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Title

**FOOD SECURITY- NEED FOR A COMMITMENT TO
UNIVERSAL DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM**

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Abstract:

Hunger and nutritional deprivation on a mass scale are key challenges before the country. The policy response from the government and its various arms is slow, grossly inadequate and confused. The imposed food security bill is in the process of being finalized by the National Advisory Committee, NAC recommended that legal entitlement to subsidized food grains should be extended to at least 75% of the country's population. The Rangarajan Committee however did not favour the recommendations of the NAC. It favours mandatory entitlement of food grains for the priority (BPL) category but not for the general category (APL) Further it suggests that the subsidized grains to the poor should be linked to inflation and to consumer price index in the country.

Introduction:

Hunger and nutritional deprivation on a mass scale are the key challenges before the country. The severe food and nutritional scarcity in the country is reflected in the undernourishment of almost half the children under three years of age and more than one third of women. More than half the women in the country suffer from anemia and more than 30 percent of the children are born with low birth weight. Millions of children are undernourished in terms of protein vitamin and mineral deficiency.

The issue of food and nutritional security has come up in a big way in recent years since the international prices of food stuff like wheat, corn, rice and soybean have increased two to threefold during the past 7 to 9 years. Even USA and Australia which are big producers of food grains are facing the problem. The situation is severe in developing countries like India where food accounts for more than half of a family's expenditure.

Food Security Bill:

The proposed food security Bill is in the process of being finalized by the National Advisory committee headed by Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. The committee (NAC) in its first recommendation sought to break the reluctance of the union government to extend the benefits of

statutory food security to those “Above the poverty line” (APL). National Advisory Committee recommended that legal entitlements to 75 percent of the country’s population-90 percent of rural areas and 50percent of Urban areas. The eligible 75 percent of the people were to be divided into two groups-priority and general households Priority households consisting of 46 percent of rural areas and 28 percent in urban areas were to have a monthly entitlement 35Kg at a subsidized price of Re.1 per kg for millets, Rs.2 per Kg for wheat and Rs.3 per Kg for rice. The general households consisting of 44% in rural areas and 22 percent in urban areas were to be entitled to a monthly quota of 20 Kg at a price not exceeding 50 percent of the current minimum support Price (MSP) for millets, wheat and rice. This approach of National Advisory Committee was opposed by Jean Dreeze economist and member of the NAC, who stated that the NAC’s proposal was minimalist that missed many important elements of food security.

The number of beneficiaries below poverty line (BPL) families is expected to go to 8.02 crore from the current 6.52 crore if 75% of BPL list is to be covered. The food grains requirement is likely to increase by about 10 million tones from the present 55 million tones and the cost is expected to rise from Rs.83000crore to Rs.1 lakh crore.

Storage facilities to ensure food supply under the food security it would be necessary to add at least 150 lakh metric the private entrepreneur Guarantee scheme to the existing storage capacity of 633.62 lakh metric tones.

The experts committee Chaired by Dr. Rangarajan – Prime Minister’s Economic Advisory council-did not favour NAC’s recommendations. This group favours a mandatory entitlement of subsidized food grains for the priority (BPL) category recommended by NAC However it does not think that it is feasible to extend to the general category (APL) under public distribution system. It suggests that the subsidized grains for the poor should be linked to inflation and to consumer price index in the coming years.

Rangarajan Committee has further diluted the recommendations of the National Advisory Committee relating to the food security Bill for a universal right to food. It has proposed for a legally established a narrowly targeted public distribution system on the grounds of feasibility. The committee’s arguments could be countered on the following grounds.

1. The current cereal production in India is enough to meet the needs of the entire population and that there is tremendous potential for increase in production.

2. The Rangarajan Committee has suggested linking prices of cereals to the rate of inflation based on consumer price index for agricultural labourers. In a period of record inflation instead of ensuring that real prices of basic staples remain low and stable the committee launches a further attack on food security by proposing to raise prices of cereals in the public distribution system in line with inflation. This will have a negative impact on the budget of households receiving PDS rations and it will also send a wrong signal to market. The Rangarajan Committee has further weekend proposals for ensuring food security for the mass of Indians at a time of spiralling food prices.

Conclusion:

Despite serious efforts for putting in place an effective food security system nothing has come out of it. It is failure of our institutions and policy be it in the field of agricultural extension or procurement and storage policy – that we have not ensured higher production and better distribution. Thus it denies a right to food because of failure of institutions. Agriculture is an important driving force for food and nutritional security. Both are complementary to each other. Farm sector needs a clear policy and heavy investment before India can claim to achieve consistent food security. The efforts should be to cover the entire farming gamut. We have to feed the millions and also ensure what we feed them is nutritionally adequate. In a country that holds the worst record for malnutrition both in absolute terms and in terms of proportion of malnourished persons there can be few more pressing objectives than ensuring cheap and regular supply of basic foods to all households. A commitment to a universal public distribution system can be an effective means to end hunger and malnutrition.

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