

Food Security in India: A critical study on its Issues, Efforts and Challenges

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Abstract:

First Millennium Development Goal states the target of “Having hunger by 2015. But unfortunately, the recent statistics of Indian is presenting a very gloomy picture about the food security of Indian citizens. Though India has made substantial progress in the food grains production over the past decades and ranks second worldwide in farm output but still India has been ranked at 102nd place among 117 economics in the Global Hunger Index (GHI). It has highest number of undernourished people in the world in spite of various welfare programs taken by the Govt. to meet the demand the people.

Keywords: Food security, Challenges, Hunger, Poverty, Malnutrition, Efforts

Introduction

Food security, as defined by the World Food Summit (WFS) and the Food and Agricultural Organization, ‘exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary and food preferences for an active life’. It implies access by all people at all times to sufficient quantities of food to lead an active and healthy life. As noted by P.V. Srinivasan, this requires not just adequate supply of food at the aggregate level but also enough purchasing capacity with the individual/household to demand adequate levels of food. That means a household is considered food-secure when its occupants do not live in hunger or fear of starvation. They should have the sufficient resources, both economic and physical to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. As for the Food security

system in India is concerned, it is related to the distribution of food-grain in the food deficit areas, towns and villages either through Govt. agencies or through non Govt. agencies. But it is a helpless situation when there is a drought, earthquake, floods, disaster, transportation problems and riots etc. and the Govt. is either able to handle this situation or not. Fluctuation in Food grain production in India is still a major threat to food security due to micro-climatic change which creates a situation of sudden low and high production. Govt. of India has started FCI stocking system to provide food to the needy but it is such a costly economic affair that no Govt. can solve the problem of food insecurity in India. Many of us have doubted that it is existed only to help the big farmers. Food security in India should be treated in relation to the small and marginal farmers and the population below the poverty line which are not able to purchase enough food-grain to maintain a sustainable livelihood.

Objectives of the Study:

Through this article an attempt has been made to examine India's efforts to achieve food security. It is also trying to understand the problem of food insecurity, from the inadequate production of food grains during colonial times, to the challenges of procurement, storage and distribution of cereals in post-independence India, after achieving self-sufficiency in food production. The establishment of the Public Distribution System (PDS) and its evolution into the Targeted PDS and the National Food Security Act are outlined. The role of the Food Corporation of India and the efforts to improve it, are discussed. A critical analysis of India's food security system is made in light of present day problems

Historical problems of inadequate production:

Agriculture has been the backbone of the Indian economy, and even today it accounts for 54.6 percent of the total employment in India. But in recent years, contribution of Agricultural sector towards GDP has declined from 15.2 per cent to 13.9 percent in 2013–2014. Indian agriculture has been facing numbers of problems since colonial era. The policies of the British aimed to collect maximum possible revenue from the farmers and paid no importance to improve the agricultural productivity. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 created a new class of landlords and sub-agents who were far removed from the cultivators and interested only in maximizing rents for themselves and their colonial masters. The destruction of traditional handicrafts by the British forced several artisans to dependent on agriculture. This increased the pressure on land, reduced

productivity and impoverished the cultivators and led to food shortages and several protests against the British.

Need of Food Security in India:

International food policy research institute (IFPR) classified the status of hunger into five category-low, moderate, serious, alarming and extremely alarming. India falls into the category of alarming. The most important aspect contributing to this development is the non-availability of basic requirement of food. It has been observed that the consumption of food, in terms of nutrition and quantity, is lacking far behind. According to the study conducted by National Institute of Nutrition, the minimum per capita food grain required for an adult is 182.5kg/year whereas in India, the availability is only 173.6kg/year and as far as the protein requirement is concerned, the daily intake should be 50mg but the situation seems to remain stagnant, the per capita daily intake is only 10mg. Despite buoyant economic growth in recent years around one-third of India's population still lives below the poverty line. All these estimates point to the existence of food insecurity in terms of either lack of economic access to food or lack absorption of food for a healthy life. Further studies have indicated that consumption and expenditure on food grain have decreased up to a certain level due to increase in food prices and enlargement in the consumption of non-food item. Every year nearly 5000 children die due to inadequate food consumption. HUNGAMA report published by Nandi Foundation in 2011 found that 42% of the children under the age of five are underweight and 59% are stunted. In India, 30 million people have been added to the rank of hungry since the mid1990s and 40% children are underweight. Worldwide 852 million people are hungry due to extreme poverty and 2 billion people lack food security intermittently due to varying degree of poverty. 600 million children die of hunger every year and 17000 every day. In India approximately, 320 Indians go to bed without food every night and recent data is very much alarming and situation is going even worse. The problem of food security is not merely confined to rural areas but also extend to urban region.

India's effort to achieve Food Security:

Food grain production increased from around 50 million tons at the time of Independence to over 200 million tons in recent years. Today, the country produces 104 million tons of rice and 93 million tons of wheat annually, which is sufficient to meet the requirements of the common people. Although what was being produced at the time of Independence and for a couple of decades thereafter was not adequate to meet the caloric requirements of the people, but now

India have reached in a situation where, if what is produced is distributed equally, the minimum requirements of all can be met in spite of the tremendous increase in population over more than half a century. In no part of the world is the food grains equally distributed, but the hypothetical calculation goes to show that availability is not the main issue. The basic reasons of food insecurity among the people of India lies in the inadequate distribution of food grains to the beneficiaries. The Governments of India introduced some major program such as Public food distribution system (PDS), the Integrated Child Development System (ICDS), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGS), Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) etc. to combat this perennial problem. But these major programs were also failed to fulfill the need of every section of the society and thus hunger continues to thrive among the poor people. In this backdrop, the National Advisory Council (NAC) drafted a new "Food Security Bill" in 2010, which is considered as the biggest ever experiment in the world for distributing highly subsidized food for any government through a "rights based" approach. After much debate and analysis it was passed and became a law on 12th September, 2013. According to this Act, Food Security is defined as the availability of sufficient food grains to meet the domestic demand as well as access, at the individual level, to adequate means of food at affordable prices. Here, an attempt has been made to give a brief about the various projects take by the Govt. of India to provide food security among the common people.

1)Public Distribution System: The Public Distribution System launched by the Govt. of India in 1940s, to procure food grains from the farmers at remunerative prices and to distribute food grains at affordable prices to the consumers, particularly among the vulnerable sections of the society. It also gives importance to build food buffers for food security and price stability. The PDS in its present form become a producer price-support-cum-consumer subsidy program that has evolved in the wake of food grain shortages of the sixties. The food subsidy of the Central Government, at Rs.17, 612 cores accounted for 0.89 per cent of GDP in 2001-02. The PDS isn't successfully in the states of Assam, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and provided limited access to households. Though the system is poorly targeted and suffers from widespread leakages and the diversion of grain to the open market, it has still gone a long way in protecting and covering a large number of poor consumers.

2) Targeted Public Distribution System: The Govt. of India launched Targeted Public Distribution System in June 1997 with more focus on the poor. The most distinctive feature of

the new policy was the division of the entire population into the 'Above Poverty Line' (APL) and the 'Below Poverty Line' (BPL) categories, on the basis of poverty line defined by the Planning Commission. It has covered more than six core poor families and 72 lakh MT (LMT) food grains distributed annually among the beneficiaries. The Govt. of India also launched Antodaya Anna Yojana in December 2000 for the poor families of the BPL category and provided food grains at the highly subsidized rates of Rs 2 per kg for wheat and Rs 3 per kg for rice. It has covers 2.5 core families (i.e. 38 per cent of the BPL category) by 2005–2006. All the landless agricultural laborers, marginal farmers, rural artisans, craftsmen, those in the informal sector, households headed by widows, terminally ill persons, primitive tribal households and even HIV-positive (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) persons of the BPL category were covered by this system.

3) Food Co-operation of India: Govt. Of India setup Food Corporation of India under the Food Corporation Act 1964 and its basic objectives are mainly: (1) To determine effective support price to safeguard the interests of the farmers. (2) Distribution of food grains in the whole country for public distribution system (3) maintaining satisfactory level of operational and buffer stocks of food grains to ensure National Food Security. In every year, before each marketing season the central government often assesses the availability of each crop and fixes targets for the procurement of food grains, and declares a Minimum Support Price (MSP) to support the farmers and to remove the exploitative middle men through the FCI and the state government agencies. Up to a third of India's wheat output and approximately 15 per cent of the rice produced are purchased and then transported to the depots located all across India. The rates for sale are declared by the Government of India and the food grains are distributed, through the Fair Price Shops (FPSs) of the PDS, to ration card holders by the state governments.

4) Ration card: The Indian ration card system itself is another example of efforts of the Govt. to establish food security in India. The card, through which the holders makes them eligible and entitled to buy subsidized food and fuel through the PDS. It is an important document and a much sought-after proof of identity, as well as a means to obtain essential food items and fuel. Until 1997, the PDS had provided food security to all without any specific targeting of beneficiaries. Consequently, it was widely criticized for its failure to serve the entire population below the poverty line, its urban bias and the lack of transparency and accountability. It was felt that a substantial part of the PDS benefits accrued to the non-poor and it did not have much of an

impact on the nutritional status of those in need. As a result, there were calls for fundamental reforms for targeting the PDS to the poor.

5) National Food Security Act, 2013: The national food security bill was enacted on September 12, 2013 with an aim to provide subsidized food grain to approximately two thirds of India's 1.2 billion people. It provides nutritious food to all children, women and men and to make India free from hunger and food deprivation. It is "an act to provide food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quality of food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto". National Food Security Act emphasised to establish new standards of delivery, transparency and accountability for social programs. It also aims to provide a guarantee of adequate nutrition which is derived from the right to food as a part of the right to life under article 21 (interpreted by the Supreme Court of India as a right to life with dignity) which is a fundamental right of all citizens. The National Food Security Bill envisages distribution of about 61.2 million tons of cereals, primarily rice and wheat, through the existing public distribution system and other welfare schemes, costing the exchequer about Rs.1, 25,000 crore annually which is about 1.1% of GDP.

Present criticism of the Indian food security system:

As shown above, India's problem of food security was initially centred on low agricultural output and the poor availability of food grains. The problems are now different. Now, the nation has attained self-sufficiency in food production. The storage of food grains has been a problem in India. Large quantities of harvesters lost due to poor post-harvest handling. It is also alleged that the transportation of food grains has not been streamlined and huge losses occur even before the produce reaches the FCI godowns. Within the godowns further losses occur due to bad storage practices. Public Distribution System, though an important step in ensuring food security in India, it is criticized on several counts — of leakage, mis-targeting and inefficient supply chain management. The Planning Commission estimated in March 2005 that for every Rs 3.65 spent by the Govt. of India, but only one rupee reached to the BPL households. Studies showed that the PDS system was failed to fulfill the need of the poor in most states, except the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Nevertheless, it was also found that the TPDS has improved over time. In a nine-state study, Reetika Khera reported in 2011, that 80 per cent of the beneficiaries felt that the TPDS was important to cover their family's needs. An increase in coverage was reported from Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Himachal Pradesh and Chattisgarh. This

dramatic change has come only after the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 by the Parliament of India on September 12, 2013 which converts the schemes such as the Public Distribution System, the Midday Meal Scheme in schools and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) into legal entitlements. It is often seen that ration cards are issued only to those households that have proper registered residential addresses. Thus, a large number of poor who are homeless and others without proper residential addresses (for example, migrant labourers) are automatically left out of the food security system. Another criticism of PDS relates to the problem of leakages from the system in the form of losses in the transport and storage and diversion to the open market. Instead of selling ration at subsidised rates, shopkeepers sell them in the open market at higher prices, pocketing the difference. A number of economists have pointed out that PDS remained limited mostly to urban areas for a considerable period of planning while the coverage of rural areas was very insufficient. However, with the expansion of PDS in rural areas in later period, this bias has been corrected. But the expansion of PDS in rural areas does not mean that it is “effective” in delivering the goods. In fact, a report released by the Government of India in 1991 pointed out that while more than 75 per cent of the fair price shops are in rural areas, “the level of their effectiveness in terms of actual supply of essential commodities, particularly in the rural, backward, remote and inaccessible areas, raises questions as to the meaningfulness of their existence.

Conclusion: In conclusion, we can state that the major strength of the Indian food security system has been in achieving self-sufficiency in the production of cereals and in setting up the Public Distribution System in India. The PDS, through the distribution of essential food grains across the country, at subsidised and affordable prices, has prevented famines successfully. Amongst India’s strengths is also the system of procurement that has been put in place and the capacity built up to hold large buffer stocks. The strong political and administrative will that has been exhibited in the country, through all these years, to sustain and improve the PDS, is no doubt a major strength. The weaknesses, however, as evident from the facts brought out in this article, are those of post-harvest storage and the transit losses due to inefficient systems. MSP decided by the Govt. is not sufficient to meet the needs of the farmers. It encourages the presence of middlemen who extract the farm produce at low prices, and sell it at much higher margins. Despite the large and unprecedented buffer stocks, huge pockets of hunger and deprivation

continue to exist in India and a huge number of people have been facing the problem of hunger and malnutrition till date.

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