

Food for Thought

IT SOUNDS FINE—RIGHT TO FOOD. And political parties, mostly on the left, have long been making noises, somewhat occasionally, about food security. But this food security like many other social securities could hardly give a sense of belonging to the majority of people living below poverty line. In reality most poverty alleviation schemes are conduits to siphon money by vested interests, political-bureaucratic nexus to be precise. Whatever remains of public distribution system in some parts of the country just mocks at fair price. Fair price shops are notorious in meting out unfair treatment to the needy and poor.

Finally the Union Cabinet of India has cleared the Food Security Bill. The Bill seeks to provide rice at Rs 3 a kg, wheat at Rs 2 a kg, and coarse grains at Re 1 per kg to over half of India's 1.2 billion population. A grandiose scheme indeed! Children under fourteen years, would be entitled to a hot mid-day meal. Proposing the right of every individual to 7 kg of foodgrains, the Bill seeks to cover 75% of the rural population, and 50% of urban households. Again a gigantic action programme by any standards. This right to food law would raise the food subsidy from Rs 63,000 crore to Rs 1.2 lac crore (\$23 billion). But the Bill will find implementation difficult with rampant corruption in the Public Distribution System. Also, the poorer states do not have the necessary budgetary support to create the infrastructure needed to provide food to the poor. There are demands that investment in agriculture be raised from Rs 20,000 crore to about Rs 100,000 crore annually. The Left parties argue for food security as a universal concept, with every family allotted 30 kg of food grains at Rs 2 a kg. But they have no plan to start a sustained agitation to realise the demand.

Between 1998-99 and 2005-06, malnutrition among below 3-year olds has increased by 3% for the bottom three deciles. Only the other day while releasing the malnutrition report (Hunger and Malnutrition) that says 42 percent of Indian children are underweight, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh termed it as 'a national shame'. Over the same period, the incidence of chronic energy deficiency among rural women, aged 15 to 49 years, has increased by 3% for bottom three deciles. Land per head under cultivation has been declining owing to population growth and sub-division of land holdings as also ever growing encroachment by the industry. Growth of output and employment in the rural non-farm sector has been slow hence pressure on agriculture has not been relieved despite so much furore over reforms and modernisation. Agriculture has not fully benefited from demographic dividends, as there has been an out-migration from agriculture.

There is a deliberate ploy to discourage peasants to stick to traditional agriculture. Factory jobs have gone. And now agricultural labourers are migrating from one state to another, virtually running from one crisis to another.

Whether law can arrest starvation deaths among the below poverty line people is open to question. There are so many good laws and yet bad news emanates from every corner all the time. Corruption starts right at the stage of implementation and right to food law will be a meaningless exercise unless the targeted audience can assert themselves politically even in their own limited way. □□