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FOOD SECURITY AND PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN INDIA: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Food insecurity is undoubtedly one of major crisis facing by mankind. Malnutrition is chronic problem and number of people suffering from malnutrition has been steadily increasing in recent years. India is facing tremendous challenges in providing nutritious, healthy, and stable diets to growing population. In recent decades, demographic and economic growth has challenged the limits of economic, social and ecological sustainability, which questioned about food security at the regional, national as well as global level. Despite technological advances that have modernized the conditions of production and distribution of food, hunger and malnutrition still threaten the health as well as well-being of the millions of people. Food insecurity exists when people are undernourished as a result of physical unavailability, lack of social or economic access and inadequate food utilisation. This truncation or shortness of human development undermines a country's potential for economic development. A number of attempts have been made at national as well as at state level to study the problem of food security. But problem of food insecurity has become more serious in the last two decades in India. The present study is an attempt to analyse the causes, extent and effects of food insecurity and to identify the discrepancies in the system, find the ways to remove the anomalies and to make the mechanism more effective for achieving food as well as nutritional security to all in general and weaker sections in particular.

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KEYWORDS

Absorption, Food Security, Poverty, Public Distribution System, Mal-nutrition.

INTRODUCTION

We live in the world with widespread poverty, hunger and undernourishment. Hunger relates not only to food production and agricultural expansion, but also to the functioning of the entire economy and even more broadly the operation of the political and social arrangements that can, directly or indirectly, influence people's ability to acquire food and to achieve health and nourishment (Sen, 2000). The correct theorisation of the questions of food security and poverty has become particularly important at the present time, which is one of rapid changes in the economic environment in which small producers including farmers and workers are living. In a poor developing country, the incidence of poverty is very closely linked to the availability of food, in which the staple foodgrains still remain predominant, accounting for three-fifths of the daily energy intake of the population (Patnaik, 2008).

Food security has attracted much attention because in the past decade and a half since India successfully embraced economic reforms and achieved high growth but this high growth rate has little impact on food security and the nutrition levels of its population. The achievements of Indian agriculture since the early 1970s have helped to ensure macro-level food security to a large extent but a considerable number of people mainly weaker sections of the society continue to live in poverty and hunger (Rao, 1995). A striking feature of the Indian economy today is the paradoxical situation whereby foodgrains stocks with the government are at record high and centre is keen on exporting food, even while poverty persist and off-take from PDS declines (Swaminathan, 2002).

The Public Distribution System (PDS) scenario in the most of the states at present is characterised by low level of off-take from ration shops, narrowing of price differences, increasing private trade and declining viability of distribution network. Further, a large number of vulnerable groups do not have access to PDS as they do not possess ration cards and food subsidies do not reach the poorest households (Mittal et. al. 1997)

Thus, the problem of food security has emerged as important at the global as well as regional level. It is adversely affecting the developed region in general and underdeveloped regions in particular. Children and women from the under developed countries are adversely affected by chronic food insecurity.

WHAT IS FOOD SECURITY?

In general words, food security refers to the availability of food and ones access to it. A household is considered to be "food secure" when its occupants do not live in hunger or fear of starvation. Food insecurity exists when people are undernourished as a result of physical unavailability, lack of social or economic access and inadequate food utilisation.

- "Food Security means that food is available at all the time, that all persons have means of access to it, that is nutritionally adequate in terms of quantity, quality and variety and that is acceptable within the given culture. Only when all these conditions are place can a population is considered food secure (Food and Agricultural Organisation of United Nation, 1996)
- "All people at all the time have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious foods to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life."

(World Food Summit, 1996)

DIMENSIONS OR COMPONENTS OF FOOD SECURITY

Food security, in a broad sense has four dimensions- availability, accessibility, utilization and vulnerability. The interaction among these determines the status of food security in a country.

1. Availability of Food: - Availability of food encompasses domestic agricultural production and food imports. It addresses supply side and is determined by the level of food production, stock level and net trade.

2. Accessibility of Food: - Access to food is largely determined by the households' purchasing power and food subsidies (either direct or indirect through various programmes).

3. Utilisation/Absorption of Food: - The utilisation of food is concerned with nutritional requirements of household members, based on their age and sex. The pattern of food utilization generally depends upon cultural factors (diet preferences, nutritional knowledge and caring practices), distributional factors (intra-household distribution of food), and absorption possibilities (depending upon quality of water, health and quality of food itself).

4. Dimension of Vulnerability: - Vulnerability denotes various external factors and contextual risks such as environmental risks (floods, droughts, earthquakes, cyclones and so on), as well as nutritional and health risks, which destabilise the food security of people across the others three dimensions.

EXTENT OF FOOD INSECURITY AT GLOBAL LEVEL

The world is facing tremendous challenges of providing nutritious, healthy and stable diets to feed its growing population. In recent decades, demographic as well as economic growth has challenged the limits of economic, social and ecological sustainability, which has given rise to the questions about food security at the global level. Despite technological advances that have modernised the conditions of production and distribution of food, hunger and malnutrition still threaten the health as well as well-being of the millions of people around the world. Regional and global economic crises and chronic problems of underdevelopment have made the situation worse particularly in the developing world (Bora, 2010). The number of undernourished people in the world has increased from 843 million in 1990 to 1.02 billion in 2009 and marginally declined to 926 million in 2010. On the other hand, 1.15 billion were overweight and 343 million were obese, which is problematic for health security (Ruth, 2010).

The region of Asia is still lagging in some major areas. It has been slow in reducing the extent of hunger, in ensuring that girls and boys reach the last grade of primary education, in reducing child mortality, in improving maternal health provision and in providing basic sanitation. About one person in six suffers from malnourishment and one child in three is underweight. India alone has more food insecure people i.e. 231 million than the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. (Buck, 2011).

South-Asian economies recorded high growth rate in past but despite this high growth in food production and consumption, the region has the highest concentration of food insecure people. South Asia still has the highest number of people (423 millions) living on less than one dollar a day. The region has the highest concentration of undernourished (299 million) and poor people with about 40 per cent of the world's hungry. Despite an annual 1.7 per cent reduction in the prevalence of undernourishment in the region in the past decade, the failure to reduce the absolute number of the undernourished remains a major cause for concern. Estimates by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) indicate that by 2010, Asia will still account for about one-half of the world's undernourished population, of which two-thirds will be from South Asia (Haq, 2011).

FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA

It is ironic that food security is an important issue more than five decades after independence. The worst irony, however is, that food security is an issue at a time when the country has mountains of foodgrains and overflowing godowns (Srivastava, 2003). With a population approaching almost 1.2 billion in 2010, India is likely to be the second most populous country in the world. Considering the extent of poverty and its correlates hunger and malnutrition indicate that economy is still far from the point of overcoming the food problem. Thus ensuring food and nutrition security is a challenge for India.

By considering the dimensions of food security, i. e., availability, accessibility and absorption, we can measure the extent of food insecurity in India. The dimension of physical availability of food realise that India is largely self-sufficient in food production at the national level and at present it is facing the challenge of tackling huge foodgrains surpluses that tend to accumulate as public buffer stock. Except for edible oils and pulses, the dependence on the imports is very low for the most of the agricultural commodities. The physical availability of foodgrains in India was estimated at 241.6 million tonnes in 2011-2012. But annual growth rate of cereals availability from 1951 to 2010 was only 0.33 percent per annum. The availability of pulses has negative growth rate and per capita availability of pulses has declined from 60.7 grams in 1952-52 to 37.0 grams in 2009-10. Total per capita food availability has increased from 394.9 grams in 1951-52 to 444.0 grams in 2009-10 at the growth rate of 0.20 percent per annum (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2011).

Abundance of food does not translate into adequate access to food for all because poverty, unemployment, food prices and diversion or exclusion from public distribution system constrain the purchasing power of the poor and other vulnerable sections. Growth alone also may not be able to ensure food security for the poor and vulnerable. The poor suffer from limited access to food and to means of livelihood. Thus, food access refers to the ability of households to secure food at a reasonable price. Access to food is largely determined by the households' purchasing power and food subsidies (either direct or indirect through various programmes).

An interrelated and important aspect of food/nutritional security is utilisation/absorption of food. Despite of intervention through several food-based social safety net programs, malnutrition levels continue to be severe and persistent. Poor nutrition, overall poverty along with lack of hygiene and inadequate health facilities like drinking water, toilet facilities and clean cooking fuel influence the children as well as women health. So, there is an urgent need to envisage an integrated nutrition and health programmes for all vulnerable groups (Dev, 2003).

The percentage of population below minimum calories consumption has increased from 64.8 percent in 1983 to 75.8 percent in 2004-05. In the rural areas, the proportion of population below standard norms has increased from 66.1 percent in 1983 to 79.8 percent in 2004-05 and this ratio has increased from 60.5 percent to 63.9 percent for the urban areas respectively. Whereas in 2009-10 people below minimum calorie norms has decreased to 62 and 57 percent in the rural and urban areas. For whole India, it has come down to 63 percent (Mehta, 2010). The calories consumption in the rural areas was 2240 kcal in 1983-84 which has decreased to 2047 kcal in 2004-05. In the urban areas calories consumption has also decreased from 2070 kcal in 1983 to 2021 kcal in 2004-05. This shows that in both rural as well as urban areas; average calorie intake is less than standard norms (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2012).

Malnutrition among women and children is the main issue of food insecurity in India. Due to hunger and malnutrition the percentage of underweight children has remained stagnant between 1998 and 2006 and more than half of India's women and three-quarters of its children are anemic, with no decline in these estimates in the past eight years. Anaemia among ever-married women continues to be a serious problem in India. National Family Health Surveys revealed that percentage of moderate and mild anaemia among women aged 15-49 years has increased from 15 percent in 1998-99 to 16 percent in 2005-06 and from 35 to 39 percent respectively. Meanwhile, 35.6 percent of women suffer from chronic energy deficiency, indicated by a body mass index below 18.5. Anaemia among children under three years old was found to be extremely widespread at the time of NFHS-2 and the prevalence of anaemia actually increased further between NFHS-2 and NFHS-3. In the period between the two surveys, there was an increase in the prevalence of mild anaemia from 23 percent to 26 percent and moderate anaemia from 46 percent to 49 percent (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2006).

In vast country like India, the issue of food security differs across states because India is diversified not only in the geography but also in caste, culture, religion and others socio-economic activities. A lot of variations also exist at the state and regional level. Every state has different type of resources and culture, so meaning of food security change under different socio-economic culture because in a broad sense; food security includes cultural factors like diet preferences, nutritional knowledge and caring practices. In India, some states are very rich like Punjab and Haryana are food surplus states and contributing more than half of foodgrains in the central pool whereas on the other hand states like Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are underdeveloped and nutritional levels of their residents are very low.

The average intake of calorie in major states has below minimum calorie intake norm (2400 kcal for the rural areas and 2100 kcal for the urban areas). In the rural areas, every state has been consuming less than minimum norms. If we take 1890 kcal as a minimum norms then states become able to fulfill the require energy. But Karnataka and Tamil Nadu did not fulfill the requirement of 1890 kcal of calorie consumption. In the rural areas calorie intake was 2047 kcal and 2020 kcal in the urban areas which was below minimum standard (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2012).

PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN INDIA

The Public Distribution System (PDS) evolved as a system of management of scarcity and for distribution of foodgrains at affordable prices. Over the years, PDS has become an important part of Government's policy for management of food economy in the country. The programme was evolved with the twin objective of

providing incentive prices to farmers for a sustained supply of food and subsidising its consumption. One of the objectives of the PDS is to insulate the poor from rising open market prices (Khera, 2011). The primary Policy objective of the Public Distribution System is to ensure food security for the country through timely and efficient procurement and distribution of foodgrains. This involves procurement of various foodgrains, building up and maintenance of food stocks as well as their storage. India has achieved self-sufficiency in the foodgrains and maintained huge stocks of foodgrains. In October, 2010 central pool hold 277.77 lakh tonnes of wheat and 184.44 lakh tonnes of rice whereas minimum norms were 140 lakh tonnes for wheat and 72 lakh tonnes for rice. Total stock of India was 462 lakh tonnes and minimum norms were 212 lakh tonnes in October, 2010 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, 2011).

In India, Public distribution system is criticised on the ground of wastage of foodgrains. It is true that every year lot of foodgrains damaged in India. Lack of financial assistance, storage capacity, lack of transportation and improper management are some basic causes of this crisis. The total storage capacity available with Food Corporation of India (FCI) and State Governments was a little over 42.6 million tonnes. The covered capacity available with FCI was 274.71 lakh tonnes in 2011 and that available with State agencies was 151.19 lakh tonnes in 2010. FCI has a total storage capacity of about 306 lakh tonnes with a capacity utilisation of 71 percent (Department of Food and Public Distribution, 2010). In India, every year average 0.58 lakh million tonnes of foodgrains are damaged (Kumar, 2010). There is a debate in India that despite wasting the foodgrains on the roads and open spaces we should distribute it to poor section freely.

Average per capita purchase of grain is approximately 1 kg per month in the case of rice, and even lower (less than 500 grams) in the case of wheat. A per capita purchase of rice has increased from 0.70 kg per month to 1.18 kg per month in the rural areas whereas it has increased from 0.40 kg per month to 0.69 kg per month in the urban areas during 2001-02 to 2007-08. In the case of wheat it has increased from 0.20 kg per month to 0.39 kg per month in the rural areas and 0.10 kg per month to 0.21 kg per month in the urban areas in the subsequent period (Khera, 2011). The poor northern states of Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, which performed badly before targeting, continued with very low percentage of PDS purchase. In these states, condition is much worse in the both rural as well as in urban areas.

The food management concludes that by implementing various policies, India has maintained large stock of foodgrains which can provide food security to all the citizen of the country. But past trends to access to PDS shows the negative trend. The system of narrow targeting and inclusion of wrong as well as exclusion of needy persons has increased. People have very limited access to ration cards and access to PDS has decreased in India. NSS data on holding ration cards reveals that in 2004-05, only 26.5 percent of rural households and 10.5 percent of urban households hold Below Poverty Line cards. Antyodaya card holders formed less than 3 percent of rural households and less than 1 percent of urban households (National Sample Survey Organisation, 2007). The main problem of the system is improper distribution, procurement and wastage of foodgrains because in 2009-10 India was procuring only 52.61 millions tonnes of foodgrains against 175.26 millions tonnes, i. e., 30 percent of total production. Many economists argue that India has sufficient food to implement universal PDS. According to one estimate 23 crore households of India require 133.032 million tonnes of foodgrains for universal PDS (Banerjee, 2011).

FOOD SECURITY ACT

The national advisory council has proposed the National Food Security Act (NFSA) aimed at protecting all children, women and men in India from hunger and food deprivation. The proposed NFSA aims to ensure public provisioning of food and related measures, to enable assured economic and social access to adequate food with dignity, for all persons in the country, at all times, in pursuance of their fundamental right to be free from hunger, malnutrition and other deprivations associated with the lack of food and related matters.

The proposed act is expected to ensure subsidised grains to 75 percent of Indian population including 90 per cent of the rural and 50 per cent of the urban population. The entire population would be divided into two categories, the Priority group (AAY/BPL families): comprising 46 percent of the rural and 28 percent of the urban population and a General group or non-priority (APL families): comprising 44 percent of the rural and 22 percent of the urban population (Sen, 2011). BPL families would be entitled to receive 35 kg of rice and wheat at subsidised prices of Rs 3/kg and Rs 2/kg respectively while the non-priority group would receive 20 kg of rice and wheat at 50 percent of the Minimum Support Price.

The draft has also proposed legal entitlements for children and expecting mothers. The act aims at covering the entire population by 2014. The act would rely on large part on India's Public Distribution System for procurement of foodgrains and allocation to different states for distribution to the intended beneficiaries. But there is no clarity between these two groups and how these groups will be identified. The National Advisory Council and others committees are unable to solve this problem and they have given totally different ways for identification.

Under this proposal, the per capita calorie requirement is fixed at 1776 kcal in urban areas and 1999 kcal in rural areas whereas the Indian Council of Medical Research has called for higher requirements of 2400 kcal for rural areas and 2100 kcal for urban areas. The unique identity card, Aadhaar, developed by the Unique Identification Authority of India would form the basis for choosing the beneficiaries of the scheme. Thus the proposed food security bill by NAC (national advisory council) excludes 10 percent of the rural population and 50 percent of urban population (Sengupta, 2011).

Thus food security act is an opportunity because existing hunger in India require legal entitlement and this is a dire need. This can be regarded as appreciable step in India. But the framework of poverty estimation and identification is complex and impractical. Proper distribution and procurement are the issues in the way of implementation of the act. The need of the time is simplified, transparent and equitable framework for practicability of the act.

SUGGESTIONS

Agriculture is the mainstay of the Indian economy. The contribution of agriculture to the livelihood of the vast majority of India cannot be overstated. Sen has rightly said that food security lies in ecologically resilient and economically efficient farming which provide a livelihood to farmers and sufficiency in food at household, community, as well as national level. The three dimensions of the agriculture policy i.e. ecological security, livelihood security and food security can only be achieved by sustainable agriculture. Today, there is a need to improve the agricultural scenario with the multiple goals of growth, equity, employment and efficiency.

The provision of the secure access to food still remains a relevant and critical issue for the public policy in India. The central problem of food insecurity is associated with local and national level fluctuations in output, distribution, inadequate transport/marketing structure and poverty. Hunger in India is an integral component of poverty. Increased production of food provide only pre-condition to move toward removal of hunger, the last solution of this problem remain contingent upon removal of poverty, in the sense of enabling the poor to earn the requisites for the decent living in the normal course of working. In this view poverty eradication through employment generation provides appropriate solution. The success of the strategy for employment depends on technical and vocational education and training. It is, therefore, recommended that a concerted effort should be made toward a broad-based employment strategy with focus on increasing farm productivity and diversified rural economy. The issue of food security should be the central concern of public policy and public debate in India.

Food Corporation of India, Central Warehousing Corporation and State Warehousing Corporation are the main agencies for procurement and storage of foodgrains. At present these agencies have very low space to store procured grains. Due to lack of storage facilities, insects and micro-organism, we are wasting large amount of foodgrains annually. In this direction, government should provide improved storage and procurement structure to the farmers. So, there is need for additional construction of grain storage. Village grains banks should be established for storage and distribution of foodgrains. It is also recommended that economical and various forms of godowns should be constructed. The stage has now come when the country must take a conscious turn to handle storage problems.

At present, there is a further need to improve the efficiency of PDS because governance of PDS is the major problem in the implementation of most of the programmes. So, some measures are suggested for improvement. Firstly, the quality of grains supplied through PDS needs to be improved. Secondly, the expansion of PDS shops in the rural areas and the regular and timely opening of shops need to be ensured. Thirdly, margin of profit for PDS dealer should also increase. Fourthly, Universal Public Distribution System is the heart and soul of State Food Policy. It should be built on the principles of non-exclusion for poor and needy people, easy access to Public Distribution System shops and adequate availability of food grain at an affordable price.

Hunger in India requires legal entitlement. Under the Indian Constitution, there is no fundamental right to food but justifiability of the right to food comes from a much broader "right to life and liberty" as enshrined in Article 21 (IV). Food security act is an opportunity and this can be regarded as appreciable step in India. But the framework of poverty estimation and identification is complex and impractical. Proper distribution and procurement are the issues in the way of implementation of the act. The need of the time is simplified, transparent and equitable framework for practicability of the act. So, to improve the standard of living and achieve the goal of food security these laws should be implemented with earnestness and determination. Secondly, to overcome the technicality of the laws authority should organised some legal education programmes.

Government of India has introduced various programmes and policies to improve the level of poor and vulnerable sections. But the main limitation of these programmes is, less coverage and improper implementation. So for effective result of these policies, barriers like corruption should be controlled and the poverty alleviation and employment generation schemes should be implemented in such a way that actual needy and poor people should be benefitted more from these programmes. The condition of food security at regional and household level is more alarming in majority of states. So, effective measures are needed to achieve the goal of hunger free, food and nutritional secure India.

Community measures like education, health facilities, children care and women empowerment are some issues which can improve the nutritional status at household level because in India women and children are mostly affected by food insecurity. In country like India where barriers like caste, religion and socio-economic culture are dominant, community measures can play important role in solving the problem of food security at micro level.

CONCLUSION

Food insecurity is undoubtedly one of the major crisis facing by mankind. Malnutrition is chronic problem and number of people suffering from malnutrition has been steadily increasing in the recent years. India is facing tremendous challenges in providing nutritious, healthy and stable diets to the growing population. In recent decades, demographic and economic growth has challenged the limits of economic, social as well as ecological sustainability, which has given rise to questions about food security at the global level, national and regional levels. Despite technological advances that have modernised the conditions of production and distribution of food, hunger and malnutrition still threaten the health as well as well-being of the millions of people.

To sum up, we can say that the recent trend in agricultural production and ongoing policy reforms of the economy are kind of changes which offer considerable scope for improvements in food security system. In present time, we should induce some hard thinking on the prevailing food security system because it is true that at the moment policy makers' main concern is to cope with large and mounting stocks of foodgrains which are now literally spilling over on the open spaces. Further, success in reaching food to the poor depends not merely on improvements in the food security system but even more critically on the thrust of the broader development policies affecting agriculture and the rural poor. Therefore, multi-pronged strategy should be adopted for ensuring the food security to all in general and weaker section in particular through proper implementation of anti-poverty and employment programmes, management of foodgrains at grass-root level, efficient working, i.e., transparency and good governance of Public Distribution System and by implementing the National Food Security Act with earnestness and determination.

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