

National Food Security Bill and its Implications for Kerala

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This article deals with the Food security Bill and its impact thereof. In this connection a brief discussion is made on the recommendations made and the points that needs to be observed by the Government while implementing the Bill and how it will affect food deficit States like Kerala.

Food Security refers to a situation that exists when all people at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life ^[1]. Thus it encompasses availability, accessibility and absorption of food. The FAO Report on State of Food Insecurity in the World 2006 confirms that no country in the world comes close to India in terms of absolute number of people living in chronic hunger. The evidence on nutritional outcomes from the most recent National Family Health Survey in India, reveals that 46% of the children below three years are underweight, 33% of women and 28% of men have a body mass index (BMI) below normal, 79% of children aged 6-35 months, and 56% of married women aged 15-49 years are anaemic ^[2]. The failure of a national policy in this regard, it is recognised, will not only affect this generation but also the next generation, as anemic and malnourished young girls are likely to grow into mothers who give birth to low birth weight babies ^[3]. The proposed National food security bill has great relevance and significance in this context since it aims at ensuring food security as a legal right to a large segment of the Indian population.

However the final bill is currently delayed due to difference of opinion between The National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by Mrs Sonia Gandhi and Experts Committee headed by C. Rangarajan (who also heads the Prime Minister's economic advisory council) regarding the scope of the bill. The NAC desired at least 75 per cent of the country's population to be covered by the bill (90 per cent in rural areas and 50 per cent in urban areas) of which 46% households in rural areas and 28% in urban areas would be treated as priority households with a monthly

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entitlement of 35 kg grains at a subsidised price of Rs 1 per kg for millets, Rs 2 for millets and Rs 3 for rice and 44% of the general households in rural areas and 22% in urban areas would have a monthly entitlement of 20 kg of food grains at a price not exceeding 50% of the minimum support price for millets, wheat and rice. The NAC had also asked the government to specify the criteria for categorisation of population into general and priority households. The NAC proposals also include legal entitlements for child and maternal nutrition as well as for community kitchens and programmes for feeding the destitute and vulnerable groups ^[4].

While implementing the law, the Government would have to decide upon the final number of eligible priority or Below Poverty Line (BPL) households. It was proposed to identify the eligible number of BPL families after every five years based on poverty estimates of Planning Commission and population estimates of Registrar General of India. But the food rights activists are of the opinion that identification of such households would be difficult and may lead to errors as the poverty line defined by the Government of India is subject to many controversies. The poverty estimates of 2004-05 and the March 2009 population estimates reveal that the number of BPL families including Antima Antyodaya Yojana will come down from 6.52 crore to 5.91 crores whereas the number of BPL ration cards actually issued by the state governments and union territories is 10.68 crores which is in excess by 4.16 crore. The number of APL (above poverty line) families, however, will go up from 11.52 crores to 15.84 crores ^[5]. When targeted population is narrowed down, the probability of occurrence of errors of inclusion and exclusion become relatively high. Public distribution aimed at a specific group of people is considered more prone to unwarranted exclusion which would lead to costs of individuals and society due to inadequacy of food, malnutrition and ill health^[2]. Jean Dreze, like many other food right activists has been demanding a move towards universalisation of PDS, emphasising that every individual has the fundamental right to be free from hunger, poverty and malnutrition ^[4].

The Rangarajan committee, formed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to study the recommendations of the National Advisory Council on the proposed Food Security Bill, concurred with provision of foodgrains to the priority households. But it has suggested that the National Food Security Act (NFSA) should only guarantee food to the below poverty line (BPL) households and has rejected the NAC's recommendation that above poverty line (APL) households be partially covered,

saying it is not feasible at the current levels of grain production and procurement. The latter, it is said can be provided food grains not as part of a legal entitlement, but through an executive order as and when grains are available.

This would certainly have an adverse impact on the country in general and food deficit states like Kerala in particular. Kerala has always been and will continue to be a food deficit state in the years to come due to its focus on plantation and horticulture crops as well as severe scarcity of land due to high population density. The state has repeatedly requested that it needs to be considered on a different platform taking into consideration the fact that it is a major supplier of many cash crops like cardamom, pepper, rubber etc: which earn significant foreign exchange for the country ^[5]. At present the state has made noteworthy achievements in human development indicators like life expectancy, infant mortality, maternal mortality rates, literacy rates etc: indicating advancement in spheres of health and nutrition ^[6]. The state also has one of the best nutritional outcomes in the country with only 11.9 % of ever married males (age group 15-49), 12.50 % of ever married females (age group 15-49) and 21.20% of children under three years reported to be underweight in Kerala, whereas the corresponding figures for All India were 28.1%, 33% and 40.40% respectively ^[2]. While a part of this achievement is attributed to better absorption of food due to good sanitation and high levels of public health, an important contributory factor has been identified to be the remarkable reach of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the state which has provided a wide access to food ^[5]. But Kerala's PDS, which is termed a model one worth emulating in the rest of the country, is reported to have already entered into a period of crisis under the Targeted Public Distribution System which replaced the universal PDS in 1997 ^[7]. In a universal PDS, automatic stabilisation of prices is ensured, as the demand for grain from fair price shops increases at times when the gap between the PDS price and the market price rises. In the new system of TPDS, however, with higher prices for APL class, the role of the PDS as an automatic stabilizer has been weakened. Even before the introduction of TPDS in Kerala the dependency of lower income households on PDS for their rice consumption was much more than that of higher income group both for rural and urban areas which was not necessarily true for India. The absence of "elite capture" of PDS, was a key element in the functioning of PDS in Kerala that has amounted to self-targeting of the rich, out of a universal system. Such self-targeting had considerably raised the efficiency of the PDS in Kerala. But targeting is stated to have lead to high rates of exclusion

of needy households from the system and deterioration of coverage in states like Kerala where universal PDS is believed to be more effective^[3]. A sample survey supplemented by qualitative interviews carried out in October 2010 to examine this issue in the 12th division of Thrikkakara municipality in Ernakulam district of Kerala clearly revealed instances of errors in targeting. The area chosen was recorded to have the maximum number of APL/BPL families in Thrikkakara Municipality. Thrikkakara is known to the rest of the world as an IT hub and an area where the Central Export processing Zone is located. But despite these technological advancements and economic growth, there are localities in the close neighbourhood of the IT park where a number of economically backward families are residing. It was observed that among the total 132 families residing in that chosen locality, 77 families belonged to the APL and 55 families belonged to the BPL class respectively. One third of the APL households as well as half of the BPL households were reported to have a monthly per capita income of less than Rs/- 1500. 80 percent of the BPL and 61 percent of the APL family heads were daily wage earners. During the field visit it was observed that families living in similar houses, having similar living conditions, life styles, living in the same locality and close neighbourhood had been given different poverty status. Some of the families also narrated that though they had been granted BPL status as per the municipal register, still they have been issued APL ration cards and are denied access to food grains at subsidised rates from PDS. Since majority of the sample population included daily wage earners they are generally prone to seasonal unemployment which further accentuates chances of such errors since a person who belongs to APL category may easily become in need of classification as BPL due to loss of employment. The survey thus reveals that any policy aimed at narrow targeting of the PDS, has resulted in higher chance of errors even in a state like Kerala characterised by high literacy, political consciousness and well run public distribution system.

The survey also revealed the high dependency of households on public distribution system with 80% of BPL families in the sample depending on ration shops for more than 40% of procurement of rice -the staple food of Kerala- and 45 per cent of APL families depending on it for more than 40 % of their consumption. During the field visit it was also noted that majority of the households were not satisfied with the quality of rice distributed through PDS. But the women in those families had developed innovative coping strategies of mixing good quality rice from local shops with the low quality rice from ration shops so as to improve the final

quality of cooked rice. This reflects rationalising behaviour on the part of the consumers whereby they try to maximise their satisfaction with available resources. If in the proposed bill, the central government is not be able to guarantee distribution of food grains to the APL category, as is generally feared by states, then these families would be deprived of the freedom to pursue such optimising behavior. Hence this paper argues for universalisation of PDS at least in states like Kerala, with a history of well run and self targeted PDS, so as to reduce the probability of errors which enhance food insecurity and to ensure the role of the PDS as an automatic stabiliser and safety net to all in times of shortages in food supply.

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