

Food security in india

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Food security is access to enough food by all people at all time for an active and healthy life. In the past concentrated efforts were made to achieve food security by increasing food grain production. Thanks to the impact of green revolution though, it was limited to same crops and too in limited states. To ensure easy access to food at household level, government monopolizes grain management and subsidized food gains. Paradoxically, India attained national food self-sufficiency 35 years ago yet about 35% of its population remains food insecure.

Low incomes and high food prices prevent individual food security. Another aspect of Indian food security situation is that after over three decades of operation, public distribution system meets less than 10% of consumption of PDS grains- rice and wheat -by the poor. At the global level, poor harvest coupled with rising demand has led to and overall increase in food prices. Unfavorable weather conditions in parts of Europe and North Africa, together with worst ever drought in Australia put stocks of major food crops, especially wheat, at record low levels.

Tight supply pushed up the prices of wheat to unprecedented heights, significantly affecting food inflation across the globe including India. Surging food grain prices and worsening global supplies are now bringing the domestic food crisis to the boil. The crisis has been building up for sometime. The food grains yields of India farmers are not going up. Grain output has been stagnating for over a decade and there is a growing gap between supply and demand. Attaining long-term food security requires the raising of incomes and making food affordable.

To ensure food security for the vulnerable section of the society a multiple pronged strategy is to be evolved. To begin with all the existing social safety net programmes need amalgamation and should focus on vulnerable and underprivileged regions and groups. The existing anti-poverty programmes may be made more transparent with better government that minimizes leakages and benefits from such programmes. Simultaneously, agriculture needs to be reformed by improving incentives, increasing investment etc. So that production of traditional and high-value commodities can be increased.

Unfortunately agriculture is in the grip of poor performance. Traditional sources of augmenting income are eroding. Production environment is changing it is not dominated by small holders. With the shrinking land holdings, their sustainability and viability can not rely solely on production of food grains. To augment their income, small holders need to diversify their production and crops. Ten years after the dismantling of the universal public distribution system systems, the statistical jugglery of the targeted food distribution system actually excludes millions of poor in both the BPL and APL categories.

Targeting is linked to neoliberal policies that seek to limit, if not eliminate, the government's welfare responsibilities. The denial of the right to food for a large section of the Indian population reflected in increased malnourishment stunted growth, ill health and loss of energy and therefore productivity is an issue that deserves more national attention. If countries

agree to be graded in terms of provision of food security to their citizens, India would rank along with Ethiopia at the lower end.

The United Nations children's fund report that one out of every two children in India is malnourished confirms the lopsided priorities of successive governments at the centre that seek to narrow fiscal deficits by reducing food subsidies. Until 1996, India has universal PDS. There it introduced the targeted system with the mistaken notion that the infirmities of the PDS should be curbed and that it would enable subsidized grain to reach those who actually needed it. India now has 10 years of experience of the targeted (into APL and BPL households with access to foodgrain at different prices) and further targeted (into BPL and Antyodaya households) system. Last year, the planning commission did an evolution of the PDS and found that 57% of the poor had been actually excluded from the BPL system. Earlier the Abhijit Sen committee had also come up with similar findings, pointing to the utter failure of the targeted system, and suggested a return to the universal PDS. For these schemes is a major problem. If only those who are officially identified as poor can have access to food, then clearly the method has ensured accuracy.

The prevailing method of identification is entirely unsatisfactory. There are two sets of estimates. The estimate that is linked to allocations of foodgrain is made by the planning commission. According to a reply given in parliament, the present concept of the poverty line is based on the per capita consumption expenditure needed to attain a minimum amount of calorie intake out of food consumption along with a minimum amount of not-

food expenditure in order to meet the requirements of clothing, shelter and transport, among other things.

This is based on the methodology suggested by the Lakdawala committee in 1993 and the population projections of the registrar-general of India as of march 12000. Shockingly, according to the current assessments, it works out to around Rs. 11 an adult a day clearly; this is not a poverty line but a destitution line. Earlier foodgrain allocations were not linked to poverty line assessments but were open-ended depending on past utilization by the states. The linkages came along with the targeted system. This creates another anomaly.

The rural development ministry has set of programmes for BPL families. According to current estimates, 6 crore households in India come under the BPL category. That such a large number of people are earning less than Rs 330 a month is shocking enough. But what is cruel is that anyone earning above this meager monthly income is classified as APL and excluded from the right to subsidized foodgrain. The very words ' Above Poverty Line' misleading because they include a vast section of poor who have been denied their entitlements through statistical fraud and jugglery to serve a neoliberal agenda.

The need for subsidized food grains for a wider section of people is also reflected in increased off take. While the off take in the Antyodaya system is around 90%, showing the desperate need of people for cheap foodgrain, the off take for BPL has doubled in the past few 73. 67 lakh tones to 228. 45 lakh tones in 2005-06 out of an allocation of 273. 20 lakh tones which constitutes

83%- of the allocation. As far as APL is concerned, the off take is much lower not because people do not need the grain but because for several years there was not much difference in the APL price and the market price.

The central issue price for wheat is Rs 7. 50 a kg. For rice the price range is from Rs 10 in Gujarat and Maharashtra for a kg to Rs 9 in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. As current market prices of foodgrain have shot up, the demand for APL foodgrain will definitely increase but the poor offtake of the grain in the demand for APL foodgrain will definitely increase but the poor off take of the grains in the past few years is being cited by the government to cut allocations, precisely when people require it more.

Since rice procurement is reportedly up by around 28 lakh tones, it is possible for the central government to replace wheat allocations will rise at least for the time being in consultation with the states. Instead of taking such a step, the Centre is proposing a cut in allocation. The demand for a revision of poverty assessment also needed. Secondly, the neglect of foodgrain production consequent to the new agricultural policy's emphasis on export-oriented cash crops is a major reason for current shortfalls in wheat production. The third Issue is that of procurement of wheat.

Wheat deficits to the extent of 29 lakh tones below the buffer stock norms leading to imports for the first time in decades are a result of the deliberate policy of the government to cut down procurement on the one hand and encourage private trade on the other. Big farmers who could hold on to their stocks would have benefited from the higher price offered later, but the bulk of the peasantry sold their produce to traders at price below the Rs 700

offered three week too late by the government, the FCI had been given the same leeway as private trade, then the present dismal record of low procurement could have been avoided.

Shockingly, the government offered the Indian farmer almost Rs 100 less than what it paid foreign trades. The concerning of the stock by private trade has permitted wheat hoarding, which has pushed market prices up by Rs 5-6 a kg. Decades of building a food security system can be wiped out by such neoliberal ideologies that undermine the principal of self-reliance. Besides, it reflects a naive belief that international prices will remain static whereas clearing international trades are waiting to maximize profits through wheat imports as higher, price to India.

Further, a dangerous concession by way of lowering of phytosanitary standards in the quality of wheat is also being planned- This must be opposed strongly. India can spend thousands of crores to protect itself through nuclear might but can render itself completely vulnerable by losing its greatest achievement, the backbone of sovereignty----- food self-sufficiency. With this approach, the situation on the rice front could follow a similar disastrous pattern in the future. It also raises the question of whether it is appropriate to combine the Agriculture Ministry with the food and Public Distribution Ministry.

Fourthly, the FCI is being weakened systematically. The employment schemes of Government, which offer part of the payment in food grains. Play an important part in the provision of food security, through inadequate. The move to cut back on this component will also cut down on the real wages of

the worker. With the current high prices of wheat and other essential commodities, What the worker gains in cash is less than what he/she has to pay for his/her foodgrain needs in the market. What needs to be done is improve the system - whether of procurement agencies, the fair price shops or the methods of distribution - but not to destroy them.

But that is what the Food and Public Distribution Department seems to be proposing. People -centered reform requires a return to the universal PDS. During periods of high inflation in food prices, governments must provide a basic minimum quantity of food grain and other food items at low prices through public distribution systems to low-income, food-insecure, and vulnerable populations. In India, the ostensible purpose of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) was to take food to the poor; in practice, it has resulted in the large scale exclusion of the poor and food-insecure from the public food system.

Recent evidence from a report titled Public Distribution system and other Sources of Household Consumption 2004-5 (GOI. 2007), which presents data from the 61st Round of the National Sample Survey (NSS), establishes that targeting has led to high rates of exclusion of needy household from the Public Distribution System (PDS) and cleared deterioration of coverage in States like Kerala where the universal PDS was most effective. Let me illustrate with evidence from rural India. The recent report of the National Sample Survey gives us an insight into the magnitude and nature of this exclusion from the PDS.

At the all-India level, 70.5 per cent of rural households either possessed no card or held an APL card. Since household with APL card are effectively excluded from the PDS, the majority of rural households in India are excluded from the PDS. The NSS Report also allows us to classify-by caste, occupation, land ownership and consumer expenditure category-the household that are excluded from the PDS. The NSS maintains five types of rural households, based on information on source of income; self-employed (agriculture), self employed (non-agriculture), agricultural labour, other labour and other households.

We focus on agricultural labour, since manual agricultural labour households are undoubtedly among those most in need of access to the PDS. The all India average indicates that 52percent of agricultural households either had no card or an APL card. The corresponding proportion was 96 per cent in Manipur, 68 per cent in Rajasthan and Assam, 71 per cent in Bihar and 73 percent in Uttar Pradesh. Can 70 per cent of agricultural labour households be considered as ineligible for the PDS?

There were only four States in which two thirds or more of agricultural labour households were not excluded from the PDS (that is, held a BPL or Antyodaya ration card). These States were Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Jammu and Kashmir and Tripura. Secondly, we examine the social background of households, focusing on Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Treble households. We have selected only those States where the rural Scheduled Caste population is more than 10 percent of the total population. In rural

areas, there is known to be substantial degree of overlap between the Scheduled Caste status, blandness and poverty.

The NSS data shows that 70 per cent or more of Scheduled Caste households had no card or an APL card in rural area of Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan and Utter Pradesh. Among these states, only Punjab is a cereal-surplus State. At the all-India level, 60 per cent of the scheduled Caste households in rural areas were effectively excluded from the PDS. States with a lower degree of exclusion of Scheduled Caste households were Karnataka (27 per cent excluded), Andhra Pradesh (31 per cent), and Kerala (38 per cent).

A large number of households belonging to the Scheduled Tribes, Again, do not have access to the PDS: to illustrate, 90 per cent of rural Scheduled Tribe households in Assam, 79 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh and 68 per cent in Chhattisgarh were excluded from the PDS. Surprisingly, the North Eastern Sates did not perform too well on this count (though again there may be a problem of data quality). There were only four states - Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Gujarat and Maharashtra-where more than 50 per cent of rural Scheduled Tribe Households had received a BPL or Antyodaya card.

The NSS report classifies households by the extent of land they possessed. It is not noted that land possessed" refers to all types of land and includes agricultural land, homestead land and non-agricultural land. It is not surprising, then, that a very small proportion of households are reported as landless. I have therefore grouped together the two categories of landless. Again, the conclusion is that a very high proportion of landless and near

landless household did not possess BPL or Antyodaya cards (86 per cent in Sikkim, 80 percent Goa, 79 per in Uttar Pradesh. 6 per cent in Haryana, 75 per cent in Jharkhand, and 74 per cent in Uttaranchal, for example) and were thus effectively excluded from the PDS. In striving for “ efficiency” by means of narrow targeting households that should be entitled to basic food security through the PDS have been left out. The data from the 61st round of the NSS make it quite clear that a high proportion of agricultural labour and other labour households, of households belonging to Scheduled Caste and the scheduled Tribes, of households with little or no land and households in the lowest expenditure classes, are effectively excluded from the PDS today.