

Providing wholesome food for rural poor is the greatest charity

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In every religion, culture and civilization feeding the poor and hungry is considered one of the most noble deeds. In Hindu religion one gets tremendous *punya* and good karmas by feeding the poor. In fact one of the rituals in *Pind Daan* is feeding the poor so as to free the spirits of one's ancestors.

However such large scale feeding will require huge investment both in resources and time. A better alternative is to create conditions by which proper wholesome food is available to all the rural poor at affordable price. Getting this done will be the biggest charity!

Our work with the rural poor in villages of Western Maharashtra has shown that most of these people are landless laborers. After working the whole day in the fields in scorching sun they come home in the evening and have to cook for the whole family. The cooking is done on the most primitive chulha (wood stove) which results in tremendous indoor air pollution. Many of them also have no electricity so they use primitive and polluting kerosene lamps. World Health Organization (WHO) data has shown that about 300,000 deaths/year in India can be directly attributed to indoor air pollution in such huts. At the same time this pollution results in many respiratory ailments and these people spend close to Rs. 200-400/month on medical bills.

Besides the pollution, rural poor also eat very poor diet. They buy whatever is available daily at Public Distribution System (PDS) shops and most of the times these shops are out of rations. Thus they cook whatever is available. The hard work together with poor eating takes a heavy toll on their health. Besides this malnutrition also affects the physical and mental health of their children and may lead to creation of a whole generation of mentally challenged citizens.

Poverty to my mind is not an absence of material goods but not getting enough wholesome food. We are what we eat!

Rural Restaurants

So I feel that the best way to provide adequate food for rural poor is by setting up rural restaurants on large scale. These restaurants will be similar to regular ones but for people below poverty line (BPL) they will provide meals at subsidized rates. These citizens will pay only Rs. 10 per meal and the rest, which is expected to be quite small, will come as a part of Government subsidy.

With existing open market prices of vegetables and groceries average cost of simple meal for a family of four comes to Rs. 50/meal or Rs. 12.50/person per meal. If the PDS prices are taken for the groceries then the average cost will be Rs. 7.50/person per meal. This makes the subsidy approximately Rs. 2.50/person per meal only and hence quite small.

The buying of meals could be facilitated by the use of UID (Aadhar) card by rural poor. The total cost should be Rs. 30/day for three vegetarian meals of breakfast, lunch and dinner. Presently an average wage of laborer is ~ Rs. 100/day. Hence with this pricing 30% of his wages will be spent on food. In developed countries like U.S. an average citizen spends < 10% of his/her total disposable income on food.

The rural poor will get better nutrition and tasty food by eating in these restaurants. Besides the time saved can be used for resting and other gainful activities like teaching children.

Since the food will not be cooked in huts, this strategy will result in less pollution in rural households. This will be beneficial for their health. Besides, women's chores will be reduced drastically. Another advantage of eating in these restaurants will be increased social interaction of rural poor since this could also become a meeting place.

Eating in restaurants will also require fewer utensils in house and hence less expenditure. For other things like hot water for bath, making tea, boiling milk and cooking on holidays some utensils and fuel will be required. Our Institute [NARI](#) has developed an extremely efficient and environment-friendly [lanstove](#) which provides simultaneously both light and heat for cooking and hence may provide the necessary functions.

Cooking is a luxury for rich and upper middle class. For rural and urban poor it is a chore and a misery. Hence subsidized meals in rural restaurants are a necessity for these people.

How can this be done?

Providing reasonably priced wholesome food is the basic aim and program of Government of India (GOI). This is the basis of their much touted food security program. However in 65 years they have not been able to do so. Thus I feel a public-private partnership can help in this.

To help the restaurant owners the GOI or state Governments should provide them with soft loans and other line of credit for setting up such facilities.

Corporate world can take this up as a part of their corporate social responsibility activity. Their participation will help ensure good quality restaurants and services. Besides the charitable work, this will also make good business sense.

McDonald's-type restaurant systems for rural areas can be a good model to be set up for quality control both in terms of hygiene and in terms of quality of food material. However focus will be on availability of wholesome simple vegetarian food in these restaurants.

More clientele (volumes) will make these restaurants economical. Existing models of dhabas, udipi-type restaurants etc. can be used in this scheme. These restaurants may also be able to provide midday meals in rural schools. At present the midday meal program is faltering due to various reasons.

Food coupons in western countries provide cheap food for poor. However quite a number of fast food restaurants in US do not accept them. Besides these coupons are most of the times used for non-food items. It will be mandatory for rural restaurants to accept payment via UID cards for BPL citizens. Existing soup kitchens, *langers* and temple food are based on charity. For large scale rural use it should be based on good social enterprise business model.

Cooking food in these restaurants will also result in much more efficient use of energy since energy/kg of food cooked in households is greater than that in restaurants. The main thing however will be to reduce drastically the food wastage in these restaurants.

Rural restaurants can also be forced to use clean fuels like LPG or locally produced biomass-based liquid fuels. This strategy is very difficult to enforce for individual households.

Large scale employment generation in rural areas may result because of this activity. With an average norm of 30 people employed/100-chair restaurant, this program has the potential of generating about 20 million jobs permanently in rural areas. Besides the infrastructure development in setting up restaurants and establishing the food chain etc will help the local farmers and will create huge wealth generation in these areas.

In the long run this strategy may provide better food security for rural poor than the existing one which is based on cheap food availability in PDS – a system which is prone to corruption and leakage.

In India huge donations are given both in cash and kind to temples. Thus most of the temples are very rich. It will be better if somehow these donations can be channeled to create rural restaurants. This will help assuage the feelings of the giver and at the same time provide food to rural poor. The blessings of the rural poor to my mind will be far more powerful than those of the gods in temples!

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