

TACKLING MALNUTRITION

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

In India crores of our people are below the poverty line and more than forty percent of our children suffer from malnutrition. With milk at more than Rs. 35 per litre and prices of pulses ranging from about Rs. 60 to about Rs. 90 per kg, is it surprising that huge numbers of our children suffer from malnutrition? They simply are not getting enough to eat.

The diet in India is largely cereal based. Cereals prices are often too high for the poor to be able to purchase an adequate quantity to fill their needs. For many children milk, in itself a complete food, is not even a distant dream. A child surviving on a handful of grain is bound to be undernourished and is highly susceptible to disease because malnutrition reduces body resistance and immunity. This is the grim picture which stalks India.

America has poor people also but it has no destitutes because the social security system takes over and the State provides for the poor who are unemployed. Social security in America is effective, efficient, people oriented and ensures the welfare of the poorest of the poor. India has no equivalent of the United States' social security coverage. The Constitution of India mandates equality of opportunity and social and economic justice. It also enjoins the State to establish a social order which will promote the welfare of all the citizens. This applies to the poor also. Does it not become the responsibility of the State to ensure that no Indian goes to bed hungry and that every Indian has an inalienable right to at least a minimum standard of nutrition?

The three items of nutrition that would be an absolute minimum for any family would be adequate grain, pulses and at least one litre of milk per day so that the children can each get a cup of milk every day. Grain at prices which people can afford, milk at Rs. 10 per litre and pulses at a price not exceeding Rs. 20 per kg should be our priorities. When this is combined with an employment oriented asset creation programme then nutrition standards would achieve a dramatic jump.

Can we achieve this? Should there be dual pricing of these commodities? Dual pricing automatically leads to evils such as low quality products being supplied at the lower price, thus defeating the purpose of the whole exercise. The relatively well to do buy all the milk and pulses that they need even at existing prices and their consumption is unlikely to increase dramatically merely because the price is reduced. It is only the poor who will begin consuming something which they never consumed before. Therefore, if for limited items there is a single price, then quality across the board will remain uniform.

Will controlled prices result in an uneconomical price to the producer and thus trigger off a reduction in production as the producers shift to some other commodities? This would not happen if the producer gets a fair price that would bring him a reasonable return. The purchasing agencies, which could be in the public or private sector, would be required to pay the producer a reasonable price and they would be reimbursed without delay by the State. We have to create a network of institutions like Amul which honestly and efficiently procure the commodities concerned, pay the producer on the dot and then supply the goods to the retail chain which distributes the product to the consumer.

In Gujarat Verghese Kurien created a milk revolution by a simple maxim of assuring the producer that the entire produce will be procured in the village and that payment would be made at the time of procurement itself. He made the system work and it has now spread through the cooperative dairying network into the farthest corner of India. The system is capable of expansion and it must grow

to a level where it can serve the last Indian to whom the State wants to deliver nutrition at an affordable price.

Presuming that the State is able to procure a sufficiency of milk, pulses and grain, how does it ensure that the commodities actually reach the ultimate beneficiary? At present from the public distribution system we exclude anyone not licensed under the system. No single model need be followed and we should co-opt anyone, potential beneficiaries, existing trade arrangements, existing retail arrangements, the cooperative sector, government distribution outlets, in fact anyone who is prepared to participate in the great adventure of bringing nutrition to people.

If consumption increases there will be shortfalls because demand for milk, pulses and cereals will substantially increase. That is not the weakness of this proposal but its strength because the objective is to increase the consumption of these items. Provided that at the procurement end the producer receives a fair price and without delay, he will have an incentive to increase production and, therefore, growth in consumption should lead to a growth in production.

How will money be raised for paying the subsidy to the producers? The most obvious way is to tax real estate, a sector which is growing very rapidly and in which profit goes to the developer, with very little being available for schemes of public welfare. There has to be a very substantial incremental value tax on real estate because of the booming land prices. The black market in property should be ruthlessly investigated and the entire underground money market be made to pay hefty taxes to the nutrition programme. Cross subsidising the programme by levies on corporate houses and on the relatively affluent is justified in a State wedded to a just social order.

There is a school of thought in India, vastly influenced by the World Bank, which favours cash subsidies to the poor so that they can buy whatever they want. This argument is fraught with many dangers, the most obvious of which would be straight embezzlement of funds meant for cash subsidies to the poor. If somehow money is made available and there is no control over prices, then the normal law of demand and supply would push up commodity prices without necessarily promoting greater production, thus leaving the poor exactly where they were before the subsidy, that is, not being able to afford the commodities necessary for daily living. This idea of direct cash payment to the poor needs to be rejected out of hand.
