

## ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY AND RIGHT TO FOOD IN INDIA

**Dr. Rajesh Singh Rawat,**

Assistant Professor,

Department of Commerce, D.A.V. ( P.G.) College, Dehradun, Uttarakhand

### ABSTRACT

*The concept of food security has undergone considerable changes in recent years. Food availability and stability were considered good measures of food security till the seventies and the achievement of self-sufficiency was accorded high priority in the food policies of developing countries. Though India was successful in achieving self-sufficiency by increasing its food production and also improved its capacity to cope with year-to-year fluctuations in food production, it could not solve the problem of chronic household food insecurity. In the past lot of emphasis, (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s), was given on green revolution technology with much emphasis on the package major irrigation projects, hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, particularly to promote growth of agricultural output in the western part of India, which later spread to the rest of India. Environment and economic sustainability of the green revolution was questioned later. Green revolution further aggravated the problem of production relations that existed because of the feudal and semi feudal structure of the India society. This sudden emphasis on agricultural production came when the 2nd Five Year Plan failed due to its much attention on industrial production.*

**Keywords :** Food Security, Self-sufficiency, Economic sustainability, Green revolution, Five Year Plan.

### INTRODUCTION

During the early 1950s, in India, a community development program was given much attention. Under the green revolution (which started in the early 1960s), there was much emphasis on growing up of high yielding varieties of wheat and rice, disregarding what impact it will have on those who rely on growing coarse cereals. Little emphasis was given to preserve indigenous varieties of seeds. Irrigation was developed in the Western part of India. Globalization started long back, and not in the 1990s. But what happened in the 1990s was that the State started rolling back its support by reducing various forms of subsidies (on various grounds that it results in inefficiency, corruption, balance of payment crisis) resulting in the impoverishment not

only of the landless and marginal farmers but also of the farmers from middle income groups. Dismantling of the Public Distribution System is just a part of the entire scenario (to reduce fiscal deficit and control inflation). Corporatization of agriculture (by both national and international MNCs) also took place with policy recommendations that ceilings on land should be removed. This was done to make our agriculture export oriented. Reliance on GMOs (genetically modified organisms) also took place. Information Technology came handy for such farms since that reduces transaction cost. Similarly, investment in infrastructure is emphasized since that promotes economic growth, reduces transportation cost, and other related costs as per the *mainstream economics*.

## MEANING OF PDS

The public distribution system, which was universal in nature during the pre-nineties, came under criticism on various grounds. It was argued that there was limited accessibility of PDS by the poor, there was regional and rural urban disparities in PDS, there were inefficiencies associated with the PDS, and leakages from PDS was considered to be quite high. The government adopting an approach, which could be expressed as, introduced the Revamped PDS: *"helping all the people living in the poor areas"*. Such poor areas included drought prone areas, desert areas, tribal areas, certain designated hilly areas and urban slum areas. The impact of targeting the PDS on food security was discussed too.

Three broader aspects of food security are.

- **Food Availability.**
- **Food Distribution.**
- **Food Accessibility.**

These Issues became the major areas of research and debates. It should be mentioned here that food security at the household level and intra-household food allocation, which is determined by many factors including gender norms, formed a negligible part of these debates. One can mention about the household livelihood security model, which allows for a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among the political economy of poverty, malnutrition and the dynamic and complex strategies that the poor use to negotiate survival. The model places emphasis on household actions, perceptions, and choices. Regarding the physical availability of food security, it was argued by some that the change in the cropping pattern in favor of non-food crops led to more risks and increased impoverishment of the small and marginal farmers, and decreased food availability per capita. This was countered by the argument that such a shift would lead to higher returns for small and marginal farmers, more exports due to increased competitiveness and would be compatible with the change in tastes and preference of both the

rural and urban consumers. However, one should also taken into account the vulnerability aspect (which covers external factors affecting food security viz. natural and man-made disasters), and sustainability aspect (which involves attention to the conservation and enhancement of natural resources like land, water, forests and biodiversity).

The recent controversy or even in the past regarding impoverishment actually shows how media and even research groups are used by various lobbies of farmers and interest groups. The big question is what happened to poverty, distribution, inequality, and various forms of social evils that exists not only in the heart of rural India, but may in an A class city? How far the past policies regarding trade reforms etc. have helped us? There should be clear cut discussion into account the present reality, the long term planning and our past track record in the current regime under the World Trade Organization (WTO). The decade of 1990s saw the debate surrounding the contraction of public distribution system (PDS) in India where economists and social scientists of various camps expressed their viewpoints in various journals, seminars and public meetings. It must be pointed out that political ideologies played a crucial role in determining the fate of Indian agriculture. The important areas which were touched during these discourses were: what one means by food adequacy, level of malnutrition, role of State and market in food allocation and distribution, impact of trade liberalization on the Indian food market etc. To summarize such a rich and enlightening discussion in a few words would be both difficult and impossible. However, certain elements could be pulled out and pondered upon to understand the politics of rights-based approach to food security.

## POLICIES AND PROGRAM BY GOVERNMENT

The policies and program which can assure food security are:

- Income-generating program like;

- Public works, including food-for-work.
- Employment generation with or without subsidies, and
- Informal sector support. The coming of the National Rural Employment Guaranty Act in 2005 is a positive step to provide safety to rural poor who will be provided employment for 100 days for performing manual work.
- Direct income transfer program which deal with economic aspects of food security and which are easier and faster to implement:
  - Food stamp program;
  - Social programs for poverty relief; and
  - Unemployment compensation.
- Food prices subsidies like the PDS which influence nutrition status in two different ways:
  - Through income effect, by increasing the purchasing power of beneficiary households, since they can buy a larger amount of food at the same cost;
  - Through substitution effect, by reducing the price of food relative to the prices of other goods.

## RIGHT TO FOOD AND MALNUTRITION

It was argued that the most of the rural and urban population do not have enough purchasing power to meet their calorie norms. But this argument was countered by saying that given the increase in the level of real expenditure per capita of the poor, there is shift in consumption from calorie based food to non-calorie based food. However, the calorie based definition of food security itself is subject to many criticisms---the required calories by a person may vary across geographies, culture and time. Even

if one assumes that „adequate“ calories are available to every member of the household, there is no certainty that available calories will meet the requirements of protein energy, and micro-nutrients, such as iron, iodine and important vitamins. The construction of poverty line on the basis of minimum required calorie intake has also been debated. Hunger is primarily a problem associated with poverty (income), and is therefore very much related to economic growth and income distribution. It is thus important to pay attention to employment opportunities, other ways of acquiring economic means, and also food prices, which influences people's ability to buy food, and thus affect the food entitlements they effectively enjoy.

There was a growing consent among economists and social scientists to widen the connotation of food security by including the concept of nutritional security at the household level. Some argued that the calorie based definition of food security be replaced by nutrition based definition of food security at the household level. Without an assurance of nutritional adequacy, food security has very little meaning. The usage of anthropometric measures in order to find the level of malnutrition and measuring the micronutrient contents in food are some techniques in order to assess the nutritional aspect of food security. If the nutritional aspect of food security is followed, then it can be found from the Second National Family Health Survey that 47 percent of all Indian children are undernourished, 52 percent of all adult women are anemic and 36% have a BMI (body mass index) below the cut-off of 18.5 commonly associated with chronic energy deficiency (International Institute of Population Sciences, 2000). Although there is decline of extreme hunger and severe under nutrition but the improvement of anthropometric indicators (heights and weights of Indian children) is quite slow. Anthropometric indicators show rural-urban disparity and gender disparity.

Nutrition status of an individual not only depend indirectly on household food security, but also gender norms practiced in the society as well as sanitation, access to health facilities and safe

drinking water etc. Micronutrient deficiency—especially deficiencies in iron, iodine and vitamin-A—are even more widespread worldwide than that of protein-energy malnutrition. Besides being important causes of disability in themselves, micronutrient deficiencies often underlie other types of morbidity. Iron deficiency is the most common cause of anemia worldwide. The consequences of iron deficiency are more serious for women. Rise in net availability of food grain at the national level does not ensure food security at the household level. But still there is a necessity to become self-sufficient in food production. One should recall the case of green revolution that took place during the 1960s, after a package was formulated. There are limits to increasing production through area expansion as the country has almost reached an upper limit in so far as cultivable land is concerned. Hence the emphasis has to be on productivity increase. The decline in gross capital formation in irrigation due to decline in public investment in irrigation is responsible for such declines in the growth rates.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the food stocks in the Food Corporation of India (FCI) godowns went up due to lowering purchasing power of the rural masses, and very little price differential between market prices and issue prices of food grains in ration shops, as has been argued by some. Drought and famine led to further impoverishment of the rural poor as there were little concerted efforts to improve their entitlement by capitalizing on the endowment poor people has i.e. labour power. **The Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY)**, which was introduced in mid-2001, was no better and suffered from the problems of under-utilization of funds, mechanization of work, and fudging of the muster rolls. The Indian state was unable to provide „safety net“ to its small and marginal farmers who could not get the return for their investment in agricultural activities. News of starvation deaths and suicides were reported from different parts of India. Although the civil society voiced its concern about these issues, the government seemed to pay no attention to it. Some

of the states which performed poorly in ensuring food security were Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and Chattisgarh. Cases of starvation deaths were also reported from the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The poorer regions which suffered hugely were Palamau in Jharkhand, Sarguja in Chattisgarh, Kalahandi in Orissa. Cases of starvation deaths were also reported from the tribal communities such as *sahariyas*, *musahars*, *kols* and *bhuiyas*. Consumption of *ghas ki roti* made from *sama* (a forest grass) took the lives of *sahariyas* in Rajasthan. Tribals in Bolangir district of Orissa were found to mortgage not only their land but also their rations cards for a paltry sum of Rs. 50. The moneylenders also lent back the cards at higher price. Farmer's suicides in Vidharbha region in Maharashtra can also be mentioned which is happening because of indebtedness, high cost of inputs (including credit) and too much reliance on green revolution technology (and growing up of cash crops) instead of traditional farming methods (and growing up of food grains).

## BEGINNING OF RIGHT TO FOOD MOVEMENT IN INDIA

The 'right to food' movement / campaign which grew after the hearing by the Supreme Court of a writ petition filed by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (Rajasthan), at that critical junction not only provided the Indian citizens with information about the food security situation, but also made a serious attempt to draw the attention of Supreme Court to consider „right to food“ as a fundamental right. The early dialogue on food security happening among economists changed its track, giving more stress on action oriented research. There are however hurdles to make right to food as a fundamental right because:

1. There is multiplicity of meanings of the term „freedom from hunger“. It can mean— getting two square meals a day, meeting specific calorie norms, avoiding nutrition related ailments and so on.

2. If right to food is seen as right to „nutrition“ as provided in the Article 47 of the Indian Constitution, then one can look into the debate among nutritionists regarding the constituents of „good“ nutrition. Another aspect of nutrition is that „good“ nutrition varies across time and space (already discussed). Nutrition can also be linked with issues like safe drinking water, good health etc., without which body's absorption and metabolism of nutrients goes down; and
3. Ensuring right to food is not only the responsibility of the State but also institutions and individuals.

Since its first articulation in official discourse in 1974, „food security“ has become the primary cognitive lens through which the prevalence and complexity of global hunger are viewed. This study traces a genealogy of „food security“ through a series of intergovernmental texts and academic studies as a means to historicize contemporary understandings of the term. A discourse analytic approach serves to deconstruct prescribed definitions and interrogates the knowledge/power relations of „food security“ as a rationalizing technology of global liberal governance. The authority of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to „speak food“ is examined in light of changing conceptions of what food security „is“ and how best it should be „achieved“.

While the **Article 37** explicitly states that the Directive Principles „shall not be enforced by any court“, it goes on to stress that-

- (i) These principles are nevertheless „fundamental to the governance of the country“; and
- (ii) It shall be the duty of the state to apply these principles in making laws“.

It is essential to remember the Millennium Development Goals and targets pertaining to poverty and hunger.

**Goal 1:** Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

**Target 1:** Halve between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$ 1 a day.

**Target 2:** Halve between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

The study embodies a critique of traditional positivist approaches to the study of food security, and to the study of social science more generally. It shows how changing discursive technocracies produce new regimes of truth which replace the need for political decision with the dictates of techno scientific knowledge and the governmental rationality of risk management.

Despite the international summits such as the Vienna Declaration, 1993 adopted at **World Conference on Human Rights** affirming that „extreme poverty and social exclusion constitutes a violation of human dignity“ and the **Rome Declaration** (1996) made during the **World Food Summit** stating that ‘food security is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active life’, it is difficult to transform these into the fundamental rights of the Indian Constitution. Although the right to food comes under the Directive Principles, it is difficult to convert it into a fundamental right.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, it may be concluded that food security in India can be achieved by paying higher attention to issues such as climate change, integrated water management, agricultural pricing and crop insurance. The impact of globalization in the form of SEZs and other factors has been both positive and negative in terms of agricultural prosperity and there is a strong need to regulate the policies related to globalization for reducing its negative effects on food security in India.

Improvement in food consumption is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for overcoming the problem of malnutrition in India.

Apart from inadequate food consumption, the other important causes of malnutrition are high incidence of gastrointestinal and respiratory infections and behavioral factors such as faulty child feeding and weaning practices, all of which contribute to the low absorption of nutrients from the food consumed. Economic growth, left to itself may not have a dramatic impact on nutritional status in the near future, although it provides greater opportunities for public intervention. Effective and efficient food and environmental interventions are needed until all the citizens are adequately fed. While India achieved success in combating transient food insecurity caused by droughts or floods, it miserably failed to make much dent in chronic food insecurity as reflected in the low energy intake and high incidences of malnutrition. The overall improvement in nutritional status has also been very slow. There is chronic under-nourishment in about half of the population, particularly among the vulnerable groups of children, women and elderly from the lower half of the expenditure class. Curiously, the proportion of consumption expenditure spent on food is slowly going down even in the households with chronic under-nourishment.

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