

Professor Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate of the Department of Economics, Harvard University, experienced the horrors of the 1943 famine in Bengal as a 9-year-old boy, and argued in the Arturo-Tanco Memorial Lecture, reprinted in ISR in 1991, that systematic public action can eliminate the terrible problems of starvation and hunger in the present world.

He divides his subject into acute famine and endemic deprivation. No acute famines have occurred in India since Independence in 1947, and a number of threatened famines in 1973, 1979 and 1987 were prevented by rapid public action before they could become major killers. However, chronic under-nourishment and endemic deprivation are still prevalent in India, due to parasitic diseases and also partly lack of public health and absence of female education. Quoting the State of Kerala, in south-west India, when life expectancy at birth is compared with other Indian States, Kerala has a remarkably longer expectancy of 70 years than the Indian average of about 57 years. Massive female education began as early as 1817, when Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai was the ruling female Monarch of the State of Travancore. Other examples are Cuba and China, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea where massive investments in public health, epidemiological control and basic education have brought an equal prolongation of life. It is noteworthy to realise that poor countries can afford public health and education, because of low wages to nurses and teachers.

Quoting examples of famines in India and elsewhere, Sen maintains that these are due to loss of purchasing power entitlements by various groups of people in particular regions and thus lead to starvation. Different economic factors are responsible for this loss, and he recommends that public employment and the payment of cash wages is an efficient manner of counteraction, better than trying long-term increased food production or camp life with free food. Successful cases from India and Sub-Saharan Africa are quoted.

In Sen's opinion the real obstacles to efficient famine prevention and amelioration lie in undemocratic governments and a censorship of the media. Governments will take action when threatened with loss of power, and only in a free democracy can the news media and an efficient political opposition, compel Governments to take early and worthwhile counter-famine action. Ultimately the protest of the public is the most essential aspect of the whole process. The people must fully use the democratic process to force the government to take the right preventive measures and rid the country not only of spectacular famines, but also of endemic under-nourishment.