

FOOD SECURITY ACT

Growing Hunger in India

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Hunger represents deprivation of fundamental human 'right to food'. The Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 states "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and his family, including food". In September 2000, leaders of 189 nations including India signed the Millennium Development Declaration which set Millennium Development Goal (MDG) to halve by 2015 the number of undernourished population in the world from the 1990 level. Yet the number of undernourished people has remained virtually unchanged since 1990.

The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2009, jointly prepared by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) reports that India is home to the largest number of people undernourished in the world. 251.5 million Indians who account for 22 percent of the country's total population of 1134.4 million go to sleep half stomached. In 1990-91 the number of Indians undernourished was 210.2 million and the proportion of undernourished in total population was 24 percent. The number of undernourished people has remained virtually unchanged since 1990.

India ranks 65 among 84 countries and it's severity of hunger is labeled as 'alarming' on the 2009 Global Hunger Index (GHI). The year 2015 is just five years away. Can India ever hope to achieve the MDG's target on hunger?

For a long time people have been demanding for an effective universal Public Distribution System (PDS). The campaign for 'right to food' has led to a demand for a Food Security Act. By ensuring supply of food at affordable prices the state is not supposed to be doing any favour to this or that section of its citizens.

Ensuring food security was a key promise declared by the ruling Congress Party in its manifesto ahead of 2009 general election. When the Congress led UPA government came to power successively for the second time in 2009 it decided to bring in the Food Security Act with the stated objective of providing food security to all so that no one goes to bed hungry. The President of India in her first address to the joint session of Parliament announced that the UPA Government would pass a legislation ensuring food security which would entitle every family below the poverty line (BPL) in rural as well as urban areas to 25 kg of rice or wheat a month at Rs 3 a kg. On March 19, 2010 the empowered Group of Ministers (eGoM) cleared the draft of the Food Security Bill.

The draft bill suggested a reduced entitlement of 25 kg food grain at a higher price of Rs 3 per kg as against the existing 35 kg at Rs 2 per kg. While the manifesto of the Congress party promised rice or wheat at Rs 3 per kg which is higher than existing price of food grains available to the BPL population in as many as nine major states of the country—Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu,

West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. These states account for 40 percent of the total rural population.

Anytime someone hears BPL, the targeting issue comes up. There are conflicting estimates of what constitute BPL. Currently, there is a debate on three sets of data produced by three different committees—Tendulkar Committee, Saxena Committee and National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS).

The committee headed by Suresh Tendulkar, former Chief of the PM's Economic Advisory Council, has estimated the BPL population taking the base year of 2004-05 to be around 80 million households which is equal to 37.2% as a whole with 41.8% from rural and 25.7% from urban areas.

Recent report by the Supreme Court-appointed N C Saxena panel has argued that BPL status be drastically revised upwards to 120 million which is as high as 50% of the rural population who are not able to spend enough money to procure food to give 2400 calories, the criterion long used to identify the BPL population.

The NCEUS, on the other hand, finds that as high as 87.8% of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, 85% of Muslim population and 77.9% of other backward castes and as a whole 77% of the Indians spend less than Rs 20 per day and thus living below the poverty line as per this criterion. They earn their living as informal workers with no security of jobs, wages, health or insurance against vulnerabilities.

The Planning Commission estimates 65 million BPL households in 1993-94. The central government allocates food grain to state on the basis of this estimate. The number will be less than 60 million if the estimate of 2004-05 by the Planning Commission is selected as the basis instead of the same of 1993-94. However while the central government sticks to 65 million the states have issued BPL cards to more than 110 million households.

The promise made by the Congress party in its election manifesto and the draft bill cleared by the eGoM target the entitlement to only BPL families as per Planning Commission estimates. The controversial issue yet to be resolved in the draft bill is the actual number of BPL families. The lack of consensus among the estimates of different committees has given an excuse to the government to opt for one best suited to it. It attempts to restrict the number of beneficiaries to almost half the desired level. A legislation that promises a right but in reality reduces the existing entitlement is a true irony to the people of India.

The present BPL or AAY [antyodaya ann yojana] entitlements ensure supply of food grains (rice and wheat) and do not provide for any other nutritional requirements such as pulses, an essential source of protein. For a nutritionally secure strategy, it is imperative that a minimum 5 kg of pulses be added to the basket. If the draft bill is enacted in its present form ignoring nutritional needs it will be a classic case of a missed opportunity for doing something substantial for the food security of millions.

The Supreme Court of India already granted the right to get 35 kg of food grains per household along with other entitlements such as reduced prices for the grain under AAY for vulnerable sections of society, supplementary nutrition for infants and young children under Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), maternity entitlements under

National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS) and Janini Suraksha Yojana (JSY), Mid-day Meal at school. This is a minimum list of interventions that need to be included in the proposed Act if it has to look at overall nutritional needs of everyone in society.

Hunger is an intrinsic and pressing development issue. Inclusive growth and state control to insulate the poor from market fluctuations can only ensure economic access to food. Under pressure of the people's movement in 1960 the government launched the PDS as a means to ensure access to food grains for all citizens. The PDS procured grains at a supportive price as well as ensured sale of food grains at an affordable rate.

But soon hoarding, black-marketeering and other fraudulent practices crept into the PDS. The poor people were deprived of their entitlement of subsidized food grains. As is the experience in other government-run programmes, the money spent for the PDS hardly reached the intended beneficiaries. In 2005 the Planning Commission reported that the vast network of 400,000 fair price shops delivered only 42 percent of grains meant for the BPL families.

Under the pretext of removing corruption the government cut off subsidies and worked to systematically limit the scope and reach of the PDS. In 1997 the universal PDS was pulled down by the then United Front government. This change ushered in a new era of liberalization, privatization and globalization. It was targeted to BPL families thus depriving millions of people from access to the PDS.

Over the years the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India had been deliberately downsized. It happened at a time when millions of poor people could not afford food at high price. Public agencies ran short of stocks when aggregate domestic supply was adequate to meet demand. The poor people were routinely deprived of subsidized food grains that were produced in abundance in the country. The escalation of prices of food articles could not be explained by seasonal supply and demand factors or any other 'real economy' causes. The role of private traders and speculators was obvious. Their speculative practices kept the prices of essential food items rising even though there was no absolute shortage in aggregate terms.

The struggle for a universal PDS and assured supply of food for all has been steadily gaining momentum. In the conditions of the recent steep hike in food prices and food shortage being reported all over the country, this struggle has become more intense. Nothing short of a universal entitlement for PDS is the demand. A universal entitlement for food is the only way that the country can ensure food security for all. The revamping of the PDS is a must for ensuring food security.

The draft Bill has been opposed by various organizations fighting for the Right to Food. Activists campaigning for the Right to Food have protested the National Food Security Bill in its present form which provides 25 kg of food grains for a BPL household. The current quota of 35 kg of food grains per BPL household in Antyodaya Ann Yojana (AAY) is thus effectively reduced. The reduced food entitlements for the targeted BPL will bring in food insecurity. Ideally PDS should be universal in order to avoid the inevitable exclusion errors of any targeted system. The bill should at least guarantee as much as is already being given.

National Advisory Council (NAC), headed by United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, put the food security Bill as an important issue in the agenda

of its first meeting held in June 2010 and decided to meet again on July 1 to finalise its recommendations. It is reported that NAC is likely to widen the net of beneficiaries by an additional 100 million people and raise the quota of 25 kg food grain taking in account the nutritional factor. Hopefully the improved draft will be designed keeping in mind the larger issues of agricultural policies.

In the past several food-for-work or food security schemes were launched by the government across the country but it produced little long term impact. It is now worth analyzing how this Act will differ from the previous programmes. Of late 'Right' has become a catch-word to the Government in India. Right to Information, Right to Employment and Right to Education are the recently government-promoted rights of an individual. Once enacted the right to food will give a precise definition of the scope and content of the individual's entitlement, specify the government's mechanism responsible for setting targets and monitoring whether targets are met to ensure that no person in the country sleeps hungry. The Food Security Act is supposed to clarify what constitutes a violation which will give an opportunity to seek administrative and legal remedies for the individuals whose right to food is violated.

Agriculture absorbs more than 60% of the country's labour force. Investment in agriculture should be made a concurrent part of the new enactment so that the agriculture labourers are gainfully employed at the farm and the food security is achieved at the local level. Creating adequate employment opportunities and promoting sustainable livelihoods by involving the village communities has to be incorporated into the proposed Food Security Act. The Act must be seen as an opportunity to raise domestic food production necessary to remove hunger and malnutrition from the country.

The point is whether the Government does exactly what is appropriate to remove hunger. The paradox of high GDP rates hovering around 7 percent to 9 percent in the recent years coupled with GHI ranking of 65 out of 84 countries itself unveils the truth that Government's economic policies by their very nature are 'exclusion' based. India's non-inclusive economic growth has made little dent to the real problem of hunger.

Certainly there is no way that the hunger will go away from this land once the Food Security Bill is enacted. People have been pressed under the worst food inflation in the last three decades. Time will say whether the Government which has done so little to check inflation of food prices over the years can take the challenge to implement the Act in a manner by which this subsidized food reaches the needy. □□□