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PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN WEST BENGAL: A BRIEF STUDY

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ABSTRACT

West Bengal economy is fundamentally an agrarian economy. Majority of the households of the state depend on agriculture as the primary source of their livelihood, which is being severely affected by uncertain rainfall and other natural calamities almost in every year. As a result, a large group of people are living below poverty line. Public Distribution has a greater significance on the economy of the poor households because it provides food (rice) for the poor and marginalized community at lower price than the market. Thus, the system plays a safety net for the poor people which protect them from competitive market economy. In order to examine verify the real picture of this (PDS) system we have selected eight slum areas of West Bengal and their corresponding FPSs for our survey to collect primary data. We have collected secondary data from FCI. After comparing the data, we have identified some loopholes in the PDS system. We have suggested some policy measures to overcome those loopholes.


KEYWORDS

fair price shop, minimum support price, public distribution system.

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS

D63, G18, H89.

1. INTRODUCTION

 Public Distribution System (PDS) in India is a food security system which was established by the Government of India under Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution. The system is managed jointly by both central and state governments in India. It distributes subsidised food and non-food items to India's poor. Major commodities distributed include staple food grains, such as wheat, rice etc., and sugar and kerosene, through a network of Public distribution shops, also known as Ration shops established in several states across the country.

Food Corporation of India (F.C.I) is a Government-owned corporation. It procures & maintains the Public Distribution System in terms of both coverage and public expenditure, it is considered to be the most important food security network. However, the food grains supplied by the ration shops are not enough to meet the consumption needs of the poor or are of inferior quality. The average level of consumption of PDS grains in India is only 1 kg per person / month. However after deprived performance of the scheme, the system was revamped and re-launched as Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). Under TPDS scheme, the Below Poverty Line (BPL) families would get basic commodities at a subsidized rate whereas the Above Poverty Line (APL) families would get them only at their economic cost. In order to curb down the rise in food subsidy bill borne by the Government as well as to ensure a more pointed targeting of the poor and needy, something which the earlier scheme had failed to do, the new scheme has been introduced. The TPDS is costly and gives rise to much corruption in the process of identifying the real poor from those who are less needy.

Most of the modern governments intervene in the functioning of market mechanism through public policy. There are two broad approaches available to correct the imperfections in the market dynamics viz. (i) changes in the socio-economic structure and (ii) positive intervention of the state through public policy. The Public Distribution System (PDS) belongs to the latter category.

In September 2013, Parliament enacted the National Food Security Act, 2013. The Act relies largely on the existing TPDS to deliver food grains as legal entitlements to poor households. This marks a shift by making the right to food a justifiable right. In order to understand the implications of this Act, the note maps the food supply chain from the farmer to the beneficiary, identifies challenges to implementation of TPDS, and discusses alternatives to reform TPDS. It also details state-wise variations in the implementation of TPDS and discusses changes to the existing system by the Act.

A major issue involved in the functioning of the PDS is whether it should have a universal coverage, as it did prior to 1997, or should it be specifically targeted at the disadvantaged sections of the society. The major reason why the issue crops up is the way the "disadvantaged" section is currently defined. Food subsidy is available only to people having a monthly income below the income level constituting the poverty line.

The main purpose of PDS is to make essential commodities available on a regular basis to the vulnerable sections at a price lower than the open market price. Through this system it is attempted to help the poor and the weaker sections affected by the spiralling inflations and wide spread socio-economic inequalities with the offshoots of the market imperfections.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Public distribution system has a great importance in view of the wide spread poverty of India. In this paper, an attempt has been made to illuminate the functioning of such system and also to reveal the loopholes of the existing system in order to suggest some remedial measures for more effective implementation of the system. More precisely and specifically we can summarize the basic objectives of the project as:

1. To depict the roles and responsibilities of the organizations and stakeholders involved in different processes of the Public Distribution System.
2. To explore the status of functioning as well as document the community perception on underlying constraints of the system.
3. To come out with suggestions for policy and practice level changes in the Public Distribution System.

3. DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY

Although our analysis is mainly based on primary data collected through field survey conducted in eight slum areas situated in different parts of West Bengal, we have also used, initially, some all-India level secondary data to develop an overall understanding regarding the performance of PDS in the country as a whole. We have also exploited secondary data collected from FCI to develop an overview of the urban public distribution system in West Bengal. Data from secondary sources provided important information that helped us in designing the study. Further the studies on the functioning of PDS, the analysis of food policy, government

documents and other relevant studies helped us in understanding the broader scenario of food supply and food security. The sources of secondary literature are data from the website of the department of Food and Civil Supply, NSSO, data from the website of the Ministry of Civil Supply and Food, Government of India and FCI. The study collected both qualitative and quantitative data during the process of data collection. In order to understand the actual situation, we collected perception of the cardholders and the shopkeepers. We also collected views of people involved into the management of the PDS at district level.

The benefit from the public distribution system is greatly realized in backward rural areas and other slum areas of the state. On the basis of backwardness, communication accessibility and magnitude of poverty, some specific slum areas and their corresponding Fair Price Shops (F.P.S) of different districts have been covered under the study. For the purpose of field survey, we have initially chosen eight slum areas. Details of those slum areas under study are provided in Table 1.

We have made the complete household listing for each of these areas and then selected randomly 5 households from each slum area. Thus, we have made a sample of 40 households. In order to collect some relevant important quantitative and qualitative information we then constructed two well-structured questionnaires, one for the card holders (beneficiaries) and for the shopkeepers (retailers). We conducted a pilot survey for the pre-testing of these two sets of questionnaires and finalized it making some little modifications for the purpose of maintaining the accuracy of our survey.

TABLE -1: SLUM AREA UNDER SURVEY

| SL NO. | SLUM AREA | LOCATION | DISTRICT |
|--------|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. | SWAMIJI NAGAR | BAGUIATI | NORTH 24 PARGANAS |
| 2. | ADARSHA PALLI | RISHRA | HOOGLY |
| 3. | TESHATTIR LANE | KESAB SEN STREET | KOLKATA |
| 4. | TIKTIKIA PARA | MECHHUA | KOLKATA |
| 5. | NARASINGHA LANE | AMHERST STREET | KOLKATA |
| 6. | KUNDU BAGAN | BAGHAJATIN ROAD | NORTH 24 PARGANAS |
| 7. | PANCHANAN TALA | DHAKURIA | KOLKATA(SOUTH) |
| 8. | KALI KRISHNA BABUR BAGAN | SINTHIR MORE | NORTH 24 PARGANAS |

As mentioned earlier this study is based on primary data collected from eight slum areas chosen from different parts of West Bengal. Our field survey was conducted in two phases. In the first phase of the field survey some retail ration shops are sampled. In this first phase our sample size is eight. The second phase of the sample survey has been conducted on the beneficiaries for whom we have made a complete listing of each slum area chosen. Now from each slum area we have randomly selected five sample households. Thus we get a sample of forty households. Therefore, sample size in the second phase is forty.

4. AN OVERVIEW OF URBAN PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN WEST BENGAL

The director of rationing functions as the administrative head of the urban PDS. The entire UPDS area is divided into six sub controls viz.- Kolkata(south), Kolkata(north), Howrah, Hooghly, Barrack pore and Asansol. The sub controls are sub divided into 55 sub areas. Each sub control is under the charge of one Jt. director of rationing while each sub area is under the charge of one rationing officer. In the Directorate Head Quarters, there are three other Jt. Directors of rationing for Administration, Establishment and Commercial matters. In addition, there are Jt. Directors / Assistant Directors of rationing in the sub-controls and in the Head Quarters with inspecting and clerical staffs.

Its function ranges from issue/ suspension / cancellation of ration cards /licences for the fair price shops / wholesalers for supplying of ration commodities like rice, wheat, sugar and 16 other commodities to the valid ration card holders and permit holders (sugar is for BPL and AAY card holders only) of various categories viz. – APL, BPL, AAY and Annapurna at government approved price.

The public distribution in UPDS areas is effected through ration shops called FAIR PRICE SHOP (FPS). The FPS under the sub controls like Kolkata south, Kolkata north and Howrah are authorised to make direct lifting of food grains from FCI’s go-down. In other sub controls i.e. Barrack pore, Hooghly and Asansol, stock of food grains is lifted by wholesalers who, in their turn, distribute the food grains among FPS tagged with them. The UPDS run through the network of 2284 FPS and 25 wholesalers.

5. FINDINGS OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY ON SLUM AREAS UNDER SURVEY

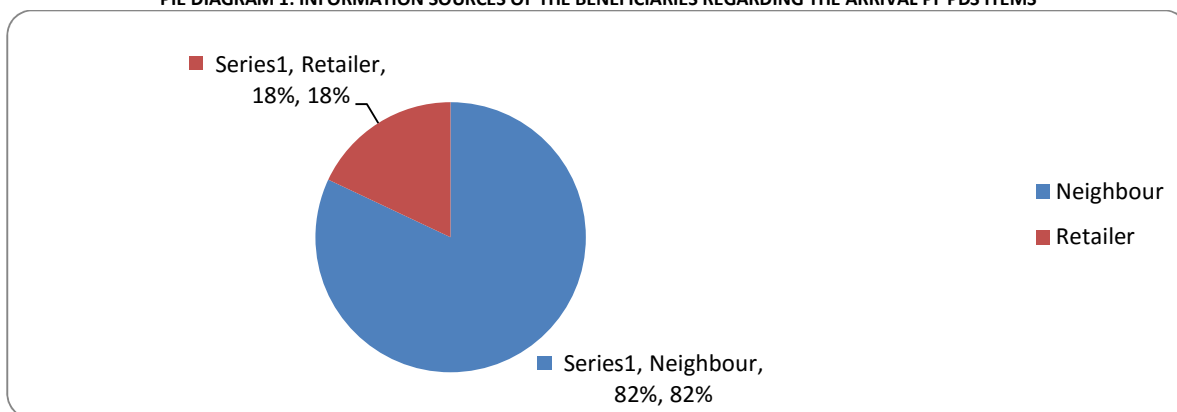
5.1. AVAILABILITY OF BENEFICIARY CARDS

Under the system the households are having specified ration cards in order to avail the benefits of the programme. Out of the 40 households surveyed from eight slum areas of West Bengal, all the beneficiaries have ration cards to get the benefits of PDS. While 57.5 % of beneficiaries are under the APL category possessing the APL cards, it is 42.5% of the total households who are belonging to the BPL category enjoying benefits of different schemes of the system. It has been observed that in Tiktikiapara, Kundubagan, Adarshapalli, Teshattir lane most of the people have APL cards but they are actually belonging to the BPL category. They have applied for BPL cards but they have not got yet.

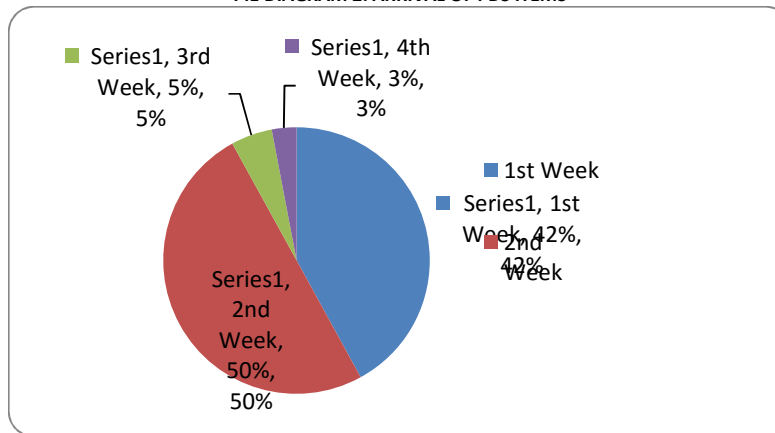
5.2. SOURCE OF INFORMATION, AVAILABILITY AND REGULARITY OF PDS ITEMS

Information with the community on availability of PDS items and punctuality in the opening of distribution centres play vital role for the beneficiaries to get the items in time. Delaying of availability of the items in the FPS becomes a problem for the people. They do not have sufficient amount of money to purchase PDS items in the end of the month. Though, there is a clear-cut provision in the PDS manual to inform the beneficiaries much before the distribution of PDS items, but in practice, it is not followed properly. It seems to be neither the retailer nor the Block Officer is interested to inform the beneficiaries regarding to the distribution of essential items. As a result, a part of the beneficiaries does not get any information on the distribution of essential items. The beneficiaries get information about the distribution of items from the informal sources such as neighbours or any others.

PIE DIAGRAM 1: INFORMATION SOURCES OF THE BENEFICIARIES REGARDING THE ARRIVAL PF PDS ITEMS

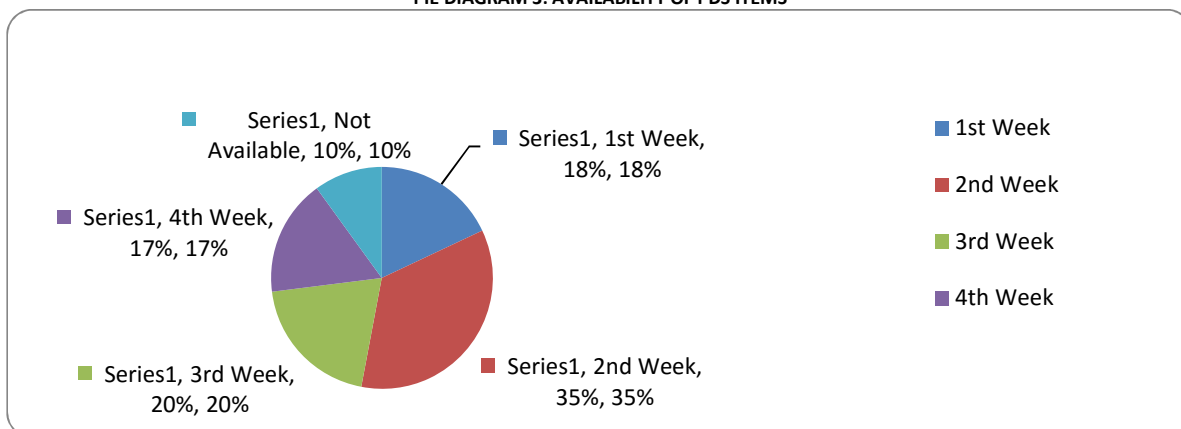


PIE DIAGRAM 2: ARRIVAL OF PDS ITEMS



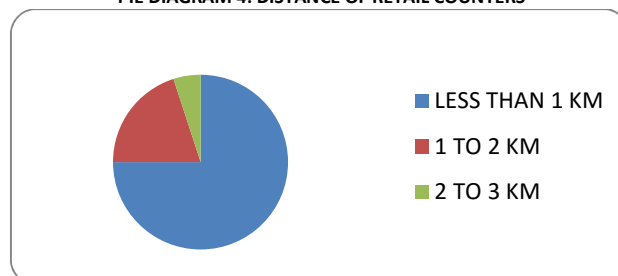
We observed in the above pie diagram-1 that out of the total sample beneficiaries 82% people get information from their neighbours about the arrival of PDS items and rest 18% people get information from the retailer. Pie diagram-2 shows that 50% FPS get PDS items in the second week of the month, 42% FPS get PDS items in the first week of the month, 5% FPS get PDS items in the 3rd week of the month and finally 3% FPS get PDS items in the last week of the months.

PIE DIAGRAM 3: AVAILABILITY OF PDS ITEMS



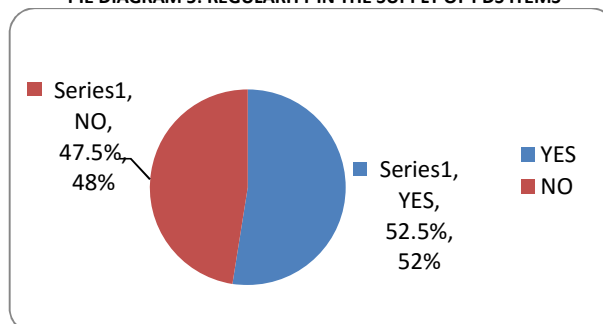
From Pie diagram-3 it has been revealed that 35% of beneficiaries get PDS items in the second week of the month, 20% get in the third week, 17% get in the fourth week, 10% get in the first week and 18% of the beneficiaries do not get PDS items at all.

PIE DIAGRAM 4: DISTANCE OF RETAIL COUNTERS



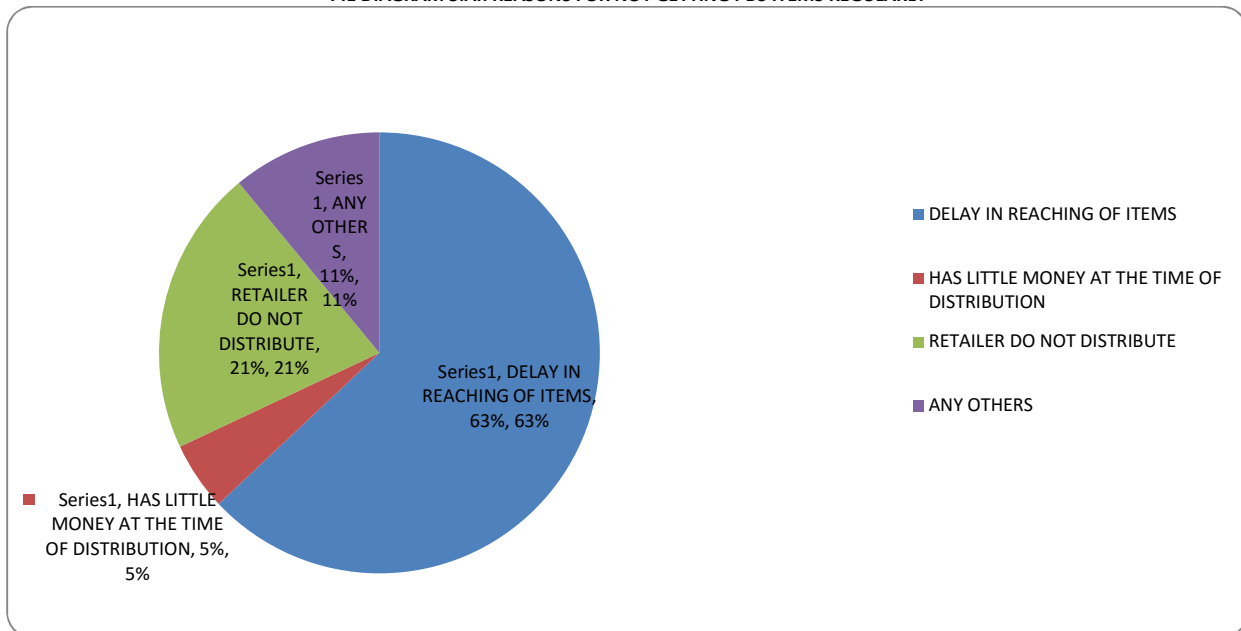
In the above pie diagram, we observe that 75% of the retail counter is more than 3 km, 20% of them are more than 1 to 2 km and finally 5% of them are 2 to 3 km from the residence of the beneficiaries.

PIE DIAGRAM 5: REGULARITY IN THE SUPPLY OF PDS ITEMS



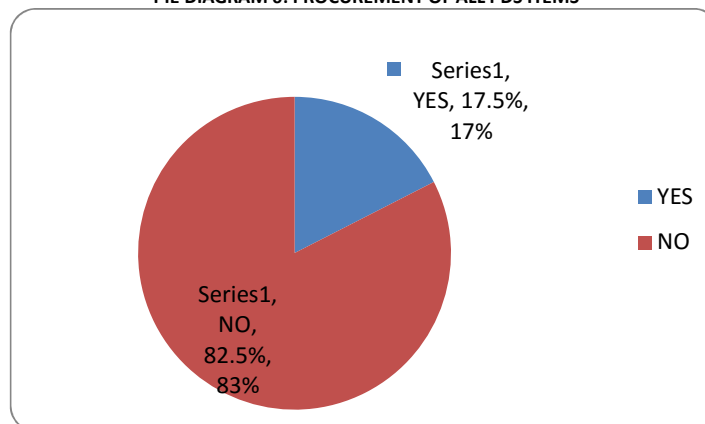
From the above pie diagram, we get that 52% of the beneficiaries are getting regular PDS items from their respective retail counter and rest 48% are getting PDS items from the retail counter quite irregularly.

PIE DIAGRAM 5.A.: REASONS FOR NOT GETTING PDS ITEMS REGULARLY



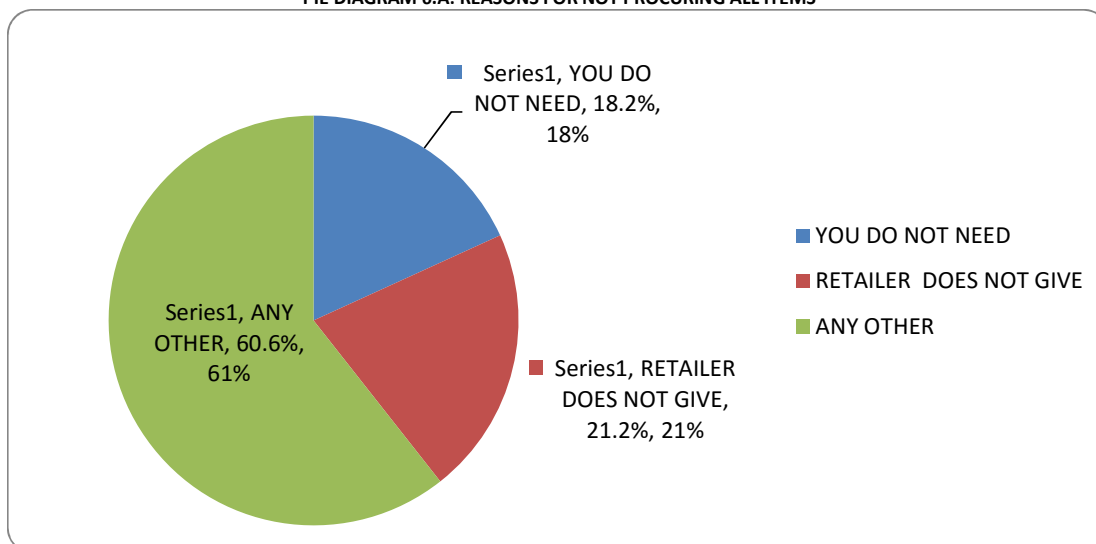
The above pie diagram has been revealed that 63% of the beneficiaries are not getting PDS items regularly because of delay in reaching of the items, 21% of the beneficiaries are not getting because retailer does not distribute, 5% are not getting because they have little money at the time of distribution and 11% are not getting the items due to some other reasons.

PIE DIAGRAM 6: PROCUREMENT OF ALL PDS ITEMS



We observe from the above pie diagram that 17% of beneficiaries are procuring all the PDS items and 83% are not procuring all the PDS items from FPS.

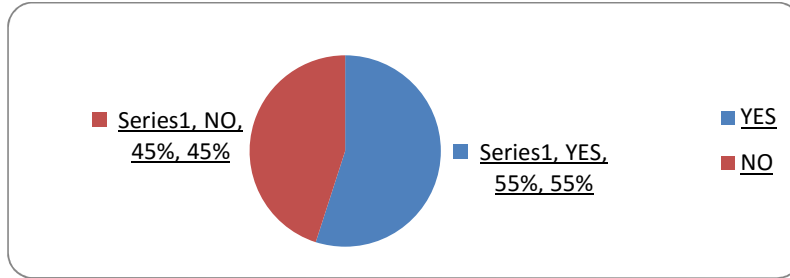
PIE DIAGRAM 6.A: REASONS FOR NOT PROCURING ALL ITEMS



Now the pie diagram-6. A is showing that the reasons for not procuring PDS items are as follows:

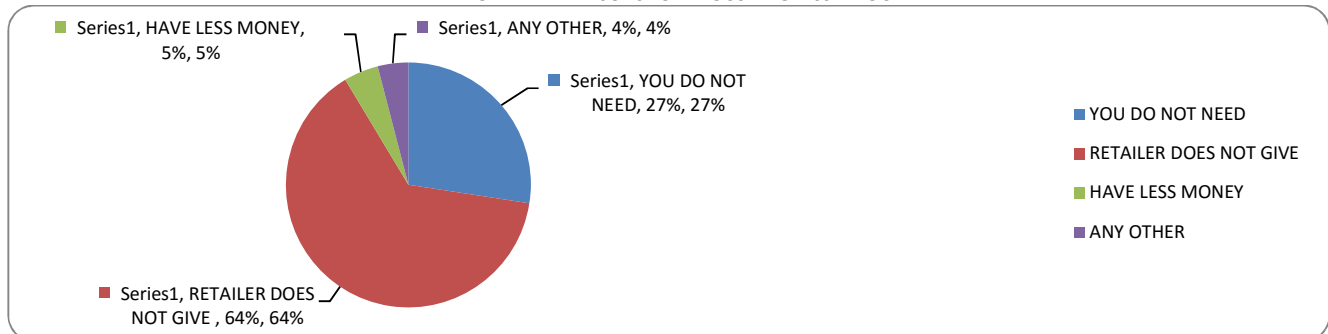
- i. 21% of the retailer does not give the PDS items.
- ii. 18% of the beneficiaries don't need the PDS items
- iii. 61% of them have some other reason such as bad quality of the items given by FPS and market values are identical with the PDS value.

PIE DIAGRAM 7: PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS PROCURING LESS THAN THE ALLOTTED QUANTITIES OF PDS ITEMS



In the above pie diagram, we get that 55% of the beneficiaries are procuring less quantity of PDS items from FPS and 45% of them are not procuring less quantity of PDS items.

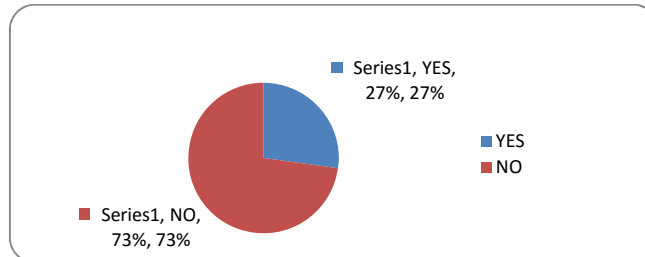
PIE DIAGRAM 7A: REASONS FOR PROCURING LESS AMOUNT



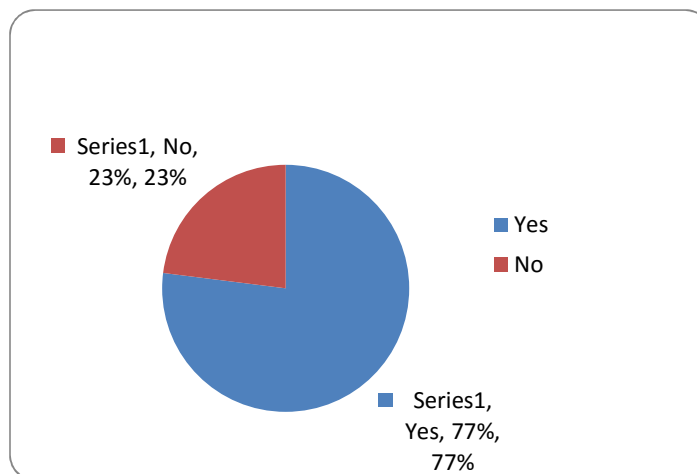
The reason of procuring less quantity of PDS items are shown in the above pie diagram. Now 64% of the retailer does not give the PDS items to the beneficiaries, 27% of them don't need the items, 4% of them have less money during the time of purchasing the items and 5% of them have some other reason.

It is observed from pie diagram-8 that 73% of the beneficiaries are not putting any grievance on the PDS items bought from the FPS and rest 27% are putting their grievance on the items. Moreover 100% of the beneficiaries are putting their grievance through the retailers. It is also found that 64% of the complaints have no result and 36% of the complaints always go against the beneficiaries. Further interrogation has revealed that 65% of the beneficiaries have desire of including some more items in PDS list. Moreover, while 57% of the sampled households have opined that the quality of PDS items is very poor, 38% of them have commented average quality. We observe from the pie diagram-9 that 77% of the FPS maintains their regularity. Further, as revealed from pie diagram 9.A, 94% FPS maintain fixed time to open the shop.

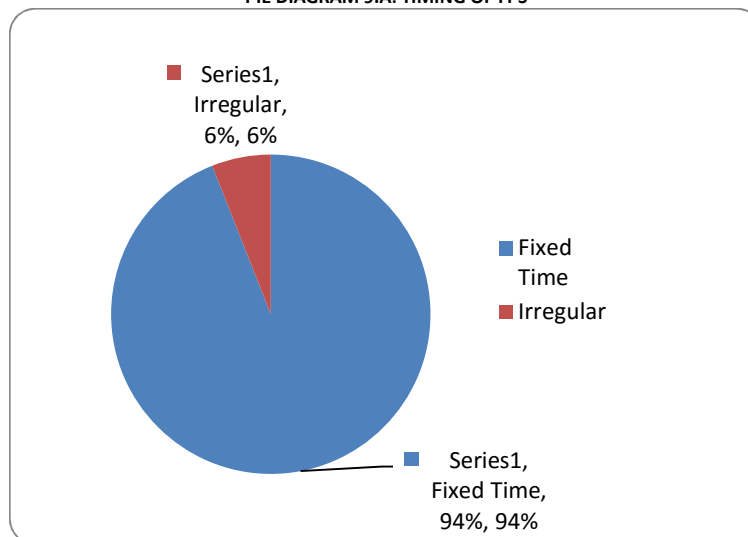
PIE DIAGRAM 8: PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS PUTTING GRIEVANCES



PIE DIAGRAM 9: REGULARITY OF FPS



PIE DIAGRAM 9.A: TIMING OF FPS



However, in spite of all its loopholes, 60% of the beneficiaries think that PDS items are useful and essential.

6. FINDINGS OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY ON FPS

6.1 RESPONDENTS, WAREHOUSE AND LOCATION OF THE FPS

From our survey in different FPS, we have got the information about the specific warehouse and its location from where the mentioned FPS gets their PDS items. The respondents Haran Chandra Paul, SanjoyDey, Tapan Kumar Dey, SujayKar, DebdasKundu, Gobindo Saha, Saroj Kumar Deb and JoydipMondal have helped us to get such informations.

TABLE - 3

| SL.NO. | FPS | RESPONDENT | WAREHOUSE | LOCATION |
|--------|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------|---|
| 1. | JAGATHPUR | HARAN CHANDRA PAUL | BIKASH BHABAN | DF BLOCK, SALT LAKE, KOL-700091 |
| 2. | RISHRA | SANJOY DEY | RISHRA | C/O PRESIDENCY JUTE MILLS,P.O RISHRA DIST. HOOGLY |
| 3. | KESHAB SEN STREET | TAPAN KUMAR DEY | COSSIPORE | |
| 4. | COLEGE STREET | SUJOY KAR | COSSIPORE | |
| 5. | AMHERST STREET | DEBDAS KUNDU | COSSIPORE | |
| 6. | GOPAL LAL TAGORE ROAD | GOBINDA SAHA | BONHOOGLY | INDUSTRIES CORP. LTD, INDUSTRIAL ESTATE, BONHOOGLY,KOL-700035 |
| 7. | TOLLYGUNGE | SARAJ KUMAR DEB | LAKE DEPOT | C/O GOVT. FOOD DEPOT, 76 DEODAR RAHMAN ROAD,TOLLYGUNGE,KOL-700033 |
| 8. | GOPAL CHANDRA BOSE ROAD | JOYDIP MONDAL | COSSIPORE | |

6.2 POPULATION OF VARIOUS PDS SCHEMES

As observed from Table-4, majority of the beneficiaries (83.61%) are getting the facilities of APL schemes from the sampled ration shops. Especially, under the college street ration shop, all the sampled beneficiaries are belonging to the APL category i.e. there are not a single cardholder of the others schemes (BPL, AAY, AY).Though the maximum cardholders are of APL schemes under the Keshab Sen Street ration shop, but there are 2.24% beneficiaries are BPL, 0.83% are AAY and 0.36% are the AY cardholders also. Under Jagatpur ration shop 0.02% beneficiaries are the AAY cardholders, 1.63% are the BPL cardholders and the rest of the beneficiaries are of APL schemes. Except Keshab Sen Street ration shop there are not any AY cardholders.

TABLE - 4

| SL NO: | RATION SHOP | APL | BPL | AAY | AY | TOTAL |
|--------|-------------------------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. | JAGATPUR | 4712 | 78 | 1 | 0 | 4791 |
| | | 98.35% | 1.63% | 0.02% | 0 | 100% |
| 2. | RISHRA | 2066 | 586 | 0 | 0 | 2652 |
| | | 77.90% | 22.10% | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 3. | KESHAB SEN STREET | 7488 | 174 | 64 | 28 | 7754 |
| | | 96.57% | 2.24% | 0.83% | 0.36% | 100% |
| 4. | COLLEGE STREET | 2400 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2400 |
| | | 100% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 5. | AMHURST STREET | 5233 | 551 | 0 | 0 | 5784 |
| | | 90.47% | 9.53% | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 6. | GOPAL LAL TAGORE ROAD | 500 | 70 | 0 | 0 | 570 |
| | | 87.72% | 12.23% | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 7. | TOLLYGUNGE | 7839 | 4507 | 0 | 0 | 12346 |
| | | 63.50% | 36.51% | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 8. | GOPAL CHANDRA BOSE ROAD | 2507 | 360 | 0 | 0 | 2867 |
| | | 87.44% | 12.56% | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 9. | TOTAL | 32745 | 6326 | 65 | 28 | 39164 |
| | | 83.61% | 16.15% | 0.17% | 0.07% | 100% |

6.3 PRICE CHART

From the above table after surveying eight various FPSs we get a price chart. Here, by analysing the prices we observed that prices of all the items are almost same in every zones but the quantity which supplied from go-downs to FPS differ.

TABLE - 5

| ITEMS | PRICE IN FPS | | | | MARKET PRICE VARIES FROM (Rs.) |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | APL PRICE (Rs.) | BPL PRICE (Rs.) | AAY PRICE (Rs.) | AY PRICE (Rs.) | |
| RICE | 9.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 10Kg. rice free of cost per month | 24.00-36.00 |
| WHEAT | 6.75 | 4.65 | 2.00 | | 12.00-25.00 |
| SUGAR | 40 | 13.50 | 13.50 | | 35.00-50.00 |
| KEROSINE OIL | 15.50 | | | | 35.00-50.00 |

Source: Field Survey

Here, we have compared how much quantity is supplied by the FPS to the beneficiaries in each surveyed area. In most of the areas while, for the APL category, the rice is allotted for adult is 1 kg. it is 500 gm each for children. However, in Tollygunge and College Street the adult gets 500 gm. and child gets 250 gm. Only in Keshab Sen Street it is not applicable for both (Adult & Child) because they don't provide rice to the APL cardholders.

As regards the BPL category, 1 kg rice is allotted for adult beneficiaries and 500 gm. for child in all the area under survey excepting Gopal Chandra Bose Road where the rice is allotted for adult is 500 gm. and 250 gm. for child.

Again in most of the areas there is not a single AAY cardholder. Although in few surveyed areas rice is allotted for AAY cardholders. Among these the maximum rice is allotted in Tollygunge where the adults get 5kg. and child gets the half of this and minimum is in Keshab Sen Street & Jagatpur where the adult gets 4 kg. and child gets 2kg. For AY categories the rice is allotted 10kg. Per month free of cost.

Regarding the allotment of wheat, maximum amount of wheat allotted for APL adult is 1 kg. and for child 500 gm in Jagatpur, Rishra, Amherst street & Tollygunge. The minimum amount is allotted in College Street area where adult gets 500 gm. and child gets half of this. For adult APL cardholders the allotment is 800 gm. in Keshab Sen Street, 750 gm. in Gopal Chandra Bose Road and 700 gm. in Gopal Lal Tagore Road and the allotment is half for the child in every area. Similarly, under the BPL scheme, for adult the maximum amount of wheat is allotted in Gopal Lal Tagore Road i.e. 1 kg., the allotment is 750 gm. in Keshab Sen Street, College Street & Amherst Street and 700 gm, 500 gm. in Jagatpur, Tollygunge respectively and the allotment is half for the child. In Rishra the respondents haven't given any proper information because the amount varies time to time. Lastly under AAY scheme, for the adult the maximum amount of wheat allotted in Tollygunge i.e. 5 kg. as well as minimum allotment is 750 gm. in Keshab Sen Street and Jagatpur. In few FPS there are not any AAY cardholders (Rishra, College Street, Amherst Street, Gopal Lal Tagore Road and Gopal Chandra Bose Road).

In case of sugar under APL scheme the maximum amount of sugar allotted in Amherst Street i.e. 500 gm for adult and minimum allotment is 100gm in Tollygunge. The allotment is 125 gm. in Gopal Lal Tagore Road and 200 gm. in College Street. In Rishra the quantity of sugar varies time to time and last but not the least in Keshab Sen Street and Jagatpur FPS, they don't provide sugar to APL cardholders.

For adult BPL cardholders the highest allotted amount is 500 gm. in Keshab Sen Street & Amherst Street. Besides the lowest allotment of sugar is 100 gm. in Jagatpur & Tollygunge. In College Street and Gopal Lal Tagore Road the allotment is 200 gm. and 125 gm. respectively. In Rishra and Gopal Chandra Bose road the respondents haven't given any proper information because the amount varies time to time.

The adult AAY cardholders get maximum amount of sugar in Keshab Sen Street which is 500 gm. & the minimum allotment is 100 gm. in Tollygunge. In Jagatpur the allotment of sugar for AAY cardholders is 150 gm. The FPSs don't provide sugar to AAY cardholders in Rishra, College Street, Amherst Street, Gopal Lal Tagore Road and Gopal Chandra Bose Road.

7. PROBLEMS FACED BY THE BENEFICIARIES

Public distribution system as a biggest welfare programme of the government has created a unique identity in the sphere of food security to the poor and marginalized. Through a wide range of networking, PDS is trying to serve the people at their doorsteps in terms of reaching the essential items at subsidized prices on regular basis. But, there are lot of constraints and loopholes at different levels of the scheme to achieve the desired objectives.

At the time of analysing the data we collected from primary and secondary sources, we have found some complications which are faced by the beneficiaries that can be pointed out in such ways:

1. The rice supplied by the FPS is very poor in quality.
2. Wheat is so dusty that it can't be eaten.
3. FPS supplies less quantity of items.
4. Most of the time the retailers cheat the beneficiaries by giving less quantity of kerosene oil.
5. Due to poor quality of rice it takes too much time to cook, so fuel expenses are higher.
6. There is worm in the wheat and rice.
7. Most of the time beneficiaries get PDS items monthly rather than weekly.
8. Sugar is very poor in quality.
9. In some areas a huge number of beneficiaries who are APL card holders at present but they actually belong to BPL categories in reality haven't yet got their BPL cards though they applied for it for a long time.
10. Some of the beneficiaries have informed us that they do not get the items regularly.
11. Most of the beneficiaries do not procure all the items mainly due to very poor quality.
12. Beneficiaries are procuring less quantity of items, the main reason behind it is the retailer does not provide.
13. Beneficiaries have put grievance on PDS but they haven't got any feedback.
14. The items supplied to the beneficiaries are inadequate for their daily needs, so they have to purchase it from market at higher market price; as a result, they have to face extreme expenses to fulfil their needs.
15. Beneficiaries do not have proper idea about the entitlements i.e. they don't know the actual amount of items entitled for them.

We have found that Public Distribution System is useful in the view of the beneficiaries but when it comes to judge the working of PDS most of them said it is poor in their locality.

8. SUGGESTIVE MEASURES FOR IMPROVEMENT OF PDS

The policy makers are solely responsible for the formulation of plans and programmes at central level. However, while formulating the plans and programmes, they are not able to realize the basic reality at the grass root level. This happens out of their lack of exposure to the needs of the community. In the case of PDS, the above statement has lot of significance. There is a wide gap between the policy and practices at each level of the system. In this situation, the beneficiary has no other way out, rather to compromise with his entitlements.

The following are the suggestions of the beneficiaries to bring improvement in the situations of PDS through the community interface programmes as a part of this study.

1. WEIGHT AND MEASURES: In the public distribution system, proper weight and measures is very much important as a beneficiary is directly affected by the weight and measures of a retailer. During the community interface, it has observed a huge dissatisfaction of the beneficiaries over the issue of underweight of items at the time of the distribution. The beneficiaries have blamed the retailers for misleading them in weight and measures by 1 to 2kg of rice and 150 ml to 200 ml kerosene per beneficiary in every transaction. To get rid of this problem, they have suggested the use of electronic weight machine instead of manual weighting. Besides, they also have recommended supply of 25 kg of rice in good quality packets, which can be easily detected if any damaging is made. They also advocated supply for all other items in packets as to their monthly entitlements.

2. FIXED DATE AND TIME FOR SUPPLY OF PDS ITEMS: Normally all plan and programmes are attached with a time period for its greater impact over the community. While evaluating a programme, time period plays as a key indicator for its grand success. In case of PDS, the role of timeline in respect of the distribution of essential items to the beneficiaries bears significance implications than other elements.

But, there is gross destruction of timing at distribution of items to the beneficiaries. Though the government has put the guidelines for the retailers to keep their shops open from 8 AM to 12 Noon and from 4 PM to 8 PM in all required working days throughout the month, but in the practice it remains open for three to four hours a day. In this situation, lots of poor beneficiaries have deprived of the benefits out of lack of information, shortage of money at the time of distribution and delay in reaching of items. In this respect, the community suggests the fixed time period for distribution of essential items at a time. So that there is no need to communicate the beneficiaries regarding the distribution of items and the time of beneficiaries can be saved.

3. ELIMINATION OF MIDDLEMAN SYSTEM: In the context of PDS, it is the storage agents and sub-wholesalers who play the role of third party for better result in the system. But it has observed through the community interface programmes that most of the irregularities in the supply of PDS items happen at the level of storage agents and sub wholesalers. Some key informants and retailers have blamed the storage agents and sub wholesalers for interfering in the quality and quantity of PDS items at their levels. As a result, the incidence of the interfering is ultimately shifted to poor beneficiaries. Under these circumstances, the stakeholders have suggested for complete elimination of storage agent and sub wholesaler structure in PDS and have encouraged for the retailers to lift the essential items directly from the go-downs and distribute to the beneficiaries.

4. AWARENESS PROGRAMMES ON BENEFICIARY ENTITLEMENTS: The partial failure of this programme is because of lack of awareness of the beneficiaries of their entitlement of PDS items. The government is spending a lot of money in the form of subsidy in providing essential items to the poor families. But a substantial part of this subsidy is going in vain because of lack of awareness of the beneficiaries. Thus, the awareness of the beneficiaries is highly necessary to get cent percent results of PDS. The beneficiaries have suggested that frequent awareness programmes on PDS be organized in different forms i.e. posters, leaflets, community radio programmes, folk stages, group discussions etc. to strengthen their knowledge base and fight for their rights.

5. STRENGTHENING GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL MECHANISM: From the rational point of view, a welfare programme should have sufficient space for the public grievances. There is no such policy and planning under a programme which are 100 percent target hitting without loopholes. In case of PDS, the role of public grievance has tremendous implications over its performance. The grievance redressal mechanism under PDS suffers serious setbacks as observed in the community interface. As per the government provision, it is the supply inspector and PDS committee, which look into the cases of the beneficiaries on spot verification with early decision. But this principle fails to address the grievances of the beneficiaries out of several factors, which are discussed earlier. The beneficiaries in this respect have recommended that a youth committee at the retailers' level as mentioned earlier be given the legal powers to hear the grievances of the beneficiaries and to intimate the authority for proper action.

6. ADDITION OF SOME EXTRA PDS ITEMS: The government has made many efforts to procure food grains at remunerative Minimum Support Price (MSP) such as rice, wheat and sugar. But it has completely neglected the other daily needs of the beneficiaries. So, beneficiaries have recommended providing some more items such as Mustard oil, spices, pulses, potatoes, onions, salt, soap, detergent, coconut oil and exercise book enlisted to PDS.

9. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis though we find lot of bottlenecks on the way to gain the desired objectives of the system, even so, it has great relevance in the field of food security to the poor and marginalized. The government has taken number of initiatives to make the system pro-poor by different rules, regulations, schemes and provisions. Nevertheless, the system fails to address the needs of the community. In this context, we cannot blame to any single stakeholder responsible for this situation. It is observed that the stakeholders of government officials in distribution, monitoring and execution of the system are seriously lacking of accountability of their responsibilities. The government at this point has a larger responsibility to ensure the accountability of these stakeholders under the system. On the other hand, the beneficiaries and retailer level PDS committee is not less responsible for the irregularities in distribution of PDS items at their localities. It has been keenly observed that the retailers are not at all functional. So far as, awareness of the community over PDS is concerned it seems to be the beneficiaries are least bother about their entitlements out of ignorance and lack of scope. With this circumstance, mass scale awareness campaign over PDS is highly imperative to make the community feel the scheme their own and utilize it in best manner.

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