

THE ASSAULT ON FOOD SECURITY: A CRITIQUE OF THE FOOD  
SECURITY BILL IN THE CONTEXT OF KERALA

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I  
INTRODUCTION

The declared objective of the UPA's proposed Food Security Bill is to address the acute problems of hunger and malnutrition in India. Malnourishment is an everyday reality of the underbelly of "shining" India. Dubbed by Utsa Patnaik (2007) as the "Republic of Hunger", India today has a vast majority of population that suffers from poverty and lack of sufficient calorific intake. In 2005-06, almost half the children under age 5 were stunted and 43 per cent were underweight. Among children between 6 months and 59 months, 70 per cent were anemic. According to Madhura Swaminathan (2000), "no country in the world comes close to India, in the absolute number of people living in chronic hunger".

These unacceptable levels of malnourishment are not just due to the limited access to, and reach of, health services. They are also, to a great extent, the reflection of extremely low levels of food grain consumption among the population in general, and specifically, women in poor households. Raising the levels of food consumption of the poor people of India is thus a matter of great urgency.

However, in effect, the proposed Food Security Bill strives for just the opposite. We shall argue in this paper that the Bill would restrict the overall supply of subsidised food in India, exclude large sections of the needy from the ambit of public food distribution, weaken the efforts to build a larger social safety net for the poor and exacerbate insecurities around hunger and malnutrition. It has been estimated that the supply of food grains worth Rs 4000 crore would be withdrawn from the supply through the public distribution system (PDS), once the provisions of the Bill come into effect.

Across the world, targeting is the most important instrument used under the policy of structural adjustment in the provision of social security assistance. Targeting reduces the burden that the state has to bear with respect to social assistance by narrowing down the "eligible" proportion of the population to a minimum. The abandonment of the universal PDS and the introduction of the Targeted PDS (TPDS) after 1997 have led to major crises in the functioning of the food distribution network in India. The Food Security Bill does not seek to address the question of exclusion inherent in the targeting of PDS; instead, it seeks to legitimise such exclusion and institutionalise it under a national legal framework.

In a State like Kerala, marked by deficits in food production and the need to raise cereal consumption levels, the Food Security Bill would have serious adverse impacts on the

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viability of the public distribution system. Kerala's PDS – widely accepted as one of the models in the country as a whole – has already entered into a period of crisis in the post-TPDS years. The present Bill is most certain to formally end this historic model of social security, which was gained as part of long years of public action.

## II FOOD PRODUCTION AND FOOD SECURITY AFTER INDEPENDENCE

In the two or three decades after independence, the question of food security essentially centred around the necessity to bridge the gap between the stagnating supply (of agricultural production) and rising effective demand. Notwithstanding the rhetoric on addressing the agrarian question, agricultural policy in the early planning period never really considered the reform of the property rights in land as a means of raising farm productivity, eliminating structural inequalities and expanding the home market (Chakravarty, 1973; J. M. Rao, 1994). In fact, a supply side orientation was the overriding feature of the plans. On the other hand, agriculture was also viewed as a “bargain sector” i.e., a sector where output can be increased with very little additional investment (Chakravarty, 1973).

By the mid-sixties, the possibilities of expanding the cultivated area were exhausted and agricultural production slowly headed towards a plateau (Vaidyanathan, 1986). This phenomenon raised serious questions regarding food availability for the growing population. The food crisis also threatened to derail the planning process itself. The two successive drought years of 1965-66 and 1966-67 led to a sharp fall in food grain production from 89 million tonnes in 1964-65 to 74.2 million tonnes in 1966-67 (Dantwala, 1977). Food inflation became a recurrent phenomenon in this period. Over the third plan period, food prices are estimated to have risen by about 50 per cent.

A significant assumption in the planning process was that of total government control in the supply of wage goods to industrial workers. With the wage goods bottleneck building up, an increase in agricultural production was essential to sustain industrial growth rates. The shift of agricultural strategy in the mid-sixties – green revolution – has to be seen in this context.

Green revolution was a classic supply side intervention in agriculture. It was a package to use new emerging technologies in agriculture to formulate a concentrated development effort on crops and areas with maximum potential for increasing production. However, given that effective organisational forms and the structure of property rights are closely related, the implementation of land reform was a crucial factor in determining the extent of technological diffusion. The failure of the NAS lied in its circumvention of this strategic choice. As the Planning Commission itself accepted in the Fourth plan,

...the concern for achieving the desired increase in production in the short-run often necessitates the concentration of efforts in areas and on classes of people who already have the capabilities to respond to growth opportunities. This consideration shaped the strategy of intensive development of irrigated agriculture (GoI, 1968).

Consequently, the benefits of green revolution remained unequal across crops, classes and regions (P. Patnaik, 1975). The NAS focussed on regions well-endowed with irrigation, on two just crops (rice and wheat) and on sections of the peasantry that could mobilise the

investment necessary for adopting the new technology. With all its technological advantages, the outcomes of green revolution were far below potential in its early phase.

This critique is not a dismissal of the contributions of green revolution towards reducing food insecurity at the national level. Indeed, the NAS was instrumental in transforming the “ship-to-mouth” predicament of the country, and as M. S. Swaminathan pointed out, “established the linkage between [national] sovereignty and food self-sufficiency”. As a result of the efforts to increase the agricultural output after the 1960s, per capita food grain availability, which was at an all time low of 144.1 kg per capita in 1951, rose to 186.2 kg in 1991.

While the gain of food self-sufficiency was real at the national level, the achievement of food security at the regional and State-level required a much broader base for agricultural growth. Given that the social base of investment and technology adoption was narrow, the achievement of food security across regions came to depend significantly on external food supplies from the surplus regions. It was clear from historical experience that the free market can not be a substitute for concerted state action in the procurement and distribution of food grains. As CDS (1975) and Krishnaji (1975) noted, the period until the mid-1960s was a period with no inter-state movement restrictions on food grains trade. Yet, correlation and regression analyses on the data for 1961-62 showed that “levels of food intake in general, and food grain consumption in particular, [were] closely correlated across the States to levels of food grains production” (Krishnaji, 1975, p. 1379). In other words, inter-State trade of food grains was insignificant vis-à-vis what was domestically produced in each State.

The inability of the market in ensuring balanced regional distribution of food was sought to be overcome by state intervention. National food policy, thus, became critical for food security in the deficit regions. The Fourth Plan instituted various mechanisms to ensure price support and subsidies to farmers to ensure a growth in output. The procurement of grains from farmers based on a procurement price and their storage and distribution to various parts of the country was institutionalized to fulfil the twin aims of equitable regional distribution of food grains at reasonable prices and granting a fair price to the farmers. The Agricultural Prices Commission (APC) and Food Corporation of India (FCI) were established in 1965. The public distribution system was introduced as an important instrument in this shift in food policy.

In the period after 1965, the role of the state as an intervening agent was mixed. On the one hand, there was “a process of unprecedentedly rapid regional concentration of food grain production” in the two decades that followed the green revolution (U. Patnaik, 1994, p. 182; see also Krishnan, 1992). On the other hand, given the close correlation between food grain production and consumption, the regional concentration of production had the potential to exacerbate the regional disparities in food grain consumption. However, studies have shown that the presence of the PDS acted as a check against such a possibility. According to Krishnaji and Krishnan (1998),

There has been a continuous increase in the inter-state co-efficient of variation in the per capita output of food grains from the mid-1960s; it rose from about 40 per cent in 1966 to 84 per cent in 1988-89...As regards the consumption of food grains, per capita cereal consumption has more-or-less remained constant during this period. The widening disparity

in production does not seem to have affected the levels of consumption in different parts of the country. The co-efficient of variation in per capita cereal consumption has even marginally declined in the 1970s and 1980s and the disparity in consumption is only half as much as the disparity in production. There is no doubt that the public distribution system has played an important role in keeping the inter-regional inequalities in consumption within bounds (p. 129).

Data on the extent of use of PDS by the rural and urban populations in India are scarce. The only major source of information on the use of PDS before the 1990s is for 1986-87, when the NSSO conducted its 42<sup>nd</sup> round survey on the use of PDS. Data from this NSS round showed that a substantial share of the total quantity of different items purchased by India's population was from the PDS (see Table 1). In other words, subsidised purchases from the PDS acted as an important supplement to other sources of purchase of the major food items. The share of purchase from PDS in the total quantity purchased was higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. The fact that, with all its infirmities, the PDS played a role in keeping in check regional disparities in food grain consumption shows its potential as an instrument of welfare (see also Dev and Suryanarayana, 1991).

Table 1 Share of quantity purchased from PDS in total purchase, by item and fractile groups, India, rural and urban, 1986-87, in per cent

Fractile group	Percentage of total quantity purchased from PDS (%)				
	Rice	Wheat	Edible oil	Sugar	Kerosene
Rural areas:					
0-10	16.9	9.5	11.0	54.6	51.7
10 to 20	15.3	9.7	11.2	56.2	49.2
20 to 40	17.6	14.0	12.7	51.7	47.7
40 to 60	15.5	12.8	10.9	47.9	47.6
60 to 80	17.9	14.1	12.1	77.2	46.9
80 to 90	17.8	13.4	9.6	37.3	47.4
90 to 100	16.3	13.6	8.4	32.8	47.4
All	16.8	12.6	11.0	61.2	25.9
Urban areas:					
0-10	21.5	12.3	17.4	58.4	55.4
10 to 20	21.0	16.6	16.3	54.5	58.3
20 to 40	18.5	18.1	16.1	51.3	57.3
40 to 60	19.6	23.6	15.9	45.9	60.9
60 to 80	18.2	20.0	13.9	42.8	60.1
80 to 90	16.7	22.1	12.8	40.7	60.7
90 to 100	14.7	19.5	8.3	36.3	60.7
All	19.0	19.3	14.5	46.8	59.3

Source: NSSO (1990).

What is also clear from figures in Table 1 is that inadequate spread of the PDS across the country. In fact, one of the conclusions that Swaminathan (2000) drew from the NSS data for 1986-87 is that “PDS was not serving the vast majority of the country’s population” (p. 44). The performance of the PDS, indicated by the extent of off take of food grains, varied considerably across States. In particular, the southern states like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu ranked the highest in respect of per capita off take, while the northern states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan ranked the lowest. In terms of the share of States in national off take, the three southern states alone accounted for 31.2 per cent of the entire off take whereas their share of population was only 17.6 per cent. As a result, a large part of the population in many States, with an exception of states like Kerala and Tripura, was not being served by the PDS (see Table 2). For instance, the share of rural households who reported no purchase from PDS in 1986-87 was about 98 per cent in States like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa. On the other hand, about 87 per cent of rural households in Kerala purchased food grains from the PDS in 1986-87.

Table 2 Dependence on PDS for the purchase of food grains, State-wise, rural, 1986-87, in per cent of households

States	Share of households by extent of purchase from PDS (%)		
	No purchase from PDS	Partial purchase from PDS	All purchases from PDS
Kerala	12.3	79.0	8.6
Tripura	30.8	66.5	2.7
Karnataka	38.1	53.9	8.0
Andhra Pradesh	40.3	47.3	12.4
Tamil Nadu	46.5	44.9	8.5
Maharashtra	52.3	32.4	15.3
Gujarat	55.5	30.0	14.6
West Bengal	73.1	22.7	4.1
Assam	75.4	21.9	2.8
Madhya Pradesh	90.9	4.8	4.3
Rajasthan	91.2	3.6	5.2
Haryana	96.9	1.6	1.5
Uttar Pradesh	97.9	0.6	1.6
Orissa	98.3	1.2	0.5
Bihar	98.3	1.2	0.5
Punjab	99.9	0.0	0.1

Source: NSS data cited in Swaminathan (2000).

Thus, even in its universalized form, PDS was spread unevenly and was serving only a small section of the population. That was the reason why there was a need to strengthen the PDS at the time when the economic reform began in the 1990s. Studies have shown that the

PDS, wherever it has functioned efficiently, helped to raise significantly the nutritional standards of the poor (see Swaminathan, 2000). However, official policy in the 1990s took the PDS onto a completely different trajectory.

### III THE NEO-LIBERAL TURN IN THE 1990s AND THE PDS

By the late-eighties and the early-nineties, the official policy on agriculture followed until then came to be criticised. This critique of the earlier policy was led by a section of economists as well as international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, all wedded to the ideas of the Washington Consensus (Parikh, 1993, 1997; World Bank, 1986; 1991; Pursell and Gulati, 1993). It was argued that the earlier policy deliberately skewed the terms of trade against agriculture through protectionist industrial and trade policies and an overvalued exchange rate. It was argued that once we “get the prices right”, the incentive structure in agriculture would improve, and farmers would respond to higher prices by producing more.

Terms of trade was biased against agriculture also because the policies of input subsidies (as in food) and output support prices (as used in procurement) had suppressed domestic prices. The government should gradually retreat from the functions of procurement of food, as “government cannot manage commodity trade in an efficient way” (Parikh, 1997, p. 12). The large buffer stocks of food should be gradually brought down. In its place, private trade could be relied up on to “import or export..., build or shed inventories, as and when they expect tightness or slack in the domestic market” (Parikh, 1997, p. 12). Parikh also argued that optimal private holding of stocks would be greatly assisted by the “creation of futures markets” for agricultural products. Most importantly, it was argued that food subsidies should not be universally accessible, and need targeting (Jha and Srinivasan, 2004).

As a consequence, in 1997, the government decided to abolish the universal character of PDS and convert it into a “targeted” scheme. Following the introduction of the Targeted PDS (TPDS), the population had to be classified into Above Poverty Line (APL) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) categories. Only those households classified as BPL were eligible for subsidised purchase of commodities from the ration shops. In the first phase, the APL households were eligible to purchase commodities from ration shops, but had to pay the full “economic cost” of the handling of commodities.

There are, of course, two immediate issues here. First, there are major problems associated with having a classification of households based on a survey in one year, and then following that classification for many years. The reason is that incomes of rural households, especially rural labour households, fluctuate considerably. A household may be non-poor in the year of survey, but may become poor in another year due to insecurities in the labour market. Also, the poverty lines that are adopted are incomes at a near-destitution level. A household that earns an income just above the destitution poverty line cannot be judged as not requiring social security assistance. These problems, however, have been allowed to persist in the TPDS (for a detailed discussion, see Swaminathan, 2000).

Secondly, the fundamental critique of the concept of targeting has centred on the higher weight that neo-liberal reforms give to errors of inclusion compared to errors of exclusion (see Cornia and Stewart, 1990; Swaminathan 2000). In other words, the increase “efficiency” realised by excluding all the ineligible persons is given more emphasis compared to the inclusion of all the eligible persons. The errors of inclusion have only financial implications, but errors of exclusion have social costs, which have to be weighed higher. As Amartya Sen has argued,

...the elementary case for targeting has to be qualified by taking adequate note of the various costs of targeting, including informational manipulation, incentive distortion, disutility and stigma, administrative and invasive losses, and problems of political sustainability. These diverse considerations, which can reinforce each other, limit the scope for no-nonsense targeting, tempting as it is...To treat poverty not just as low income but also as capability handicap makes the exercise of poverty removal both more cogent and, in some important ways, also less subject to targeting distortions (Sen, 1995, p. 22).

The Indian experience after 1997 has shown that the fears of massive exclusion of the needy from the system were to be truly realised in practise. A widespread complaint from many parts of rural India after the introduction of TPDS has been the existence of a major mismatch between households classified as BPL by the government and their actual standard of living (Swaminathan, 2000; GoI, 2002). As noted in report of the “High Level Committee on Long Term Foodgrain Policy” (chaired by Dr Abhijit Sen; GoI, 2002), “the narrow targeting of the PDS based on absolute income-poverty is likely to have excluded a large part of the nutritionally vulnerable population from the PDS.”

We attempted a small correlation exercise to understand the changes in the inter-State differentials in per capita production of food grains, per capita calorie intakes and per capita SDP. This exercise was a slightly simpler extension of an earlier regression exercise in CDS (1975) and Krishnan (1992). The argument in CDS (1975) for 1961-62 was that “there was a close relationship between calorie intake and per capita production of food grains” (p. 10) and that “observed differences in calorie intake are explained by differences in levels of production of food grains but not by differences in levels of income” (p. 13). Krishnan (1992) extended the analysis for the period after 1961-62 till 1988-89. He concluded that “per capita food grains consumption was still positively correlated with food grains output and negatively correlated with per capita state income” (1992, p. 2486).

In our analysis, we selected two time points after 1988-89 to understand changes in the nature of inter-State relationships noted by CDS (1975) and Krishnan (1992). These years were 1993-94 and 2004-05 (see Table 3). Our results show that:

- The correlation co-efficient between per capita food grain production and per capita calorie consumption fell between 1993-94 and 2004-05 from 0.74 to 0.59. In other words, the close relationship that earlier studies had talked about had weakened between 1993-94 and 2004-05.
- The relationship between per capita calorie consumption and per capita SDP remained negative, and increased from -0.01 to -0.14, between 1993-94 and 2004-05.

In other words, more the State's per capita SDP, lesser was the calorie intake in 2004-05.

- The correlation co-efficient between per capita food grain production and per capita SDP fell between 1993-94 and 2004-05 from 0.43 to 0.33. In other words, more the State's SDP, lesser was the per capita production in 2004-05.
- Across States, the co-efficient of variation for per capita food grain production and per capita SDP rose slightly between 1993-94 and 2004-05. On the other hand, the co-efficient of variation for per capita calorie intake fell slightly between 1993-94 and 2004-05.

Table 3 Correlation co-efficients and co-efficients of variation across States between selected indicators of food security, India, 1993-94 and 2004-05

Item	1993-94	2004-05
Correlation co-efficient between pc FGP and pc CI	0.74	0.59
Correlation co-efficient between pc CI and pc SDP	-0.01	-0.14
Correlation co-efficient between pc FGP and pc SDP	0.43	0.33
CV for pc FGP	0.95	1.01
CV for pc SDP	0.33	0.36
CV for pc CI	0.09	0.06

Source: Computed from NSS data.

Note: pc – per capita; FGP – food grain production; CI – calorie intake; CV – co-efficient of variation.

While we are in the process of undertaking a more comprehensive analysis of the above trends, these preliminary results show that the relationship between per capita production and per capita calorie intake are probably getting weakened in the period of neo-liberal reforms. A clearer picture of the reasons for the changes between 1993-94 and 2004-05 may be obtained from Table 4. In Table 4, we have grouped States at both the periods according to their relative position vis-à-vis the national average in per capita food grain production and per capita calorie intake.

The reasons for the sharp fall in the correlation co-efficient between per capita food grain production (pc FGP) and per capita calorie intake (pc CI) between 1993-94 and 2004-05 are evident from Table 4. Both in 1993-94 and 2004-05, there were eight States with less than average pc CI. All these eight States had also below average pc FGP in 1993-94. However, by 2004-05, four of the eight States had above average pc FGP, but still they remained below average in pc CI. By 2004-05, States like Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka moved into the

group of States with more than average pc FGP, but yet remained with less than average pc CI. In 2004-05, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh newly moved into the group of States with less than average pc FGP and less than average pc CI. Of these two States, Orissa was in the group of States with more than average pc FGP and more than average pc CI in 1993-94.

Table 4 Grouping of States based on the national averages of per capita calorie intake and per capita food grain production, 1993-94 and 2004-05, India

Criterion	States below average per capita calorie intake	States above average per capita calorie intake
Year 1993-94		
States below average per capita FG production	Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bihar, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka (8)	Orissa, West Bengal (2)
States above average per capita FG production	- (0)	Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab (5)
Year 2004-05		
States below average per capita FG production	Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra (4)	Assam, Bihar (2)
States above average per capita FG production	Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka (4)	West Bengal, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab (5)

Source: Computed from NSS data.

Note: The figure n brackets indicate the total number of States in each box.

The weakening of the relationship between pc FGP and pc CI does not lead to the conclusion that narrowing regional differentials in pc FGP has lost relevance in the 1990s and 2000s. This shift has taken place because of the fact that in spite of improvements in pc FGP, some States have failed to raise the levels of per capita food grain consumption and calorie intakes. There are two central issues here. First, there has been the problem of a massive deficiency of effective food demand. This deficiency, as Utsa Patnaik has argued, is a direct result of the contractionary policies of the Government of India to maintain fiscal prudence. Secondly, there is clearly the lack of a sufficiently well provided network ensuring distribution of food grains at reasonable rates due to the misconceived reform of the universal PDS into a targeted PDS. Utsa Patnaik has summed up the problem thus: “demand deflation on the one hand, and administratively excluding the poor from PDS on the other, has reduced a functioning PDS to shambles.”

The problem of inadequate food production as well as falling food consumption and calorie intake has been exacerbated by recent policies of the Centre related to the encouragement of futures trading in food items. Futures trading has resulted in a phenomenal rise in speculative activity in food marketing, and has seriously threatened the maintenance of food

price stability and the viability of state interventions. Right from 1952, futures trading in food items, particularly essential commodities, were banned in India. In 2002, the NDA government lifted all restrictions on futures trading on all primary commodities. It took the high rates of inflation experienced in 2006 for a review of the 2002 decision and the UPA government suspended the trading in rice, wheat, arhar and tur in 2007. The Expert Committee chaired by Dr Abhijit Sen, which was formed in 2007 to examine the desirability of allowing futures trading presented its report to the government in 2008. The conclusions of this Committee, and particularly the supplementary note that the Chairman had appended, clearly bring out the adverse implications of allowing futures trading in agriculture (see Bose, 2008 for a useful review).

The Sen Committee was not able to arrive at a firm conclusion on the impact of futures trading on food prices after 2002 because of the short time period available for analysis. However, the Chairman's note pointed out that in 14 out of the 23 food items examined, the post-futures prices were higher than the pre-futures prices. These 14 items included essential commodities like rice and wheat. In fact, the prices of rice and wheat fell after the ban on their futures trading in 2007. Abhijit Sen also argued that,

...it is clearly necessary in the immediate inflationary situation that there be a clear statement of the government's intent to maintain and expand the current system of public procurement and PDS in order to ensure remunerative prices to farmers and affordable prices to consumers. In this context, combining prudence with benefit of doubt, the best course of action would be to identify those commodities where there is possibility of futures trading affecting expectations that may influence inflation in essential commodities and insulate these from futures. Therefore, the suspension of futures trading in the four sensitive commodities should continue...

Futures trading is not just a case of simple market failure in maintaining food price stability. It is in fact a more direct attempt, involving corporate players as aggregators of marketed surplus, to undermine the procurement policy of the government and usurp huge profits from gain trade. The encouragement to futures trading would lead to the weakening of the PDS and in some sense, the weakening of the PDS is necessary so that futures market can flourish. The resistance to futures trading, thus, also implies a resistance to protect the PDS as a strong social security net in India.

#### IV PDS AND TPDS IN THE CONTEXT OF KERALA

Kerala is a hugely food-deficit State. It produces only 15 per cent of its required quantity of food grains by itself, or a marketable surplus of just about four lakh MT of paddy. The cropping pattern in the State is dominated by cash crops, which are largely export-oriented. The problem of food production in Kerala is closely related to its problem of nutrition security. From the time of its formation, per capita cereal consumption levels in Kerala, as well as per capita calorie consumption levels, have been lower than in India. In 1961-62, the per capita calorie consumption in Kerala was 1620 Kcal, while the corresponding average for India was 2445 Kcal (Panikar, 1980).

However, what keeps Kerala apart from India are two major achievements between the 1960s and 2000s. First, in spite of falling production of food grains, Kerala was able to raise significantly the per capita intakes of calorie, protein and fat (see Table 5). Between 1972-73 and 2004-05, the per capita calorie consumption in rural Kerala increased from 1559 Kcal to 2014 Kcal. In the same period, the per capita calorie consumption in rural India fell from 2266 Kcal to 2047 Kcal. In 2004-05, the per capita calorie consumption in rural Kerala and rural India were almost the same. In the case of proteins and fat also, similar catching-up trends are noted for Kerala vis-à-vis India (Table 5). Nevertheless, it is notable that even in 2004-05, the levels of intake of calories were lower than the recommended dietary intakes.

Table 5 Levels of per capita intake of calories, proteins and fat, Kerala and India, Rural, 1972-73 to 2004-05, in Kcal and gm

Item	Kerala	India
Calorie intake (Kcal)		
1972-73	1559	2266
1983	1884	2221
1993-94	1965	2153
1999-00	1982	2149
2004-05	2014	2047
Protein intake (gm)		
1972-73	38.0	62.0
1983	47.0	62.0
1993-94	50.8	60.2
1999-00	52.4	59.1
2004-05	55.4	57.0
Fat intake (gm)		
1972-73	19.0	24.0
1983	32.0	27.0
1993-94	32.7	31.4
1999-00	38.8	36.1
2004-05	40.8	35.5

Source: NSS reports, various issues.

Secondly, even while nutrition intakes in Kerala were lower than the national average and the recommended dietary intakes, nutritional outcomes in Kerala were far better than in other States. One of the arguments is that NSS surveys may have been underestimating the levels of consumption in Kerala, as they do not account for all the components of the diversified diet pattern such as home-produced tapioca and coconut (CDS, 1975; Ramachandran, 1996). A second argument has been that unlike in other Indian States, the intra-household distribution of food may be more equitable in Kerala, with respect to gender (cited in Swaminathan and Ramachandran, 1999). A third argument has been that the utilisation of nutrients may have been better in Kerala compared to other States due to the more efficient

interactions between nutrition, awareness on health care and education (Soman, 1992). As a result, overall nutritional outcomes from a given level of consumption may be better in Kerala than other States.

There is consensus among scholars that the significant catching up in terms of the intake of calories in Kerala after 1960-61 was due to the presence of a successful public distribution system. While data on per capita off-take from the central pool in Kerala has always been higher than in other States, NSS household surveys also show significant spread of the PDS within the State by the 1980s. In terms of the share of people who purchased rice only from the PDS as well as in terms of the share of quantity of rice purchased from the PDS, Kerala was in a different league in 1986-87 (see Tables 6 and 7). The share of quantity of rice purchased from PDS as a share of total rice purchase in Kerala was 51.4 per cent in rural areas and 46.2 per cent in urban areas. The corresponding shares for India were 16.8 per cent and 19 per cent (Table 7).

Table 6 Percentage of persons purchasing rice from PDS alone, by fractile group, India and Kerala, 1986-87, in per cent

Fractile group	Rural areas		Urban areas	
	Kerala	India	Kerala	India
0-10	24.1	15.0	24.2	13.0
10 to 20	15.1	11.5	13.7	10.5
20 to 40	15.2	24.2	18.6	25.3
40 to 60	13.8	19.6	19.7	24.0
60 to 80	19.3	18.4	17.6	16.4
80 to 90	6.8	6.8	4.7	6.8
90 to 100	5.7	4.5	1.5	4.1
All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: NSSO (1990).

Table 7 Percentage of quantity of PDS purchase of rice to total purchase of rice, by fractile group, India and Kerala, 1986-87, in per cent

Fractile group	Rural areas		Urban areas	
	Kerala	India	Kerala	India
0-10	64.9	16.9	54.4	21.5
10 to 20	58.6	15.3	54.1	21.0
20 to 40	51.6	17.6	51.5	18.5
40 to 60	51.9	15.5	45.2	19.6
60 to 80	47.1	17.9	38.9	18.2
80 to 90	40.7	17.8	37.5	16.7
90 to 100	38.8	16.3	23.6	14.7
All	51.4	16.8	46.2	19.0

Source: NSSO (1990).

In Kerala, the share of households in the lower fractile groups (households with lower MPCE) was generally higher than the upper fractile groups (households with higher MPCE) in terms of both participation in PDS and purchase from PDS. At the same time, in India, the range of the quantity purchased between households in the lower fractile groups and households in the higher fractile groups was generally narrower than in Kerala (Tables 6 and 7). In other words, poorer households in Kerala used the PDS more than richer households, while in India this was not necessarily true. The absence of “elite capture” of PDS, even in its universalised format, was an important element in the functioning of PDS in Kerala. Some scholars have argued that this amounted to self-targeting of the rich out of a universal system (Koshy, 1988). Such self-targeting considerably raised the efficiency of the PDS system in Kerala. It may be instructive here to quote Amartya Sen, who uses the capability perspective to analyse the benefits of self-targeting in a social security scheme:

There is a particular connection between the use of self-selection as a method of targeting and the valuational perspective to be used. If the selection can be left to the potential recipients themselves..., the actual choices made will depend on all the values that influence the choices of the potential recipients... Thus, through the choices made, the self-selecting potential recipient will tend to reflect a wider class of values than simply income maximization. Since the rationale of the capability perspective relates closely to this wider class of values, there is a clear connection between the move toward self-selection and the rationale of the capability perspective (Sen, 1995, p. 18).

The history of PDS in Kerala is a history of struggles of the working and poor people of the State. The origins of today’s institutionalised PDS in the State can be traced back to the peasants’ and workers’ struggles in Malabar as well as industrial workers’ struggles in Travancore. For the same reason, issues related to shortage of food grains have always been a politically sensitive issue in Kerala.

In Malabar, even in the 1940s, only about 45 per cent of food grains were domestically produced, and imports from Burma (and surplus regions of south Malabar) constituted a significant part of consumption. Prakash Karat (1973) notes that between 1911-14 and 1923-26, imports of “grain, pulses and flour” at the Calicut port increased by 165 per cent; in the same period, exports of coconut, coir, spices, tea and rubber also increased considerably. With the II World War, food imports from Burma stopped completely. Overall, the rice imports at Calicut port fell from an annual average of 32,000 tonnes in 1938-40 to just 13,000 tonnes in 1941 (Menon, 1992). There was a huge increase in hoarding of grains and rice prices increased manifold.

The struggles for rationing of food began with the struggles of the Communist Party and the peasant movement to establish Food Committees and ‘Producers and Consumers Co-operatives’ (PCCs) in 1942 (Sivaswamy, 1946; also Ramachandran, 1996). The movement in Malabar was to demand the distribution of large quantities of paddy stored in the godowns of landlords to hungry peasants and labourers suffering from the severe food shortage. The peasant movement forcibly entered the godowns of the landlords, took out the paddy and distributed it to the poor through the PCCs, which were essentially ration shops. Many communist activists were killed by the goons of landlords and Police in these struggles. Trade unions in sectors like weaving and beedi-making distinguished themselves with their

unstinted support to the food committees and PCCs (Isaac, Franke and Raghavan, 1999). Finally, in October 1944, rationing was officially introduced by the government.

In Travancore and Cochin too, the food shortage was acute during the War and famine conditions developed in many regions. The coir belt in Ambalapuzha and Sherthallai taluks was most severely affected due to the disruption of coir exports and limited food cultivation in the sandy tracts. The price of meal in Alleppey town increased four-fold from 0.09 paise to 0.38 paise. The severe labour unrest resulted in a strike agitation in August 1942 (Isaac, 1984). The Travancore government was forced to respond by issuing subsidised rice to 14 hotels at Alleppey and Sherthallai to provide subsidised meals to workers. The coupons for the meals were distributed from the trade union offices. Interestingly, the workers voluntarily set apart a portion of the coupons for the starving households in the countryside. Ultimately, in 1943, a skeletal rationing system was introduced in both Travancore and Cochin.

While in other parts of Madras Presidency, the rationing system was abandoned after the War, sustained resistance from the peasant organisation made sure that it continued in Malabar, as well as in Travancore and Cochin (Ramachandran, 1996).

When the first Communist Ministry led by E. M. S. Namboodiripad took over in 1957, food distribution was one of its most important concerns. Being an acutely food deficit State, the government took up the issue of more supply of food grains to Kerala from the Central government. It established local food committees to supervise food distribution and ration shops. The central government had then established a southern food zone constituting the States of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Madras and Mysore; the effort here was to use the surplus production in Andhra Pradesh to be directed to other deficit regions like Kerala within the same zone. Selling rice from Andhra Pradesh to regions outside the zone was made illegal.

However, the zone system faced serious crises over a period primarily because of the failure to ensure the supply of adequate quantities from rice from Andhra (Krishnakumar, 1997). As stock-holders in Andhra Pradesh refused to sell rice at the administered prices, the supply of rice to Kerala's ration shops was frequently interrupted. In the address of the Governor to the Assembly in 1958 itself, the EMS government had referred to the "cutting of supply by the Central Government following the formation of the Southern Food Zone and the difficulty which my Government is facing in securing stocks even within the Southern Zone". By 1964, the failure of ensure adequate supplies had snowballed into a problem of acute food shortage in the State, leading to a sharp rise in food prices. As a result of protests across the State, the southern food zone was abolished. At a Chief Ministers' meeting in 1964, it was decided to introduce a system of "informal rationing" in Kerala to "ensure an equitable distribution of the available supplies at a specified price." In 1965, food struggles swept the State, primarily led by the Communist Parties. Out of political concern that it would result in a sharp leftward shift in Kerala's politics, the central government formally undertook to provide a minimum universal statutory ration for the State. Thus, the modern PDS was born in Kerala.

With the introduction of the PDS in the State, the central government gave an undertaking that it would meet all the requirements of Kerala directly from the central quota and that the State need not procure directly from other States. It was this undertaking that had continued

to guide food distribution policy in Kerala till the 1990s, when the centre abolished the universal PDS. The importance of continuing central assistance to Kerala to meet its food shortages was reiterated in the policy statement of the second Communist government in 1967:

A difficult problem that any government in Kerala has to face is the food problem. That is has become so serious is due to the wrong policies pursued by the Centre. Though this State is deficient in food production, it earns foreign exchange so sorely needed by the country and as such it is the responsibility of the Centre to see that its people are not made to starve but enough food grains are provided to meet the needs of the State.

The government will demand of the Centre to provide in time all the rice requirement of the States' people at prices within the capacity of the poor people of Kerala...It is our opinion that to solve the food problem, substantial changes will have to be made in policies at present pursued by the central government. For instance, it is necessary to ring wholesale trade in food grains into the State sector..., guarantee fair prices to cultivating peasants while at the same time organising distribution in such a way as to make food available to consumers at low prices. All this cannot be done by a State government alone, specially the government in a food deficit State like Kerala. What the Kerala government will do is to exert pressure on the Centre to concede the demand that Kerala should get the rice it needs at low prices (cited in Namboodiripad, 1982).

It is through such mass struggles and conscious public policy that Kerala developed the best functioning Public Distribution System (PDS) among all States in India. And it is this PDS that has been gravely endangered by the system of targeting after economic reforms began.

As mentioned, the major feature of targeted PDS is the differentiation of the population into BPL and APL households with different allocations and prices. The problem here was on how to classify the population into BPL and APL. There was no system to ensure that identification and estimation of BPL households go hand-in-hand. Hence, a totally unscientific and arbitrary method was followed by the central government, which further complicated the inherent contradictions in TPDS.

Although every State in India conducted its own survey to classify households into BPL and APL, the total quantity of commodities supplied by the FCI to each State was fixed using a different criterion. The Government of India used estimates from the quinquennial rounds of the NSS to arrive at the proportion of income-poor in each State. The quantity of commodities supplied by the Centre to the States was fixed as per the requirements of this proportion of income-poor only. For instance, the number of income-poor in Kerala was estimated as per NSS data to be about 10 per cent of the population in 1999-2000. According to the State government, this was a gross underestimate, and the number of income-poor (BPL) was at least 42 per cent of the population. However, the FCI provided commodities to Kerala only for the requirements of 10 per cent of the population. To meet the requirements of the remaining share of the population, the State government had to bear an annual financial burden of about Rs 480 million (see Suryanarayana, 2001). Such burdens are difficult to be borne every year, especially when the fiscal health of most State governments in India is under great strain.

After 1997, with the adoption of TPDS as the official policy of the central government, the APL ration price was regularly raised so that the gap between the market price and the APL ration price considerably narrowed. This phenomenon, coupled with the poor quality of rice that was supplied through the PDS, forced a large number of APL households in Kerala to shift to the open market for grain purchase. As a result, the ration off-take of the APL households in Kerala declined sharply. Citing the decline in off-take, the APL rice quota for Kerala, which was 113,420 MT up to March 2007, was reduced to 21,334 MT from April 2007 and further downward to 17,056 MT from April 2008. Similarly, the quota of APL wheat was reduced from 37,325 MT to 11,777 MT between March 2007 and April 2008. Soon after this drastic reduction in the food grain quota, the food grain markets in India, and globally, underwent major transformations. In congruence with the global prices, grain prices in India also began to rise sharply. The shrinkage of official food stocks, speculative hoarding and futures trading exacerbated the food crisis. Though there was a clamour for APL ration at non-subsidised prices, even that was not heeded to by the centre. The ostensible reason cited was the decline in off-take in the first half of the 2000s.

Further, the introduction of TPDS has destroyed the financial viability of the institutional network of rations shops in States like Kerala. The ration shops are private outlets. The owner of a ration shop receives a profit of about Rs 0.20 when he sells one kg of rice. The viability of running such an outlet in the earlier years was based on the large quantum of business that was transacted. Under TPDS, this quantum of transaction declined significantly affecting the viability of the ration shops. The reason for the decline was that charging full economic cost from APL households raised the issue prices to levels very close to their market prices. As a result, APL households did not purchase any commodity from ration shops. A back-of-the-envelope calculation would show that an average ration shop owner used to sell about 60 quintals of rice every week under universal PDS. Under TPDS, the average quantity of rice sold has come down to less than 20 quintals per week. As the business has become less viable, ration shop owners are trying to close shops. Thus, targeting is threatening to destroy the institutional network of subsidised food grain supply for the poor in Kerala, raising the possibilities of an end to PDS itself.

In spite of all the constraints imposed by the TPDS regime, the efforts of the Kerala government to protect the PDS from degenerating are obvious from the results of the NSS 61<sup>st</sup> round survey in 2004-05 on the public distribution system in India. Even in 2004-05, indicators related to the PDS in Kerala were significantly better than the corresponding national averages. First, in 2004-05, the share of households reporting purchase from PDS was 34.6 per cent in rural Kerala and 24.4 per cent in rural India (Table 8). The difference between rural Kerala and rural India was wider in the lower MPCE classes. Thus, while up to 86 per cent of households in the lower MPCE classes purchased grains from the PDS in rural Kerala, this share never exceeded 36 per cent in rural India as a whole. Similarly, the average quantity purchased by a BPL/AAY household and an average household in rural Kerala, particularly in the lower MPCE classes, was significantly higher than in rural India as a whole (see Table 8).

Caste-wise data on access of households to PDS in 2004-05 also shows the extent to which households from the Dalit and Adivasi caste groups were not allowed to be pushed out of the PDS in Kerala (Table 9). If we take the Antyodaya and BPL cards together, the share of Dalit and Adivasi households possessing one of the two cards was far higher in Kerala

compared to India. The Antyodaya scheme in Kerala covered a significantly large share of Adivasi households in Kerala compared to India as a whole in 2004-05.

Table 8 Monthly consumption per household from PDS of rice, Kerala and India, Rural, 2004-05, in per cent and kg per household per month

MPCE size-class (Rs)	Share of HHs reporting purchase from PDS last month (%)		Average quantity consumed from PDS by BPL/AAY HHs (kg per HH per month)		Average quantity consumed from PDS by all HHs (kg per HH per month)	
	Kerala	India	Kerala	India	Kerala	India
0-235	57.8	35.7	28.5	11.7	19.4	6.7
235-270	86.0	31.6	29.3	10.6	24.5	5.7
270-320	82.7	30.3	25.6	10.2	24.2	5.2
320-365	59.3	29.1	28.7	9.6	16.7	4.9
365-410	55.8	27.1	17.5	9.1	13.4	4.5
410-455	53.9	26.7	19.3	8.9	13.2	4.4
455-510	58.4	25.8	21.1	9.5	13.7	4.3
510-580	46.2	22.5	18.0	8.9	10.5	3.7
580-690	45.9	22.9	14.4	9.3	8.6	3.7
690-890	33.4	19.1	14.4	8.9	6.8	3.1
890-1155	24.7	14.8	11.0	8.2	4.3	2.4
1155 and more	16.5	11.8	7.9	7.9	2.6	1.9
All classes	34.6	24.4	15.9	9.6	7.3	4.1

Source: NSSO (2007).

The data in Table 8 and Table 9 are evidence of the partial success of the State government in its constant struggle to maintain the access to PDS at the original levels.

In a sense, the newly proposed Food Security Bill aims to totally abolish the category called APL households and end their association with PDS completely. The demand raised by the government in Kerala has been a total reversal of the policy of targeting and a restoration of the universal system of PDS.

## V

### THE FOOD SECURITY BILL AND KERALA'S ALTERNATIVE

We have discussed very briefly the evolution of the universal PDS in Kerala and the growing threats it has been facing during the last two decades of neo-liberal reforms. The Food Security Bill is seeking to put a statutory end to the Kerala model of PDS. In this context, the efforts of the Left in the State to develop a more democratic alternative to the central government's scheme assume special significance. In many ways, Kerala's alternative, despite its many limitations, significantly seeks to depart from the approach adopted in the Food

Security Bill. In this final section of the paper, we shall summarise the major points of departure.

Table 9 Share of households possessing different types of cards, India and Kerala, Rural, 2004-05, in %

Social group	Share of households possessing each type of ration card (%)					
	Antyodaya	BPL	Antyodaya + BPL	Other	No ration card	All types
Kerala						
Scheduled Tribe	30.8	36.5	67.3	16.5	16.3	100.0
Scheduled Caste	2.6	59.5	62.1	27.9	10.0	100.0
OBC	0.8	27.3	28.1	57.4	14.5	100.0
Others	1.4	16.3	17.7	70.0	12.4	100.0
All households	1.8	27.7	29.5	57.1	13.4	100.0
India						
Scheduled Tribe	5.0	39.6	44.6	30.8	24.6	100.0
Scheduled Caste	4.4	34.9	39.3	43.7	17.0	100.0
OBC	2.3	24.5	26.8	54.5	18.7	100.0
Others	1.9	17.3	19.2	63.0	17.7	100.0
All households	2.9	26.5	29.4	51.8	18.7	100.0

Source: NSSO (2007).

The first point of departure in Kerala is with regard to the definition of BPL. The central government follows a narrowly defined per capita monetary expenditure to estimate the number of BPL households in each State. For the State of Kerala, the present estimate is 10.2 lakh households i.e., about 16 per cent of all households. Before the above narrow criterion was imposed in 2001, the number of households below the poverty line was arrived at through household surveys conducted by the Rural Development Department in 1993-94. The number of poor households as per this method constituted about 20 lakh households. Even after 2001, Kerala has continued to treat these 20 lakh households as eligible for subsidised food provision. While the 35 kg per month rice was distributed for Antyodaya beneficiaries, for the rest of the BPL households, only 25 kg per month was allocated in Kerala. No government in Kerala could have reduced the number of BPL households by half.

However, even this broader list of households excluded many of the vulnerable sections of the society from the purview of subsidised food provision. For example, about 40 per cent of the Dalit and Adivasi households were classified as APL and about 60 per cent of the fisherperson households were classified as APL. Therefore, from the current year, it has been decided that the Dalit and Adivasi households, fisherperson households and destitute persons (beneficiaries of Ashraya scheme) would be eligible for the subsidised food provision. The number of BPL households by this broader definition increased from 20 lakh to 26 lakh.

The Kerala government has further announced that it intends to expand the scope of PDS to include all the agricultural labourer households and all the traditional industrial worker households to be eligible for subsidised rice, irrespective of their BPL/APL status. The definition of the poor adopted for PDS in the State will no more be based up on a poverty-line decided in terms of per capita consumption expenditure; a more appropriate class approach is sought to be adopted. The workers and petty producers in the entire unorganised sector are defined to be poor. The number of BPL households in Kerala by this new definition would be about 30 lakh households, which constitutes about 42.3 per cent of all households in the State.

Secondly, Kerala is currently distributing rice at Rs 2 per kg for the 26 lakh eligible households, which it intends to raise to 30 lakh households by the next year. Currently, the food subsidy of the State would come to Rs 230 crore. The Food Security Bill seeks to provide rice at Rs 3 per kg. Will the central government be willing to allow the State governments to provide an additional Rs 1 per kg subsidy? In fact, as per the Food Security Bill, such an act on the part of States would stand illegal and invite penal provisions.

Thirdly, the scope of the Food Security Bill is limited to narrowly targeted public distribution. It does not seek to integrate other ongoing schemes for providing food and nutrition to the poor with the Bill. This raises a question about the future of many of these schemes. The first casualty is the AAY under which the destitute persons were receiving 35 kg of rice at Rs 3 per kg. Under the provisions of the present Food Security Bill, the quantity of rice to these poorest of the poor is being reduced to 25 kg. Kerala has continued to provide 35 kg of rice at Rs 2 per kg under the AAY. In the last year, the mid-day meal scheme was extended in Kerala to the high school students also. Instead of the traditional rice gruel, the school children are being provided rice meals and pulses. A large part of the resources required are raised from the community itself. The local governments have taken an initiative in improving the nutritional quality of the Anganwadi supplementary feeding programme. An innovative experiment – Hunger Free City – is being introduced in the city of Kozhikode. Here, community kitchens are being set up at various points in the city for guaranteeing free mid-day meals to any needy citizen. If found successful, the Hunger Free City scheme would be expanded to other urban centres also.

Fourthly, the need of the hour is to expand the list of commodities supplied through the ration shops and include – in the context of Kerala – items like edible oil and pulses. The Food Security Bill is totally silent on this issue. Within the existing set of commodities distributed through the PDS, there has been a cut in the allocations of sugar for BPL households and kerosene. The network of ration shops is supplemented by 3000 Supplyco outlets run by the Civil Supplies Corporation, which provides 13 essential commodities, such as seven types of pulses, five types of condiments and spices and sugar. In August 2009, the set of pulses were sold at prices less than the market price by 37 per cent. The condiments and spices were sold at prices less than market price by 32 per cent. Similarly, ConsumerFed has its own co-operative outlets spread all over the State supplying the same items at subsidised prices. Both the above networks, besides the above subsidised items, provide almost all necessities and consumer goods at fair prices. They act as an important stabilising influence in the consumer markets. Further, in festival seasons like Onam, Ramzan and Christmas, a large number of special stalls are opened by agencies like Horticulture Corporation.

Fifthly, the Food Security Bill has divorced public distribution from internal production and procurement. In a sense, this divorce is part of another agenda of neo-liberalism in India, which is to phase out the policy of procurement itself and replace it with imports and speculative instruments like futures trading. This policy would spell disaster for the country. Kerala has recently launched a new drive to increase food grain production within the State. The target is to produce at least 25 per cent of grain requirements domestically. This comprehensive package includes interest-free loans, subsidies for various agricultural inputs, crop insurance and procurement at Rs 2 per kg higher than the central procurement price. About 4 lakh tonnes of food grains have been procured from the State in the above manner.

To conclude, given the lack of resources, the State government is constrained to provide subsidised ration only to the broadly defined poor and limit the ration to the APL households at whatever APL quota that the centre is willing to provide. Nevertheless, its vision is the reinstatement of the earlier universal PDS. The proposed Food Security Bill, on the other hand, sticks to the neo-liberal idea of targeting in PDS, and hence will continue to deprive millions of needy households of subsidized food. Universalisation of the PDS has to be the central feature of any meaningful food security legislation in India, which is marred by huge levels of malnourishment.

Food security legislations and policies in Kerala are not simple poverty alleviation programmes. They are lifelines for a chronically food-deficient State, to which the centre had made a solemn commitment to ensure food security in the 1960s. The second-level demand of the Kerala government has been to declare it as a special category State, given its food deficient status, and APL allotments should be made at the rate applicable for the other special category States.

The commercial crop economy in Kerala is entering into a new phase of uncertainty and crisis with the signing of the ASEAN free trade agreement. One result that is certain is the dampening of the prices of commercial crops. At the same time, Kerala is experiencing a phase of sharp increase in food prices due to the dismantling of PDS. Caught in this scissor movement of prices, the terms of trade for the State is going to deteriorate with disastrous growth and welfare implications. It is in this context that universal PDS becomes a key slogan for the development of the State.

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