

# Democracy and Public Food Distribution System: A Critical Study of Food Security in India

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[www.ijrah.com](http://www.ijrah.com) || Vol. 3 No. 3 (2023): May Issue

Date of Submission: 23-04-2023

Date of Acceptance: 27-05-2023

Date of Publication: 30-05-2023

## ABSTRACT

For India food security is non-negotiable. Governments of all developing nations have a legitimate obligation and moral commitment towards food and livelihood security of hundreds of millions of their hungry and poor. Public procurement at administered prices is often the only method of supporting farmers and building stocks for food security in developing countries. Need of public stockholding of food grains to ensure food security must be respected. (India's union cabinet minister in charge of commerce and industry, Mr. Anand Sharma's address at the plenary session of the ninth ministerial World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting at Bali in December 2013).

The question of food security is a global imperative issue, predominantly among developing countries, in the wake of globalization. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, food was at the heart of secular interventions to improve the welfare of the population of India. Indian constitution played a fundamental role in the realization of the right to food. In light of the above statement my paper is a simple effort to highlight the critical role of state in strengthening food security and ensuring the availability and access of food to poorer households through different mechanisms.

**Keywords-** democracy, food security, public distribution system, right to food.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The right to food can be seen from the three distinctive perspectives. One is the approach of the Indian Constitution, especially, the Directive Principles of State Policy. Secondly, we can allude to the international declarations and conventions on this matter, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thirdly, it is conceivable to contend for the right to food as a moral and social right, independently of all these records.

Food security can be defined as a situation where every household have physical and economic access to adequate food for all members, without any risk of deprivation. In an era of globalization, the question of food security has become a significant issue globally, predominantly among developing countries.

Late nineteenth century, saw food as the heart of secular intrusion to improve the welfare of the Indian people. The colonial state together with Indian social reformers, nationalist politicians, and Indian scientists

made claims and counter claims surrounding the manufacture, distribution, consumption, and nutritive value of food to enhance life and prevent death. The first ever demographic survey of India in 1921 recorded a rapid growth in population with a waning per capita availability of food grain. The population escalated so high that it was seen not only as an impending threat but also a major problem to be tackled.

Government of India in order to deal with its rising population launched a population control programme through its Five Year Plan in 1950s followed by the Green Revolution a decade later in 1960s, to provide food security to the growing population.

## II. LITIGATING THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN INDIA

Indian constitution, as the supreme law of the land and source of all political power played a

fundamental role in the realization of the right to food. Jean Ziegler a former exceptional correspondent on the right to food appointed by the Human Rights Commission opined that India stands testimony to the striking example of the justifiability of the right to food. An interpretation of Article 21, Articles 39(a) and 47 of Indian Constitution, places the issue of food security in the right perspective—making the right to food a guaranteed fundamental right, enforceable by the constitutional remedy provided under Article 32 of the constitution.

The Directive Principles in addition direct the Indian state to “regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties”

The role of Indian state in strengthening food security is greater in ensuring the availability and access of food to poorer households. It is furthermore the duty of state to improve the quality of food through its different policies. The right to food entails an obligation on the part of the state to provide for minimum food security to the poorer household in India.

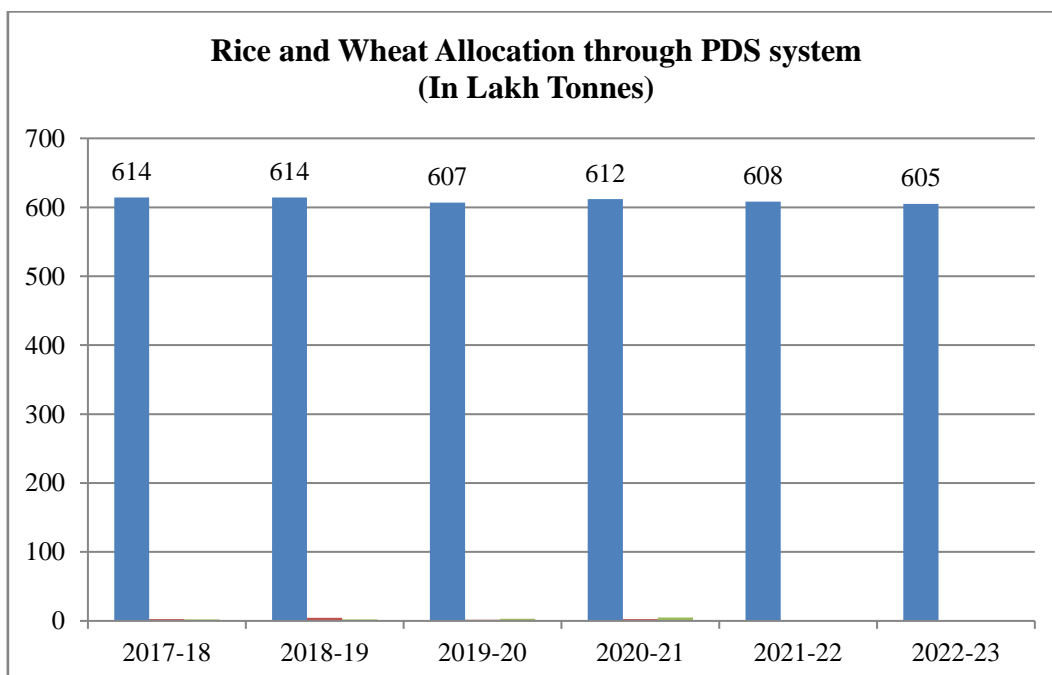
### III. OPERATIONS OF PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN INDIA (PDS)

The food grain markets in India have been in existence for a long time and an extensive use of this mechanism has been adopted in post second world war period.

There have been a number of attempts to alter the scope and coverage of the public distribution system (PDS) in India and the Seventh Five year Plan specified

PDS as a permanent feature of the government strategy to control price, reduce price fluctuations and achieve an equitable distribution of essential commodities. The food grain procurement operations and distribution through the PDS outlets implicated an explicit amount of government subsidy. In addition to this, the procurement system was to some extent linked with the policy of providing a minimum support price to the farmers. Therefore, the public distribution system in India has close associations with food security for the weak segments of the population as well as budgetary support for food subsidy and price policy.

For the most part, the food procurement operations until mid- 1960s was to meet the PDS requirements. Nevertheless, the procurement efforts were strongly followed to adhere to the commitment of providing a minimum support price to the farmers and the establishment of the Food Corporation of India. Rice accounted for most of the procurement up to mid-1960s while the share of wheat in the total procurement increased considerably from late 1960s making share of rice and wheat more or less the same during the 1970s and 80s. However, a slender improvement could be seen in the share of rice in the 1990s. Over the past years Punjab has emerged as the major supplier of both rice and wheat in terms of regional contributions to the PDS. Food grains are distributed through an arrangement of fair price shops spread all over the country. During the last few years, the allocation to the states for distribution of rice and wheat through PDS has recorded a fluctuating trend. However, for 2022-2023, the allocation is 605 lakh tonnes, comprising 401 lakh tonnes of rice and about 204 lakh tonnes of wheat. To be precise, the last three years 2020 to 2022 have seen an additional food grain allocation to provide relief from the pandemic devastation.



The frequent increase in the price issue has however narrowed the gap between the open market price and the price charged for supplies of goods through PDS.

The increased procurement and reduced offtake from the PDS has led to the soaring food grain stock in the central pool. The Food Corporation of India hence have initiated number of measures such as release of subsidized wheat to Modern Food Industries for supply of bread at reduced prices, supply of subsidized food grains to hostels occupied by backward categories, mid-day meals scheme for the benefit of students enrolled in primary schools, and open market sale of wheat and rice ever since 1990s to check the overflowing godowns of food grains.

#### **IV. CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN INDIA**

The major criticisms of the Public distribution system speak about three different aspects: (1) there is a sectoral bias towards urban areas; (2) there is a regional bias; and (3) the seepage in the system introduces class prejudice especially when it does not provide food security for the required poor class. However, despite criticisms, it is rather difficult to judge if the situation has improved or not in lack of adequate empirical findings regarding the outcome of the efforts made on targeting the PDS to the backward region and poorer sections of the population.

As specified earlier, the amount of food subsidy depends on a number of factors such as procurement quantity, PDS offtake, storage capacity, gap between issue price and procurement price, and the efficiency of the government organization.

Number of suggestions has been made in the context of broad discussion on reduced food subsidy:

These suggestions directly or indirectly entail one or more of the following measures:

- (1) Control the volume handled through PDS by effective means to reduce leakages;
- (2) Procurement system should match both the commodity composition and volume as well the distribution targets so that storage levels can be controlled;
- (3) Increase the efficiency of management operations, especially that of the Food Corporation of India.

In the absence of appropriate machinery to execute these suggestions, it is rather difficult to visualize how food subsidy can be reduced while preserving the current mechanisms.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

While India may be trying to emerge as a superpower nation, the government's slogans of ghareebi hatao (eradicate poverty), India Shining, Emerging India, jai jawan jai kisan jai vigyan (hail the soldier, hail the farmer hail science) at times appear to conjure pies in the sky. The reality is that India still has the largest number of acutely undernourished people and one of the highest numbers of child malnutrition in the world. The paradox is that such situation persists despite several food schemes and the National Food Security Act 2013. To date despite the unending efforts by central and state governments at increasing agricultural production and the accomplishments of both judicial and executive branches to implement the right to food, India is yet to be successful in its aim of providing food for all its citizens.

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