

Food as a Discourse: Politics of Poverty and Poverty Politics in Context of India's Food Security Act 2013

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Abstract—*The present paper, in its limited way, provides a non-conventional approach to look at the entire issue of poverty politics and its relation to National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013 from non-economic points of views such as social, political and cultural. In its discussion the present work stress on the various discourses which construct a larger discourse on Food both as a consumption entity and a political issue coupled with poverty in the country. Though the article does not provide any major recommendations, it opens up a new possibility to critically look at the issue of poverty and food security related to various socio-cultural and political discourses in the country.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Millennium Development Goals report 2014, India was the host of one third of the world's extreme poor people (1.2 million) in 2010. This clearly indicates that India's National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013 is, thus, a response to such harrowing situation in the country. However, the recent political as well as academic debates over the FSA shows that poverty alleviation and right to food in India are not merely policy issues. In fact, the entire gamut of food security and poverty alleviation construct a very complex discourse which includes a large number of issues such as: how to implement this effectively?, what is the motive behind such schemes?, and the implication of such national act and its impact with regard to international commitments. In this way, the whole subject of food becomes a matter of socio-political discourse rather than just a substance of consumption for mere survival of the body. Hence, the body as a category becomes political and not just the biological entity.

The NFSA in its design and approach is one of the worlds most ambitious and massive program, wishes to solve the problem of a country which is complex both in its geography and demography. The NFSA intends to provide food security to almost 67 per cent of India's population. Under this act, the people who are qualified for the benefit will receive five kilograms of food grains at well subsidized rates of rice Rs 3 per kilogram, wheat Rs 2 per kilogram and coarse grains for

Rs. 1 per kilogram. Now, it is the responsibility of the state government to identify such people who are really in need for this benefit. Additionally, the entire process from the beginning till it reaches to the poor involves central government, state government and local authorities. To achieve its true target, the beneficiary segment has been divided into children from the age of 6 months to 14 years and the pregnant and lactating mothers.

To maintain the sanctity of the program a well defined social audit system has been put in place so that the possible corruption can be checked and the intended target can avail the benefit easily.

In fact, K.R. Venugopal (2010), former secretary to Prime Minister and special rapporteur, in his article raised some fundamental issue when the bill was in the offing. He was particularly concerned with the alignment of "all relevant laws and programmes for a credible fulfillment of the promised food security for the poor" (p.599). In his concluding remarks, he emphasizes on the host of issue, including the identification of the poorest of the poor, the proper assessment of production and consumption of the country in the next 5-7 years, and at last he stresses on the responsibility of the social activist groups to warn the government about the hardships and complexities involved in it. In this way, Venugopal presupposes the possibility of the food discourse which needs to be studied for the proper understanding of the NFSA. Hence, the paper, in the next part, attempts to define the food discourse and what it entails in terms of implementation and execution.

2. WHAT IS DISCOURSE?

This paper, for its theoretical framework and conceptual design, is based on the Foucauldian notion of discourse, where the term 'discourse' is not just the linguistic category, but system of knowledge formation. To make the concept lucid, it

would be appropriate to quote Stuart Hall's observation about the term:

Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as a discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it 'rules out', limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it. Discourse, Foucault argued, never consists of one statement, one text, one action or one source. The same discourse, characteristic of the way of thinking or the state of knowledge at any one time (what Foucault called the *episteme*), will appear across a range of texts, and as forms of conduct, at a number of different institutional sites within society. However, whenever these discursive events 'refer to the same object, share the same style and ... support a strategy ... a common institutional, administrative or political drift and pattern' (Cousins and Hussain, 1984, pp. 84–5), then they are said by Foucault to belong to the same discursive formation. (p.29)

The above observation reveals that the discursive formation of food in terms of NFSA involves the discourses on closely related topics such as poverty, production of food grains, role of NGOs and social activist organizations, foreign and domestic policies in terms of availability of the food grains in the country, and perception of such programs in the common masses. Since poverty eradication has for long been in the top list of MDG and other developing nations, it would be apposite to discuss the discourses on poverty in the country. In a report, Indian chronic poverty report, prepared by Indian Institute of Public Administration, Shashank Bhide and Asha Kapur Mehta (2011) have deliberated on the dynamics of poverty, which is one of the crucial socio-political aspects to comprehend the elusive category of poverty. In the paper the authors raise certain questions related to the unending poverty. For instance, the factors which push a huge chunk of population in the country to become poor and the factors which prevent some of them from poverty are at the core to understand the poverty dynamics. When it comes to poverty, it has to be understood that poverty is not a given condition, but an acquired one through socio-economic factors. This has been made very clear by the authors by providing survey data. Though the authors have talked about chronic poverty and its long duration, this paper looks at poverty as non-divisible category with no segregation. Poverty is in itself a chronic phenomenon which reflects the worst living conditions of an individual. It has to be seen in totality rather than in multiple types and hierarchy. As per the report, a particular segment reflects the severe cases of poverty, not because they do not have opportunity to overcome, but they have been historically denied the basic human rights. Moreover, this becomes dangerous when the household is headed by a woman, who

has no asset or skill. In this case the household may not get one meal at a time. Hence, the entire issue has to be seen from socio-cultural point of view where the caste based system coupled with gender discrimination gives it a very ugly turn. Poverty, in this sense is much more than data. For instance, due to social discrimination, the vulnerability of such groups to poverty becomes very high. Tribal in Orissa are one such example of severe case of poverty. In this context, Bhide and Megata note:

The multiplicity of spheres of exclusion STs and other marginalized groups in India face is an outcome of historically determined social processes and institutions. Unfortunately, development initiatives have at best mitigated processes of exclusion. (p.47)

According to the report due to the development processes (irrigation, mining, infrastructure) almost over 20 million tribal people have been displaced from their local place. This has aggravated the problem of poverty and food security. In fact, those who live in remote areas in forest suffer more from malnutrition than others. Hence, it is not about the ownership of the land which makes such groups exit from poverty, but the better ways of agricultural productivity is necessary to improve the situation, apart from other infrastructural developments. Other significant reasons which force one to poverty are surprisingly non-economic such as sudden social expenses on death or marriage in the family.

The social problems, which are non-economic in nature, can only be tackled through education. It is a known fact that education can do miracles when it comes to such matters. Sadly, the state of illiteracy in these groups is not very encouraging. For instance, according to 2001 literary census, population gap in literacy rate at the national level in scheduled tribes is 17.7 percent. According to 2011 literary census the low literacy rate among the scheduled tribes is less than 30 percent. These two data somewhat reveal saddening state of affairs. Hence, to understand poverty one has to take into consideration the dynamics of poverty because it is related to not only one's poor status but the choices one makes in life be it political, economic or social in nature. To solve the problem of poverty, a local mechanism has to be put in place which can truly understand the dynamics of the reason and local socio-cultural set-up. This has been reiterated by the leading economist of the country, A. Vaidyanathan (2013), when he harshly criticizes the role of the politicians and stress on the importance of local representation in the central programs of poverty alleviations. He says:

The indifference of the political class to transparency and accountability has much deeper and not so edifying reasons. Programme for the poor and underprivileged cover wide areas, numerous villages and towns and a huge number of potential beneficiaries. Many of the programmes also have sizeable loans and subsidy components. Detailed administrative monitoring is inherently difficult. Since elected panchayats have no role in making or implementing decisions, or do not

know what is done, there is no local mechanism to ensure accountability. (p.232)

Vaidyanathan sees "the deficiency in governance and in the functioning of the public systems and enterprises" partly to a greater extent "the attitude and behaviours of the political class" (p.239). The perception and attitude of politicians construct a discourse about any policy in the country which is intended to benefit the poor class. Thus, politicians have to be very careful when they declare NFSA just as a politically motivated scheme, because their observations and statements affect a large section of society.

Next deliberation in the food discourse is the pattern of food consumption and nutrition status in the country. There are three main data sources available in the country which provide the consumption and nutrition trend in the country. These are: National Sample Survey (NSS), Food Balance Sheet (FBS), and National Nutrition and Monitoring Bureau (NNMB). These three data sources provide somewhat similar yet different trends in the nutrition and food consumptions of the country. However, the indicators on which they rely upon are not adequate to give a comprehensive outlook. As per the experts (Vaidyanathan, 2013) outcome indicators such as body size, mortality and morbidity, nature and intensity of activity has to be considered to get a true picture of the state of affairs. It is a fact that the status of nutrition will differ considerably from one segment to another in a complex society like India. Hence, data needs to go simply beyond the "average values for the population" and every people should be seen as individuals and not community.

Food is directly related to agricultural produce of the country. In India though the situation is not so alarming, it is also not very satisfactory. Agricultural is basically subject to the land fit for producing. According to the recent data during 2004-2007 0.57 million hectares land has been procured by non-agricultural activities and around 40 percent of total agricultural area is deteriorating where the country loses 5.3 billion soils every year. These changes in any way are going to affect NFSA in the long term; hence a careful look at these states of affairs has to be taken into account. Similarly, M Suchita (2015) notes that rice is one of the most accessible agricultural produce in the country. It is one of the accepted food grain both culturally and geographically. She laments:

States such as Madhya Pradesh and Punjab are giving a production bonus of Rs. 200/100 kg for wheat; none of the states in the country is giving a bonus for producing rice in the country. Procurement systems for rice are not effective and efficient in many parts of the country. (p.109)

The current state of rice production is a case in point. The reason is that almost more than 60 per cent people in the country rely on the rice. Moreover, the Planning Commission of India has declared that 120 million tons of rice may be needed to feed 1.5 billion population of the country by 2030.

Hence, this issue has to be taken seriously, otherwise it will, in the long run, affect the NFSA objectives.

Apart from these issues, there are several other issues which need to be mentioned to complete the discourse of the food security. One such important issue is the WTO agreement and NFSA. Sudha Narayan (2014) does not find any point of dispute between NFSA and India's international commitment; however she points out that the country and the government "needs to revamp its food management systems in a way that ensures transparency, accountability and predictability" (p.46). It is, thus, necessary to invent cost-effective measures of procurement to because the base period notification in INR is creating and will create a problem in the nation on this front in the coming future which will affect the NFSA design.

In sum, the above review is obviously far from complete and comprehensive to point out any major fault in the food security system. However, it points out several related discourses which revolve around the food and poverty. In this way, rather than actually considering the issue in its complexity, policy makers and the government perceive poverty and food as a two separate issues and judge it on its economic values. Though the previous statement may not seem true and convincing, the state of affairs does not seem to have understood this complexity. In this very, this short review, which is very restricted it is approach to provide some strong basis of a problem, indicates some of the symptoms related to poverty and its relation to NFSA both at the domestic and international level. Moreover, when the entire issue of sustainability will be viewed considering the aforementioned points, then its meaning and operation will definitely be altered. This article, therefore, has tried to open up an interesting possibility to approach the issue of poverty and its relation to NFSA in an entirely different and non-conventional way where the politics of poverty and food has been highlighted from non-economic stands.

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