

ST.GALLEN SYMPOSIUM

Global Essay Competition 2024

Title: Multi-Faceted Scarcity of the Deprived Collective – Who Bears Responsibility?

Essay:

INTRODUCTION

Before the advent of capitalism in the 19th century, much of human history revolved around avoiding destitution and producing sufficient food for all. The subsequent revolutionised modern society brought capital, mass production, and markets, and it was heralded as the new engine of prosperity for humanity, which would lead to a promising and brighter future for mankind. Yet, as we stand 250 years thence, the lofty promises made by the new world order seem to have failed us all in the face. Even in the 21st century, where, on the one hand, we explore unlimited future possibilities of - Artificial Intelligence, inter-planetary travel, breaking the sound barrier in human flights and many more such scientific laurels, this essay explores the millions of people who face scarcity in every aspect of their lives – nutrition, access to education, decent livelihood, housing, healthcare – dehumanising their very existence.

CONTEXT

My contention through this essay is that regardless of the strides we have made in the fields of technology, social sciences, mathematics, and physical sciences, there are still 700 million people worldwide living in extreme poverty¹. These people survive on less than \$2.15 per day². Crowning ourselves as the most advanced species in the world, have we really made any progress when 1 in 10 people go to bed hungry each night?³ Why do world leaders thump their chests in pride when they take credit for taking humanity to space, discovering nuclear energy or even bombing and decimating rival states? Have we ever spared a thought for who shoulders the responsibility of emancipating 160 million⁴ children world over who are forced into child labour as a direct result of poverty?

The Problems

i) Urban Infrastructure and Sanitation

I reside in Mumbai, so most of the analyses presented will be centred around India, but they can be extrapolated to most of the developing countries of the world. Mumbai is India's financial capital, home to some of India's wealthiest people and the most famous celebrities. These are people who live flamboyant, envious lives, yet alongside such privilege, there also exist 9 million people⁵ who live in the cluttered, unhygienic slums of Mumbai, having an infrastructure so dilapidated that residents must spend as much as two hours⁶ every day standing in queues just to relieve themselves in shared community toilets of Mumbai, ironically the financial capital of India. About 5.5 million residents of this city do not have access to clean hygienic toilets; about 750 community toilet blocks serve them⁷. Poor access to toilets has even caused the loss of lives in the past; in 2017 seven people in Mumbai drowned to death in human excreta when the floor of a toilet collapsed, and they fell into the septic tank below⁸. Who will provide clean and safe toilets to residents of one of India's largest metropolises with necessities like running water and electricity?

¹ [Poverty Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank](#)

² [Poverty : Development news, research, data | World Bank](#)

³ [Why do more than 800 million people live in hunger? | Infographic News | Al Jazeera](#)

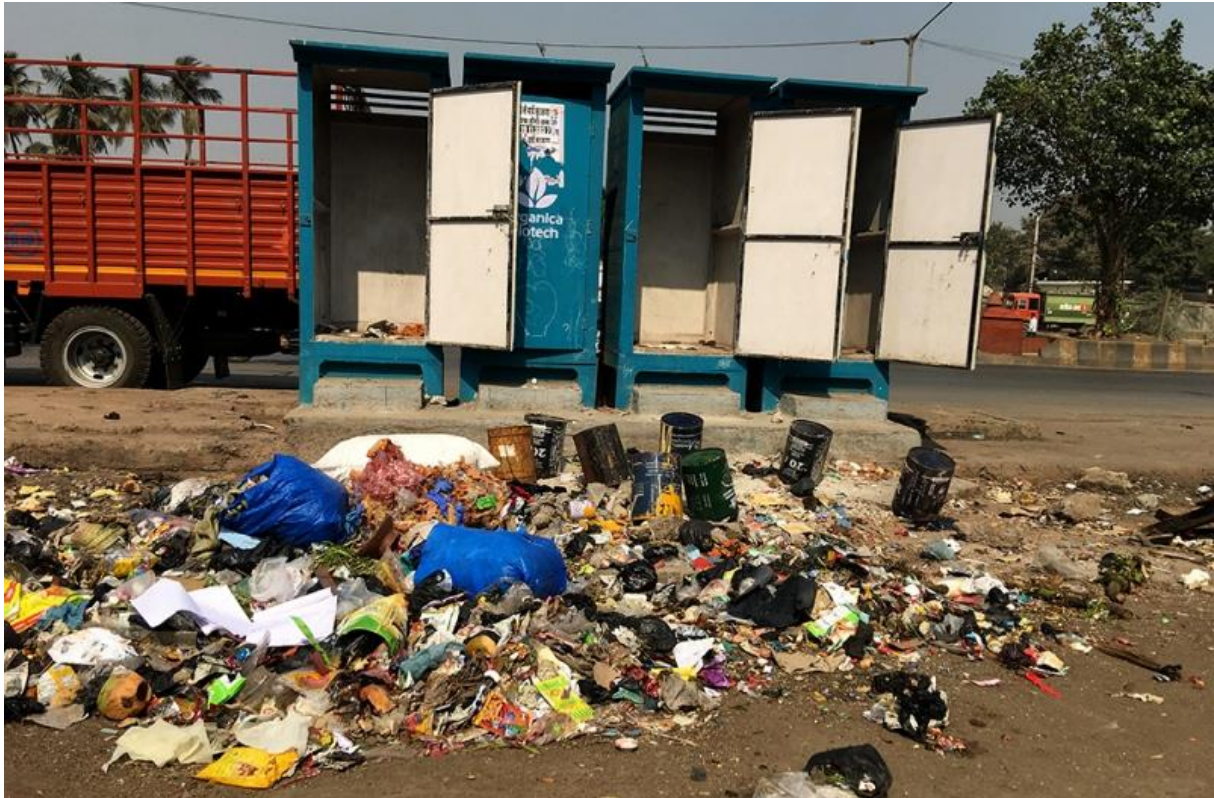
⁴ [World Day Against Child Labour | United Nations](#)

⁵ [Mumbai Population 2024 \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](#)

⁶ [Poor sanitation in Mumbai's slums is compounding the Covid19 threat \(orfonline.org\)](#)

⁷ [Sanitation problems in Mumbai at catastrophic proportions \(orfonline.org\)](#)

⁸ [In Mumbai's poorest slums, water and sanitation carry a steep price tag – sometimes death \(scroll.in\)](#)



(Image Source: <https://scroll.in/article/829255/in-mumbais-poorest-slums-water-and-sanitation-carry-a-steep-price-tag-sometimes-death>)

ii) Food and Hunger

Food is the primal need for any living being, and it is a disgrace to all of us if hunger (i.e., an extended state of starvation which leads to physical and cognitive impairment⁹) and undernourishment mar the lives of 224.3 million people in India - 16% of the total population¹⁰. India is one of the biggest producers of food grains in the world, but the delivery and distribution of these food grains adequately to all citizens is inefficient and ineffective; Indians waste about 50 kg of food per capita per year¹¹. While we like to spend lavishly on weddings, celebrations, and restaurants and still never seem to be satiated, who takes the onus to secure the future of the 1.4 million severely malnourished children of the country¹²?

⁹ [Issue of Hunger in India \(vajiramandravi.com\)](#)

¹⁰ [Stuffed Granaries and Empty Stomachs: Hunger in India | South Asia@LSE](#)

¹¹ [Food waste in Indian households: status and potential solutions | Environmental Science and Pollution Research \(springer.com\)](#)

¹² [Over 14 lakh children 'severely malnourished' in India: Govt | Latest News India - Hindustan Times](#)



(Image Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/quest-upsc-notes/hunger/>)

iii) Clean and Safe Access to Water

A well-known quote in Hindi reads, “जल ही जीवन है” - water is life. Yet, 600 million people in India face acute water stress¹³ and “India is placed at 120th amongst 122 countries in the water quality index, with nearly 70% of water-bodies being contaminated.”¹⁴ 94 million Indians live without a source of clean water¹⁵. When families do not have access to water, the women and children of the house generally must go to far-off places to collect water. Children spending their precious childhood collecting water means that they drop out of school and female children bear the maximum brunt of this menace. Lack of access to safe water also relates to a high incidence of water-borne diseases, crippling the already dented healthcare system. While we have the luxury of swimming pools, water theme parks and temperature-controlled water on tap in our homes, who provides for the female child or her mother who travels up to 6 kilometres each day to collect water?¹⁶

¹³ [Water Crisis in India: The World's Largest Groundwater User | TERI \(teriin.org\)](#)

¹⁴ [NITI Aayog Report on Water Crisis \(pib.gov.in\)](#)

¹⁵ [Unclean water, community toilets and open defecation puts millions in India at coronavirus risk \(scroll.in\)](#)

¹⁶ [World Water Day 2019: Water crisis' disproportionate toll on women can no longer be ignored-India News , Firstpost](#)



(Image Source: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/world-water-day-2019-water-crisis-disproportionate-toll-on-women-can-no-longer-be-ignored-6306511.html>)

iv) Modern Slavery

As per the recently released Global Slavery Index 2023, India has over 11 million slaves¹⁷ – the highest incidence of modern slavery in any country. It is a crime that despite slavery being formally abolished in India in 1843 under the colonial British Raj, this anathema persists even in 2023. Modern slavery takes the form of debt bondage, bonded labour, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation. The socio-economic marginalisation of a particular caste, race, gender, or minority group is the basis of this atrocity. The result of modern slavery is women and children being forced to become second-class citizens and deprived of their fundamental human right to life. Leaders of the world's most advanced countries take main-stage at events and conferences to assert their loyalty to human rights and freedom, but who takes account of 40,000 children are abducted each year in India for trafficking¹⁸?

¹⁷ [On India's 77th Independence Day, Driven By Poverty, Caste, Millions Of Migrant Workers Live As Modern Slaves | Article-14](#)

¹⁸ [Child Trafficking – Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation](#)



(Image Source: <https://satyarthi.org.in/child-trafficking/>)

v) Illiteracy and Lack Education Equality

There are currently 1.32 million¹⁹ Indian students studying abroad in various countries across the globe. In 2022, students going abroad to study spent \$47 billion. As India aspires to become a \$ 5 trillion economy, these figures are expected to rise, which indicates a strong tendency to pursue education. Alternatively, a grim reality is that 1.25 million²⁰ children between the ages of 6 and 18 are out of school in India. Who is responsible for educating the 1.5 million²¹ girls who get married below the age of 18 as a direct consequence of being out of school and being seen as a burden to family members?

¹⁹ [India's Great Student Out-Migration \(worldbank.org\)](https://www.worldbank.org/)

²⁰ [Over 1.2 million students out of school, most of them at elementary level: Govt | Latest News India - Hindustan Times](https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/over-1-2-million-students-out-of-school-most-of-them-at-elementary-level-govt-latest-news-india-hindustan-times/)

²¹ [Child-marriage-country-profile-India-2021.pdf \(unicef.org\)](https://www.unicef.org/india/child-marriage-country-profile-india-2021.pdf)



(Image Source: <https://www.app.com.pk/national/national-action-plan-to-be-devised-for-tackling-out-of-school-children-issue/>)

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Balanced Scorecard

Balanced scorecards are used to measure a corporation's performance on various metrics. I propose using balanced scorecards to measure the performance of each constituency of an elected representative to measure his/her performance in the term elected. In a democracy, voter appeasement is an excellent mobiliser. If voters can be empowered to choose their leaders based on the developmental work done in their region, it will indeed create a binding responsibility on the candidates standing for elections. The competence to mandate and publish this scorecard should be with the bodies that conduct elections, like the Election Commission of India (which is an independent, constitutional body).

Responsible Consumption

"With great power comes great responsibility." Coming from the privileged section of society where we have access to food, water, education, healthcare, and personal liberty, it is crucial to understand how millions of people in the world still don't have equitable access to these resources, due to which it falls upon us that we judiciously use resources as global citizens. Instead of taking a 15-minute long shower, if you shower for 5 minutes, up to 90 litres of water can be saved. Running the air conditioning at 24 degrees Celsius instead of 21 degrees Celsius can save 20 billion units of electricity annually²². Walking or cycling – instead of using a car or motorbike – to complete short trips has a potential remunerative impact on the environment.

Behavioural Changes from Childhood

School kids in Japan must mandatorily clean their classrooms at the end of each day for 15 minutes. These traditions help build the values of dignity of labour, thankfulness, and gratitude towards those millions of faceless people – sanitation workers, construction workers, farm labourers – who do back-

²² [Press Information Bureau \(pib.gov.in\)](http://pib.gov.in)

breaking work every day and keep our lives running smoothly. There can be a buddy program launched wherein each student of a private educational institute (generally seen as better equipped, offering a better quality of education) is mapped to one buddy from a public educational institute (generally poorer infrastructure, quality of education); these students will be of the same grade and age-group. They can be made to visit each other's schools in an exchange-student format. This will help to make the privileged children empathise more with the unknown realities of their country, and it will also make public schools more accountable, hence increasing their overall quality.

Policy Intervention

The Indian government has mandated 25% reservation of seats in private schools for economically weaker sections. The students of such seats cannot be charged tuition fees. It is a bold socialist move aimed at making education accessible to the poor. Such steps are welcome initiatives with the goal of empowering all with education. Similar best practices from around the world can be replicated based on the country-specific scenario.

Global Collective Action

As witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, research institutes/scientists and doctors came together and collaborated when a virus wreaked havoc. Thus, there need to be fora, conversations, and dialogues to ensure that the world's capacities are directed towards global empowerment. The forthcoming plan of action from these forums must be legally binding for each member with clearly demarcated penalties in case of non-collaboration. USA walking away from the COP 15 Paris Agreement was contemptible and multi-lateral development institutions must ensure compliance from each participant nation. As the great Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "Where the world has not been broken up into fragments, By narrow domestic walls... Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

Redistribution of Global Wealth

Global financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) can set up a pool of funds. The proceeds of these funds should be distributed to member countries based on their past track record in fighting pressing issues like CO2 emissions, people living in poverty, child mortality, and the percentage of the literate population. The quantum of funds disbursed, if based upon these measures of socioeconomic development, will provide incentives to each country to tackle them on a war footing.

Wealth Tax

There is a global furore about rich people using their unsold assets to secure loans and using these proceeds for expenses, foregoing income taxes as a result. "In 2018, Tesla founder Elon Musk, the second-richest person in the world, also paid no federal income taxes."²³ International fora should develop a common framework to tax rich people not only on their income but also on their wealth (OECD crystallised on the consensus of having a minimum proposed tax rate of 15% for corporations across the globe). Senator Bernie Sanders had a similar proposal in his 2020 election campaign. Funds acquired from these sources can be then utilised for social welfare programs.

CONCLUSION

In envisioning a future where every individual can flourish devoid of scarcities, we must confront the uncomfortable truths of hunger, lack of access to water and sanitation, educational inequality, modern slavery, and unequal access to opportunities. Prof Ashoka Mody, in his book – "India is Broken," has written how the lived reality of India is vastly different from what we encounter in our daily privileged lives. He mentions that millions of Indians don't have jobs, healthcare, a clean environment, education and even adequate nutritious food. And all these deprivations in their lives have stunted India's human

²³ [Billionaires Barely Pay Taxes — Here's How They Get Away With It | Teen Vogue](#)

capital resource pool and its economic growth. Similarly, if we don't rise up to address these concerns at a global level, the future of humanity could be in peril. Addressing these systemic issues demands a multifaceted approach. From redefining political accountability through balanced scorecards, fostering responsible consumption habits, and policy interventions to redistributing wealth and taxing excesses. By promoting collaboration, empathy, and a shared commitment to empowering individuals, we can forge a path towards a world where dignity, equality, and opportunity are not just lofty ideals but tangible realities for all. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, let us heed the call to action, knowing that the true measure of our progress lies not in technological advancements or economic indices but in the collective well-being of humanity as a whole.

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Word Count (essay text only): (2083/2100)