

Environmental Dynamics Impact of Food Security Bill in India

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Abstract

'When India achieved independence, more than 50 years ago, the people of the country were much afflicted by endemic hunger. They still are.'

Amartya Sen, Noble Prize winner

Shortage of food has not been unknown to the societies world over throughout the ages. The most extreme form of such shortage, the famines, has also been experienced by societies in varying degrees. India, with a vast population and uncertain harvest due to dependence on monsoon rains, has always been vulnerable to famines. Partition of the country in 1947 left India with 82% of the total population of undivided India but only 75% of the cereal production.

India has an over abundance of food grains stocked in warehouses, yet millions of India's poor are left without food. The government's national food security bill proposes to provide food at a subsidised rate to nearly two-thirds of the country's 1.2 billion population. The bill would lead to nationalisation of agriculture by making the government the biggest buyer, hoarder and seller of food grains. There is a clear feeling that this would distort the market mechanism and reduce the bargaining power of farmers. The bill makes no provisions for production of food or for support of small and marginal farmers who are food producers. The main objection to the bill is that it does not specify any timeframe for the rolling out of the entitlements.

While the Indian Council for Medical Research recommends that an adult requires 14kg of food grains per month and children 7kg, the bill provides entitlements to 5kg per person per month, thus ensuring only 166g of cereal per person per day. It's truly justified that our policy-plan-programme must ensure nutritional security than food security.

1. Brief History of Food Security In India

India, before independence had suffered drought, famines as well as food shortage. People were inflicted badly from these menaces and had no option other than to live a miserable life. There was shortage of food grains and money which resulted in degradation of the standard of life. But, after the Green Revolution in the 60s, there was increase in the production of food stocks. Now, 30 years later, Indian farmers have realised the follies of their tryst with intensive agriculture. Despite 70 per cent of the population being engaged in agriculture and allied activities, declining food grain production and access to food remain the two biggest problems confronting the country. Soon after independence, India was amongst the largest importers of food grains in the world. In 1966, the year in which India faced severe drought, it imported 11 million tonnes of food grains. It was need of the hour that India had to give special importance to agriculture in its First Five year plan, because of the effects of drought and scarcity of food. It was not easy to feed such a large population at the same time as resources were less which led to the decline of production.

Green Revolution proved beneficial for India. There was an increase in the production of food grains (including wheat as well as rice) in the mid 60s. PDS (Public Distribution System) was introduced which confirmed equal and appropriate distribution of food grains among the poor and needy class of society. Presently, PDS covers more than 80 million families, but still it will not be correct to say that it has completely filled the stomach of poor families who cannot afford two squares meal a day. The programme will be beneficial only if it has the capacity to serve the needs of the people on a large scale. PDS system however has given food to the people but has not talked anything about the proper and effective management.

2. Hunger Facts

1. Hunger remains the number one cause of death in the world.
2. There are 820 million chronically hungry people in the world.
3. 1/3rd of the world's hungry live in India.
4. 836 million Indians survive on less than Rs. 20 a day.
5. Over 20 crore Indians sleep hungry tonight.
6. 10 million people die every year of chronic hunger and hunger related diseases. Only eight percent are victims of hunger caused by high profile earthquakes, floods, draughts and wars.
7. India has 212 million undernourished people.
8. Over 25 lakh Indians die of hunger every year.
9. Despite substantial improvement in health since independence and a growth rate of eight percent in recent years, under nutrition remains a silent emergency in India, with almost 50 percent of Indian children underweight and more than 70 percent of the women and children with serious nutritional deficiencies as anaemia.

3. Introduction

India has an over abundance of food grains stocked in warehouses, yet millions of India's poor are left without food. The UPA government's national food security bill proposes to provide food at a subsidised rate to nearly two-thirds of the country's 1.2 billion population. The fundamental problem in the bill is of under nutrition. Jean Drèze says that ideally the bill should be able to protect everyone from [hunger](#), and can make a significant contribution to the elimination of under nutrition. But, it is not completely true. PDS system, so introduced in the bill is seen as a social security for the poor rather nutritional intervention.

The scheme offers a uniform monthly entitlement of five kg grains for up to 75 percent of the rural population and up to 50 percent of the urban population. The entitlement of Antodaya Anna Yojana households – the poorest of the poor- however, continues at 35 kg per month. The right cannot be claimed if there is a war, flood, drought, fire, cyclone or earthquake affecting supplies. The prices of the grains will remain the same for a three year period after which they may undergo revision. Now, this particularly is a 'deficiency' in the services or the programme. Natural calamities are not in the hands of humans (here poor people) and therefore making them suffer because of these calamities is completely ridiculous.

4. Food security bill: will it serve the purpose?

If seen at a national level, we can see the problem revolves around the word 'malnutrition'. Meaning thereby, the current UPA Government has decided to provide food grains to the needy, but it should have focussed upon the quality of nutrition. Pregnant ladies, infants and the old aged people generally suffer because of lack of nutritious food. The quality of food is not up to the mark and because of it, their condition remains the same. We cannot neglect the importance of nutritious food. It should be the process of providing food to people and not simply 'gaining votes'. At present time, a lot of food grains are deliberately wasted by making them wet in order to sell them to the influential Wine Business tycoons. This simply reflects the poor management and malafide intent of the Government which proves to be fatal for the poor. This wastage must be stopped for the upliftment of poor people. Noble Prize winner Amartya Sen has said the best place to store food grain is the human stomach, public health cannot be ensured by distributing rice and wheat at throwaway prices alone. It is generally argued that the Food Security Bill will put an additional burden on the Government's revenue. But, the country procured 72 metric tonne of food grain in 2012-13. So, this ideology should be kicked out. India primarily is an 'agriculture dependent' country and therefore it can be said if everything is properly managed, there will not be any scarcity of food as well as revenue.

The Indian Council for Medical Research recommends that an adult requires 14kg of food grains per month and children 7kg; the bill provides entitlements to 5kg per person per month, thus ensuring only 166gm of cereal per person a day. Can we say that it is *cumin in the mouth of camel*? Apparently Yes. 166 gm of cereal for a person to survive daily is not adequate. It is to be noted that 'quantity' as well as the 'quality' of food has to be appropriate.

The bill does not specify any time frame clearly for giving the food to the poor. A perusal of the bill clearly shows that it has not cared for the small farmers who are food producers. A lot of farmers have opposed the bill by saying that it has reduced their bargaining power. The Right to Food Campaign, states that the act must include strong accountability and grievance redressal provisions, including mandatory penalties for any violation of the Act and compensation for those whose entitlements have been denied.

Apart from nutrition and quality, 'sanitation' is also the problem related to distribution of food. The government unfortunately has said nothing about this and has only made a mess of everything. It is known that India is a vast country and the population of poor people is large. Lack of proper sanitation facilities creates an environment of confusion and chaos. Moreover, it gives invitation to hazardous diseases such as cholera, typhoid, malaria etc.

The bill has also talked about identification of eligible households to get the food grains. But, the complete responsibility is left for the State governments to identify. Now, this is nothing, but simply 'escapist' tendency. State governments are not in a better position to understand the eligibility criteria as they have limited resources and powers. The bill should have given this power to the Central Government. Not only this, the obligation is on the Central government to provide food grains to State governments for distributing it. Rather, the provision should have been made for the Central Government to provide these food grains directly to the poor people. There is a risk of 'corruption' and 'mismanagement' on the part of State governments and therefore this step cannot be welcomed. Accountability should have been made directly towards the poor.

Apart from the negatives there are some positives in the bill also and 'transparency' is one of them. The bill says that all PDS related records will be placed in public domain. Besides this, periodical social audit of the PDS and other social welfare schemes is proposed. Setting up of vigilance committees at all levels to supervise all schemes under the act will conform the proper functioning of the system. It is argued that Food Security Bill has highlighted the difference between the rich and the poor. But, this thinking is not correct. The Bill has got nothing to do with the difference of rich or the poor; rather it has provisions of giving food to the poor people. There has been already a vast difference between the high and the low class for a long time. Food Security should not be connected with it.

The step can also be welcomed on the ground that it plays an important role in shaping the economy of the country. The country produces cereals every year at a large scale and therefore it is desirable that this production is utilised by feeding the needy people. The revenue, however small, so collected from the poor people can be utilised for the effective and proper functioning of the PDS system. It will not put burden on the government's exchequer and ultimately, people's money will be given back to them in the form of proper facilities.

5. Conclusion

The framers of the Constitution of India always wanted to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich. Article 21 of the Constitution, through judicial interpretation, specifically provides for Right to Food as a Fundamental Right. Meaning thereby, everyone has the right to keep his or her stomach filled.

The Food Security Bill has proved to be a mixture of positives as well as negatives. Positive in the sense, as it has accountability and transparency. Negative, as it lacks proper and effective enforcement machinery. However, the real question is bigger than these two issues. The authenticity of the bill has to be tested on the ground of its efficiency and features. No one expects 'huge' and 'prolific' results at the initial level. But still, the system or the programme should have the capability to yield good results in near future.

It's truly justified that our policy-plan-programme must ensure nutritional security than food security. The government has not cared about the nutrition level, but has only opened the tap without caring for the quality of water coming out of it. Meaning thereby, it has not provided the effective enforcement machinery. No doubt, this bill has very less to do for the marginalised section of the society.

A close eye on the bill gives us an impression that it is more or less, a 'game' played by the government by mobilising the poor people for electoral purposes. The question is why these people are put deliberately poor for long time and are given so called 'lollipop' just before the elections. Government's accountability towards them should not be only at the time of elections, but throughout the year. It should understand that these people are not simply a key to open the doors of election. Rather, there should be continuous efforts to raise their standard of living so that the nation as a whole gets on the way of progress and upliftment.

References

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