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Food Security In India: A North-East Perspective

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Abstract:

Human society is now confronted with non-traditional security challenges. Maintaining human security is the main concern of all the governments. Food security is one of the significant aspects of human security discourse. Food security refers to access for people, especially poor who are below the poverty line, to adequate food necessary for a normal life. In terms of quality the food must be reasonably nutritious that enables a person sustain and develop his physical and mental faculties and personality. Now, the issue of food security is occupying a significant place in the discussion of post-independent political developments in India. The Government of India, at the post-independent period had adopted several measures to ensure food security for the people of India, but could not achieve much success in this regard. Being a significant part of the homeland India, the North-Eastern part, comprising of seven states also comes under the prevailing food insecurity dilemma of India. The issue of food security also opens up some vital phenomena associated with socio-economic developments of the region. Thus, the article aims at bringing up the food security scenario in North-East India at present context. Along with this, some suggestions are also forwarded to ensure food security in this region.

Key words: food security, internally displaced persons, malnutrition, mid-day meals system, national food security act, NREGA, public distribution system.

1.Introduction

Food security refers to the ensuring of food for all. It is the most important step to eradicate absolute mass poverty and lay a foundation for growth and development of a society. Food security refers to access for people, especially poor who are below the poverty line, to adequate food necessary for a normal life. Food security is a social concept dealing with community needs. Food security can be defined as a situation wherein all households have physical and economic access to adequate food for all members, and where households are not at risk of deprivation of this basic access. Adequate food means sufficient quantity of nourishment that a person in normal circumstances is required to consume according to food science experts. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), a person needs a minimum of 2000 calories per day. The absence of food security can have disastrous consequences for the deprived people and the society. It becomes a stigma if a significant section of the population is unable to participate in the development process of the society. When adequate nutrients are not available in one's food, it impairs one's ability to work.

According to Monirul Hussain, there are three interlinked dimensions involved in the definition of food security-- availability, stability and access. The first dimension means that on average sufficient food supplies should be available to meet consumption needs adequately. The second dimension - stability means minimising the probability that in difficult times, food consumption might fall below the requirement. The third dimension of access refers to the fact that everyone should have the resource to produce or purchase the food they need.

Therefore, the quality the food must be reasonably nutritious that enables a person sustain and develop his physical and mental faculties and personality. On the whole a society with a significant section deprived of food security, make development meaningless as it results in an unbalanced development where the rich get richer and poor degenerate into more acute poverty. The absence of food security retards a society's development while adequate security releases productive human resources for nation-building.

2.Food Security In India

The goal of food security becomes very difficult to achieve in a country like India where poverty is vast and the population is still growing. According to the Planning Commission, a person needs a minimum of a daily calorie intake of 2400 in rural areas and 2100 in urban areas. Food security in India in terms of poverty and hunger presents a very unsatisfactory picture. FAO, in its report The

State of Food Security in the World 2000, estimated that the number of people suffering from hunger worldwide is over 800 million. In India alone, there are 400 million poor and hungry people. The higher the level of poverty, the lower would be the purchasing power of the poor people. One recent survey of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) (61st Round, 2004-05) brings out that poverty has declined. According to the Planning Commission, the percentages of rural, urban and total population below the poverty line were 37.3%, 32.4% and 36% in 1993-94 and these percentages fell to 28.3%, 25.7% and 27.5% respectively in 2004-05 (61st Round of NSSO). But still the absolute number of poor remains highly significant. In rural areas 28.3% population was below poverty line amounting to about 221 million. In urban areas 25.7% of the urban population amounting to 81 million was below the poverty line. Both rural and urban areas together hold 27.5% of the total population amounting to 302 million (Poverty line assumed as per capita monthly expenditure Rs.356/- in rural and Rs.538.6 in urban areas. It shows that over 300 million in the Indian population would suffer from hunger and deprivation but for the assistance received from the various employments, poverty eradication and other programmes of the governments at central and state levels.

In India the availability of nutrients in a poor man's food is very scanty. The following table gives the per capita per day net availability of cereals and pulses:

Year	Cereals	Pulses	Total
1951	334.2	60.7	394.9
1961	399.7	69.0	468.7
1971	417.6	51.2	468.8
1981	417.3	37.5	454.8
1991	468.5	41.6	510.1
2001	386.2	30.0	416.2
2005	390.9	31.5	422.4

*Table 1: Per Capita Net Availability Per Day (Gms)
(Source: Economic Survey February, 2008)*

Again, the Global Hunger Index 2009 highlights the fact of India's poor nutritional performance. 21% of the Indian population were undernourished (Between 2003 and 2005); 43.5% of Indian children under the age of five were underweight (between 2002 and 2007) and under five years age infant mortality rate in 2007 was 7.2% for India.

Surveys of the National Nutritional Monitoring Bureau and the National Family Health Survey unambiguously suggest that the incidence of malnutrition is extremely serious. In 2000-01 about half the children and one third of adults were undernourished. A large number of Indian citizens thus perpetually suffer from 'food-insecurity' including the tribals, Dalits, women, children and internally displaced Persons (IDPs).

3. Food Security In North-East India

Food security is a major issue confronting the North-Eastern part of India. Northeast India, consisting of the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura is known for its biological and cultural diversity and the unique Brahmaputra and Barak river systems. While the seven states are indeed collectively referred together as the 'Northeast', there is substantial diversity within the region even as far as political and socio-economic issues are concerned, both historically and in contemporary times. The North Eastern Region of India is endowed with rich natural resources of soil, water and diverse flora and fauna. The region falls under high rainfall zone and the climate ranges from subtropical to alpine. However, the entire north-eastern region of India is deficit in food production. The issue of food security generally remains unnoticed in view of the emerging political issues in the region. The issues like, 'identity', 'migration', 'conflicts' and 'insurgency' are dominating the politics of North-East India. Gross misuse and indiscriminate exploitation of the resources have resulted in vast amounts of soil erosion, nutrient loss and environmental degradation in the hills and silting of river beds causing floods, loss of property and life in plain areas. The region has lagged much behind the other states of the country in overall development. The infrastructure facilities like roads, transport, communication, industries, health care and agriculture are inadequate. The supply of inputs, marketing, institutional credit and extension services are still inadequate resulting in the poor growth of agriculture sector despite good potential. The majority of the population is still dependent on agriculture and allied land based activities mainly due to lack of modern industries. Shifting cultivation, also known as slash and burn agriculture is the chief means of livelihood of tribal people in these areas who have evolved this mode of cultivation in response to the most difficult terrain and topography under most inhospitable environment. The NE region is lagging much behind the other advanced states as far as the production and productivity are concerned.

The concept of food security is also related to other phenomena of North-East India. Landlessness is causing serious problems in the North-East. It has increased among the peasantry substantially together with the concentration of land in the hands of a few. As a

result, a large number of landless peasants have become economically rootless in the rural areas of the plains. This situation is deteriorating again due to the process of urbanisation and industrialisation.

One of the significant aspects associated with the landlessness in North-East India is the present development initiatives introduced in this region by the central government. People are displaced from their places for development activities, like road and transport, industrialisation, power projects, water resource management etc. Among the population, a new group i.e. the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) emerged questioning their basic right to life and development. This displacement raises serious security issues. People lose their livelihood and this is the main reason for the emergence of "food Insecurity" among them.

Again, the economic condition of the people of Assam is aggravated as a result of the flood. Many people lost their lives including serious harm of properties. Floods not only destroy standing crops, but also the stored food grains and consequently affect the fragile food security. The victims of flood and displaced people of river-bank erosion, or 'environmental refugees', do not get the attention that they deserve.

Internal displacement in case of ethnic violence is more prominent in Assam. Some of the displaced persons have spent more than a decade in relief camps along with their families. The government has been providing only rice for the displaced people, which can barely meet their minimum requirement. These issues need immediate concern of the government in Assam.

4. Food Security Measures

The food security measures adopted by the Government of India are extensive in nature; but their implication represents mixed results. Various employment and poverty eradication schemes like the IRDP, Swarna Jayanthi Gram Swarajgar Yojana and Swarna Jayanthi Shahari Rojgar Yojana aim at raising income and purchasing power of people and help in improving food security. An important measure to deal with the problem has been the attempt to increase food production through better agricultural methods and use of higher level of technology which was ushered in the Green Revolution. As a part of the initiatives taken by the Central Government, the states are also adopting policies to ensure food security. Some important measures are:

- The Public Distribution System: A well organized public distribution system- (PDS) is perhaps the most important direct measure to help poor in getting food. It ensures equitable distribution of food articles and protects poor from high prices and provides the required minimum of food. In India PDS has been expanded over time to provide not only food grains but also other essential commodities like sugar and kerosene. Food grains are procured and made available by the Food Corporation of India, set up in 1965. About 150 million families are covered under the PDS which provides goods worth Rs.30000/- crores annually and is termed as perhaps the largest distribution network in the world. This system takes care of meeting the demand; the instability in the supply; the availability; and price stability aspects.
- Integrated Child Development Services: This is a scheme sponsored by the central government but contributed and coordinated by both the central and state governments. At the central level, the scheme is under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD). State governments provide funds for supplementary nutrition. The scheme was launched in 1975 and is considered to be one of the largest and comprehensive intervention programmes in the world offering several services to pregnant women, lactating mothers and children up to the age of six years. It provides the targeted sections, supplementary feeding providing nutrition; immunisation; public health check-up; referral services (for the attention of experts); education, health and nutrition for adult women; and non-formal pre-school education to children between the ages of three to six years. The scheme provides food security including nutritional security and health security and has been expanding its coverage of women and children.
- Mid-day Meals Scheme: In 1982, the Tamil Nadu government introduced a scheme of Free Noon Meals Scheme which became very popular and effective. Nutrition to children improved and there was also a fall in the infant mortality rate. Inspired by its success, the central government introduced the MDMS in 1995 with the purpose of:
 - Improving children's attendance in the school,
 - Reducing dropouts from the schools, and,
 - Providing nutritious food to children of primary section of aided schools.

It is considered to be the largest school nutritional programme in the world.

- NREGA 2006: The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act/Scheme became effective in February 2006. It seeks to provide 100 days of guaranteed unskilled wage employment to each rural household that seeks employment under the scheme. It has now become the government's flagship scheme and is being renamed after Mahatma Gandhi (MG-NREGS). It was initially introduced in most backward states of India but now covers all rural areas in the country. It provides a guarantee of some income to have some food security. The Sampoorna Grameen Rojgar Yojana and the National Food for Works Programme (NFFWP) have been merged into this scheme. The scheme was inspired by the success of the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme introduced in Maharashtra in 1972-73 providing employment guarantees to the rural poor.

Though extensive measures are adopted to remove poverty from India and to ensure food security, expected results could not be achieved. The operation of the PDS suffered from a number of flaws. Leakages due to corruption have led to diversion of food grains to the open market and not all the poor benefited. The distribution of the commodities over the country was also uneven, with the Southern states getting higher quantities compared to their share of population below the poverty line and reverse was the position in the Northern states, especially in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The system has also been imposing on the government an enormous burden of food subsidies. The food subsidy which in 1980- 81 was a modest Rs. 662/- crores rose to Rs.2850/0 crores in 1991-92 and then to a whopping Rs.23828/- crores in 2006-07. The implementation of Mid Day Meals Scheme

was also unable to bring the expected results. The corruption in the implementation of NREGA in the official level created major dissatisfaction among the agrarian section of the North-East India.

5.National Food Security Act

The recent discussion over the National Food Security Act signifies important dimension of food security in India. There has been a persistent demand in the country that food security, especially for poor, must become a right and an entitlement. The government of India has enacted a Food Security Act to ensure food security for the poor. A national public debate and consultation process for this was taken. This Act proposes that every family below poverty line will be entitled by law to 25 kgs of rice or wheat per month at Rs. 3 per kg. The scheme is expected to cover 65.2 million families below the poverty line.

6.Conclusion

Food security is still an issue of concern in North-East India. Hence, it is necessary to take significant steps to overcome the insufficiency of foods. Some of the suggestions in this regard are:

- It is necessary to ensure effective demand that reflects the nutrition requirements and efficiency needs of poor people. The norms fixed by the Planning Commission of a minimum of daily calorie intake of 2400 per person in rural areas and 2100 in urban areas must be considered while framing policies for poor people.
- It is necessary to meet the shifts in demand for different articles especially wheat and rice. More grain supply is needed in festival seasons.
- The most difficult challenge is to help the poor earn adequate purchasing power to buy food so that they can make choices in the purchase of goods. There are a number of community development projects, poverty eradication programmes, and employment generation schemes which bestow purchasing power on poor who take part in any of these schemes. There is also 'Food for Work' programmes where they get food grains instead of cash payments.
- Government should Promote a safety net for the poor is necessary in the form of Subsidy. Resultantly, the poor may get food grains at a cheaper rate or government may give farmers inputs like fertilizers at cheaper rates thus subsidising the sale of grains.
- Adequate investment in agriculture and rural development is necessary. Investment in rural development should cover agricultural production as well as non-farm employment and micro entrepreneurship that will generate income in rural areas for the poor and enable them to participate in the development process.
- The issue of development should place emphasis on the hopes and aspiration of people. Adequate food should be supplied to the displaced persons.

Food security refers to the provision of basic food requirements for all. It refers to ensuring minimum food requirements to the poor and disadvantaged sections of the society at subsidised or concessional rates. Food security ensures the welfare of the poor and is therefore highly valuable from the point of view of equity and social justice. Especially in a backward economy like North-East India, sufficient measures should be adopted to ensure food security of society.

7.References

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