

### 13.15 Why is there hunger and famine in the world today?

**Background:** Amartya Sen was the winner of the 1998 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science. He has changed the way economists think about issues such as collective decision-making, welfare economics and measuring poverty. He pioneered the use of economic tools to highlight gender inequality and helped the United Nations devise its Human Development Index. Sen is primarily known for his work on the causes of famine and his assertion that famines do not occur in democracies. Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, physicist, and environmental activist who champions the rights of small farmers and opposes unrestrained globalization.

#### Questions

1. What is Sen's main argument about famine?
2. What is Shiva's response to Sen?
3. Whose arguments do you find more persuasive? Explain.



#### A. Amartya Sen, "Why Half the Planet is Hungry" (*Observer of London*, June 2002)

**Source:** <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/211/44284.html>

A. Widespread hunger in the world is primarily related to poverty. It is not principally connected with food production at all. Indeed, over the course of the last quarter of a century, the prices of the principal staple foods (such as rice, wheat etc) have fallen by much more than half in 'real' terms. If there is more demand for food, in the present state of world technology and availability of resources, the production will correspondingly increase. The demand for food is restrained mainly by lack of income. And the same factor explains the large number of people who are hungry across the world. Given their income levels, they are not able to buy enough food, and as a consequence these people. . . live with hunger. But it is not adequate to look only at incomes. There is need to look also at the political circumstances that allow famine and hunger. If the survival of a government is threatened by the prevalence of hunger, the government has an incentive to deal with the situation. Incomes can be expanded both by policies that raise overall income and also by redistributive policies which provide employment, and thus tackle one of the principal reasons for hunger.

B. In democratic countries, even very poor ones, the survival of the ruling government would be threatened by famine, since elections are not easy to win after famines; nor is it easy to withstand criticism of opposition parties and newspapers. That is why famine does not occur in democratic countries. Unfortunately, there are a great many countries in the world which do not yet have democratic systems. Indeed, as a country like Zimbabwe ceases to be a functioning democracy, its earlier ability to avoid famines in very adverse food situations (for which Zimbabwe had an excellent record in the 1970s and 1980s) becomes weakened. A more authoritarian Zimbabwe is now facing considerable danger of famine. Alas, hunger in the non-acute form of endemic under-nourishment often turns out to be not particularly politically explosive.

C. Even democratic governments can survive with a good deal of regular undernourishment. For example, while famines have been eliminated in democratic India (they disappeared immediately in 1947, with Independence and multi-party elections), there is a remarkable continuation of endemic undernourishment in a non-acute form. Deprivation of this kind can reduce life expectancy, increase the rate of morbidity, and even lead to under-development of mental capacities of children. If the political parties do not succeed in making endemic hunger into a politically active issue, hunger in this non-acute form can go on even in democratic countries.

#### B. Vandana Shiva, "The Real Reasons for Hunger" (*The Guardian*, June 2002)

**Source:** <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jun/23/1>

A. 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 [warehouses] are overflowing. 300 to 400 million Rupees are being spent daily to stock food of which 35% is rotting.

B. 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.

C. 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. 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.