

Food Security in India: Some Proposals to Remove Hunger

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In the article “Food and Freedom” Professor Amartya Sen argued that “The provision of food is indeed a central issue in general social ethics, since so much in human life does depend on the ability to find enough to eat. In particular, the freedom that people enjoy to lead a decent life, including freedom from hunger, from avoidable morbidity, from premature mortality, etc., is quite centrally connected with the provision of food and related necessities.” In India a large section of people live in dire poverty and hunger. According to the recent estimate of *Tendulkar Committee* about 30% of the people do not have a square meal and suffer from malnutrition. The average growth rate of India during the period 2007-2011 was 8.2% but unfortunately the poverty declined by only 0.8%. According to the *Arjun Sengupta Committee* (2006) for Unorganised Sector, appointed by the Prime Minister, 77% of Indians live on a consumption expenditure of less than INR 20 (around USD 0.42) a day. There are, however, differences of opinion on the issue of poverty line for estimating the below poverty population. But what is significant is the absolute number, which amounts to about 0.4 billion people in India who fall in this low-income bracket in the recent years. According to UN study on Human Rights, India still ranks 134 out of 187 countries on the UN human development index. Again, India ranks 67 among 81 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) of 2011 (Prepared by International Food Policy Research Institute). With a GHI value of 23.7 the situation is considered alarming for India. This indicates a greater relevance of food security bill in India. It is said that India’s new economic policies of liberalization could do little in improving the situation and in violating Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of the Constitution of India. India has made a strong effort to implement the policy of right to food for all. However, the National Advisory committee has expressed deep concern over the high levels of food insecurity in the country, as well as on the functioning of Public Distribution System (PDS).

A large section of people suffers from malnutrition and could not lead a decent life. Malnutrition is an important factor contributing to the death of young children. If a child is malnourished, the mortality risk associated with respiratory infections, diarrhea, malaria, measles, and other infectious diseases is increased. More than half (54 percent) of all deaths before age five years in India are related to malnutrition. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), India has 237 million undernourished people and become number one in the world in terms of the number of hungry people. Again, about 42% of the world's underweight children live in India. It is sometime argued that there is a positive relationship between economic growth and health but in reality, and as confirmed by recent research, the reverse is equally true. Hence, the economic role of health and nutrition thus provides an additional and compelling rationale for public policy to support well-targeted nutrition improving interventions in a way directly analogous to the support given for increasing other forms of capital investments.

In this gloomy perspective of Indian poverty scenario the proposed “National Food Security Bill” (NFSB) is thought to be an effective instrument not only in eradicating the hunger but also to put a step forward in improving the nutritional level of timid millions, particularly of the undernourished children and mothers. It is understood that the existing system of distribution of food through PDS is not enough to improve the condition of the millions who are suffering from hunger and malnutrition.

The proposed NFSB aims to ensure public provisioning of food and related measures, to enable assured economic and social access to adequate food with dignity for all. The act will provide the people their fundamental right to make themselves free from hunger, malnutrition and other deprivations, associated with the lack of food and other related matters. The main focus of NFSB is to ensure legal *food entitlements* of the households and to make Government facilities to provide food to the people, through subsidized grain, direct feeding programmes and related interventions.

National Advisory Committee (NAC) recommends that NFSB should take a broad view and not restrict itself only to the Public Distribution System (PDS) only. Also, the NAC recommends adopting a life cycle approach to food security. The food entitlements created by this Act should cover the entire life cycle of a human being,

starting with overcoming maternal under-nutrition resulting in low birth weight babies, and extending up to old and infirm persons. The first 1000 days of a child's life need to receive special attention especially because nutrition deficiencies at this stage lead to lifelong physical and cognitive deficiencies.

National Advisory Committee suggests for switching from households food entitlement to individual food entitlement, which seems to be more scientific in the sense that households with more members will be entitled to more food. However some safeguard is necessary for small households with disable or aged persons, who are vulnerable member of the society. On the basis of the socio-economic condition of the household NAC advocates for separate out the households into two group namely, "priority category" and "general category" and suggests for differential monthly entitlement for these two groups. It is observed that there is a large proportion of population who have BPL card holder belong to 'non-poor' category and on the other hand a good proportion (about 19%) of poor having no ration card. These anomalies of identification will be taken care and the adoption of a 'social inclusion approach' where a minimum error of inclusion and exclusion is expected.

The proposed National Food Security Bill seeks to ensure food security by providing the legal right to every BPL household, residing in rural or urban areas, to gain access to certain minimum quantities of rice, wheat and millets at subsidized prices. The proposed act is expected to ensure subsidized grains to 75% of India. 90 per cent of the rural and 50 per cent of the urban population will be covered. The entire population would be divided into two categories, the Priority sector (AAY/BPL families) and the Non-Priority Sector (APL families). BPL families would be entitled to receive 35kgs of rice and wheat at subsidized prices of Rs 3 /kg and Rs 2/kg respectively while the non priority sector would receive 20kgs of rice and wheat at 50% of the Minimum Support Price. At present BPL families are provided 35 kgs of rice and wheat at Rs 4.15/kg and Rs 5.65/kg respectively. The draft has also proposed legal entitlements for children and expecting mothers, and community kitchens for the destitute.

The total food grains requirements in the proposed system is higher compared to that of PDS because in the new system some other facilities are given to the vulnerable

section of people. The total food grains requirements in the First phase and Final phase of the implementation of NFSA are estimated as 57.4 and 63.6 million metric tones respectively. Ministry of Agriculture agrees that it should not be difficult to procure 60-65 million metric tones food grains annually for the vulnerable section. But, there exist a difference in production and procurement of cereals and this gap is expected to meet by giving major thrust in government procurement of food grains. Also, India has been exporting some 7-14 million metric tones of cereals every year.

The present draft of NFSB has some serious shortcomings and the experts suggested for modification of the bill. The points given in favour of the proposed NFSB and the way of implementing of the Act are sometime ridiculous. It is thought that the hasty attitude of the Government in implementing the Bill is primarily politically motivated and these populist measures are proposed to raise confidence among the voters in favour of the present Government. It can be argued that the policy initiated targeting of households on the basis of an income criterion, that is, use of standard poverty line to demarcate 'poor' and 'non-poor' households could not be flawless and the Targeted PDS has not been effective in ensuring food security to the needy. The NFSB is criticised for the simplistic way of calculating the availability of food grains for the targeted population. Agricultural production in India by and large depends on the monsoon of the year, and the projected amount of estimated food grain requirements may not be fulfilled by the production in the existing system of cultivation unless some major policies are taken in favour of improving it. Also, the present machinery of procurement is not sufficient to reduce the gap between production and procurement through FCI and other Government agencies. The export of food items is in most cases politically determined and the consignment is not on yearly basis. So it may not be always possible to seize export for any lean year when actual production of food grains falls below the average production or expected production.

Finally, it cannot be denied that the theory of trickle down effect has failed in India and to make the poorest people enable to reach at the threshold human development criteria, government assistance is necessary in terms of cash or kind. However, food security in India requires that government expands its focus beyond welfare scheme, and take policies to increase employment opportunities to the poorer section. Measures to motivate the people to run independent small business, to initiate

cooperative farming, to earn from handicraft by local artisans and similar activities help to grow self-confidence among the vulnerable section of population. Also, public investment to develop infrastructure facilities in the priority sector is essential to uplift the condition of the poor of the vast backward regions of India.