which they said that they did not have grains in stock. But we counter-questioned as to how could they say openly like this. At that time there was 60 million tons of foodgrains lying in FCI godowns. We questioned, “what about the FCI godowns which are full of grains and bursting with grains.” It was a long battle in which people understood that in a small village if you ask just for employment, you are not going to get it.

Because your Panchayat will say there is no employment. Your Panchayat Samiti will say there are no sanctions. And the District Collector or District Magistrate will say there is no money. You go to the State Capital and they will say, “we don’t have the money to buy the grain from New Delhi”, or they would say “we belong to two different political parties and so we are not getting the grain.” And so you’ve to reach New Delhi as well. And you have to lobby. But for the poor great democratic education is in understanding. And the micro and the macro are not divided. To get your micro benefits you have to be interested in macro issues.

And for purchasing these grains you need money and many times over. I remember, in the first severe drought that we had in 1987 before the birth of *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghatan* (MKSS), Prof. Hanumantha Rao came out from the Planning Commission with a team of experts to visit Rajasthan. And 300-400 people got together to meet him on the highway. And when he asked them as to what did they want, the really half- starved people but with great dignity, in India may be a few beggars in the cities but people in our villages are dignified and I felt so proud when they all said that “we don’t want your doll but we want to work. We want work because we want to live with dignity. We want to earn money and buy our own food. “

So even today, even during severest drought in Rajasthan, people have not asked for a doll. They have asked for employment and they have asked for work. They have asked for food for work. Because women want food. Because money is used for buying liquor and spent on intoxication but grain comes home and used by the women to sustain the family. So this takes me to third slogan that we have coined, “we demand our birthright, not begging for alms. “

Finally, if we (poor people) introspect within ourselves as to what can we do to eke out our livelihood, because we know nothing, as we are illiterates. We are villagers and don’t understand anything. But in Rajasthan the scene has now changed where the villagers say “we want our rights and we are not begging for anything. We want our rights and this is an independent country with secular fabric. And you cannot assure us of employment? You cannot assure us some amount of livelihood with dignity?” So the demand for collective action was one of the most amazing things in Rajasthan state over the last two-three years.

A number of people who have got around in Delhi can not explain as to why the Rural Employment Guarantee Act is so important. But any villager in Rajasthan and any villager now in any part of the country can understand the need for employment, because there is lack of jobs. People who had been in the organized

sector have lost their jobs and people who had been working in mills and factories have come back home. There is rampant unemployment and with unemployment comes many diseases. It is disease of polity, disease of society, it's disease that leads to violence.

This is partly due to lack of employment, and lack of employment will lead our people to sell themselves anywhere. Because hunger is very strong motivational factor to make you to do such things. So those of us who are interested in peaceful India will also try and ensure that there is employment for our brethren even if we can't give them everything they need. They need to eat to survive and that can be assured only through a proper Employment Guarantee Act.

So people understood and the means of protest that was generated in Rajasthan through the *Akal Sangharsh Samithi* and many others established that we need to fight whether in Rajasthan or all over the country for our right to food. It is no longer a demand that you give me few kilos of more grains through Public Distribution System units. But, we have the right to food in this country and right to survive and right to live.

And if people want to stop hunger and we want not to die of guilt as most of the sensitive middle class does by eating extra *rofi* or having extra sweet, we will have to ensure that people get food and people get employment. But today, we have wonderful opportunity. Two Bills are in Parliament- The Right to Information Bill and The Employment Guarantee Bill. Large numbers of people have written about it but much more public pressure can be put on this present government to honour its commitment made in the Common Minimum Program (CMP) to bring these two things to the people of this country. And I expect from most people in this audience to add on to this struggle and to push through this window of opportunity to see that people don't go hungry.