

## Crisis of Food Security in India: Themes and Issues

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### ABSTRACT

*Food insecurity is a serious public health problem associated with poor cognitive and emotional development in children and with depression and poor health in adults. The need for achieving food security is felt significantly in the recent years due to enormous pressure from the ever-increasing population in India. Food security in India has to be understood as a distress phenomenon, as with marginal increase in their incomes over time they are forced to cut down on their food consumption to meet other pressing demands of health and education that were not considered important in the past. High economic growth rates have failed to improve food security in India leaving the country facing a crisis in its rural economy. This paper is focused various Themes issues and challenges in food security in India.*

**Key Words:** Food Insecurity, Phenomenon, Food consumption, Rural economy

### Introduction:

Food is one of the basic needs required for the survival of human being. It is necessary for getting energy for doing different works. One requires a balanced diet to be healthy otherwise one can suffer from hunger and malnutrition that causes many deceases, famines and epidemics. So each and every person has a security to have sufficient, healthy and balanced food at affordable price. For healthy life with the healthy food pure and safe and drinking water, sanitation facilities, primary health awareness and facilities provision of basic education and hygienic environment is also needed. The main object of this article is to present the realistic picture of the food security in India. The concept of food security has undergone substantial changes during nearly two decades starting with the World Food Conference of 1974 which was organised in the wake of the world food crisis of 1972-74. In the early years food security implied arrangements for providing physical supply of an adequate minimum level of foodgrains for the population in the developing countries during years of normal as well

as poor harvests [Andersen 1985. Sarris and Taylor 1976, Gale 1976, Valdes 1980, Konandreas 1975, George 1985].<sup>1</sup> However, it is now recognised that the ultimate aim of food security is not only provision for the physical availability of adequate amounts of foodgrains for the entire population on a stable basis throughout the year, but also to assure that all population including the poor and vulnerable sections have economic access to foodgrains [Bhalla 1993, Sarma 1992]<sup>2</sup>. This also implies that satisfactory production levels and stability of supply should be matched by a reduction in poverty and an increase in the effective demand to ensure economic and physical access to food for the poor [FAO 1987]<sup>3</sup> "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (World Food Summit 1996). Food insecurity results

<sup>1</sup>A Sarris and L Taylor (1976): 'Central Stocks-Food Aid and Food Security for the Poor' *World Development*, 4(12).

<sup>2</sup>G S Bhalla (1993): 'Food Security in South and South Asian Countries', *Man and Development*. Vol XV, No 1. March, pp 34-63.

<sup>3</sup>FAO Conference 24th Session (1987): Evaluation of Food Security Assistance Scheme, Rome C87/88-sup 3.

from failures in food availability, access, utilization or stability. Food security means availability, accessibility and affordability of food to all people at all times. The poor households are more vulnerable to food insecurity whenever there is a problem of production or distribution of food crops. Food security depends on the Public Distribution System (PDS), Government vigilance and action at times when this security is threatened.

## What is food security?

Food is as essential for living as air is for breathing. But food security means something more than getting two square meals. Food security has following dimensions-

**(a) Availability of food** means food production within the country, food imports and the previous Years stock stored in government granaries.

**(b) Accessibility** means food is within reach of every person.

**(c) Affordability** implies that an individual has enough money to buy sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet one's dietary needs. Thus, food security is ensured in a country only if **(1)** enough food is available for all the persons **(2)** all persons have the capacity to buy food of acceptable quality and **(3)** there is no barrier on access to food.

## Why food security?

The poorest section of the society might be food insecure most of the times while persons above the poverty line might also be food insecure when the country faces national disaster/calamity like earthquake, drought, flood, tsunami, widespread failure of crops causing famine, etc.

## How is food security affected during a calamity ?

Due to a natural calamity, say drought, total production of food grains decreases. It creates a shortage of food in the affected areas. Due to shortage of food, the prices go up. At the high prices, some people cannot afford to buy food. If such calamity happens in a very wide spread area or is stretched over a longer time period, it may cause a situation of starvation. A massive starvation might take a turn of famine. A Famine is characterised by widespread deaths due to starvation and epidemics caused by forced use of contaminated water or decaying food and loss of body resistance due to weakening from starvation. The most devastating famine that occurred in India was the FAMINE OF BENGAL in 1943. This famine killed thirty lakh people in the province of Bengal. Nothing like the Bengal Famine has happened in India again. But it is disturbing to note that even today, there are places like Kalahandi and Kashipur in Orissa and Uttar Pradesh in Bundelkhand regions where famine-like conditions have been existing for many years and where some starvation deaths have also been reported. Starvation deaths are also reported in Baran district of Rajasthan, Palamau district of Jharkhand and many other remote areas during the recent years. Therefore, food security is needed in a country to ensure food at all times.

## What is food Insecurity ?

Food insecurity has been variously defined. For our purposes, a nation or a community or a household is considered to be free from food insecurity if six conditions are met:

- a) **Food is available at all times.** That is, there is enough food in the system. In the absence of enough food in the system at all times, people cannot access food and must, therefore, go Food Insecure.
- b) **Food that is systemically available is also culturally acceptable.** People will not eat food, which is not acceptable culturally (in the broad sense). A Hindu may not eat beef,

even when it is available. A Muslim may not eat pork, even if Pork goes abegging.

- c) People have economic access to food.** That is, people have the purchasing power to buy food. Even if culturally acceptable food is available in the system, people will go Food Insecure if they have no purchasing power to buy that food, or what is called economic access. In the great Bengal famine of the early 1940s, people were dying outside granaries full of food grains, because, inter alia, they had no purchasing power to buy the food (Sen, 1986).
- d) People have physical access to food.** That is, people can buy food if they have the purchasing power. There must be outlets where people (especially the aged, the disabled, the sick and the ostracized like people with HIV/AIDs) can buy food, which is culturally acceptable and if they had the purchasing power to do so.
- e) Food that people consume has the requisite nutritional value for a healthy life.** Food that people can access must have nutritional value. Consumption of food, which has no nutritional value will leave people without energy for a healthy life and hence food insecure.
- f) People have access to potable water, for absorption of food by the body.** Unsafe drinking water will prevent absorption of nutrition from food into the body, because unsafe drinking water leads to diseases and other forms of attrition.

Whenever any of these conditions or some combination thereof are violated, food security is jeopardized, and food insecurity sets in. Symptomatically when none is undernourished and no one faces absence of access to food, we have absence of food insecurity. There is a subtle distinction between hunger, food insecurity and starvation, which is of fundamental importance. In Official parlance Food Insecurity is often defined in terms of calorie intake. The “subadjacent Food Insecure comprise those consuming between 18000-2200 calories per day; medial Food Insecure are

those who with calorie intake between 1600-1800 a day; and the ultra-Food Insecure have the lowest calorie intake (less than 1600 calories per day”.<sup>4</sup> (Gaiha and Kulkarni, 2008)

## Who are food-insecure?

Although a large section of people suffer from food and nutrition insecurity in India, the worst affected groups are landless people with little or no land to depend upon, traditional artisans, and providers of traditional services, petty self-employed workers and destitutes including beggars. In the urban areas, the food insecure families are those whose working members are generally employed in ill-paid occupations and casual labour market. These workers are largely engaged in seasonal activities and are paid very low wages that just ensure bare survival. The social composition along with the inability to buy food also plays a role in food insecurity. The SCs, STs and some sections of the OBCs (lower castes among them) who have either poor land-base or very low land productivity are prone to food insecurity. The people affected by natural disasters, who have to migrate to other areas in search of work, are also among the most food insecure people. A high incidence of malnutrition prevails among women. This is a matter of serious concern as it puts even the unborn baby at the risk of malnutrition. A large proportion of pregnant and nursing mothers and children under the age of 5 years constitute an important segment of the food insecure population. According to the National Health and Family Survey (NHFS) 1998–99, the number of such women and children is approximately 11 crore. The food insecure people are disproportionately large in some regions of the country, such as economically backward states with high incidence of poverty, tribal and remote areas, regions more prone to natural disasters etc. In fact, the states of Uttar Pradesh (eastern and south-

<sup>4</sup>Ghaia, Raghav and Kulkarni, Vani S.: “Look at the pyramids base”, Indian Express, New Delhi, 5 January 2008, op. Ed.

eastern parts), Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, Chattisgarh, parts of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra account for largest number of food insecure people in the country. Hunger is another aspect indicating food insecurity. Hunger is not just an expression of poverty, it brings about poverty. The attainment of food security therefore involves eliminating current hunger and reducing the risks of future hunger. Hunger has chronic and seasonal dimensions. Chronic hunger is a consequence of diets persistently inadequate in terms of quantity and/or quality. Poor people suffer from chronic hunger because of their very low income and in turn inability to buy food even for survival. Seasonal hunger is related to cycles of food growing and harvesting. This is prevalent in rural areas because of the seasonal nature of agricultural activities and in urban areas because of the casual labour, e.g., there is less work for casual construction labour during the rainy season. This type of hunger exists when a person is unable to get work for the entire year.

**India is aiming at Self-sufficiency in Foodgrains since Independence.** After independence, Indian policymakers adopted all measures to achieve self-sufficiency in food grains. India adopted a new strategy in agriculture, which resulted in the '**Green Revolution**' especially in the production of wheat and rice. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, officially recorded the impressive strides of the Green revolution in agriculture by releasing a special stamp entitled 'Wheat Revolution' in July 1968. The success of wheat was later replicated in rice. The increase in foodgrains was, however, disproportionate. The highest rate of growth was achieved in Punjab and Haryana, where foodgrain production jumped from 7.23 million tonnes in 1964–65 to reach an all-time high of 30.33 million tonnes in 1995–96. Production in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and the northeastern states continued to stagger. Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, on the other hand, recorded significant increases in rice yield.

## Food Security in India:

Since the advent of the Green revolution in the early-'70s, the country has avoided famine even during adverse weather conditions. India has become self-sufficient in foodgrains during the last thirty years because of a variety of crops grown all over the country. The availability of foodgrains (even in adverse weather conditions or otherwise) at the country level has further been ensured with a carefully designed food security system by the government. This system has two components: **(a)** buffer stock and **(b)** public distribution system.

### What is Buffer stock?

Buffer Stock is the stock of foodgrains, namely wheat and rice procured by the government through **Food Corporation of India (FCI)**. The FCI purchases wheat and rice from the farmers in states where there is surplus production. The farmers are paid a pre-announced price for their crops. This price is called **Minimum Support Price**. The MSP is declared by the government every year before the sowing season to provide incentives to the farmers for raising the production of these crops. The purchased foodgrains are stored in granaries. Do you know why this buffer stock is created by the government? This is done to distribute foodgrains in the deficit areas and among the poorer strata of society at a price lower than the market price also known as **Issue Price**. This also helps resolve the problem of shortage of food during adverse weather conditions or during the periods of calamity.

### What is the Public Distribution System ?

The food procured by the FCI is distributed through government regulated ration shops among the poorer section of the society. This is called the public distribution system (PDS). Ration shops are now present in most localities, villages, towns and cities. There are about 4.6 lakh ration shops all over the country. Ration shops also known as **Fair Price Shops**

keep stock of foodgrains, sugar, kerosene oil for cooking. These items are sold to people at a price lower than the market price. Any family with a ration card\* can buy a stipulated amount of these items (e.g. 35 kg of grains, 5 litres of kerosene, 5 kgs of sugar etc.) every month from the nearby ration shop. \*There are three kinds of ration cards: (a) Antyodaya cards for the poorest of the poor; (b) BPL cards for those below poverty line; and (c) APL cards for all others. The introduction of **Rationing** in India dates back to the 1940s against the backdrop of the Bengal famine. The rationing system was revived in the wake of an acute food shortage during the 1960s, prior to the Green Revolution. In the wake of the high incidence of poverty levels, as reported by the NSSO in the mid-1970s, three important food intervention programmes were introduced: Public Distribution System (PDS) for food grains (in existence earlier but strengthened thereafter);

Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (introduced in 1975 on an experimental basis) and Food-for-Work\*\* (FFW) (introduced in 1977–78). Over the years, several new programmes have been launched and some have been restructured with the growing experience of administering the programmes. At present, there are several Poverty Alleviation Programmes (PAPs), mostly in rural areas, which have an explicit food component also. While some of the programmes such as PDS, mid-day meal etc. are exclusively food security programmes, most of the PAPs also enhance food security. Employment programmes greatly contribute to food security by increasing the income of the poor.

### National Food for Work Programme:

National Food for Work Programme was launched on November 14, 2004 in 150 most backward districts of the country with the objective of intensifying the generation of supplementary wage employment. The programme is open to all rural poor who are in need of wage employment and desire to do manual unskilled work. It is implemented as a 100 percent centrally sponsored scheme and the foodgrains are

provided to States free of cost. The Collector is the nodal officer at the district level and has the overall responsibility of planning, implementation, coordination, monitoring and supervision. For 2004–05, Rs 2,020 crore have been allocated for the programme in addition to 20 lakh tonnes of foodgrains.

### Current Status of Public Distribution System:

Public Distribution System (PDS) is the most important step taken by the Government of India (GoI) towards ensuring food security. In the beginning the coverage of PDS was universal with no discrimination between the poor and non-poor. Over the years, the policy related to PDS has been revised to make it more efficient and targeted. In 1992, Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS) was introduced in 1,700 blocks in the country. The target was to provide the benefits of PDS to remote and backward areas. From June 1997, in a renewed attempt, Targeted

Public Distribution System (TPDS) was introduced to adopt the principle of targeting the 'poor in all areas'. It was for the first time that a differential price policy was adopted for poor and non-poor. Further, in 2000, two special schemes were launched viz., Antyodaya Anna Yojana\*\*\* (AAY) and the Annapurna Scheme (APS) with special target groups of 'poorest of the poor' and 'indigent senior citizens', respectively. The functioning of these two schemes was linked with the existing network of the PDS. The PDS has proved to be the most effective instrument of government policy over the years in stabilising prices and making food available to consumers at affordable prices. It has been instrumental in averting widespread hunger and famine by supplying food from surplus regions of the country to the deficit ones. In addition, the prices have been under revision in favour of poor households in general. The system, including the minimum support price and procurement has contributed to an increase in food grain production and provided income security to

farmers in certain regions. However, the Public Distribution System has faced severe criticism on several grounds. Instances of hunger are prevalent despite overflowing granaries. FCI go-downs are overflowing with grains, with some rotting away and some being eaten by rats.

### Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY):

AAY was launched in December 2000. Under the scheme one crore of the poorest among the BPL families covered under the targeted public distribution system were identified. Poor families were identified by the respective state rural development departments through a Below Poverty Line (BPL) survey. Twenty five kilograms of foodgrains were made available to each eligible family at a highly subsidised rate of Rs 2 per kg for wheat and Rs 3 per kg for rice.

This quantity has been enhanced from 25 to 35 kgs with effect from April 2002. The scheme has been further expanded twice by additional 50 lakh BPL families in June 2003 and in August 2004. With this increase, 2 crore families have been covered under the AAY.

In July 2002, the stock of wheat and rice with FCI was 63 million tonnes which was much more than the minimum buffer norms of 24.3 million tonnes. The stock eased after 2002–03 due to relief operations undertaken by the government as the year was declared as drought year due to failure of monsoon. The decline in stocks continued in the subsequent years. However, these remained consistently higher than the buffer norms. This situation improved with the distribution of foodgrains under different schemes launched by the government. There is a general consensus that high level of buffer stocks of foodgrains is very undesirable and can be wasteful. The storage of massive food stocks has been responsible for high carrying costs, in addition to wastage and deterioration in grain quality. Freezing of MSP for a few years should be considered seriously. The increased food grains procurement at enhanced MSP is the result of the pressure exerted by leading food grain producing

states, such as Punjab, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh. Moreover, as the procurement is concentrated in a few prosperous regions (Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and to a lesser extent in West Bengal) and mainly of two crops—wheat and rice—increase in MSP has induced farmers, particularly in surplus states, to divert land from production of coarse grains, which is the staple food of the poor, to the production of rice and wheat. The intensive utilisation of water in the cultivation of rice has also led to environmental degradation and fall in the water level, threatening the sustainability of the agricultural development in these states.

# The rising Minimum Support Prices (MSP) have raised the maintenance cost of procuring foodgrains by the government. Rising transportation and storage costs of the FCI are other contributing factors in this increase. Another major area of concern is the marked ineffectiveness of PDS, which is apparent from the fact that the average consumption of PDS grain at the all-India level is only 1 kg per person per month. The average consumption figure is as low as less than 300 gm per person per month in the states of Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh. In contrast, the average consumption in most of the southern states like Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh is in the range of 3–4 kgs per person per month. As a result the poor have to depend on markets rather than the ration shops for their food needs. In Madhya Pradesh only 5% of wheat and rice consumption of the poor are met through the ration shops. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar the percentage is still lower. PDS dealers are sometimes found resorting to malpractices like diverting the grains to open market to get better margin, selling poor quality grains at ration shops, irregular opening of the shops, etc. It is common to find that ration shops regularly have unsold stocks of poor quality grains left. This has proved to be a big problem. When ration shops are unable to sell, a massive stock of foodgrains piles up with the FCI. In recent years, there is another factor that has led to the decline of the PDS. Earlier every family, poor and non-poor had a ration card with a fixed quota of items such as rice, wheat, sugar etc. These were sold at the same low price to every

family. The three types of cards and the range of prices that you see today did not exist. A large number of families could buy food grains from the ration shops subject to a fixed quota. These included low income families whose incomes were marginally higher than the below poverty line families. Now, with TPDS of three different prices, any family above the poverty line gets very little discount at the ration shop. The price for APL family is almost as high as open market price, so there is little incentive for them to buy these items from the ration shop.

### Role of cooperatives in food security:

The cooperatives are also playing an important role in food security in India especially in the southern and western parts of the country. The cooperatives societies set up shops to sell low priced goods to poor people. For example, out of all fair price shops running in Tamil Nadu, around 94 per cent are being run by the cooperatives. In Delhi, Mother Dairy is making strides in provision of milk and vegetables to the consumers at controlled rate decided by Government of Delhi. Amul is another success story of cooperatives in milk and milk products from Gujarat. It has brought about the White Revolution in the country. These are a few examples of many more cooperatives running in different parts of the country ensuring food security of different sections of society. Similarly, in Maharashtra, Academy of Development Science (ADS) has facilitated a network of NGOs for setting up grain banks in different regions. ADS organises training and capacity building programmes on food security for NGOs. Grain Banks are now slowly taking shape in different parts of Maharashtra. ADS efforts to set up Grain Banks, to facilitate replication through other NGOs and to influence the Government's policy on food security are thus paying rich dividends. The ADS Grain Bank programme is acknowledged as a successful and innovative food security intervention.

### Summary:

Food security of a nation is ensured if all of its citizens have enough nutritious food available, all persons have the capacity to buy food of acceptable quality and there is no barrier on access to food. The people living below the poverty line might be food insecure all the time while better off people might also turn food insecure due to calamity or disaster. Although a large section of people suffer from food and nutrition insecurity in India, the worst affected groups are landless or land poor households in rural areas and people employed in ill paid occupations and casual labourers engaged in seasonal activities in the urban areas. The food insecure people are disproportionately large in some regions of the country, such as economically backward states with high incidence of poverty, tribal and remote areas, and regions more prone to natural disasters etc. To ensure availability of food to all sections of the society the Indian government carefully designed food security system, which is composed of two components: (a) buffer stock and (b) public distribution system. In addition to PDS, various poverty alleviation programmes were also started which comprised a component of food security. Some of these programmes are: Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS); Food for Work (FFW); Mid-Day Meals; Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) etc. In addition to the role of the government in ensuring food security, there are various cooperatives and NGOs also working intensively towards this direction.

### Conclusion:

So far as the above discussion is considered we come to the conclusion that the problem lies not with the welfare schemes but at its implementation level. So the government has to ensure that the benefits of this scheme reach the people for whom the programme is targeted. Identifying the correct beneficiaries arranging funds to fund this scheme on time and to plugging the loopholes and lacunae will

definitely give success to the government in implementing this ambitious programme.

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