his paper argues that tackling the problem of under-nutrition in rural India, and thus, addressing the sustainable development goal of ending world hunger in its most acutely affected region, requires first, situating the problem in the longer term historical context of agrarian change and second, understanding the pathways through which diets and access to food have been shaped over time. Whereas most attention to the problem of under-nutrition has focused on maternal and child health, sanitation, feeding practices and the issue of access or entitlements, this paper shows how a shift to intensive monoculture agriculture, green revolution style, in conjunction with the commodification of agrarian resources, and the shaping of aspirations surrounding food consumption, has contributed to a nutritional crisis in rural India.

Using oral history interviews, focus group discussions, commodity chain mapping, and a seasonal diet survey over 12 months in the plains of western Awadh in north India, this paper challenges the dominant narrative of a past of scarcity and hunger that was redeemed by the green revolution. It shows, instead, that hunger was shaped by inequity and not an absolute shortage of foodgrains. Moreover, the hugely diversified diets of the past, with food sourced from the fields, the commons (water bodies, forested patches), and the homestead, which included milk and milk products, millets, oilseeds, pulses, seasonal varieties of greens, meats, and fish, have been replaced, across caste and class, with the monotonous diets of wheat, rice and potatoes. Diversification, if any, is towards highly processed and packaged sugary foods like rusks and biscuits. These results are supported by national level consumption surveys over the last few decades that show declining caloric intake and a growing micronutrient (iron) and protein deficit, despite rising incomes across all classes.

We argue that untangling under-nutrition requires going beyond a medicalised approach and towards a fundamental re-assessment of the relationships between the production and consumption of food. Unless these relationships are transformed to bring back dietary diversity and access to a variety of nutritious foods, the sustainable development goal of ending world hunger will continue to remain beyond our reach.