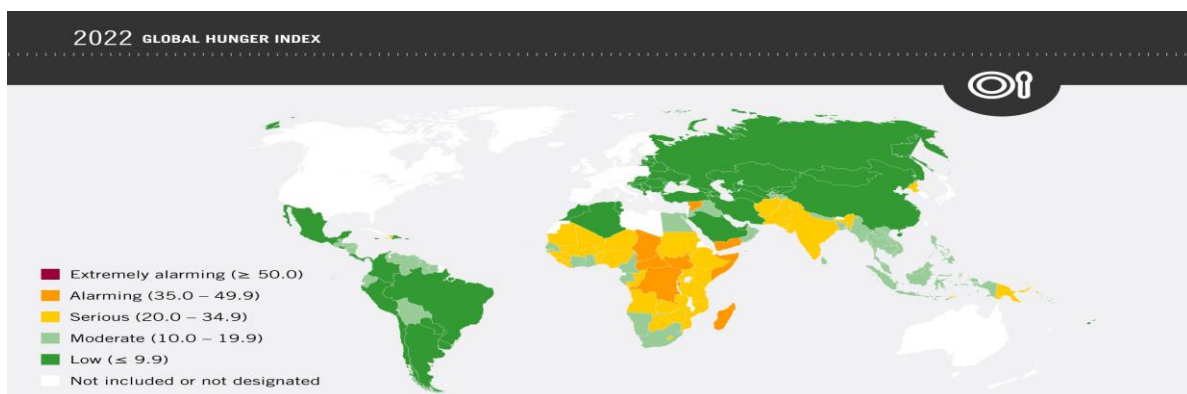


## THE HUNGRY BODY

The world is growing hotter - and hungrier. In 200 BC, the early Roman playwright, Plautus, wrote a remarkable poem describing his town's inhabitants as 'shrunk up with hunger'. Today, two millennia later, technologies from automated grain harvesters to advanced irrigation systems, to sensor drones that monitor minute changes in weather-systems have, in tandem with more traditional measures of crop nurture, ensured that there is more than enough food to feed the whole species. *Why should anyone go hungry in such a brave new world?*

True, the population of the world has grown exponentially from around 200 million in Plautus' time to 8 billion today but, since we have plenty of food to go around, why is almost half the population of the world still going hungry? Why is India, which has been food-sufficient since the Green Revolution of the 1960s, still ranked at 111 out of 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index?



The elimination of hunger stands high at number 2 among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN. However, this powerful international body has openly admitted that it will not in fact achieve its previous time-bound 2030 'zero hunger goal'. Far from being eliminated, world hunger and malnutrition appear to be growing alarmingly. Why is this so?

This book will show why the paradox of hunger confronts us so starkly even in the 21st century. Unlike most statistically driven indices which demonstrate that hunger is a gnawing problem but do not offer anything but the most general, large-scale explanations of why it persists - poverty, misgovernance, wars, famines and floods - *The Hungry Body* offers a new perspective.

In our story, backed by the latest research, we go back to the evolutionary roots of hunger as an 'early warning system' shared by all of humanity. Each of us has a 'hunger clock' built into our bodies as a chief survival mechanism. This clock is not a system designed for elimination: it is a constant tick-tock in human and other species that regulates our life-rhythms from birth to death. *As long as we have bodies, we cannot get rid of our hunger-clocks.* This is the **first**, crucial insight in our reasoning about naive approaches to SDG 2.

'Zero-hunger' is simply *not* a plausible goal. We will always be hungry; we will always be thirsty. That is the truth, but the great consolation is that *none of us need lack for food.* This is because what *is* quite easily achievable is sustainable nutrition, i.e. food-sovereignty and food-security across geographies. Intellectuals and scientists everywhere are, after all, happy to embrace the view that the presence of nature in our lives, despite its rages, is essential to everyone living fulfilled lives. Despite fears of precipitous 'climate change', seasons and weather-fronts cannot, indeed *should not*, be merrily done away with even if we could do so. William Shakespeare wisely put it like this almost five centuries ago: *One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.*

What societies and individuals *can* do in the face of apocalyptic climate change is to take measures in their own backyards such as changing the practice, in India, of using chulhas that exacerbate smoke emissions, damping down on carbon emissions in rich countries by switching to electrical vehicles or using 'green gas' fuels, and generally regulating thoughtless waste and consumption. Is this enough? This is where government spends on education and infrastructure, in rich and poor nations alike, is critical to persuading the public to accept the dire truths of climate change. *So why is this rather straightforward logic so difficult to accept when it comes to hunger* being an inalienable part of deep nature programmed into our bodies that we have to understand and regulate rather than violently seek to eliminate in the guise of 'zero hunger'?

Food, exactly like the right to breathe clean air, is a basic human right. So this book asks - and answers - the *key question about why even the limited, doable goal of food security is increasingly a vanishing point in the 'advanced' 21<sup>st</sup> century*. First though, we have to digest, so to speak, a fundamental point. Hunger as a sensation, a craving, a chief driver of our emotions, is in fact *even more basic than sexuality for the survival of the human species*. Simply put, the twin-engines of hunger and food have long motivated inventive creative moves across human cultures.

The desire for food - and of course, water - undergirds our desire for sex and various other hedonisms. Indeed, the word for desire in Buddhism is *tanha*, derived from the Sanskrit *trishna*, meaning 'thirst'. And modern biology supports this claim by telling us that the composition of human blood is 70% the same as that of sea-water, even though there are significant differences in levels of magnesium, zinc and so forth. As the Oceanographic website beautifully phrases it: *there is an ocean within us* (<https://oceanographicmagazine.com/oceanviz/98-match-between-human-blood-and-sea-water/>) This book will investigate those internal, mental tides of hunger and thirst.

*I will now tell just one of the many stories in this book that so breaks my heart that I almost have to shut my eyes as I type. As my very ill father lay in bed a few years ago, he asked for water. The doctor on standby forbade this: she said that to give him water would interfere with his medication. An hour or so later, my father died. In another place, another time, we would never have withheld that water. How do we deal with such an eternity of suffering imposed by the conditions of the modern, medicalised world? This is one of the tragedies the book contemplates.*

Let us fast-forward now and position ourselves as citizens of this comfortable, yet discomfiting, modern world that most readers of this book - and I, as its author - inhabit today. We very probably live in a city (alongside 73% of our fellow humans); we are literate (as are 85% of other humans); moreover, we have quickly transitioned to becoming cosmopolitan *food-literates* as well, with at least an A-to-Z (artichokes to zucchini) school-leaving certificate, even though we may not be PhD-level food connoisseurs like Chefs Jamie Oliver or Sanjeev Kapur. We have, in addition, seamlessly adapted to cell-phones, computers and the Internet as constitutive of our sociobiological environments, feeling quite lost and limbless without them (75%). *Most importantly, few of us have ever experienced severe, debilitating hunger* (100%). It follows that when we order take-aways from Zomato or DoorDash, or buy special ingredients for a 'great' recipe from an online cooking-site, *we are not exactly driven by raw hunger but something else*.

This book explores what that 'something else' is. As our social and social-media environments change radically and we rapidly urbanise, it's obvious our food habits have changed. Many now eat not because their body clocks demand food but, often, from *loneliness, anxiety, binge-eating*. Food has always been a *major emotional locus*; eating together was celebratory and joyous in the past - a symbol of togetherness. It still is. And yet, *food emotions have suddenly grown ominously darker* the world over. Pathologies such as obesity, bulimia and body-shaming are growing, especially amongst the urban young and vocal foodies. We cannot underestimate the import of this huge change in our evolutionary habitats. This is our **second** alarming insight.

No guilt-tripping please, but the diets of the well-off are guided by ‘mouth-watering’ advertisements and tailored health-requirements. Others starve but remain part of the peripheral vision of the food-secure. They are invisibilised. Honestly, as our flat-screens are flooded with images of food-plenty, how many photograph of starving children stranded in South Sudan ever run alongside? Could our fragile nerves take it if they did? Fact is, unlike climate change, hunger is just not an edgy subject anymore: it is not sexy, it is someone else’s problem. *Why is this?* Well, it is undeniable that new comfort-zones are being created in an increasingly polarised world. Global trends indicate that both *income inequality* and *food inequality* are sharply escalating between, as well as within, countries in these first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is a period in world history when we are able to communicate in milli-seconds at warp-speed, but it is also a time when we can manipulate our narratives more efficiently than ever: we do not have to hear what we do not want to hear. So much ‘freedom to choose’, so many shiny objects in our virtual vicinities, means that we can exercise the choice to ignore the massive polarisation between the emotional and imaginative worlds of the haves and have-nots at the click of a button. The striking irony is that the fact of food-polarisation today has *nothing at all* to do with the actual availability of food but everything to do with a largely market-driven choice to just screen out the problem.

This **third** insight on the *narrative invisibility of global ‘food-polarisation’* in a technology addicted world requires immediate refocussing of how we view the interconnections between food and hunger today. The question is: how might such an imaginative refocus be achieved? *The Hungry Body* suggests a solution to this basic problem, to which we come a little later in the book when we look at the crucial roles that art and literature play in bringing ‘hunger pangs’ to life in a way that ‘flat-stats’ simply cannot. For now, backing up our argument with some hard figures from one of the largest businesses worldwide, the thriving food industry, we find that:

Revenue in the food market amounts to US\$ 9.12 *trillion* in 2024. The market is expected to grow annually by 6.47%. in relation to total population figures, per person revenues of US\$1,177.00 are generated in 2024. (<https://www.statista.com/outlook/cmo/food/worldwide> )

If we go into these figures a bit more, a **fourth** obvious insight emerges: *food is not scarce, but buying power is skewed*. For example: Statista.com informs us that products such as pet-foods, baby foods and ‘convenience foods’ command a growing market. This is all good of course *but* the citizens of the world who buy pet-foods do not intersect in any conceivable Venn-diagram with those who scrounge for food in the dirt. So where does the book’s argument go from here?

*Reinterpreting the present from the perspective of history* is a first obvious step. For example, the devastating Bengal Famine of 1934 in which more than three million people died is widely described as a ‘man-made famine’ by economic historians because, in this case, it was not that the crops had failed. There was no drought at all but the colonial administration, directed from the very top by the great statesman, Winston Churchill, directed food-plenty away from the Bengal villages to the feed the Allied armies. Their blithe strategic thinking at the time was that food-consumption could be ‘reduced’ for the Bengal peasantry to benefit soldiers during the crisis of WWII. The ‘free-world’ was after all, fighting the ‘Axis of Evil’ As it happened, the colonial British succeeded marvellously in achieving their objective, not least because the poor Bengal peasants did not have the money-power to buy back the grain that they themselves had grown.

Today, most of the ‘developed’ world greatly appreciates Churchill’s speech (‘we shall fight on the beaches... we shall fight in the fields ’ etc.) and Zelenski repeats them with great rhetorical effect in war-torn Ukraine today - but few have heard of, or care about, the ‘invisible’ loss of 3 million in the Bengal famine. Looked at from this perspective, it seems a reasonable hypothesis that, just as in the case of the Bengal famine, high-level market strategies today that cater to the sophisticated food preferences of the rich have largely succeeded *in erasing the hungry poor from the world map of desire*. This is the **fifth** insight we derive about hunger and its imaginative

erasure from a polarised history of modernity. *Starvation in the post-industrial world is entirely manmade and its moral compass driven by an ethic designed to erase empathy for 'the other'.*

Consider another statistic: "The food-market's largest segment is... **Meat**...[and] in global comparison, most revenue is generated in China." *The Hungry Body* suggests that meat is an expensive food to cure, can and export to faraway destinations, but the prices of products from China are competitive in this regard, since it has a socialist economy but not so much a democratic one. An aside: These political and economic facts about meat also comport, amazingly, with our larger evolutionary narrative as, ever since humans discovered fire in prehistory, the human gut *cannot tolerate raw meat* and, unlike, say a dog's gut, depends on it being cooked to consume. A story:

*Just before the advent of Covid, in late October 2019, I went for an academic conference to the University of Changsha, situated in the beautiful Hunan province in which Mao Tse Tung was born and educated. At Changsha, I not only enjoyed the most stimulating intellectual company but feasted on a variety of deliciously prepared foods, including meats. Then a very strange thing happened. On my return to Delhi, I found I had completely lost my sense of taste. Sour, sweet, salty, bitter or umami (meaty), neither my taste buds, nor my tongue, could detect any of these flavours. For two months or more, I might have been chewing on rubber and this affected my appetite, my sense of well-being, enormously. Not only did I not want to eat, I felt oddly estranged from the world, from people. Finally, I was diagnosed with 'ageusia' - a condition caused by a variety of infections and associated today with Covid, although I displayed no other Covid-symptoms at all.*

Did I have an early version of Covid, a strain of flu maybe resembling Covid? I will never know but that is hardly the point. The point is that I reacted to something 'invisible' or 'in the air' through an embodied system which scientists call 'qualia'. **Qualia** are also known as 'raw feels': what this means is that when we see red, or hear thunder, or taste sweetness, there is instant feedback to our brains. That is why it was so natural when, on my return from China, I felt I had lost something very intimate. It was as if that part of my body had died. Like the 'Body Clock' that internally warns us that we are hungry and that we must renew our bodies with nutrition or fade away, we are born equipped with a range of **qualia sensors**. These are the senses of *taste, smell, touch, hearing* and *smell* which function, like hunger, to alert our bodies to sensuous pleasures in the world as well possible dangers. Now we come to the **sixth** insight in the book.

There is exciting cutting-edge research in the developed world on all the five senses. However, hunger, also an internalised, immediate qualia sensation, a 'raw feel', is almost completely ignored in current research. Why? Again, two reasons seem preeminent: the first is *historical* and the second *psychological*. The historical reason, as we observe from the Global Hunger map 2022, is that the developed countries of the world are absent from it. Hunger, which we might call *the sixth sense*, is vital to our survival. Yet it has, in effect, been eliminated from the narrative imagination of the west for the past 75 'post-colonial' years, further accentuating the polarisation between the 'first' world and the 'third'. The apathy towards hunger research in the advanced nations is, to a great extent, explained by an obvious fact: *it simply lacks hungry bodies to study*. Just as malaria, cholera etc., prevalent in the west from the middle ages on, were redesignated as 'tropical diseases' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century once environmental conditions in the west had improved, so it is with hunger in the 21<sup>st</sup>: what we witness here is a radical renarrativisation of history.

Here is a picture that illustrates, in the context of hunger research, how our biological **qualia** can sometime give us *contradictory information* that we then have to decode and renarrativise.

.



MARBLE SLURRY & SALT DESERT, RAJASTHAN

In this photograph, our eyes inform that a cold 'snowy' landscape lies before us. However, if we were actually there, on the spot, we would find that the temperature was around 50 degrees and our skins were burning. A story narrated from the point of view of a worker, often migrant and itinerant, undertaking this backbreaking labour *pet ke liye* (for the sake of the stomach) could arouse real curiosity, real empathy, in us. We might want to reach out - but such historical and geographical 'qualia' facts are seldom foregrounded in our *national narratives of who we are*.

The *psychological reason* is equally interesting. It turns out that all qualia sensations, including hunger, are extremely difficult to describe in language, precisely because they are directly felt, immediate. Unlike abstract concepts such as 'truth' or 'freedom' which depend on verbalisation, qualia, as embodied sensations, are curiously resistant to language capture. For example, you can easily point to the colour red in the real world, but if asked to describe it, you can only fall back on declaring metaphorically that quality of 'redness' is 'like', say, blood or a rose. No more.

This brings us to the **seventh** insight of the book. Counterintuitively, the biggest source of data we have at the moment on hunger resides in the realm of narrative fiction. Metaphor, fiction, poetry down the ages have provided us the sharpest, most in-depth descriptions of how hunger affects mental states as well as bodies. We have to turn to great literary texts such Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*, Rabindranath Tagore's *Hungry Stones* and Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* to understand the qualitative phenomenon of hunger.

Again, why? Linguists, psychologists and philosophers point out that there are, in fact, excellent biological reasons for our reliance on literature to understand the complex manifestations of hunger. It happens that while our 'old brain' qualia sense-perceptions (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell and hunger) help us react in quick-time 'without thinking', they are hard to describe in language because this sophisticated communication system, with future-oriented decision-making powers connected to the 'thinking forebrain', developed much later. This *evolutionary* reason makes us very reliant on literature and art to describe for us the 'raw feel' of hunger.

*The Hungry Body* argues that storytellers have been 'expert resource persons' across cultures, enabling us to interpret an essential qualia warning-system like hunger. They help us connect the phenomenology of hunger (our hunger experiences; see Sharman 2005) to its complex epistemology (our knowledge of/about hunger; see Nwonka 2016). Narrative analysis is thus a main research tool for us, not only because narratives are 'discourse universals' found in every human culture but also because they basic 'empathy machines' (Nair 2003, 2011, 2015, 2022).

But can fictional texts really contribute to a debate on basic social questions relating to the alleviation of hunger? I believe that they do so by revealing a *fundamental flaw* in most top-down, statistically guided, policy recommendations that concern the amelioration of distress. In our straightjacketed bureaucratic imaginations, the poor are often conceptualized as **mere bodies**. These 'masses' must be fed, clothed and kept healthy - but their individuality is less than important in a 'developing society'. This cardinal error leads to our **eighth** and final insight.

All humans, including the children most likely to suffer the lifelong effects of malnutrition, are *perpetual thinking machines*, fuelled by endless desires, intentions and emotions. It is precisely these mental resources that give the 'common man' the uncommon resilience to resist the good

advice of 'the authorities' and proceed on long marches, such as the ones they undertook during the first phase of Covid in India without any support from the state, risking death along the way. The simple biological truth is that, although 'culture' acts like a huge magnifying glass, highlighting social differences, there is actually less than 1% genetic difference between us all. Skin-colour, sex, height, facial physiognomies, even propensities to illness, are all dependent on the tiniest jiggle of a chromosome, the chemical and electrical composition of brains and bodies.

Disciplines like literature, philosophy and psychology are critical thinking tools because they typically view civilization and its discontents in terms of *insubordinate minds* rather than just as *passive bodies*. They demonstrate that human minds are idea factories that can produce either horror or healing, fake news or true insight. That is why, if the world today collectively seeks to effect a major paradigm shift *from the familiar competitive model of 'the survival of the fittest' to the compassionate one of 'the survival of the weakest'* –the poor, the sick and the old – the deep probes of the human sciences could prove invaluable in this endeavor, since a post-coronavirus situation, like a post-truth one, will depend on a sophisticated skills-set that can separate fake data from real and *derive qualitative empathy from quantitative graphs*. Arguably then, in terms of our shared humanity, the global North and South have much to learn from each other: we Indians will benefit as much from reading Hamsun's dark and complex portrayal of hunger as Norwegians from, say, Premchand's descriptions of utter destitution in 'Kafan' or *Godaan*. Here is a long extract from Hamsun's *Hunger* that speaks for itself - and for all of us, even today.

*The pains of hunger were unbearable and never left me alone. I swallowed spit over and over to take the edge off, and I felt it did some good. I had had very little to eat generally for several weeks, even before this current trouble, and my strength now was falling off noticeably. Whenever I had been lucky and scraped up five kroner by some maneuver or other, the money never managed to last long enough to get me back on my feet before a new famine fell on me....How could it be that nothing ever turned up for me! Didn't I have the same right to life as anybody else, Pascha, the rarebook seller, for example, or Hennechen, the steamship clerk? And didn't I have shoulders like a giant and two strong arms for work, and hadn't I in fact tried to get a job chopping wood on Møller Street to earn my bread? Was I lazy? Hadn't I applied for jobs... and worked night and day like a madman? And hadn't I lived like a miser, eaten bread and milk when I was rich, bread when I wasn't, and gone hungry when I had nothing? Did I live in a hotel, did I have a suite of rooms on the second floor? I lived in a shack, a loft, in a tinsmith's shop deserted by both God and man since last winter because snow came in.*

Substitute the word 'snow' in this passage and you will recognize the unsentimental accuracy of this description in 21<sup>st</sup> century India. For all the well-intentioned talk of 'we are in this together' we heard so frequently in Covid times, a novel like *Hunger* forces us to remember that although every society in the world struggles with the demeaning facts of inequality, it is invariably those citizens whose rights, even in the best of times, come last, who are the first to suffer when disaster hits. They may have done nothing in the least criminal but they are the ones most likely to be 'criminalized' for breaking the rules. Social and natural crises, in short, throw into sharp relief the fissures that *already exist* within cultures: between those at the edge of poverty lines and those at the pinnacles of the social order. *The Hungry Body* strongly makes this case.

Norway today is one of the richest countries in the world, and ranks first on several global indices, such the Human Development Index (HDI), the Index of Public Integrity (IPI) as well as the Democracy Index (DI). In contrast, India stands unconscionably low on these indices, as well as on the Global Hunger Index. This is not an attempt at self-flagellation; it is simply to observe that, at first glance, there seem to be few points of comparison between these two vastly different countries. For starters, India's size, diversity and colonial past implies that its tryst with democracy and development is incommensurable with Norway's, which has a population of just about five and a half million. Yet, the fact is that hunger and farmland poverty were a grim

reality in Norway not all that long ago, leaving an indelible mark on the psyche of the nation. Hamsun's novel *Hunger* is a literary manifestation of that scar that we put aside at our peril. And this brings us to the proposed chapter plan for the book, one of the themes of which is the way in which literary texts, music and art manage to build empathy-bridges across deep cultural fjords.

#### CHAPTER PLAN:

#### **BODY CLOCKS: THE EVOLUTION OF HUNGER**

#### **A TALE OF TWO CITIES: CHRISTIANIA AND CALCUTTA**

**CHAPTER 1.** HUNGER AS AN EMBODIED HISTORY OF MEMORY AND FORGETTING

**CHAPTER 2.** FOOD SECURITY AS THE UNACHIEVED GOAL OF SDG 2

**CHAPTER 3.** FAMINES AND HUNGRY BODIES IN COLONIAL INDIA

#### **IMAGINING A NATION: HUNGER AND THE IDEA OF INDIA**

**CHAPTER 4.** NATIONAL HOPE: THE GREEN REVOLUTION AND THE MIDDAY MEAL SCHEME

**CHAPTER 5.** NATIONAL DESPAIR: FROM FARMERS' SUICIDES TO THE COVID MIGRANT CRISIS

**CHAPTER 6.** INDIA'S POSITION ON THE GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

#### **THE HUNGER STRIKE: VOLUNTARY VERSUS INVOLUNTARY HUNGER**

**CHAPTER 7.** THE POLITICS OF HUNGER: EMACIATED BODIES FROM GANDHI TO G.D. AGARWAL

**CHAPTER 8.** MODERN PATHOLOGIES OF HUNGER: ANOREXIA, OBESITY & BODY SHAMING

**CHAPTER 9.** HUNGER, FOOD AND TASTE PREFERENCES IN CITIES AND IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

#### **CHANGING OUR MINDS, CHANGING OUR BODIES**

**CHAPTER 9.** LITERARY & ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF FOOD & HUNGER ACROSS CULTURES

**CHAPTER 10.** FOOD EMOTIONS & HUNGER ANOMIES: THE LONELINESS OF HUNGRY PEOPLE

**CHAPTER 11.** HUNGER GAMES: THE ETHICS & EPISTEMOLOGY OF HUNGER

#### **STAYING HUNGRY, STAYING FOOLISH? FUTURE RECIPES FOR THE HUNGERS OF THE MIND & BODY**

To summarise and reiterate, this book raises a basic question: *What is it about the phenomenon of hunger that it remains so resistant to concerted efforts to bring about a future where there will be a more just and equitable distribution of basic food resources?* Part of the answer is that we still do not understand very well how this foundational evolutionary system essential to our very survival manifests across time and place. We have relatively little qualitative, organized data, for example, on:

- The times when the body is hungry and demands food, based on its pre-set 'hunger clock'
- The delayed effects of hunger in childhood on later life
- The rhythms of hunger as patterning the day to day lives of families and communities
- The stories of hunger from young adults – and the ways these play out in time
- The narratives of leaders who have used the 'hunger strike' as a political tool in times of crisis
- The future(s) of hunger and justice as cultural moves and countermoves on a global timeline

This book creates this *essential qualitative database*. It then grapples with the rich information provided by it. Hunger, initially, seems such a simple word, such an uncomplicated feeling: only children protest about it. What this book shows is that the evolutionary phenomenon of hunger provides crucial insights into a *global structure* of political, cultural, economic and affective enmeshments. For the first time, we have curated a **hunger archive** for the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we can be collectively moved by, and empathise with. It is widely known that a wired-in feature of

the human brain that is it reacts *emotionally* to stories (Dennett 1991, Carroll 2004, Nair 2014). My hypothesis, therefore, is that a simple measure such as widely disseminating hunger narratives will bring out its deep *rasa* roots (Nair 2021) - and thus more effectively accomplish the task of communities world-wide pulling together on the **SDG-2 goal** of ameliorating hunger than impenetrable, top-down statistics that are evolutionarily very hard for our brains to decode. The global South can seize the initiative here. It can convince the world that, like tackling climate change, this is a project that's *basic to being human*. Our research so far has:

**a.** elicited qualitative responses at different sites (schools, universities, community centers), among different age-groups, to a set of 'hunger-time' narratives described in *key literary texts*: songs, films and artworks, both local and global.

**b.** collected children and young adults' (who constitute the world hungriest cohort) narratives of their hunger experiences, as well as their responses to a detailed questionnaire that records the times when they feel most hungry in a 24-hour cycle, their changing tastes in food, and emotional attitudes towards hunger, etc.

**c.** developed qualitative hunger questionnaires to record the views of children, mothers, urban migrant workers and others, concerning food injustice/security/sovereignty, liaising with local bodies such as Panchayats, the Centers for Equity and Policy Studies, as well as international groups such as the UN and WHO with offices in Delhi, who are all working on SDG 2.

**d.** presented a robust theoretical framework, rooted in 'deep history', to guide an empathy-generating, time-sensitive approach to the future(s) of world hunger.

**e.** is in the process of setting up 'hunger-clocks' in some India's hungriest and poorest districts. As this idea of a manmade clock that mimics and makes manifest of the rhythms of our biological hunger clocks is a new one, I elaborate some of its possible features in this proposal, just as an exemplar.

1. A Hunger Clock is a **physical installation** with an **online presence**.
2. It pertains to **SDG Goal 2** and constitutes **people's local response** to the perceived failure of a country's government and/or the UN and other agencies to effectively tackle the challenge of world hunger in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
3. Its purpose is to make the problem of hunger **visible and tractable**, including to top policy makers
4. It is **owned by the people** of a 'hungry' region and is, ideally, **designed** by them using local materials but perhaps aided by technical expertise from other regions
5. It will involve **time-spends and initiatives by local institutions** such as schools, municipal officials, courts etc.
6. It is a clock based on hope, in contrast, say, to a 2-minutes-2-midnight Domsday Clock
7. Capture salient '**facts**' about hunger as the phenomenon is perceived by the people actually suffering from hunger, as well as it is globally understood by world 'experts'
8. Indicate the **time required to make a food-sustainable future** in a region/in the world
9. Record **statistical facts** relating to hunger, food waste, food preferences, as well as **recipes, cooking times, healthy versus wicked meals** etc.
10. Record **live testimonies** by the hungry as well as the well-fed
11. Resemble a regular clock but record the passage of time by reflecting on different aspects of hunger **in the span of a day** - such as the times when, let's say, the young in urban versus rural settings feel most hungry
12. Foreground issues related to hunger and **mental health** such as anorexia, obesity, loneliness and so on.



A VISUAL EXAMPLE OF A SIMPLE HUNGER CLOCK

Finally, to end with, here is a short summary of the **who**, **where**, **when** and **why** queries that animate this book.

**WHO?** The main characters in this archive, or ‘the global text of hunger’, are, importantly, those who suffer most from it: women, children and youth, migrants. Other voices include state officials, lawyers, NGOs, artists, writers and academics.

**WHERE?** The nerve centres of the book comprise a network of the 7 hungriest states of India: Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat, as well as locations in India’s two most affluent and largest metropolises, Delhi and Mumbai.



ALIRAJPUR: HUNGER IN INDIA’S POOREST DISTRICT

**WHEN?** In this book, we will track a wide arc of hunger histories from about 1900 when Norway’s Knut Hamsun wrote his great novel *Hunger* to 2025, through the Bengal Famine of 1943, to more recent hunger events etched into history such as the migrant treks back to the villages from the cities during the Covid Crisis of 2022 and the wars in South Sudan, Gaza and Ukraine. Such ‘hunger-games’, this book argues, arise in each case from the fostering of the moral illusion, wrapped in a shiny economic cloak, that it is okay to turn a blind eye to the suffering of those on the peripheries because ‘they’ are not ‘like us’. We must shed this illusion,

**WHY?** Some of the main ‘why’ questions we address in the book concern:

1. **‘Zero Hunger’** is number 2 on a list of 17 SDG Goals. The problem seems eminently solvable but world hunger, including child stunting and malnutrition, is inexplicably growing. Why?
2. **‘Hunger Clocks’** are built into the human body by evolution. Hunger is a chief survival sensation in human and other mammals from birth to death - but is almost completely ignored in current research, which focuses on the ‘qualia’ perceptions of sight, sound,

touch, taste and smell, but never on hunger. Why?

3. **'Hunger Narratives'**: It is very difficult to articulate the sensation of hunger without recourse to literary devices such as metaphor, irony and hyperbole that enable us to feel and empathise with the sensation. This may be why writers and artists across cultures have been best witnesses to hunger in human history. Why?

4. **'Hunger in Cities and Hunger in the Countryside'**: These two scenarios are very different. Why?

But perhaps the most immediate, compelling, question that arises when one proposes a book like *The Hungry Body* is: why focus on India? The answer seems obvious in many ways: India is one of the world's largest democracies in the global South with a daunting population demographic of over a billion citizens of whom more than 60% are under the age of 30; the income gaps between its top 5% of billionaires and its lowest income-band 300 million continue to pull apart alarmingly; India's is a big economy that is attempting to integrate into the world while ensuring that it is not overwhelmed when it opens up its markets to the rest of the world; it produces a large cohort of highly skilled engineers and the like, and yet its school systems are extremely unequal. India's legendary pluralism, not to mention its endemic caste-system has ensured that all sorts of moral positions are acceptable, especially on social media, including being so highly nationalist that some will not admit that India *has* any hungry citizens. And yet this 'patriotic' stance seems belied by the Indian government's recent decision to continue to distribute free grain to 80 million of its citizens, implicitly admitting that hunger still persists as a significant developmental lack in the country. For all these reasons, and more, the Indian subcontinent is an fascinating place to investigate the contradictions of the 'hungry body' as well as the terrifying consequences it signals for the future of hope if it is not urgently attended to.

The other processes in this research include not just the archiving, but the creation of innovative vocabularies for the analysis and storying of hunger. Here again, by way of illustration, we may return to Hamsun's key text *Hunger*. Although there is a perfectly good word for 'hunger' in Norwegian (*sult*), the book's first-person narrator and central character takes it upon himself to invent a whole new word for the feeling of hunger. *Kuboa!* is this new word, and at first, he confesses, it could signify just about anything: *padlock* or *Tivoli Gardens* or *sunrise* or *cattle show* or even *God*. In short, this word appeared out of the blue, standing for the very destabilization of knowledge itself, just as the advent of the coronavirus upended the familiar structures of the world. Scientists and the general public, are still learning the meaning of the word 'coronavirus', bit by painful bit. This is where we might laud the anticipatory genius, the predictive power of literature. Here is a comment from the nameless narrator of *Hunger*, that is, to me, inspiring:

*My thoughts took amazing leaps as I tried to establish the meaning of my new word.*

Perhaps our besieged world is now ready - even hungry - for precisely such 'amazing leaps' of thought - not to mention a new book on the ancient, indelible, subject of hunger. I end with the full text of Plautus' old but unforgettable poem on hunger's ever-present biological 'body clock'.

The gods confound the man who first found out  
How to distinguish hours! Confound him too,  
Who in this place set up a sundial  
To cut and hack my days so wretchedly  
Into small portions—*When I was a boy,*  
*My belly was my sundial:* one more sure,  
Truer, and more exact than any of them.  
This dial told me when 'twas proper time  
To go to dinner, when I had aught to eat—

But now-a-days, why, even when I have,  
I can't fall to, unless the sun give leave.  
The town's so full of these confounded dials,  
The greatest part of its inhabitants  
Shrunk up with hunger, creep along the streets.

**Note:** This book proposal arises out of a large research project supported and funded by the British Academy <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/the-times-of-a-just-transition/> However, it should be make clear that the copyright for any publication that arises out of this research lies with the author and not with the British Academy. My own work on the gnawing subject of hunger began in earnest during Covid when Indian migrant workers began their long treks home from faraway urban work centres. At the time, I wrote articles for the *Hindu* and so forth, as in: <https://www.thehindu.com/books/the-global-text-of-hunger/article31482143.ece> about the possible major paradigm shift needed in order to reach the goals of SDG 2, which, we note, are persistently being pushed back decade by decade. I have also by now presented my work on the importance of qualitative descriptions of hunger in creating narrative empathy in international conferences such as the 9<sup>th</sup> Language Culture and Mind (LCM) conference held in 2022 in Almeria, Spain <https://lcm2022.com/index.php/plenary-speakers/> This research has been surprisingly well-received globally, partly because hunger as a physical and psychological danger had been erased from public memory in Europe and the West for over a century but is now making a dramatic comeback post the crisis in Ukraine, long regarded as the "bread-basket" of Europe, and as the threat of starvation grows ever more serious with new manmade wars from South Sudan to Gaza

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qt2XslRM0to> ABHJIT BANERJI AND THE PRESSURE COOKER

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzGxRxCPkfQcJdmctdgWtGCwBVKr>

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?pli=1#inbox/FMfcgzQbgRkpMSRhpGXRKcSbWclGtqbf> GAZA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qt2XslRM0to>

**Rukmini Bhaya Nair**

**Delhi, July 2024**