

# Exploring realities of food security: Oral accounts of migrant workers in urban India

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**Rajnish Kumar Rai**

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India

**Patturaja Selvaraj**

Indian Institute of Management, Indore, India

## Abstract

Traditional approaches of food security largely draw from neoliberal prescriptions, which focus on supply side issues of improving productivity and efficiency through market mechanisms. Reflections on the oral accounts of 30 migrants from eastern India to the capital city of Gujarat, India, provide two important insights regarding food security related issues. First, in terms of the lived realities of these migrants, traditional approaches of food security are inadequate to address their concerns as they exacerbate their food related vulnerabilities. Second, economic democracy and food sovereignty approaches are more helpful in addressing food related vulnerabilities as these approaches engage more comprehensively with the multidimensional socioeconomic vulnerabilities of the migrants from the perspective of equity and justice.

## Keywords

Economic democracy, food security, food sovereignty, India, migrant workers

## Introduction

Daily wage work is the main means of livelihood for poor households in rural eastern India. These jobs are mostly arranged informally, without a written contract, and reflect the temporary peaks of demand for labour in agriculture, government sponsored asset building projects such as road-building, construction, etc. But there is a limit to the number of days for which these jobs are available within daily commuting distance, especially to the poor households living in remote areas beyond the cities and towns. Therefore, a large number of poor rural people migrate from their native homes, where

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### Corresponding author:

Rajnish Kumar Rai, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, K-133, Sector – 19, Gandhinagar, 382019, India.

Email: rajnishrai@gmail.com

they perceive limited livelihood opportunities, to cities and urban centres in search of job and employment opportunities (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2005).

In the recent years, it is generally believed that globalization has improved job opportunities in cities (World Bank, 2002). Consequently, in order to improve the economic prospects and to ensure a more secure living environment, migration of poor rural households to urban centres has increased (Kahanec and Zimmermann, 2008). Thus, the past few decades have witnessed a marked demographic shift from rural to urban areas (Solomons and Gross, 1995; Tolossa, 2010). Though studies reveal diverse motivations for migration (Rogaly, 2003; Rogaly and Coppard, 2003; Shah, 2006; Start and Deshingkar, 2006), it is not entirely voluntary as people are often compelled by economic circumstances, including structures of inequality in their native villages and towns (see for example Rafique and Rogaly, 2005; Van-Sanso, 2007), to take risky journeys and undertake demanding, unhealthy work that they would not take part in if they had alternative means of livelihood (Rafique, 2006). Migration is a source of vulnerability for several reasons such as having to set out without the guarantee of a job, and a lack of effective regulation of employment conditions at the destination and absence of near relatives or social networks (Rafique, 2006). The situation gets exacerbated for the migrants due to issues of availability of food and food related vulnerabilities (Rafique, 2006).

Apart from income related variables, sociodemographic variables such as education and family size are also important determinants of food security (Uraguchi, 2012). Migration from rural to urban places results in a change in environment and lifestyle, affecting food habits, dietary patterns and quality of food intake as the migrants give in to the pressures of the new environment (Ebrahim et al., 2010; He et al., 1996; Huang et al., 1996; Hyman et al., 2002; Opare-Obsaw et al., 2000; Wandel, 1993). Migrant workers often face various difficulties such as economic shocks, poor sanitation, unemployment and lack of access to financial resources (Tolossa, 2010). Consequently, this affects their food security and they have to adopt several coping strategies such as avenues for diversification of income. The urban poor are especially affected by issues of food security as the bulk of their expenditure is on food related issues (Cohen and Garrett, 2010).

The problems of food security faced by migrants are likely to have increased since the economic crisis of 2007–2008. In the aftermath of this crisis, more than 100 million people were added to the ranks of the global hungry and almost two-thirds of the world's 1 billion people who are facing problems of hunger live in Asia (Kuroda, 2011). According to the neoliberal perspective, food security is merely seen as a problem of food self-sufficiency (Qijiang, 2011). Consequently, important issues of social justice and the rights of workers associated with food security are ignored in this perspective. Due to their vulnerabilities, migrants often have to accept poor conditions of employment, which may increase their problems with respect to food security. In addition, Schanbacher (2010: ix) distinguishes between food security and food sovereignty: 'Ultimately, the food security model is founded on, and reinforces, a model of globalization that reduces human relationships to their economic value. Alternatively, [the] food sovereignty model considers human relations in terms of mutual dependence, cultural diversity, and respect for the environment.' Thus, the concept of food security relies on narrow, economic interpretations of the life worlds of migrant workers. On the other hand, the concept of food sovereignty engages with workers in the sense of their political

rights and economic entitlements. While the food security approach is anchored around instrumental exchange, the food sovereignty approach is anchored around a sense of accessing social justice.

Through an exploration of migrants from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh<sup>1</sup> in Gandhinagar, the capital city of Gujarat, India we attempt to understand: (1) their subjectivities, life worlds and actions pertaining to issues of food security; (2) the linkages between food security and economic democracy; and (3) tensions between food security and food sovereignty. Issues of food security need to be explored in greater detail because the employment relationships of migrant workers are exploitative, and located in regimes of insecurity. These insecurities have an impact on the ability of migrant workers to access food. Insecure employment is a part of the same set of neoliberal practices that prescribe production and efficiency related solutions for food security. Neoliberal policies in the domain of the employment relationship and vulnerabilities of migrant workers pertaining to food are perhaps related to each other. It is these relationships that this study seeks to explore.

### **Theoretical framing: Economic democracy, food security and food sovereignty**

Adherents of neoliberal policy suggest that food security can be achieved if investment cycles related to the production of food can be managed effectively (Razzaque, 2011). In order to achieve food security, shocks which may lead to a decline in the production of food commodities need to be anticipated and early warning systems which predict these shocks need to be put in place (Razzaque, 2011). Such neoliberal approaches, therefore, only adopt technical approaches to achieve food security. These approaches do not focus on inequalities in the political economy, which create problems in achieving food security. In addition, these approaches do not concentrate on developing policies to expand economic democracy and transform unequal social relations as a method of achieving food security. The task of public food management is to stabilize food prices during emergency and ensure price security (Razzaque, 2011). However, it needs to be examined whether price security is a reliable index of food security. From Bauman (2005), we can access critiques of consumerist notions of food security. Bauman (2005: 14) points out that the threat of poverty ensured that 'employers could push their employees' endurance without fear of either rebellion or withdrawal of labor'. The consequences of accepting work where the employment conditions are unjust are dismaying; while the living conditions of workers still remain horrifying, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the material conditions of those who are employed and those who are unemployed (Bauman, 2005).

Thus, the lack of democracy in the employment relationship warrants critical examination of the thesis of the welfare state once held by thinkers like Offe (1996). According to Offe (1996), while capitalism could not coexist with the welfare state, it could also not exist without it. The disruptive impact of the collapse of the welfare state would be difficult to manage (Offe, 1996) as the welfare state provided the capitalist employment relationship with a sustainable supply of labour if minimum conditions had been reasonably met. Thus, capitalism would live with the limits placed on its accumulation by the

welfare state (Offe, 1996). The welfare state was anticipated not only as a means of creating insurance for issues of want, but it was also created as a mechanism for ensuring that citizens would not resort to idleness (Bauman, 2005). Thus, there exist tensions between the welfare state and the objectives of economic democracy, as the assumptions about workers and their rights vary in both these paradigms. While economic democracy revolves around institutional anchors of workers' participation in decision making in the political economy, the welfare state is concerned with providing a minimum of the necessities of life to citizens. Thus, economic democracy has the potential to advance the cause of food sovereignty, while the welfare state is anchored around the advancement of food security. Food insecurity has been defined as 'limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways' (Struble et al., 2003, cited in Rush et al., 2007: 73). Food insecurity has also been defined as 'lack of access at all times, due to economic barriers, to enough food for an active and healthy lifestyle' (Quandt et al., 2004: 568). Tampubolon (2004) suggests that food security can be increased by increasing the income of those engaged in marginal livelihoods. The income of those engaged in marginal livelihoods can be increased by providing them with supplementary employment opportunities (Tampubolon, 2004). This is again a neoliberal prescription which does not call for increased economic democracy in terms of decent wages, but instead calls for the involvement of increased labour power on the part of the worker.

In contrast, Schanbacher (2010: xiv) outlines the of food sovereignty: 'Alongside control over how food is produced, distributed, and consumed, the idea of sovereignty ultimately centers on local, state, and regional control over natural resources such as land and water.' Thus, issues of access to food cannot be seen in isolation of the social relations of production. Democratic social relations of production with workers controlling natural and state resources is an important determinant of food sovereignty. Since migrant workers do not control either natural or state owned resources, their ability to assert a sense of food sovereignty is restricted. Food sovereignty encompasses cultural aspects of food and does not merely reduce it to the idea of calorie intake (Schanbacher, 2010). It is not only concerned with the consumption of food but also with livelihood issues connected with the production of food (Schanbacher, 2010). It includes a critical analysis of international trade regimes such as the World Trade Organization, which represent neoliberal interventions in agriculture (Schanbacher, 2010). Food security and food sovereignty represent alternative visions of human relations: 'In contrast to themes of competition, efficiency, unfettered growth and consumption, autonomy, and profiteering, food sovereignty emphasizes themes of sustainable development, environmental conservation, genuine agricultural reform, mutual dependence, and local, small-community prosperity' (Schanbacher, 2010: xiv). Due to underdevelopment of their political and social rights, and lack of ownership of resources, migrant workers benefit to a substantially lesser extent from measures such as agricultural reform and prosperity of local communities. Consequently, their ability to access food sovereignty is limited.

In a broad sense, economic democracy refers to the public regulation of economic activity as opposed to a deregulated environment where the market determines everything on its own (Frank, 2001). Food sovereignty is closer to the social relations of economic democracy in envisaging a political economy where the production and

consumption of food is anchored in practices of human dignity, social justice and equality. Food security, on the other hand, is at best a liberal welfare state ideal, which promises a minimum amount of security to the citizens of a state. The concept of food security is not anchored in the politics of transforming the political economy we inhabit on more egalitarian lines. Thus, food security may be complicit in a politics which encourages workers to give consent to social relations where economic democracy may be absent.

Food security is embedded in Malthusian ideas of the limited capacity of nature to take care of the food needs of a growing number of citizens in the world, especially those who are living in poverty, and who consequently have low human capital (Pertiwi, 2004). While food security systems are thought to comprise population, labour, land use, price policy and input technology, the attempt is to optimize the system rather than transform the social relations, particularly those of labour, in expanding the efficacy of food security systems (Pertiwi, 2004). The practice of food security is more in tune with the concept of representative democracy than with the concept of participatory democracy. On the other hand, economic democracy is linked with the practice of participatory democracy where the gap between the leadership and people is to be bridged (Wignaraja, 2009). Economic democracy requires people to emerge as the subjects of policy formulation and governance rather than as objects of governance (Wignaraja, 2009).

Structural adjustment policies adopted by the state have contributed to greater strains on the poor by minimizing their say in governance and thus preventing economic democracy from being realized (Wignaraja, 2009). In a holistic sense, the achievement of food sovereignty may be linked to economic democracy in the achievement of all these processes. Food sovereignty and economic democracy are linked to the needs for communities to have control over their lives (Mazhar et al., 2007). The call for food sovereignty is also part of wider social movements which critique international governance regimes linking trade, aid and security and look for solutions beyond the state and the market in ensuring access to food as a basic human right (Mazhar et al., 2007).

Food sovereignty requires that the production, circulation and consumption of food be controlled by culturally situated local communities (Mazhar et al., 2007). Currently, the global food system is controlled by corporations in that they determine policies related to agricultural inputs, knowledge and economic policies (Mazhar et al., 2007). The food sovereignty discourse contests this appropriation and seeks to return decisions pertaining to food system governance to communities (Mazhar et al., 2007). In this article, through the lived accounts of migrant workers, we attempt to discern the intersections of economic democracy, food sovereignty and food security. Next, we describe the methods through which we accessed the narratives of migrant workers around the lived realities of food security.

## **Method**

### *Research design*

Initially, we designed this qualitative study to be conducted by using in-depth interviews and observations to obtain the experiences of migrant workers related to issues of food security. These workers had migrated from the eastern Indian states of Bihar and Uttar

Pradesh and were currently living in the village of Vavol in the Gandhinagar district of Gujarat. We asked the migrant workers questions of how their social situatedness as migrants impacted their access to food. However, in order to access the conversations that migrant workers have with each other and the dilemmas and tensions that are part of these conversations, we also conducted three focus group discussions (Stewart et al., 2007). The focus group is an important method of accessing data in order to unravel the beliefs of participants in terms of similarities and differences in their views with respect to each other (Basch, 1987; Frey and Fontana, 1993; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; all cited in Edmonds, 2005). Some of the concepts used in the study pertain to the cultural life worlds of participants, and since focus groups are useful techniques for finding entries into the cultural lives of participants (Betts et al., 1997; Marshall and Rossman, 1995, cited in Edmonds, 2005) this method provided insights about the relationship between cultural practices and food security of migrant workers.

We made full disclosure of our identity and purpose of the study to the participants. Both of us who carried out the study were males and the data collection process involved conversations with women participants. We acknowledge that the dominant position of males in Indian society and that of researchers may have created difficulties in overcoming gender barriers and this may have influenced the answers of respondents. In order to overcome these barriers the purposes of the study were clarified not only to the women participants but also to their family members. This helped in building rapport and access to women participants and overcoming gender barriers that may have existed initially. Further, in order to overcome gender hierarchies during the research process, in our informal conversations with respondents, we pointed out how males and females might have different views on the same subject, and how the aspirations and voices of females may often be suppressed in society. We hope that these conversations conveyed that while our position as researchers was influenced by our gender identities, we were trying to overcome it by being sensitive to multiple positions, and were inviting the respondents to overcome the same gender barriers in the research process. We carried out all our conversations with the participants in Hindi as the native language of all the participants was Hindi. The mother tongue of one of the researchers is Hindi and the other researcher is fluent in Hindi. Our familiarity with Hindi helped us in relating to the participants more easily.

### **Setting**

Vavol is a village, 3–4 km away from the capital city of Gujarat, Gandhinagar. Due to its contiguity with Gandhinagar, Vavol can be looked upon as yet another locality of Gandhinagar. In order to take care of the expanding needs of the capital city, a lot of construction activity is occurring in Vavol. Consequently, many migrants who earn their livelihood through the construction activity live in Vavol. Real estate and property prices in Vavol are comparable with the rest of Gandhinagar. We accessed data from a settlement in Vavol which comprised 86 households of migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The migrants were from both Muslim and Hindu communities.

We conducted the interviews and the focus groups at the site of the settlement. Each interview and focus group lasted for approximately one and a half hours. The interviews

and focus groups were conducted during those times when participants indicated that they were relatively free. Women participants preferred being interviewed immediately after lunch. Male workers preferred being interviewed in the evening after returning from work. The focus group discussions were held in the village primary school. We made arrangements for serving tea and snacks in the village primary school.

The interviews and focus group discussions were carried out over 12 different visits to the village spread over two months. Observations were also carried out during these visits. We also visited the kitchens of the participants to enter the cultural and material settings that informed their food habits and food related consumption practices. Since we visited the kitchens and held conversations with the women there, our rapport with them improved and we found that participants were more forthcoming to discuss their food practices.

### *Sampling and characteristics of participants*

We adopted purposive probability sampling method for choosing the participants for the study. Ten women and five men were chosen for in-depth interviews and three groups were chosen for the focus group (each group consisting of three women and two men). Thus, a total of 19 women and 11 men participated in the study. Sixteen women were from the Hindu community while three women were from the Muslim community. Eight men were from the Hindu community while three men were from the Muslim community. Thus, in all 24 Hindus and six Muslims participated in the study.

The participants of the study had migrated to Vavol in distress and did not carry any monetary or other resources with them while migrating. In order to enlist prospective participants in the study, we contacted them personally. During this initial personal contact, we obtained details such as size of the family, number of working members and religion. One of the selection criteria was that at least one member of the family should be working. Further, we wanted a mix of families where both husband and wife were working, and those families where only the husband was working. Sometimes, in order to expand their sense of food security, the woman of the household also ventures out to work. The mix of households pertaining to different livelihood decisions taken by women was chosen to assess the impact of these decisions on food security. We also wanted to access households with different family sizes as with an increase in the number of dependent members of the family, difficulties pertaining to food security might increase. The workers who had migrated recently were the ones most likely to face problems of lack of food security, as they might be excluded from networks of social and economic support at the site of the migration. Therefore, we made a conscious decision to conduct interviews and focus groups with only those participants who had migrated to Gujarat in the last three years.

A greater number of women were chosen for the study as they were responsible for procurement, preparation and distribution of food in the families. One of the reasons for having focus groups with both women and men participating in them was to ensure that a dialogue across gender barriers could be created. Having three women in a focus group of five participants helped as the women were able to reinforce the points made by each other. This gave women confidence to speak out on several issues and the depth of the

insights increased. Also, the men had to listen to several issues privileged by women and respond to them. Further, having Hindus and Muslims in the same focus group discussion increased the cultural diversity of the issues and brought out conversations pertaining to different food habits. Thus, participants were sensitized to issues which they may have otherwise ignored, and they could now offer their views on a range of themes.

Before conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups, we visited the settlement site four times for informal conversations with community leaders/migrants. These visits helped us in building connections and rapport with the community leaders/migrants and identifying potential participants for the study. The community leaders were gatekeepers for the study, and once they understood the objectives of the study, contacting other participants became easier. Informal conversations also helped in acquiring cultural familiarity with the field and deciding the questions that could be framed. The initial familiarity also ensured that conversations could flow freely and that several issues beyond those initially identified, could be discussed.

The participants were aged between 25 and 45 years. All the participants were married and their families were staying with them in Vavol. All the participants were literate and had attained primary or middle school level education. Four participants were graduates. The educational background of the spouses was similar to that of the participants. Eight of the women participants were working as maids in the houses of government officials in Gandhinagar and two other participants were hairdressers and were working in beauty parlours in Ahmedabad city. The majority of the spouses were artisans and labourers. One of the male participants was working as an accountant in the office of a big business house in Ahmedabad and the other male participant was working as supervisor at a commercial construction site in Ahmedabad. The income levels reported by some of the participants were far below the present minimum wages per person prescribed under the law.

The average family size of the participants consisted of three adults (range two to four) and three children (range two to four), thus making a total of six members in a house. On average, each family had experienced one abortion and a child death before they had migrated. Almost all deaths among children were reported before the age of three. These deaths were due to malnutrition and infection.

### *Data collection*

We conducted 15 in-depth interviews (10 women and five men) and three focus groups to know the thoughts and experiences of migrant workers regarding food related issues. These interviews were conducted during June–July 2011. We developed open ended questions covering main issues such as socioeconomic conditions, past and present food procurement, food consumptions, food avoidance, nutrition and other factors which influenced their food choice and consumption, food insecurity, etc., in English and then translated them into Hindi. We recorded all interviews and we also simultaneously took notes when the conversations were being carried out. During the focus group, one of us acted as a moderator to facilitate the discussions while the other took notes.

Before starting the interview and the focus group, we asked the participants about their preference of language. All participants indicated that they were comfortable

speaking in Hindi. Since the participants were speaking in their mother tongue, they could express themselves easily and provide us with valid and deep insights.

We supplemented the information collected in the in-depth interviews and focus group through unstructured active observations. We conducted the observation as outsiders who had come to the site of the community for research purposes. The observations did not have any fixed agenda, but helped us to understand the living conditions of participants. We had already informed the participants that no immediate policy level changes or welfare scheme implementation was likely to emerge from our study and that we were just trying to contribute to the body of knowledge about food security and the experiences of migrant workers in this context. Several participants understood this and while they wondered about the practical utility of our study, they agreed to participate, considering our study as an opportunity to provide their voice about issues which affected their lives in important ways.

### *Analysis*

The method of oral history articulated by Abrams (2010) formed the epistemological anchor of the study. Oral history is a method of producing texts which provide us entries into the selves and subjectivities of subjects (Abrams, 2010). Oral accounts help in accessing important insights from women participants as it enables them to overcome patriarchal barriers in articulating their voice (Abrams, 2010). In our own interview data, women participants may not have been able to overcome patriarchal barriers which existed in the social setting, but the opportunity to provide oral accounts gave them the space to articulate counter-structural moves of resistance. Thus, oral accounts can also provide us with insights into resistance and subversion that subjects may be undertaking on the ground (Abrams, 2010). Oral history is an important method of entering into the everyday lives of participants and can provide us interesting insights into their material culture (Portelli, 1990). The narrative accounts accessed through oral sources need to be seen in terms of the distance and perspective which participants deploy in describing different narrative elements (Portelli, 1990).

We adopted an iterative approach, moving back and forth between data collection, analysis and reading existing literature (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following each in-depth interview and focus group, we transcribed the tape-recorded discussions, translated the transcriptions, categorized/coded and analysed them. We began the analysis of the transcripts as soon as possible, so that the analysis could feed the interviews and discussions that we subsequently had.

We chose 'long table approach' to analyse the transcribed transcripts (Krueger and Casey, 2000: 132). We produced a priori a code list from the designed questions and analysed the in-depth interviews and focus group transcripts with reference to these codes. Subsequently, we carried out the interpretation of the major themes that emerged from the analysis process.

Each line of the transcripts was numbered and every set of transcripts were given a specific coloured line down the left margin, allowing us to quickly locate quotes in a given transcript. We read the translated transcripts several times, and subsequently categorized or coded them by questions and then by themes. We constantly compared the

answers to each question to identify similarities and differences and compiled the quotes accordingly. Based on the analysis, we not only rearranged the categories but also created new categories or subcategories that emerged from the analysis process. We then wrote a descriptive summary for each question that we had analysed and compared these summaries with the summaries of other questions. During the process of analysis, we gave special attention to certain factors including specificity, emotions and extensiveness of comments and themes (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

### Observations

From our observations, we found that conditions of housing and sanitation of migrants were unsatisfactory. Most of the participants living in the village had built their own houses with mud floor, brick walls and roofs of tin and old wooden planks. The houses in the settlement usually had two rooms, a kitchen and a toilet. The rooms of these houses were small and the space was congested considering the number of people in the family. Lighting and ventilation were not adequate. In some cases, the house did not have a toilet. In the absence of access to sanitation, members of such households used to defecate outside. Even in those houses which had toilets, they were not connected to the sewer. Lack of a sewage system caused used water to drain freely around the house and onto the streets causing serious sanitation problems, especially for children. This led to an accumulation of dirty water and unhygienic surroundings in the streets. Access to potable water was also limited and the migrants stored potable water from the village *panchayat* water tap. In general, the living conditions of migrants were substandard characterized by insufficient garbage disposal, lack of adequate water drainage and unsafe drinking water and sanitation.

None of the participants had ration cards, which is an important document for obtaining access to the public distribution system in India. Not having residence proof also meant that they could not get liquefied petroleum gas cylinders for cooking from the public sector oil companies. Since they did not have ration cards, they could also not obtain subsidized kerosene, sugar and other grains from the local fair price shop. They had to buy kerosene at expensive rates from the open market. They either used fire wood or kerosene stoves for cooking. From our observations of the kitchens, we learnt that women did not cook food separately for themselves when the men and children were not around. Usually, they ate the leftovers or reheated food which had been cooked earlier.

The women considered their utensils to be precious and kept them properly arranged in a clean state in the kitchen. The kitchens were organized well and the women knew the stock status of the essential food items they needed. While the women had some autonomy about stocking the kitchen, they often had to rely on the men to buy the items needed on a day-to-day basis. When the men returned in the evening from their work, they usually bought these items and brought them home. While women sometimes expressed displeasure about the price and the quality of items that the men had bought, their voices still remained suppressed in this regard. Most of the time, women had to remind men either early in the morning or during dinner about the items which were needed. These requests were made in a polite and cajoling tone rather than in the form of a demand.

In general, quality of life of the migrants was very poor. Access to recreation was limited. Mothers with young children mostly stayed at home without much activity. Children, if not at school, spent most of the time on the streets playing in an unhygienic environment or watching television. Men, when not at work, stayed at home sitting idle. Large number of men smoked *beedis*.<sup>2</sup> Though Gujarat is a province where liquor is prohibited, many men were prone to alcoholism and they consumed alcohol which was brewed locally in illegal distilleries.

*Reflections on observations.* Since women had little financial autonomy or control over economic resources, their ability to influence food related choices was limited. Due to their patriarchal power, men could spend the household earnings on consuming alcohol and smoking *beedis*, and in the process, food related needs of the family might be neglected. Consumption patterns favour those who are able to make bulk purchases. But since daily wage workers do not have enough savings to make bulk purchases, they are forced to make daily purchases. Consequently, these purchases are more expensive for them. The lack of refrigeration facilities also mean that migrant workers are not able to make bulk purchases of perishable food items. There is also a gendered consequence of the lack of refrigeration facilities. Since women prepare food freshly for other family members, and have a tendency to consume leftover food, the lack of refrigeration facilities affects their nutritional intake adversely. We were able to discuss and understand these issues with women participants while having conversations with them in the kitchens of their households. Through these conversations, we came to know about the problems faced by the families of migrant workers such as lack of access to cooking fuel or storage spaces. These conversations also gave us important insights into the difficulties involved in the purchase decisions of these households.

Migrant workers also face difficulties pertaining to financial inclusion and they are often unable to access affordable channels of credit. This creates further difficulties for them in accessing food during times of distress. The daily wages earned by migrant workers are largely used for meeting the daily food related needs. The reliance on daily wages for meeting food related needs means that workers can hardly afford to miss work even for a single day. Workers are forced to report to work even when they are unwell as their ability to meet their food related needs depends on their daily earnings. The dependence on daily wages for meeting their food related needs implies a heightened sense of insecurity for migrant workers. This sense of insecurity is deeply associated with the hunger and malnutrition experienced by migrant workers. Thus, the families of migrant workers almost face an everyday crisis in meeting their food related needs. Women in migrant workers' families are forced to work in order to supplement their household incomes. The supplementary income earned by women becomes an important source of sustaining the food related needs of migrant workers' households. Neoliberal policy makers and the state view the food insecurity induced participation of women in the labour market as a part of the income diversification strategy that is necessary for overcoming food insecurity. Neoliberal policy also shifts the attribution of moral and economic blame of prevalent food insecurity related issues to workers themselves. It holds their consumption patterns and issues like alcoholism as being responsible for their food insecurity. Neoliberal policy largely absolves the retreat of

the welfare state or the absence of adequate social justice mechanisms as being responsible for food insecurity. It fails to recognize important determinants of food insecurity such as depressed wages, lack of decent working conditions and lack of access to state subsidy for essential food items such as kerosene, cooking gas and food grains. Thus, serious efforts are not being undertaken to frame structural solutions that would address questions of food security.

## **Results**

According to the participants, food related consumption was an important part of their overall consumption expenditure. The participants were facing problems of food security as food prices were constantly increasing. In addition, migrant workers had to travel long distances for their jobs. Consequently, they could not carry food from their homes to the workplaces and had to make do with whatever was available. Also, the nutritional requirements of women and children were often not met. There are many dilemmas reflecting concerns of food sovereignty and economic democracy when we consider the food security needs of the migrant workers.

### *Access to food*

One of the migrant workers had this to say about price rises:

Prices have increased so much. It is very difficult to make both ends meet. With 5000 rupees every month, nothing happens. There must be an income of at least 10,000 rupees. I have to control all expenses. Earlier I used to buy 2 kg tomatoes. Now I can't afford it. So I buy only 750 gm. I am telling what the truth is. This is the reality. The common man cannot stay in the city.

Thus, workers who come to the city from villages in the hope that they will be able to earn more and satisfy their needs soon find that they are confronted with lack of access to food on account of rising prices. Morin (2012) identifies three main elements of economic democracy – efficiency, freedom and public responsibility. With increasing prices, workers find that one of their important freedoms, the freedom to access food, is constrained. Migrant workers also perceive a sense of abdication of public responsibility by the state and feel that the policies of the state have ensured that common people like them cannot live in the city. Thus, the lack of access to food is also equated with the lack of access to decent life in the city. Bauman (2005) indicates that the abdication of state responsibility is a part of the advancement of neoliberal policy regimes. These regimes function on the premise that market based mechanisms are the best methods for dealing with individual experiences of distress. Thus, the neoliberal idea holds that migrant workers should be left to look after food security on their own, and the state should not bear any responsibility in this regard.

The importance of the proof of residence, ration card, etc. and the need for an effective public distribution system was brought out by a few migrants. A woman migrant commented:

We have to even pay for water – 10 rupees per can. And kerosene – we have to buy from outside – it costs 20 rupees per litre.

Another migrant worker said:

If [we have the] the card ... then we will get food at subsidized rates. Outside rice, wheat, sugar and kerosene are extremely expensive, here it will be cheaper. Outside, kerosene costs 20–25 rupees per litre, through [the] ration card, it will be available for 10–12 rupees per litre. So if we get the facility of the ration card, it will be very useful for us.

The difficulties for migrant workers increase because they often live in homes which are not formally registered with the local municipal bodies. Thus, municipal provision of drinking water, electricity, etc. are not easily available and due to lack of coverage of the public distribution system or the inefficiency of ration shops, they have to buy kerosene at higher prices. According to Schweickart (2002), economic democracy comprises worker self-management, the existence of free markets and social control of investments. The fact that water and kerosene, which are important elements of food, are beyond the reach of migrant workers, indicates that public investments, which govern their access, have not yielded satisfactory results. It appears that rather than social control of investments, it is private control of investments which is prevalent, as the distribution and sale of water and kerosene may be determined by these private interests. Also, given that the organizing of production does not follow the principles of worker self-management, workers are unable to extract wages which are commensurate to the work that they do, and often they are inadequate for meeting basic food related needs of water and cooking fuel. Lack of food security may thus be related to increasing levels of economic inequality as small proportions of the population are appropriating a disproportionately large share of the income and wealth produced in the economy (Frank, 2001). The resulting inequality is experienced by vulnerable groups like migrant workers in the form of lack of access to basic food related needs.

Nove (1991) conceptualizes economic democracy in the form of socialized firms where workers have a say in management, but must still strive to meet their needs as consumers in the market. In the lived experiences of migrant workers, we found a complete absence of economic democracy. Not only do they have no say in the management of production, but in fact they have little say in the management of their own lives. They have little say in the management of their own food needs. They are subject to exploitation by both the market and the state. The market does not compensate them adequately for the labour power which they sell on the labour market, and the state excludes them from the nets of social security and public welfare. Thus, in the context of rising prices, they have to pay three times more for accessing the most basic food needs. Thus, because of their social exclusion and political disempowerment, vulnerable groups like migrant workers lose control over the fulfilment of their food needs and are thus denied food sovereignty (Borras, 2006).

In the context of rising prices, one of the women had this to say about the desperate situation that they had been driven to:

We are now living like monkeys in a jungle; monkeys pluck bananas from the tree and eat. We are living like that only, somehow we are earning money for our food and eating whatever is possible. Look at where our country has gone, and look at where we are.

The absence of economic democracy is experienced by workers in the form of denial of their basic rights (Morin, 2012). It is experienced by migrant workers in the form of social relations of citizenship being replaced by the social relations of the jungle. The absence of food security is felt as the loss of political and economic rights of citizenship and workers feel that they are forced to live like animals in a jungle. As Bauman (2005: 46) points out, 'the right to dignified life' is 'a matter of political citizenship, rather than economic performance'. Migrants experience the denial of access to food as a denial of dignity, as a loss of the guarantees of political citizenship and the imposition of an animal-like existence.

### *Issues of food security and food sovereignty*

Outlining the lack of affordability of nutritious food like fruits and fish, migrant workers said,

Though large number of varieties of fruits and vegetables are available here, they [are] very expensive, and we are unable to afford them.

We are unable to eat fish here; we used to consume lot of fish at our native place as it was available in plenty at cheaper price. It was also available in village ponds and rivers. But here the cost of fish is very high.

Tom (2012) argues that social movements are important for food sovereignty to be realized and that rural ways of life should not be marginalized if links around social justice are to be found between the production and consumption of food. The importance of preserving rural forms of life is highlighted by the experiences of migrants here. They point out that they could afford fish in their native villages, but they cannot afford it in Gandhniagar as it is very expensive. This is because the production systems related to fisheries in villages are community driven rather than being market driven. Similarly, migrants are also denied access to fruit in cities, as it is very expensive. The practices of food sovereignty are structured in community oriented action, where the community takes charge of the production of food and the distribution of food at affordable prices to members of the community. On the other hand, the practice of food security follows a neoliberal approach where technical market oriented solutions are sought for production, distribution and consumption of food. Adopting such a neoliberal approach, Zeigler and Dobermann (2011) suggest that food security can be enhanced through policy measures such as public-private partnerships for research and development and the dissemination of new technologies to increase productivity. From a food sovereignty perspective, it can however be argued that market based solutions have limitations. Rather than expanding access to food, such market based solutions may restrict access to food. On the other hand, community ownership of the resources of production of food and community based governance of food distribution can lead to

more equitable access. Migrant workers testify to the advantages of a culture of commons in expanding access to food. Thus, they describe how fish and fruit were accessible to them in a rural community setting and how such food is no longer accessible to them in a market based urban setting.

Also, it was more difficult for migrant workers to afford fresh food in Gandhinagar:

Food is generally very expensive here, that is why I can't buy fruits, vegetables, fish and milk and milk products. Actually I can rarely afford to buy fresh foods.

I could procure green vegetables from the farms in my village at cheaper rates. We also grew vegetables in our backyards in our native village. But here vegetables are very expensive and we are unable to buy them.

We had cows in our village, so we used to get cow milk very easily which is good for our health. You know, we can't even buy cow milk for our children in Gandhinagar, ... it is very expensive.

We can't afford fruit here ... I am unable to give fruits to my children here. I feel very bad about it. We were able to get some fruits in our village, we had trees in our backyards.

From the above accounts, we see that affordability of food is often related to the social relations of production of food, and this is a central theme in the demands advanced for food sovereignty. In their villages, people are able to obtain fresh fruits, vegetables, milk and fish from commonly shared land and water resources. But they are unable to afford these food items in the city as they are sold at high prices in the market. By emphasizing the affordability of food as a basic human right, the food sovereignty movement asserts the need to preserve anti-hegemonic forms of life where communities were able to provide basic food items to their members (Claeys, 2012). While the focus of food sovereignty is on democratic social relations to make food affordable, the focus of food security is on finding technical solutions to increase productivity. For instance, Hartulistiyoso (2011) suggests that food security will improve if post-harvesting handling systems are better able to deal with issues of quality, investment, primitive technology and lack of sanitation, safety and management. Yet these technological solutions are embedded in market based frameworks, which migrant workers feel are making food less affordable for them. Migrant workers are unable to access adequately nutritious food, including fresh food, because of the inequalities in the political economy, where they face exploitation in the employment relationship and various other aspects of life such as access to health, education and housing. All these inequalities intersect in determining their lack of access to food, as the political economy of food also becomes anchored around numerous inequalities and corporate profit.

### *Issues of food and socioeconomic vulnerabilities*

A migrant worker expressed the difficulties faced by him in Vavol:

I work as an accountant in a construction company in Ahmedabad, ... *Seth*<sup>3</sup> gives me 14,000 rupees a month. This is much more than what I used to earn in my village. But you know, the

quality of food that my family eats now is much worse than what we used to eat at my village. It is so expensive here ... I have to also send my children to good schools. I am sending them to a private school ... I want my children to study well and get a government job.

The migrant worker indicates that though he is earning more than what he used to earn in his village, there are several concerns pertaining to food. Food is not only expensive but it is also of poor quality. Furthermore, there are expenses such as children's education that migrant families need to take care of. Given the limited household income, families find it difficult to manage all their different expenses to lead a decent life. This leads to tensions between immediate food related expenses and other long-term expenses such as education. As seen in the account of this migrant worker, there is also an aspiration for government jobs. This is particularly because jobs in the private sector are insecure, and this can cause income related shocks, which affect the fulfilment of food related needs. These tensions emerging from socioeconomic vulnerabilities have led to a call for redefining food security. Shepherd (2012) argues that food security needs to be redefined as the protection of vulnerable populations from the structural violence of hunger. Such protection from the structural violence of hunger can be secured in a sustainable way only when various other aspects of life such as the employment relationship and access to education are also anchored around principles of social justice. This calls for policies which move away from the structural adjustment frameworks of debt reduction, privatization and trade liberalization, to a sustainable approach, which finds an integrated solution to issues of food, work, health and education (Schanbacher, 2010: 34).

Workers migrate not only because they desire better jobs, but also for the sake of providing better education for their children. However, given the cost of education, they face numerous difficulties and dilemmas:

We know that we are facing hardships and we are unable to even feed our kids properly but we are getting [the] opportunity to educate our children in good schools. ... this was not possible in Buxar<sup>4</sup> ... we don't have good schools there ... kids also don't do anything there, they only play or go to the fields to assist their father. You know, the problems are only in this generation ... once our kids are well educated, they will get [a] good job.... Studying is very important these days.

It is very difficult for us to educate our children. We are not able to fill their stomachs. How will we educate our children? From where will we pay the school fees? The school fees are increasing day by day. It is 500 rupees, 1000 rupees. For big people, it makes no difference. If they don't earn for a day, it is not going to affect them. But for us, it matters. If we do not earn for a day, how will we give food to our family or educate our children?

There is constant tension. We want to give our children good studies. My child should get good education. After that she should be able to get a good job. But we are unable to do so. We are left with very little money when fees are paid ... It is difficult to manage the monthly expenditure. We do not even have the right to live.

Education is such an important aspiration for migrant workers that they are willing to compromise their food related needs and accept other difficulties related to migration.

Migrant workers find that there is a dilemma between food security and meeting the high costs of education for their children. They theorize these dilemmas as the denial of the fundamental right to live. Thus, they perceive inequalities pertaining to food and education as increasing their social and economic vulnerabilities, which make life difficult for them. The experiences of migrants are indicative of the contradictions within the food security agenda. While the food security agenda is aimed at expanding the access to food, it is embedded within the economic liberalization framework, which increases economic inequalities (Young, 2004). Economic liberalization gives rise to the marketization of various needs of life such as education. The withdrawal of state support means that private players do not open schools in villages and it is difficult for vulnerable segments such as migrant workers to afford the fees that they charge in urban schools. Consequently, they are forced to compromise on their food needs, and spent a large part of the little money they earn in educating their children. The food sovereignty movement, therefore, stresses instituting social relations of production which do not reduce inequalities pertaining to food to technical, economic issues of productivity and efficiency (Altieri, 2002), but focus on these inequalities from a larger social, ethical and cultural perspective.

Apart from education, migrant workers also face difficulties pertaining to housing. The accounts of some workers echo this issue:

With the kind of payment we have, no one can buy a home. Though our wages have increased, the rates of houses have also increased by four to 10 times. If you were able to get a home earlier for 2 lakh rupees, the same house you get now for 10 lakh rupees. We may have started earning more ... from 6000–7000 rupees to 14,000–15,000 rupees, but the prices of houses and inflation have also doubled or trebled. Because of this we cannot buy a house. It is a dream to own a house. With the kind of money workers earn, they can only buy a *jhopda*.<sup>5</sup>

Even if you take a house on rent, it is extremely expensive. And if you want to buy a one room flat, it is almost 20–25 lakhs. This is beyond the reach of [the] common person. We can only think about buying a *jhopda* for 40,000–50,000 rupees.

There is a lot of problem[s] of housing. If somebody comes from a village, and she has got a job, then this is the first problem which she has to face ... find a place to stay. Once she finds a house to stay, then her savings are reduced as she has to pay high rents. Then she has to send money to her parents and take care of her family. So all her earnings are spent. These problems are due to anti-worker policies of the state. It is against these policies that we are protesting.

In the context of depressed wages and the increasing price of food, migrant workers hardly have any savings. The rising real estate prices in the city mean that decent housing is beyond their reach. The rents of houses are also very expensive, which again eat into the savings of migrants. The expenditure on rents also reduces the money available with them for satisfying food related needs. Migrants blame policies of the state in creating these problems for them. They feel that protests will need to be organized to fight for their rights. In this sense, there is a class consciousness which demands greater regulation of the employment relationship from the state so that employers are not able to exploit workers. Workers are asserting their right to a decent life where a contradiction between different basic needs such as housing, education

and food is not created because of depressed wages. Poor housing in urban slums is intrinsically linked to the absence of food security (Tolossa, 2010). Workers are forced to live in unhygienic, overcrowded conditions in slums with poor access to sanitation as a survival strategy to at least have some money to meet their needs of food (Tolossa, 2010). This problem is further compounded by unemployment, and indicates that strategies to address food security must address a range of inequalities and deprivations (Tolossa, 2010).

Lack of access to food creates many health related issues for migrant workers. In order to meet the basic needs of life such as food, workers are often made to work for extremely long hours:

A person can work for eight hours in a day and remain healthy, how can he work for 16 hours in a day and remain fit for a long time. We are being exploited and destroyed. With this much work to do, she can at the best work for five to 10 years, after that she will not be in a physical position to work. There are physical limits to [the] human potential to work, and they are being challenged everyday by the worker.

There are many problems here. It has been raining incessantly. And we are sitting here. We have coughs, colds, headaches; our health is getting affected as we were getting drenched in the rain. Two of our colleagues have been admitted to the hospital ... There is no sign of proper food.

The employer is responsible for our problems. The employer is doing injustice and is not paying us fair wages. He is paying us far less wages. With these wages it is difficult to survive in this city. Then there are no health benefits. Suppose if something happens to us while we are working, the employer is not held responsible, and it is very unlikely that we will get any assistance for our medical treatment. Also, the government does not support us.

Workers are forced to work for long hours to fulfil the basic needs of life like food. The inequality in the political economy for migrant workers is such that their wages are low but their consumption expenses on basic aspects of life are high. This imbalance between income and expenses leads to problems pertaining to health. Many of the migrant workers are either located in the informal sector or are doing contractual and temporary work. Generally, health benefits are not available in these temporary employment relationships. It is difficult to survive in a city with scant wages because costs associated with basic needs such as food and housing are high. It is very difficult to divert the expenses that have been allotted for food for health purposes. Consequently, migrant workers let their health suffer and this in turn diminishes their earning capacity in the long run. The lack of sufficient food for vulnerable workers in urban slums is often associated with their poor health (Tolossa, 2010). Bauman (2005) indicates that welfare state structures are often ineffective in eliminating injustices existing in society. One of the important deprivations currently facing our society is lack of access to food for workers caught in exploitative situations. The accounts of the workers in our study also indicate that the state is not supporting them in preventing the exploitation that the employer subjects them to. In order to find a sustainable solution to the needs of food, health and education, the employment relationship will have to become more democratic and just.

## Discussion

Migration affects the food related issues of workers in different ways. It is, therefore, necessary that issues of food security be not looked at in isolation, but in intersection with issues such as housing, health and education (Rawlings and Rubio, 2004). As seen from the narratives of migrant workers, issues of food, education, housing and health are interlinked. The capacity of households to access food is closely related to their ability to access several other basic necessities of life. Food insecurity has linkages with urban poverty and is a result of political and economic inequality (Devas, 2004). Issues of food security are linked to larger issues of economic democracy with neoliberal policies dismantling the social security measures of the state and calling for market based solutions to social problems (Frank, 2001). Food sovereignty is associated with the struggles and protests of people who believe that neoliberal policies and international trade regimes are responsible for problems of hunger (Stiglitz, 2003).

Migrants particularly find that food is expensive and they are often not able to afford it. While food security approaches look upon increasing productivity and efficiency to make food more affordable, the food sovereignty approach offers a critique of the political economy (Shiva, 2007). For instance, under the food security approach microfinance schemes operate in conjunction with multinational companies selling seeds. It is argued that agricultural productivity would improve and bring down food prices. However, since farmers cannot rely on naturally renewable seeds, and need to purchase them every year from multinational corporations, they become indentured to these corporations. The genetically modified seeds may also damage nature by limiting biodiversity. Ultimately, as rural livelihoods are adversely affected, migration to urban areas increases. The market based solutions also lead to an increase in the price of food rather than reducing it. Thus, the food security approach ends up reproducing food related vulnerabilities and regimes of inequality. The market based approaches of food security are also complicit in the marginalization of workers' rights and linked with the international mobility of capital (Bauman, 2005). These approaches thus limit the practice of economic democracy as well.

Migrants are forced to respond to the lack of access of food by working long hours and accepting unjust terms of employment. In the absence of the state's commitment to social justice and economic democracy, migrants are forced to cope with the lack of access to food by adopting livelihood strategies through which they can earn a little more and adapt to the risks of the market (Davies, 1996). The food sovereignty approach looks at these coping strategies as a violation of basic human rights and deems the perpetuation of hunger and malnutrition as unacceptable (Schanbacher, 2010). Often the modus operandi adopted by the state in withdrawing from welfare measures lies in labelling workers as irresponsible who do not know how to judiciously use the resources available to them (Bauman, 2005). It is strategies such as these that are responsible for the indifference of the state to work towards providing access to basic needs such as water and kerosene at affordable prices to migrant workers.

Workers are resentful of the lack of right to food. They view the lack of right to food as the denial of citizenship and a violation of their dignity. The concept of economic democracy is linked to participation, ownership and egalitarian social relations (Miller,

2012). Egalitarian social relations of production have implications for the distribution of profit and can lead to decent wages for workers. Decent wages help in securing their right to food, which in turn is helpful in respecting the dignity of workers. Unlike the economic democracy approach, the food security approach is not interested in food security on account of respecting the dignity of workers. The implicit purpose of the food security approach is to provide access to food to workers to ensure that their capacity to consume increases and a completely new market for goods and services is created (Bolger, 2011). This approach holds involves the integration of workers in the current social relations of production. Those workers who contest the alienation of these social relations are labelled as individuals who shirk work, and thus are a burden on liberal democratic states (Bauman, 2005). This approach holds individuals responsible for their own poverty. In contrast, the food sovereignty approach holds access to food as a basic human right, and calls for the elimination of hunger, malnutrition and premature death, in the effort to preserve the dignity of human beings (Nussbaum, 2003). For migrant workers, the denial of the right to food is experienced as a violation of dignity and exclusion from the realm of citizenship. The food sovereignty paradigm suggests that it is not merely access to food that is important but collective control over the production, distribution and consumption of food.

Migrant workers indicate that while their incomes were low in their villages, they still had better access to food items like vegetables, fruit, fish and milk. Since these food items are available from land and water resources often commonly shared in the village, villagers are able to access them from these resources and need to spend less in purchasing them from the market. Such social relations of producing food satisfy both the economic democracy and food sovereignty approaches. As per the economic democracy approach, villagers collectively own the land and water resources where these food items are produced. The produce is also collectively available to all those who are a part of the community food system. As per the food sovereignty approach, this is a food system that is respectful of human dignity and the cultural forms of the community. It is also respectful of egalitarian social relations of production, which do not involve notions of competition and subordination. On the other hand, rather than a focus on social relations, the focus of the food security approach is on an analysis of resources available as inputs, the different competitive uses to which they can be put and the output that can be extracted from them (Zeigler and Dobermann, 2011). This is in line with notions of a consumer society premised on choice and competition and the marginalization of other values of life (Bauman, 2005). In the name of choice, however, the food security approach often forces people to buy the cheapest possible goods which add to the profits of corporations from developed countries which trade in them (Patel and Henriques, 2003). The food security practices of choice often end up denying traditional rights to food obtained from common resources that were available to people.

Education of their children is one of the important reasons why people migrate to cities in India. Migrants find that they are not being adequately compensated for the work they do. This creates problems in fulfilling their basic food related needs. Also, given the high cost of education, many tensions are created for migrant workers on how to distribute their limited incomes among competing costs. Further, workers are forced to increase their working hours in order to generate a little bit more income. Since they work for

long hours of time under difficult conditions, there are adverse effects on their health. Also, since they spend a lot of money on food, they are unable to spare sufficient money to take care of their health needs. Given that they are able to save very little, and since real estate prices are very high, access to decent housing is very difficult for migrant workers. Consequently, they are forced to live in slums and this again results in deterioration of their health due to the prevalent unhygienic conditions. Thus, issues of food security are connected to other socioeconomic vulnerabilities of migrant workers. Theorists of the food security approach often ignore these problems containing a holistic description of lack of access to food. They often reduce food security to a technical problem and focus on solutions such as increasing market competitiveness, investment and efficiency (Uy, 2011). Bauman (2005: 84) is critical of the food security approach where the multidimensional reality of poverty is reduced to hunger, and other issues of poor housing conditions, health, illiteracy, collapse of families and social bonds and lack of a hopeful future are ignored. The food security approach wants to deny the possibility of the access to food as a basic human right and only wants to devise mechanisms through which this goal can be progressively achieved (Schanbacher, 2010: 31). The oral accounts of migrant workers are also critical of the implicit principles of the food security approach and call for a wider approach encompassing economic democracy and food sovereignty.

## Conclusion

Issues related to food security need to be understood in concrete terms of lived reality, and not in the abstract. We have tried to reflect on concerns pertaining to food security in terms of the oral accounts of migrant workers in a large city in India. The oral accounts contest the dominant common sense that migration helps workers achieve a greater degree of food security because of their integration into productive economic activity. On the contrary, in their villages migrant workers often had better access to various food items such as vegetables, fruit, fish and milk, which were available from commonly owned land and water resources. In the city, because of the need to purchase these food items from the market, migrant workers are deprived of access to them.

This leads us to conclude that the neoliberal approaches of food security anchored around supply side notions of improving productivity and efficiency may not be very helpful in improving food related concerns of vulnerable people like migrant workers. Instead, greater attention should be paid to the food sovereignty approach, which emphasizes community based action of giving communities power over the entire food system of production, distribution and consumption. In conjunction with the economic democracy approach which calls for greater democratization of the social relations prevalent in the political economy, this can help in eliminating problems of political and economic disempowerment. This can provide holistic, sustainable solutions pertaining to food related issues as it envisions a more comprehensive approach to the multidimensional reality of poverty rather than merely reducing poverty to the problem of hunger. By looking upon issues of health, education, housing and food together as a comprehensive set of socioeconomic vulnerabilities that need to be addressed jointly, issues of food sovereignty can be addressed more effectively.

Food sovereignty is anchored around building social relations that transcend instrumental engagement of people with each other. According to this approach, people are not merely the objects of state policy, but they are viewed as principal entities constituting the social relations of the state. This approach is aimed at restoring control over their life worlds to communities and people. In many ways, the food sovereignty approach is also a critique of the visions of a consumerist society embedded in neoliberal prescriptions. Ultimately, food is a basic, democratic human right, which must be universally available to all people, and cannot be made contingent on economic performance. In concrete terms, the state needs to expand social security measures of food, health, housing and education for migrant workers. Also, there needs to be greater regulation of the employment relationship in terms of wages, decent working conditions and hours of work so that migrant workers do not face exploitation and their capacity to access basic entitlements is increased.

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### Notes

1. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh carry the socioeconomic stigma of being one of India's Bimaru (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) states with the worst socioeconomic indicators. These states witness large-scale migration to urban India due to extreme poverty and lack of job opportunities.
2. *Beedi* is a thin Indian cigarette filled with tobacco flakes and wrapped in a *tendu* leaf tied with a string at one end. *Beedi* smoking tends to be associated with a lower social standing, and it is inexpensive
3. *Seth* means employer.
4. Buxar is a very underdeveloped district in Bihar.
5. *A jhopda* is a hut in a slum.

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### Author biographies

Rajnish Kumar Rai is a member of the Indian Police Service. He has recently completed his Doctoral Fellow Programme in Business Policy at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. His research interests include value creation and value appropriation in alliances and application of dynamic RBV, social exchange theory, transaction cost economics in alliances in high-technology research-intensive industries. He has also worked in the field of IPRs, the TRIPS Agreement and its impact on FDI, technology transfer and innovation in emerging economies.

Patturaja Selvaraj is an Assistant Professor in the Organizational Behaviour and Human Resource Management Area of the Indian Institute of Management, Indore and completed his doctoral education at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. His research interests include entrepreneurship, caste inequalities, employment conditions of marginal workers and collective formations.