



## Women and Food Insecurity in India: A Study on Democratic Institutional Responses and Interventions for Food Security

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### Abstract

This paper is trying to examine the democratic institutional responses to the problem of women and food insecurity as both are embedded together in Indian society. The paper tries to locate the responses and interventions in the issue of women and food insecurity from the different democratic institutions of India i.e. the government, judiciary, media and political parties. Although food insecurity affects people across the board but we are focusing only on women, as they are more vulnerable to it.

**Key words:** India; British; Public Distribution System; Economic policy

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### INTRODUCTION

The evolution of public distribution of food grains in India had its origin in the ‘rationing’ system introduced by the British during the World War II. It had started with an aim of combating food insecurity by maintaining price stability of food and food products in the market and at the same time to provide food security to the poor. In view of the fact that the rationing system and its successor, the Public Distribution System (PDS) plays an important role

in attaining higher levels of the household food security. Its basic aim is to provide essential commodities such as rice wheat, sugar, edible oil, soft coke and kerosene at subsidized prices. The huge network of PDS is a major instrument of Indian Government System. India’s food and economic policy aims to ensure food security to the poor. The system is designed to help both the producers and consumers of food grains. It helps the producers by procuring the foodgrain by providing Minimum Support Price (MSP) and ensuring the distribution of it to the consumers along with other essential commodities at affordable and subsidized prices through out the country (Bhatia, 1983 & 1985).

However, the history of political economy of food and food security as a public policy in contemporary India is invariably open to diverse, sometimes contradictory interpretations, depending on the outlook, approach, and ideology of the research scholars and perspective of the policy makers. Perhaps it is not true in the case of contemporary India as the availability of food is more than buffer stock norms<sup>1</sup> in the Food Corporation of India (FCI) store rooms. Even after more than five decades of Green Revolution, with the multiplication of food production, the goal of food security among women remains elusive. The Green Revolution reduced India’s grain imports substantially and increased food availability but it did not have similar impact on reduction of hunger or food insecurity especially among women. It has been argued that hunger is not caused by shortage of food and thus cannot be eliminated by producing more. Alleviation of hunger depends upon

<sup>1</sup> Buffer stock norm is an important part of PDS in India that forms a part of the bumper production of good years in the subsequent year(s) of lower production by creating buffer stocks during favourable years and using such stocks in the lean years. Buffer stocks also stabilise the intra-year availability, taking care of the lean months. But it is criticised on the ground of huge storage costs and damage during storage.

the economic, political and cultural rules that people make (Rosset and Frances, 2001). Thus, food insecurity is not about the supply of food but about distribution, hence a focus on entitlement is necessary to achieve food security (Devereux and Simon, 2001, pp.13-31).

This paper is divided into three sections for an intensive study to locate different institutional dynamics while looking at the issue of women and food insecurity in India. The paper begins with a general introduction on the evolution and working of Public Distribution System (PDS) as a food security policy in India and its contribution for achieving food security among women. The second section of the paper deals with conceptualization of food security to understand and analyze the intensity of food insecurity amongst women. The third section tries to understand the relationship between women and food insecurity to map out their vulnerability in comparison to men. It deals with democratic institutional responses and interventions to address the vulnerability of women to food insecurity. The analysis is based upon the available secondary literature and data. The findings of my study indicates that though there are democratic and institutional interventions by different pillars of Indian democracy and it has been playing a major role towards the achievement of food security among women but the problem of food insecurity still persists among women. It demands more proactive role and response from the different pillars of Indian democracy to realize the goal of food security among women in their day to day life.

## 1. CONCEPTUALIZING FOOD INSECURITY IN INDIAN SCENARIO

Food insecurity as an issue has become prominent in the 20th century and has been a topic of considerable attention. The conceptualisation of food security is necessary to understand the issue of food insecurity. One of the common conceptualisation comes from the World Food Conference, 1974 which asserts that “every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition.” In 1983, FAO expanded its concept of food security as “ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food that they need”. The World Bank Report (1986) has elaborated food security as “access of all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”.

However, food security indicates the availability of food at all times, accessible to all the people in terms of quantity, quality and nutritional adequacy and needs to be acceptable within a given culture and food habit. It is indicated by physical and economic accessibility of right to food, which is an inalienable human right. The physical access to food depends on production, procurement, storage, buffer stock and supply of food where as the

economic access to food demands purchasing power of the consumers. In India, PDS as policy covers all the above items necessary for food security.

However, the PDS as a food security policy over these years, there have been important changes in the scale and scope of public distribution. In the 1990's under the regime of orthodox economic reform and structural adjustment, the policy of PDS is regarded as the financial burden for the Central Government. So, the reduction of food subsidy became an important move by the government to target the system with less food subsidy in budgetary allocation. In this way, the government is trying to dismantle the system forgetting the problem of food insecurity. By characterizing the existing universal PDS as inefficient, more leakages, less benefit to the poor and mal-administration, the government has shifted its operation to target orientation and revamped orientation of PDS (Swaminathan, 1996 & 2000). The current study focuses on the issue of food insecurity among women and the democratic and institutional<sup>2</sup> interventions to combat it.

From the above analysis, it is clear that food insecurity means lack of timely availability and accessibility of nutritionally adequate food. Though food insecurity as a problem affects people across gender, women are more vulnerable to it due to lack of accessibility. This argument is further developed in the following section.

## 2. WOMEN AND FOOD INSECURITY IN INDIA

Women are the majority of the India's agricultural producers, playing important roles in fisheries, forestry as well as in agriculture and agro-farming. Women produce more than 50 percent of the food grown in India. In rural India, agriculture and allied industrial sectors employ as much as 89.5% of the total female labour and thus contribute immensely for the household income (CSO, 1995). In overall farm production, women's average contribution is estimated as 55% to 66% of the total labour with percentages much higher in certain regions (Venkateswaran, 1992). In this way, women in India grow most of the crops for domestic consumption and are primarily responsible for preparing, storing and processing food. They also handle livestock, gather food, fodder and fuel wood and manage the domestic water supply. In addition, they provide most of the labour for post-harvest activities. Women hold a share of only 25.7% in earned income but their contribution to the household income is even being underestimated. This puts women in a food insecure position. As a result, approximately 35% of the households below the poverty line are headed by women

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion on institutional democracy in India; see, Chandhoke, Neera (2005).

(Venkateswaran, 1992). The food insecurity has further increased the proportion of pregnant women (age 15-49 aged) with anaemia is as high as 88% (UNDP, 1997).

The above analysis shows that the women play a crucial role in food security both at household and national levels but they suffer from food insecurity which needs urgent attention to address their problems. The achievement of food security amongst women could enhance their capacities. Food security among women can contribute significantly to improve the nutritional and health status of women, and thus, women who enjoy good health are better able to contribute to economic development. "Food security in a household is pervasively linked to the control they have over household resources and the access they have to household incomes" (Hart, 1986; Evans, 1991; Kabeer, 1991 & 1995 as cited in Devereux & Simon, 2001). In India men are the owners of all household income and women are denied any direct access to household income that put them in a position of food insecurity. However, various studies of the FAO (1995 & 1996) on women and food security have noted that given the crucial role of women in providing food security, the public policy needs to give special attention to remove the barrier to access the productive resources like access to land, credit and productivity-enhancing inputs and services. The same studies have also indicated that women's limited access to resources and their insufficient purchasing power are products of a series of inter-related social, economic and cultural factors that force them into a subordinate role, to the detriment of their own development and put them in situation of food insecurity.

"When India achieved independence more than 50 years ago, the people of the country were much afflicted by endemic hunger. Since India is often considered to be one of the great success stories in tackling the food problem, the belief in success has to be scrutinised in the light of the grim reality that we can observe."<sup>3</sup> The problem of food security is grimmer in case of women in India as historically women's access to land and access to other resources and income is based on status of women within the family and involved right of use, not ownership (Agarwal, 1994). Without land and secure tenure, a woman cannot access credit and membership in agricultural associations particularly those responsible for processing and marketing. This puts them in food insecure position. So, lack of secure land tenure, lack of access to support networks for credit and marketing etc are among the examples of gender-based discrimination in food security. In this way, an attempt has been made to reflect on the food insecurity among women in India. This will help us to understand the inter relationship between food

<sup>3</sup> Amartya Sen, speaking on Hunger in India at a public hearing on the Right to Food New Delhi, 10 January 2003.

security and women in the contemporary food security policy interventions and responses from the democratic institutions of India. Further, the Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, entitled "protection of life and personal liberty" says in its entirety, "no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law". This means right to life indicates right to food and the right to food can be seen as a right to "nutrition", and this is indeed the term used in Article 47 of the Constitution of India, thereby making right to food a fundamental constitutional right.

In spite of all the constitutional provisions, women are the worst sufferers of the food insecurity. As a result, the mortality differential is especially sharp among children where girls are dying more than the boys. In the same way mortality rate among women is higher than men that applies to all age group until the late thirties in India (Dreze & Sen, 1989 as cited in Nussbaum, 1999, p.32). Although the current situation has progressed and mortality rate among women has declined but still that the differential in terms of food insecurity exists.

However, food insecurity among women in India have multiple causes that needs to be addressed through public policy in general and by targeting and making special provision for women in the existing food security policy i.e. PDS. Poverty, social, cultural and political institutional arrangements are some of the important reasons for the comparative vulnerability of women in the context of food security (Dreze & Sen, 1996; Sen, 1990, as cited in Nussbaum, 1999, p.32). Thus, food insecurity among women as an issue needs to be addressed both in terms objectivity and subjectivity. Objectively, women's food insecurity needs instant reply through special public policy by targeting PDS for women. Subjectively speaking, the issue demands a transformation in the social and political institutional arrangements. In the next section, I am going to discuss how the democratic institutional set up in India works towards these goals.

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### **3. DEMOCRATIC AND INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY AMONG WOMEN IN INDIA**

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The different pillars (the government, political parties, media, and judiciary) of Indian democracy play a vital role in promoting the goal of food security among women since their inception. Although these pillars of Indian democracy are playing an increasing role, there is a growing concern about their ability to function in an inclusive institutional set up. These institutions act as facilitators in creating and sustaining consciousness and public opinion on the issue of food security among women in India. Women are often more vulnerable to nutritional problems and food insecurity because of their lower social and economic status, as well

as their physiological needs. These are the result of distinct, though interlocking, social relations and institutional processes. It becomes imperative to look at the context in which social relations of gender act to exacerbate or relieve food insecurity through its institutional policy networks. Thus, it is significant to study the institutional interventions and responses to food insecurity among women. As gender analysts have developed Sen's framework of entitlement to focus on the institutional rules, norms and unruly practices from which entitlements are derived and specifically the gender biases that these embody (Kabeer, 1994, 1996, 1997). Thus, it is essential to analyse the ways in which different institutions of Indian democracy responds and intervenes to achieve food security among women.

### **3.1 Responses and Interventions of Government of India on Women and Food Insecurity**

The Government of India's commitment to provide food to the poor and particularly to women is a part of its constitutional obligation and socialist and welfare orientation of its democratic politics. The problem of food insecurity among women is widespread and a number of deaths were reported in different parts of the country but the response from the Central Government upto 1966 was very less. Whenever, the Centre responded through public policy on food security for women through PDS, it had been handicapped by a short-term, relief-oriented perspective, enabling it to act only when food insecure conditions manifested themselves. However "it has rarely engaged with the long term concern for drought proofing and hunger mitigation, despite injunctions to the contrary by a series of committee reports from the planning commission" (Jayal, 2001, p.43). Regarding the issue of food insecurity and starvation deaths, the Indian Government has often attempted to divert it by putting the blame on bad monsoon, natural calamities and food poisoning. The issue of food insecurity among women is again aggravated by the culture bound unequal position of women in the Indian society. According to the cultural norms, the women needs to be the last one to eat, i.e. the left overs of other family members. Thus, the government of India has made no special provisions for achieving food security among women by targeting this cultural issue. The public policy made by government needs to respond towards the removal of the cultural barriers of women's right to food. After the interventions of the Supreme Court of India, the Government of India has started the schemes like Integrated Child Development Scheme, National Benefit Maternity Scheme for BPL pregnant women, Annapurna Scheme, Antyodaya Anna Yojana, National Family Benefit Scheme and National Maternity Benefit Scheme to provide food security to women. The government's response to food insecurity among women is a part of its welfarist orientation and constitutional obligation for its citizens.

### **3.2 Responses and Interventions of the Indian Judiciary on Women and Food Insecurity**

The highest judiciary (the Supreme Court of India) has played a vital role in bringing the issue of food insecurity to the governments and asked the governments to provide food to the poor, especially to the needs of women and create necessary environment for a dignified life of the human beings and perform it as an obligatory duty.

The judicial intervention and response to food insecurity has derived its strength from the Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. The PUCL has submitted a "writ petition" on April 16, 2001, that has opened up the space for the Supreme Court of India for its judicial activism to combat food insecurity in general and for the women in particular. The PUCL in its "writ petition" has raised three major questions; 1. Does the right to life mean that people who are starving and who are too poor to buy food grains free of cost by the State from the surplus stock lying with the State particularly when it is lying unused and rotting? 2. Does not the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India include the right to food? 3. Does not the right to food which has been upheld by the apex Court imply that the State has a duty to provide food especially in situations of drought to people who are drought affected and are not in a position to purchase food (Chhibbar, 2001; Gaiha, 2003).

As a result of these ongoing proceedings, the Supreme Court has been issuing orders calling upon government agencies to identify the needy within their jurisdictions, and to assure that they receive adequate food. On July 23, 2001, the court said "in our opinion, what is of utmost importance is to see that food is provided to the aged, infirm, disabled, destitute women, destitute men who are in danger of starvation, pregnant and lactating women and destitute children, especially in cases where they or members of their family do not have sufficient funds to provide food for them. Again on September 17, 2001, the court reminded the states that "certain schemes of the Central Government are mentioned which are required to be implemented by State Governments". The court has specially indicated about the schemes like Integrated Child Development Scheme, National Benefit Maternity Scheme for BPL pregnant women, National Old Age Pension Scheme for destitute persons of over 65 years, Annapurna Scheme, Antyodaya Anna Yojana, National Family Benefit Scheme to provide food security to women. On May 2, 2003, the Supreme Court of India has reminded the Government of India on the same issue and asked to double the budget allocation for the above schemes. Again on May 9, 2005, the court asked the government to modify the National Maternity Benefit Scheme as a scheme to provide food security to women.

### 3.3 Responses and Interventions of the Indian Media on Women and Food Insecurity

The mass media both in its print and visual form has played a key role in raising the issue of food insecurity among women in India. The sustained campaign of the Indian media on the issue of growing hunger and starvation deaths among women led to many public actions, political interventions and government actions to combat food insecurity among women. Swaminathan (2003) acclaims further “the mass media, particularly those in the public sector like the Dooradarshan (TV) and All India Radio can play a very important role in making the Hunger-free India movement a success. Community Radio stations, giving location-specific information, should be encouraged to assist other mass media in spreading messages of hope. It will be useful to set up Media Resource Centres for a Hunger-free India”. This has made possible for the civil society groups and political parties to raise the issue of food insecurity among women and to create pressure on the government to pay attention towards it.

### 3.4 Responses and Interventions of the Indian Political Parties on Women and Food Insecurity

The highlights by media on hunger and starvation deaths among women due to food insecurity are picked up by the political parties in India to mobilize the masses against the government. Basically the opposition parties have always raised the issue of food insecurity both inside Indian Parliament to make policy to combat food insecurity and outside the parliament to pressurize the government. These public actions and political interventions bring instant attention, thereby motivating governments to initiate policy interventions necessary to safeguard public access to food and the capability to achieve this (Sen, 1993, pp.31-32). Thus, the crux of these debates is that protection against starvation deaths among women due to the food insecurity is closely linked with the existence of electoral democracy and the civil and political freedoms necessary to make this operational (Sen, 1989, pp.769-781 & 1990). The political pressure generated by the political parties especially the opposition parties in India on the issue of food insecurity among women has led to the shaping of government policy and in enhancing a government’s ‘political will’ to engage in sound development management (Sen, 1993). The left political parties in India like CPI (M) and CPI, have always demanding for a universal and integrated approach to food security. The women’s wings of these left political parties are demanding special care to achieve food security among women. Where as the ruling parties like Congress and BJP have promised to provide food security to the women but quite often after being in power they forget the promise and the fact of food insecurity remains the same (Nayak, 2002). Within multiparty electoral politics governments cannot be seen

to neglect public needs during times of hardship for fear of exposure by active news media and opposition parties, and ultimately for fear of electoral defeat (Dreze & Sen, 1996, p.87). So, women’s political marginality in India is one of the other reasons for the prevailing food insecurity condition among women.

## CONCLUSION

India’s multiparty parliamentary form of government, relatively free press, independent judiciary, political parties and periodic elections have been central for a sustained campaign on the issue of food insecurity among women in India. The problem of food insecurity among women still persists due to the disadvantaged position of women in Indian social, political and economic life. The institutional interventions and responses of Indian democracy is trying to combat food insecurity among women on one hand and addressing the disadvantaged condition on the other. As a result of which the Food and Nutrition Council (FNC) was constituted in November 1997, National Nutrition Mission (NNM) has been developed, National Plan of Action on Nutrition (NPAN) and National Nutrition Policy (NNP) was formed in 1993 and 43 field units called Community Food and Nutrition Extension Units (CFNEUs) located in 27 States and Union Territories by the Department of Women & Child Development, Government of India to combat food insecurity among women. Although there is a positive impact due to the institutional responses and interventions but still the problem of food insecurity persists among women in terms of availability, accessibility and consumption of food.

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