

Food Security Act: An Assessment

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Abstract—India is the world's 2nd most populous country with 1.2 billion people but, it has the largest number of population below the poverty line too. It has always been in news for its hunger, malnutrition along with glorious economic growth rate. And ensuring basic necessities for all its citizens always have been a challenge & prime concern of our planning since independence. Food is our prime need & plays an important role in our life because without it we can't be alive. So, it becomes the utmost duty of the government to ensure food security of its citizens & to ensure that nobody should sleep hungry. The Indian planners right from the beginning, realized that the need to attain self sufficiency in foodgrains as one of the important goals of five years planning. The government realized that food surplus countries used their surplus food as a weapon to force food deficit countries to submit to their dictates or orders. That's why Government had always tried to find new ways to ensure food security for its citizens. There is a long list of government programs, especially designed for ensuring Food security; and much popular name in this list is "Food Security Act 2013". This had grab world's attention because it will benefit 800 million people or 67% of Indian population. The Food Security Bill has special focus on the needs of poorest of the poor, women and children. In case of non-supply Of foodgrains now people will get Food Security Allowance. The bill also provides grievance redress mechanism and penalty for non compliance by public servant or authority. But there has been a wide criticism done by many people about this program. In my paper I tried to assess its performance & need, and we stand now.

Keywords: Food security, food security act, diversification, phased implementation.

1. BACKGROUND

India is a nuclear power & also the world's largest democracy and apart from it, it is the world 2nd most populous country with 1.2 billion people but, it has the largest number of population below the poverty line too. It has always been in news for its hunger, malnutrition along with glorious economic growth rate. And ensuring basic necessities (like food, shelter, & clothing) for all its citizens always have been a challenge & prime concern of our planning since independence. And in these three, food is our prime need & plays an important role in our life because without it we can't be alive. So, it becomes the utmost duty of the government to ensure food security of its citizens & to ensure that nobody should sleep hungry. However in Indian case, The Indian planners right from the beginning, realized that the need to attain self sufficiency in foodgrains as one of the important

goals of five years planning. The government realized that food surplus countries used their surplus food as a weapon to force food deficit countries to submit to their dictates or orders. In case of India, the same situation was felt when after independence, India's first Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru realized that it was with great difficulty that India was able to avoid the political strings attached with food aid, but it did hurt national pride. One of his broadcasts to the nation he stated very candidly:- "we have sought help from abroad and we shall continue to do so under pressure of necessity but the conviction is growing upon me more forcefully than ever how dangerous it is for us to depend for this prime necessity of life on foreign countries. It is only when we obtain self sufficiency in food that we can progress and develop ourselves, otherwise there is continuous pressure of circumstances, there is trouble and misery and there is sometimes shame and humiliation". Later, When Mrs. Indira Gandhi became prime minister she had also faced the brunt of food diplomacy. Soon after she took charge as prime minister, India suffered from very severe drought for continuous two years in 1965 and 1966. Then the American president Lyndon Johnson, restricted food aid to monthly basis under the P.L 480 program. This was done to force India not to condemn American aggression in Vietnam. Then Mrs. Gandhi had allowed the import of high yielding variety of seeds of wheat from Mexico to usher in a new paradigm as what we called "Green Revolution. Agriculture scientist Dr. M S Swaminathan, who is hailed as the father of India's Green Revolution, once told to Devinder Sharma (food analyst) that the seeds of Green Revolution were actually sown in a car journey that he took with the Prime Minister, Mrs Gandhi. During the short car journey Dr Swaminathan recalls Mrs Gandhi had sought a commitment from him if he could provide an assurance that "India will have a surplus of 10 million tonnes or so in a couple of years because I want the bloody Americans off my back." So these all incidents show the great importance of food surplus or food security for residents of a developing world. And after a couple of decade, Dr. Swaminathan made their commitment, and India become self sufficient in food production & the seed-water-fertilizer policy popularly known as the green revolution made a hilarious change in food production outlay. This policy ushered in a revolution in food production and dispensed self sufficiency in foodgrains by the year 1976 and since then, Indian imports of cereals have remained negligible (except

2006-07). India had produce 264.38 million tonnes of foodgrains during 2013-14 compared to 257.13 million tonnes last year. This is more than 7million tonnes higher than the production last year. In the earlier estimates released in February, the total foodgrains production was pegged at 263.2 million tonne. Rice production is expected at record106.29 million tonne and wheat production is expected to reach 95.85 million tonnes, again a record. Record production has also been achieved in the case of tur (3.38 million tonne), gram (9.93 million tonnes), maize (24.19 million tonnes), all pulses put together (19.57 million tonne), cotton (36.50 million bales) and jute (10.82 million bales). Appreciating India's achievement on the food front Gilbert Etienne state: --- Despite of the gloomy and perfectly similarly founded forecasts or prophecies' about India's future disasters, which were fashionable in 1960's. The country is no longer exposed to real famine.

2. INTRODUCTION

Food Security means that all people at all times have physical & economic access to adequate amounts of nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate foods, which are produced in an environmentally sustainable and socially just manner, and that people are able to make informed decisions about their food choices. It also means that the people who produce our food are able to earn a decent, living wage growing, catching, producing, processing, transporting, retailing, and serving food. At the core of food security is access to healthy food and optimal nutrition for all. Food access is closely linked to food supply, so food security is dependent on a healthy and sustainable food system. The food system includes the production, processing, distribution, marketing, acquisition, and consumption of food. Food security is defined in a numerous way by different organisation and by different economist/ persons. But some of the standard definitions are the following.

1996 World Food Summit: "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 Development Report 1986: "food security as access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life"

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 1983: "food security as, ensuring that all people, at all times have both physical and economic access to basic food they need"

According to staatz (1990): "food security as the ability to assure, on a long term basis, that the food system provides the total population access to a timely, reliable and nutritionally adequate supply of food"

World Health Organization (WHO): "Food security means that:

- All people at all times have both physical and economic access to enough food for an active, healthy life;
- The ways in which food is produced and distributed are respectful of the natural processes of the earth and thus sustainable;
- Both the consumption and production of food are governed by social values that are just and equitable as well as moral and ethical;
- The ability to acquire food is ensured;
- The food itself is nutritionally adequate and personally and culturally acceptable; and
- The food is obtained in a manner that upholds human dignity."

3. INDIA'S AT PRESENT SITUATION ON THE FOOD SECURITY

After achieving self-sufficiency in food-grain, India at present finds itself in the midst of a paradoxical situation. India's food security situation continues to rank as an "alarming ". According to international food policy research institutes, global hunger index, 2014. It ranks 55 out of 76 Countries of the world with the worst food security status. This means there are only 21 countries in the world whose people have worse nutritional status than us. The GHI is composed of three equally weighted indicators –first is the proportion of the population that is under nourished, second is the proportion of children who are underweight, and third is child mortality under the age of five year. However, India's GHI position for 2014 is 55 which show that it is better than the last year position, which were 63. Thus "Progress in dealing with underweight helped India's 2014 GHI score & it fall to 17.8 points. India now ranks 55th out of 76 countries, before Bangladesh [57] and Pakistan [57], but still trails behind neighbouring Nepal [44] and Sri Lanka[39]". There are the some other facts related to food security of India's which reveals the real condition/face of India.

- i. One in seven people don't get enough food to stay healthy every day.
- ii. An estimated 963 million people in the world go hungry every day.
- iii. According to food agriculture organization of United Nations estimates, 1.02 billion people are suffering from chronic hunger mostly in south Asia and Africa.
- iv. Despite food economic performance, over 200 million people are food insecure & India is home of the largest number of hungry people in the world.

The World Bank defines poor person as someone living on less than 1.5 USD a day. India is home of world's largest number of poor people in the world. According to Indian national poverty estimates only 28% population are poor but

international poverty estimates state a different story & portrays a grimmer picture with the statement that one third of world's poor people live in India. Indian government has followed many plan & policies since independence to secure food security. But these are mainly related to Food distributions programs & Wage employment programs. But both programs have their own characteristics and benefits. Many of them became successfully run in India, but the main motive behind these entire programs was same, to ensure food security for all its citizens. And in September 2013, Indian parliament passed a law that ensure Right to food & will benefit 800 million people or about 67% of total population.

Food Security Act: - The National Food Security Ordinance is a historic initiative for ensuring food and nutritional security to the people. It gives right to the people to receive adequate quantity of foodgrains at affordable prices. The Food Security Bill has special focus on the needs of poorest of the poor, women and children. In case of non-supply of foodgrains now people will get Food Security Allowance. The bill provides for grievance redress mechanism and penalty for non compliance by public servant or authority.

4. HIGHLIGHTS OF FOOD SECURITY ACT

- Coverage of two thirds or 1.2 billion population to get highly subsidized foodgrains: Up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population will have uniform entitlement of 5 kg foodgrains per month at highly subsidized prices of Rs. 3, 2, 1 per kg. For rice, wheat, coarse grains respectively.
- Poorest of the poor continue to get 35 kg per household: The poorest of poor households would continue to receive 35 Kg foodgrains per household per month under Antyodaya Anna Yojna at subsidized prices of Rs 3, 2 and 1. It has also proposed to protect the existing allocation of foodgrains to the States/UTs, subject to it being restricted to average annual offtake during last three years.
- Eligible households to be identified by the States: Corresponding to the coverage of 75% rural and 50 % of urban population at all India level, State wise coverage will be determined by the Central Government. The work of identification of eligible households is left to the States/UTs, which may frame their own criteria or use Social Economic and Caste Census data, if they so desire.
- Special focus on nutritional support to women and children: There is a special focus on nutritional support to women and children. Pregnant women and lactating mothers, besides being entitled to nutritious meals as per the prescribed nutritional norms will also receive maternity benefit of at least of Rs. 6000/-. Children in the age group of 6 months to 14 years will be entitled to take home ration or hot cooked food as per prescribed nutritional norms.
- Food Security Allowance in case of non supply of foodgrains: The Central Government will provide funds to States/UTs in case of short supply of food grains from Central pool, In case of non-supply of food grains or meals to entitled persons, the concerned State/UT Governments will be required to provide such food security allowance as may be prescribed by the Central Government to the beneficiaries.
- States to get assistance for intra-State transportation and handling foodgrains: In order to address the concern of the States regarding additional financial burden, Central Government will provide assistance to the States towards cost of intra-State transportation, handling of foodgrains and FPS dealers' margin, for which norms will be developed. This will ensure timely transportation and efficient handling of foodgrains.
- Reforms for doorstep delivery of foodgrains: The Bill also contains provisions for reforms in PDS through doorstep delivery of foodgrains, application of information and communication technology (ICT) including end to end computerization, leveraging 'Aadhaar' for unique identification of beneficiaries, diversification of commodities under TPDS etc for effective implementation of the Food Security Act. Some of these reforms are already underway.
- Women Empowerment-- Eldest women will be Head of the household and if not available, the eldest male member is to be the head of the household.
- Grievance redressal mechanism at district level: There will be state and district level redressal mechanism with designated officers. The States will be allowed to use the existing machinery for District Grievance Redressal Officer (DGRO), State Food Commission, if they so desire, to save expenditure on establishment of new redressal set up. Redressal mechanism may also include call centres, helpline etc.
- Social audits and vigilance committees to ensure transparency and accountability: Provisions have also been made for disclosure of records relating to PDS, social audits and setting up of Vigilance Committees in order to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Penalty for non compliance: The Bill provides for penalty to be imposed on public servants or authority, if found guilty of failing to comply with the relief recommended by the District Grievance Redressal Officer (DGRO).
- Expenditure: At the proposed coverage of entitlement, total estimated annual foodgrains requirement is 612.3 lakh tons and corresponding estimated food subsidy for 2013-14 costs is about Rs.1, 24,724 crore.

5. A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE FOOD SECURITY ACT

Huge fiscal burden: - By supplying rice at Rs. 3 per kg, wheat at Rs. 2 per kg and coarse cereals at Rs. 1 per kg to the target groups, the government is set to raise its subsidy bill by Rs. 1,24,000 crores which is supposed to burn a huge hole in the government's pocket and widen the already huge fiscal deficit. With the major economies of the world facing a slowdown, lack of preparedness and adequate resources to finance its deficit might have a detrimental effect on the growth of the Indian economy. For food subsidy, this year the government has allocated Rs. 1, 15,000 crore, which includes a provision of Rs. 88,500 crore for implementation of National Food Security Act. The food subsidy bill has been kept unchanged from interim budget proposal of Rs. 1.15 lakh crore. This is a huge amount for a poor and developing country.

6. WHEN POOR IS ONLY 30% OF POPULATION THEN WHY SUBSIDY TO 67% OF POPULATION

But doubts persist over the very concept of the Bill. Is it not extravagant to subsidise food for such a large part of the population when the poor constitute only 30 per cent of the population? Can a poor and developing country afford such huge spending? Isn't the Food Bill just corruption by another name? Wouldn't the Bill lead to a virtual takeover of the grain trade by the central government? As a rising tide lifts all boats, should we not invest in growth rather than spend on consumption? These are all valid questions and we will attempt to answer them.

Lack of diversification in food basket:- The act also fails in diversification of food entitlements by not providing bajra, jowar, ragi and maize. Continuous rise in MSP of wheat and rice distorted the cropping pattern. Only wheat and rice produced by the farmers because it has higher MSP but it completely distorted the inter crop pattern. Then government should raise the Minimum Support price of all crops like Coarse Cereals, Pulses etc. they should enlarge the food basket with Ragi, Millets, Pulses, Sorghum (Jowar), and Corn (maize). And according to a survey report on PDS now a day's people are aware of the benefits of these nutritious grains and feel that eating these grains will enable them to work well and be healthy. This diversification would not only provide nutritious alternatives, but also encourage farmers to cultivate these grains due to compulsory procurement by the government.

Lack of phased implementation: - The act should focus on "phased implementation" & priority should be given to those states that are food insecure state Bihar, Orissa, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, eastern part of Uttar Pradesh etc. So in these states we would reach up to the desired level of food security after some times. Otherwise it will be a biased

decision in favour of surplus and rich state where Hunger is not a big issue.

The two child norm:- The two child norm, under which, the cooked meal at aanganwadis and the monetary benefits would not be applicable to any mother having a third child is unjustly punitive to women who may not have access to contraceptives and who may not have a voice in crucial matters like the number of children to bear.

7. NEED SOME REFORMS FOR TRANSPARENCY

The mechanism to ensure transparency also needs some reforms. The grievance Redressal system is at the district level; a more decentralised approach, wherein, an officer at panchayat or block level would prove more effective and more accessible to the people. Act can also be expected to contribute to lowering of leakages in the PDS. Recent studies based on NSS data and field surveys have shown that the extent of leakages in the PDS have been going down in many states. The PDS is functioning better in states where the BPL coverage has been expanded, where issues prices have been decreased and reforms in PDS have been initiated. One of the most compelling clauses of the act was *'no denial to child'* specification. Under this, no child, less than 14 years of age, can be turned away from an aanganwadis, govt school or destitute feeding centre. Here, only age can be a criterion. The government draft does not mention anything about this.

8. NOT GOING FAR ENOUGH – MATERNITY ENTITLEMENTS

The Act introduces a limited but extremely important entitlement for women in the form of maternity entitlements for all pregnant women. By doing this, for the first time we recognise the right of children less than six months to breastfeeding and that most women in our country are in fact 'working' women. However, once again the act fails us by not going far enough – maternity entitlements are wage compensation for women to be able to stay home for rest and exclusive breastfeeding. They should therefore have been linked to minimum wages. But, the act at least makes a beginning by including this very important entitlement.

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