

# Transcript of 'Learning To Sleep Hungry'

## Season 2, Episode 26, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

**Paul:** Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Penland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School.

I'm Paul Turner.

**Jan:** And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

In today's episode, we're turning to India and exploring the topic of food security, how it threatens democracy, and how we can learn from indigenous Indian communities.

[Theme music]

**Paul:** Have you had a nice lunch, Jan?

**Jan:** I had a really nice lunch, thank you.

**Paul:** Did you have a nice breakfast?

**Jan:** Yes, I did.

**Paul:** Did you have a nice dinner last night?

**Jan:** Yes.

**Paul:** I don't want to feel like you're going through some kind of food diary [Jan laughs] with me and I'm gonna ask, but the reason I bring this up is because one of the topics we're gonna be discussing today is all around food security and food inequality.

**Jan:** Indeed. And I think, um, I know that I'm very lucky that I've, um, mostly always known where my next meal is coming from, but that is not the experience of everyone in the world, and I think it's important to highlight that.

**Paul:** Yes, because we probably do take it for granted that we'll have the traditional three square meals a day, and that we have the ability to have that, the resources out there to be able to go and get that food, and the money to be able to buy the food.

But not everyone in the world has it. And we're gonna be speaking to someone today who's gonna shed a light on the situation where there are people who do suffer from food poverty, food inequality.

**Jan:** Excellent. So who are we gonna talk to then Paul?

**Paul:** Well, we're joined today by Biraj Patnaik, who is the Executive Director of the National Foundation for India, who work all around issues such as food poverty and food inequality in India.

Hello Biraj.

**Biraj:** Good afternoon.

**Jan:** Lovely to have you with us.

**Paul:** Yes. Thanks very much for joining us Biraj. So, first of all, can you tell us a little bit about what the National Foundation for India is and what your mission is?

**Biraj:** Well, uh, the National Foundation of India is one of India's oldest, uh, independent philanthropies, which was set up by some of the most eminent Indians of their generation.

And we work towards enabling social justice. Uh, we work on, we work with, uh, communities from the margins, uh, the Dalits or the, what, what is known as the 'untouchable' caste of India, uh, minority communities, including uh, ethnic and religious minorities. And also with, uh, with the, with the lens of gender in young people.

We support smaller organisations of, uh, indigenous communities across the country or com, or organisations working with indigenous communities. And we work directly with communities as well, uh, especially in the northeastern states of India.

**Jan:** How, what's your connection to Lancaster University?

**Biraj:** Well, that's more of a personal connection.

The sense that I have, uh, worked on right to food for close to three decades now, uh, as the advisor to India's Supreme Court on food issues. As somebody who was involved in the drafting of all the major laws that you have, primarily the National Food Security Act and all the programmes that you have, uh, for food security in India over the last 30 years.

Uh, Lancaster University has a, in the sociology department, has a major project running on food equity. And that's something I've been an advisor on since it started, and I'm on the advisory panel and I delivered the annual public lecture last year at Lancaster as well.

**Jan:** That's brilliant. And here I think there's a really, uh, strong connection, um, across to some of the previous podcasts that we've had, looking at human rights.

And often we've been looking at, uh, the rights of nature. But the right to food seems so pivotal as well, and that's something that isn't always, you know, enshrined in, in, in acts of Parliament. But actually that's, is that novel, is that really important? How did that come about?

**Biraj:** Well, the reason why the right to food is not part of, uh, the, the discourse as an established right, has a different history in different parts of the world.

So for instance, uh, you know, it goes back to the Cold War, really, why many Western countries did not enshrine the right to food as a fundamental right through legislation.

Because there was this big debate back then on the primacy of civil political rights on one hand, led by the Western Bloc and the socioeconomic cultural rights on the other hand of the Soviet Bloc.

Which is why, you know, even the most progressive, wealthiest countries in the world, the United States, for instance, have consistently opposed, uh, socioeconomic rights.

And, and you know, that's where we are. And, and it's a concern now because as you know, inequality is pushing us towards a world where it's no longer a third world problem. It's no longer a problem of the Global South, but it's a problem worldwide.

And in the UK for instance, if you look at the number of people, the children, you know, a quarter of UK children face food, poverty, uh, which is appalling. The child poverty rates, the increase in people going to food banks, for instance.

Now in India, it's a slightly different history because like with most countries, which became independent, uh, in the middle of the last century, it was felt when the constitutions were being written that it was not possible with the

limited resources, because imperialism had completely popularised the economies.

It was not possible with the limited resources then to guarantee a right to food, uh, as a post-colonial legacy. And therefore it was enshrined in constitutions as something that would be progressively realised. More of a direction, uh, or what we call a directive principle of state policy. A nudge to the government to say that, look, uh, of course, economic, uh, social rights are important and civil liberties we can assure right away, but the economic, cultural, social rights is something that we strive for.

And it took a long time for India to achieve this, right, you know, and we, we got it legislated only in 2013 in India, uh, in the National Food Security Act. Something that I had worked for for many years.

**Paul:** That almost seems like ridiculously recently, given the history of famine in India. And you talk about when, you know the UK was there as the colonial power, and I know there were lots of issues around famine at the time, and some of the people in charge didn't want to admit there were famines sometimes, they wouldn't get asked for aid. I think particularly was it during World War 2, there was issues of famine in India, but because of what was going on with the conflict, the people in charge, from the UK side over in India, didn't want to even admit there was a famine 'cause they didn't want to ask for resources that they didn't think they would get.

And, so for it to have taken 70 years after the end of World War 2 for the, for this act to be enshrined seems like it, it was an awful long time. Do you think it also took a lot of persuading maybe, 'cause you talk about the caste system in India, the people at the top of the caste system maybe didn't see it as, as big of an issue as those who were more affected by it?

**Biraj:** Yeah. I, I think the, the backdrop to this would be, uh, the following that why, when we attained independence, we, the recurrence of large-scale famines stopped almost immediately.

And of course, the seminal work done by the Nobel Prize winning economist, uh, Professor Amartya Sen, showed the connection between democracy, a functioning by democracy, and the absence of famine. Because you always had democratic pulls and pressures, which ensured that large-scale hunger and starvation, which unless there was a war or a civil war or a big society

breakdown, you would not see. And there's evidence from across the world on that.

But what happened in our societies was that, uh, hunger, you know, hunger, you can't see it, you can feel it, it's like heat, right? So hunger was very widely prevalent. And malnutrition, which is linked, uh, also to food, malnutrition has, has many, many causes, but, uh, one of the primary causes of malnutrition is food. The absence of it, or overnutrition, which is now again, a big problem in the West, which is because of excess consumption on food.

That not only remained, but it was also increasing every decade. You know, we were not successful in our battle against hunger for a very long time, and what you had was isolated instances of what are called starvation deaths.

That literally somebody is starving to death in a community where these are isolated cases. It's not the entire village being impacted, but a, a section of the people. And of course that's linked to caste and gender because, uh, uh, the caste system is the oldest institutionalised system of oppression that still exists.

People who are born into a lower caste do not, not just have the economic means to, uh, attain food, but they do not have the social means either. They don't have the network, they don't have the support systems that poorer people from higher castes or better off castes have.

And therefore the recurrence or the incidents of hunger and famine, uh, hunger and malnutrition in these communities is much higher. And the same goes for indigenous communities as well.

**Paul:** It's interesting, isn't it? 'Cause it might not be classed as famine, but there's still that food insecurity, and there's the people who are suffering malnutrition and it's, famine is the word that really captures the imagination around this issue. You talk historically about India and then more recent decades, Africa, there was, you know, it's recently been the 40th anniversary of, um, Band Aid as raising money for the famine in Ethiopia.

So you, you see that, you see it on the news, but you don't necessarily see, you know, the individual cases in communities, or the families that are in communities.

And yet the, the, if it's not the whole, you don't necessarily see the smaller parts.

**Biraj:** Yeah, you're absolutely correct. And what makes this, uh, dichotomy, uh, very stark in India is that after 1970s, you know, when we had the Green Revolution, the late, late sixties, 1970s, India is self-sufficient in food grains.

There are very few food grains like pulses that we export. In fact, uh, India is a net exporter of food. For decades now, and when the, the right to food issue in India really came up in the late nineties, the, uh, warehouses of the Food Corporation of India, which is the government's official, uh, the body that purchases or procures, uh, food grains from farmers, they were overflowing.

You know, you had food grains rotting in the warehouses. And to give you an idea of how much it was in the year when we went to the Supreme Court, uh, the People's Union for Civil Liberties. Uh, because in India, of course, the right to food, uh, started with a court case in the Supreme Court when activists went and said that this should be a fundamental right, because the right to life is a fundamental right and you can't live without food.

So it goes without saying that food, you know, right to life is, uh, right with dignity, it's not an animal existence, so to speak. And at that point in time when we, when the People's Union for Civil Liberty, which is India's leading human rights organisation, took this matter to the Supreme Court, we had almost 70 million tons of food grains in our warehouses.

And the economist, Jean Drèze had estimated then that if you put one bag of wheat or rice that was in our godowns over each other and stack it up, you could go to the moon and come back halfway down, right?

That's the kind of food that was in government godowns, and the state was refusing to release it to people or give the food grains, the subsidised prices through a public distribution system and so on and so forth.

So, so that's why the stark contrast of, what is there with the state, the resources available, uh, India was not Africa, we, we were not net food deficit, uh, we were not a Malawi or we were not a, a Kenya, we were not a Sudan that was impacted by wars, or we did not have any large scale civil wars.

So therefore it was all the more unconscionable that the hardest lesson a mother in India would have to teach her child in, you know, in this day and age is the lesson of how to sleep hungry.

And that's a very hard lesson for any mother to, uh, teach her child. And, and that is what was happening back in the day, 25 years ago when the case was filed in the Supreme Court.

**Jan:** And of course, nothing stands alone and everything's connected to everything else.

So I wonder if you could talk through for our, our listeners, how food security, poverty and then more sustainable flourishing and sustainable living links together.

**Biraj:** So, uh, that's a very interesting question, Jan, because you really hit, uh, hit the nail on the head in, in so far as the link is concerned.

And I would only add, uh, as I said earlier in the Indian context, uh, poverty, not just as an absence of resources, but also uh, look at it, uh, slightly differently, uh, because we have caste and gender discrimination. You know, which, and, and in South Asia in particular in terms of, uh, gender discrimination is, is really worst in the world.

There, there are three aspects to food which are impacted when you are poor. One is the access to food. You may not have access physically to food.

Second is availability. You know, you may have the means to access the food but you may not have availability because of macro factors. You may have money in your pocket, but there's no food available.

And the third is you may have both. You have access and you have availability, but you don't have the ability to absorb the food. Because if you are ill, if you have an infection, if you are diarrhoea, then you are not able to absorb the food or the nutrients that come with the food.

And all of these are linked to broader social determinants, uh, which is access to clean drinking water, access to quality healthcare, none of which is available to you if you are poor.

So, so there were two Indias really, I mean, there is an India, which is where 18% of the national wealth is owned by 2000 families. Right? And that's the figure from 2024, as we speak. And, and it's, inequality is rising. India has more billionaires than most other countries in the world except China. We are number two in the list of billionaires. We are adding a billionaire a day, almost, uh, in this country or a week.

So, so the challenge also is of climate today, which is, it is, uh, you know, we just, with increasing temperatures, for instance, uh, it impacts different communities differently. You know, inequality impacts different communities differently. It's the same in the UK, it's the same here.

So I am also affected by the heat, but I have a air conditioner, a labourer who's out there toiling does not have access to air conditioner, and there, therefore the mortality rates or, or the possibility of a heat stroke of somebody labouring out there is much higher than it would be on me, even though we are exposed to the same temperature.

And this goes for any climate-led extreme weather event. Every disaster has a differential impact and the poor get impacted much more. And women, amongst the poor in particular, would get impacted worse.

**Jan:** And I was, I was very struck when you were talking about, um, food security in particular that, that India exports food. Because in the UK our level of food security is, is much lower and, and my understanding of our government's food policy over many, many decades is that we're rich enough to buy it, and so they're not so exercised about growing their own food.

So I wonder with regard to climate change, how that's affecting the ability of India to grow food and to have that high level of food security, and to be exporting food as well.

**Biraj:** The answer to that is that we don't know yet. We know that the weather, extreme weather events are impacting local communities and impacting the food. The amount of food that's grown here.

It's having a very drastic impact at on production, right? But we are not seeing that impact at the level, uh, where it's affected the macro numbers. If anything, productivity has been growing in India because of technology, because of more intensive means of, uh, agriculture and so on.

But with the kind of projected rise in temperatures, it is going to be much worse, because sea level rise means, uh, very, India has a very large coastline, so large parts of India will go underwater in the next 50 years.

And we know that large parts of the world will go underwater, which is not only one of just impact food security, but also create a very large number of climate refugees across the world. Again, not a problem that's, that's going to



impact India, but our neighbourhood, if you just look at South Asia in particular. But we don't, we don't see the impact as of today.

If anything, India continues to export food grain, there's no let-up in production. Uh, but, but the situation that is not gonna be this way for too long.

**Paul:** So in, in this context then, what does sustainability mean?

Because obviously you're talking about the fact that it's not necessarily affecting you right now, but you know it will in the future.

You know that there's gonna be issues that come up. How do you create a kind of a sustainable environment whereby there will be an ability to carry on supplying food to people and to try and eliminate food inequality.

**Biraj:** Now, for that, the answer is much easier because we know the solutions, even though we do not want to implement them. And a large section of the world today continues to be, take the path of denying the impact of climate change, or that climate change is a problem because we live in such a divisive world that we can't seem to agree with something that is staring us at your, uh, in our faces. Uh, and again, across the world, more in the West than here of course, because communities are directly impacted.

And the solution really is to go move away from a system of production, of industrialised production of the West, where agriculture has essentially become a process of converting petroleum into crops, uh, which is very, very high dependence on, on machinery.

You can have large farms in the UK with just, uh, intensive use of machinery, intensive use of pesticides, weedicides of every kind, all of which require energy to produce.

And the way forward is very simple, which is agroecology, which agroecology essentially looks at the food system as a whole. It does not look at food as something that needs to be produced, quantified to maximising the production out of, uh, acreage, but looks at involving local communities in a way and building a food system based on local cultures, identities, traditions, uh, reducing the use of artificial inputs like fertilisers or pesticides and so on.

And, and, and it's, and it's been tried out in communities across the world. It's very successful in the short term, of course, it leads to a fall in production, but there's enough evidence to suggest that in the long term it actually increases

productivity, because if you take India's own experience in the regions where we had the Green Revolution, when we transitioned into a, a very industrialised way of producing our food grains.

Now all of those states, Punjab, Haryana, uh, where this was extensively practiced, the soils are dead because of overuse of pesticides. The water table has gone down to levels where you can no longer access water, ground water for agriculture. And they're now being forced to move into agroecological ways of production, out of nece, out of necessity, out of compulsion rather than by choice.

So there is a way of, of doing it, and it's proven. Now, Jan very interestingly said, well, in UK we are, we can afford to import our food, uh, therefore we don't grow it ourselves. Uh, which is of course, uh, one way of looking at it. But that also comes at a huge ecological cost. Because the food miles incurred in putting a particular item of food on a shelf, and providing consumers a choice in the UK is costing the planet, right?

How long can we bear that cost where a consumer, uh, has access, of course, of multiple fruits being flown in from across the world, uh, irrespective of the season on their supermarket shelves, right?

And, and the corporatisation of the food chain has its own, uh, ill effects as we know. Because it takes away the autonomy of, of food cultures, uh, which is what the UK has been seeing, uh, for decades now.

The consumer may be able to afford the food that's in the supermarket, but the planet cannot. You know, and therefore that needs to change. So, uh, it's, it's a trade-off between what is sustainable long term and the interest of consumers, uh, in the, in the developed world vis-à-vis the producers in, in countries like India or in, in Latin America, in Brazil or, or in Africa.

**Jan:** And those points are absolutely, you know, electrifyingly important. And I think our, our listeners will, will gain a lot from making that connection.

And here I'd like to point our listeners towards, um, series one and we, we did an extended set of episodes, um, looking at the Lake District Farmers and, you, I don't know if we actually used the word agroecology, but it was exactly those principles.

So how you rebuild carbon in the soil, how do you, um, move to a farming system that has much lower inputs, but also one that respects the food culture

and the history of, of the Lake District and how, um, farmers for many, many generations have been creating, you know, food and, and feeding both their local and further away communities.

So I think there's a really good parallel there for us, you know, all countries and all farming systems to learn from.

**Paul:** Which brings me to asking about the businesses and the organisations you work with, Biraj, as part of the National Foundation for India.

How do you work with them? And are these some of the issues that you cover whilst working with them?

And how does it help to further the campaigns around food inequality?

**Biraj:** I would say our work is at three levels. Uh, one of course is the work directly with communities and there are 10, because my institutional mandate, our institutional mandate is primarily to work with communities which are, uh, on the margins.

We work with indigenous communities to understand their traditional practices. Because these are communities who have protected our forests, who have a relationship with nature that, uh, we can never hope to have, uh, in our urban areas. Who have made nature a part of their life in ways that, uh, we can only envy anywhere in the world.

And, and therefore, in many ways, uh, they are the most advanced civilisational, uh, they operate on very advanced civilisational principles that factor in the rights of nature, uh, over, uh, over, uh, greed or production and so on and so forth.

So that's work that we do with communities. Uh, we also advocate with governments through networks that we create of indigenous communities from different parts of India who share their learnings and, and try to bear that on policymaking.

And third, of course, we work with institutions like Harvard University and, and, and Lancaster and others on the research front to bring in cutting edge researchers to look at what indigenous communities are practicing in India.

Researchers also share what they know of the future of modelling on, on food security, on climate, the, the impact of climate on, on food security in the

future, and, and we try and factor them in for recommendations to be made for policy makers in India.

So, so I would say we do work at all three levels, which is the micro, the macro, and also the global to some limited extent.

**Paul:** Biraj, what inspiration can we draw, all people around the world from what's going on in India in terms of addressing these issues of food inequality?

**Biraj:** So I think there are a few things.

There are a few lessons from India and that, that the world can draw because India has also drawn its lessons from Brazil, from other countries across the world when we did our programming.

I mean, the first lesson is, of course, to legislate or to have a, a guarantee, whether through constitutions or through laws on the right to food.

You know, we must reach a point where we say that, look, uh, no mother should have to teach her, uh, child the lesson of how to go hungry. No one in the world should go hungry today, uh, when we have many times over the food that we would need to feed the whole world. So I think that's fundamentally [inaudible] and India has done it. Others could learn from it.

Uh, it's still patchy in its implementation. It's not perfect. But India, Brazil, many other countries have adopted the rights-based approach, uh, to food security and have achieved it. Uh, that's number one.

Number two, India needs to learn from its own indigenous communities, and the world needs to learn from indigenous communities globally, on how do we strike a balance with nature where we become less extractive, where we do not, uh, make every interaction with nature transactional, but go back to understanding the cultural, spiritual link with nature that our ancestors had. And to regain some of that, you know, because we have no choice, essentially.

If we do not recognise the rights of nature, as a former boss of mine always used to remind me, uh, there are no rights on a dead planet and, and the planet is dying. So this is a lesson I think that all of us need to collectively learn if we ever survive as a race.

And I think the, uh, lesson that the world and India refuses to learn is the lesson of moving towards, uh, governance systems which are more equitable, you know. And that's something India needs to learn from parts of the world

which are more equitable and the world learns to, uh, needs to learn it from, uh, from them as well.

Uh, where growing inequality is going to be the factor that will drive not just food insecurity, but it will make our democracies redundant, you know? The threat to democracy across the world because of rising inequality. If we do not recognise the political risks of that, uh, I don't think we, our political systems or, or the civilisational path in a sense that we are now taking of, of multi-party democracies across the world will survive.

And we are seeing that. We've seen that in the UK, uh, with the push, uh, on Brexit. Uh, we have seen that with populist governments across the world, now coming right-wing governments who are using social media to undermine democracy. Undermine our democracies, and even as I speak, uh, we know what's happening in the UK on Twitter after Elon Musk's taken over Twitter, and the assault on, on, on British democracy that is being sought to be created as indeed in France and Germany, in other parts.

If we do not fix that as, as a global community, if we do not fix democracy, uh, we won't be able to do that. And, and I would say the only answer to bad democracy is actually more democracy. The only answer to bad, uh, decentralisation is more decentralisation.

So move from the global to the local, understand from communities, you know, what they have been practicing for thousands of years. Adopt it. Uh, take it to scale, and solve the problems that we need to solve urgently. We can't, we don't have a moment to lose.

**Paul:** Biraj, thank you very much for joining us. That's been wonderful.

[Theme music]

It's really interesting, isn't it, Jan? How, speaking to Biraj over there in India, so many of the concepts that he speaks about, and we talked about the soils, about agriculture, about learning to work and live within your means almost not just as individuals, but as, as a country, can be applied there in India and also over here in the UK, and I'm sure all around the world.

**Jan:** There are certainly very common themes, and I, I think that hearing that kind of, uh, those kind of messages and including the one about like indigenous people having been, you know, sort of guardians and stewards of, of a natural world and learning from them is a, is another really common theme.

But I think within that commonality and placing it within India, there are things that makes it more impactful. So, so I took it as a, you know, a complete punch to my gut about a, a parent having to teach a child about how to go to bed hungry...

**Paul:** ...mm-hmm..

**Jan:** I mean, that's just unthinkable in my lived reality and the lived reality of many of our listeners.

And if you really take that seriously, then I, you know, it just, yeah, it was really hard. That's hard to hear, I think.

**Paul:** And yeah, for those of us who don't necessarily know that much about India, realising that the caste system as well is still a thing, that it's still such a big part of society no matter how much people there and abroad might like to think that it's not anymore. And yet knowing that people in certain castes are suffering because maybe they're in that caste, there's...

**Jan:** ...yeah...

**Paul:** ...yeah. Uh, it's, it really is hard. Yeah, I mean, I've got two children at home and I can't imagine having to teach them. Yeah, I'm sorry, you're gonna have to learn to sleep hungry tonight because we haven't got any food for you.

**Jan:** Yeah, and I think the other thing about, you know, looking at, you know, class, but also looking at, um, both in terms of caste as well as economic situation and well as, um, you know, gender. The intersectionality, uh, that affects, uh, equality or inequality I think came through really strongly as well.

So oftentimes it's not a singular issue, but it's a combination of issues that lead to people being, you know, hugely disadvantaged at the margins.

**Paul:** But also the positive side of it. Biraj saying that the solutions are already there. It's just a case of people taking that step and being willing to apply them.

And he can see how that would apply in India, how that could apply around the world when he talked about, you know, being able to go to a supermarket and pick up fruit at any time of the year because it's been flown in from South America, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, because you know that that global system is there that's thinking of convenience rather than thinking about the future of the planet.

**Jan:** And then there was something else that he said quite early on, which I'd like to sort of bring to the fore again for our listeners, is that he referred to the economist Amartya Sen, and Sen is absolutely at the heart of some of the approaches in and around sustainability and in particular, he looks at the capabilities to flourish, um, framework.

And so, um, both internationally, um, as well as within India, Sen becomes a really important, um, part of thinking about solutions as well. And we'll make sure that in the, the podcast description, we, we give you some links through to resources on Sen if you're wanting to go further because it's, he's hugely important in this area.

**Paul:** So what have we got next time?

**Jan:** I don't know, you tell me. I've forgotten. [laughs] Help me out...

**Paul:** I just had to ask you these questions just to throw you into a moment of [inaudible] I know who we're speaking to next, it's perfectly fine...

**Jan:** ...was I supposed to know...? [laughs]

**Paul:** [mock exasperated] ...you're never supposed to know anything.

So, yeah we're gonna be talking to Rebecca Liu and also Steve Kramer from Periphas all about Industry 5.0 and Society 5.0.

Well, society XP, society 98 or whatever version of society we're on at the moment.

**Jan:** [laughing] Yes, it does sound a bit like a computer, a computer programme. But I think this is gonna be really interesting 'cause it's looking forward quite a bit to imagine what kind of society and economy we could build with sustainability principles.

[Theme music]

So I think it's gonna be really cool.

**Paul:** Until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

**Jan:** And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]