

Is Food Insecurity in Kerala a Myth?

JOSEPH THARAMANGALAM

While agreeing with K P Kannan's remarks on the neglected agricultural scenario of Kerala ("Agricultural Development in an Emerging Non-Agrarian Regional Economy: Kerala's Challenges", 26 February 2011), this comment challenges the author's dismissal of food insecurity in Kerala as a myth.

K P Kannan's article (26 February 2011) on Kerala's rapidly declining agriculture must be welcomed as an urgently needed intervention by one of the best experts in the field on an issue of critical importance for the people of Kerala and beyond. As the author rightly remarks, the issue has not caught the public imagination as it should; indeed, it has remained one of low priority for policymakers as well as the supposedly vibrant civil society in Kerala. Kannan examines some of the causes of this decline, highlights factors that favour or hinder the revival of Kerala's agriculture, and provides a few valuable policy recommendations. Surprisingly, however, Kannan summarily dismisses the issue of food insecurity in Kerala as a myth. This, we believe, requires a response. We provide several reasons why the issue of food insecurity should be taken seriously, and why the revival of agriculture in general, and food production in particular, should be given the highest priority by all concerned. This is followed by a few observations on why agriculture and food production continue to be viable in Kerala.

Food Insecurity in Kerala

Kannan says that food insecurity in the state is a myth if we view the Kerala situation from "a larger perspective" according to which "...food security is not entirely dependent on production, but, more importantly, on the ability of all sections of the people to access food and consume an adequate amount, as shown by nutritional and related health outcomes". Let us accept this perspective which is based on the Food and Agricultural Organisation's (FAO) well-accepted definition although Kannan omits the important words "...(all people), at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that

meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO 2010). What kind of evidence does Kannan provide to show that in Kerala *all people, at all times* have access to food as defined above? He provides three. Kerala, he says, has: (1) very high purchasing power compared to the rest of the country; (2) a relatively well-functioning public distribution system (PDS); and (3) a better record in sanitation and care of children.

But there are at least three reasons why these are insufficient, if not irrelevant, to assure us that there is no food insecurity in Kerala. First, statistical measures of very high purchasing power and consumption hide social exclusion and unequal distribution. Indeed, increasing opulence and consumption in many parts of the world during the neo-liberal period have been accompanied by increasing food insecurity. This has been true of even the United States (US), the world's largest exporter of food and home to the most powerful agribusiness corporations. A recent study on food insecurity by the US department of agriculture reported that 50.2 million Americans (15% of the population) including 17.2 million children (one in four) were food insecure in 2009 (Nord et al 2010). Another study (NCBR 2010: 2) stated that the number of people seeking emergency food assistance each year through food banks has increased 46% since 2006, from 25 million to 37 million, the highest numbers seen in the organisation's 26-year history.

Second, Kannan ignores the issue of declining social safety nets including access to food rations. Third, his perspective is agnostic about the global and Indian conjuncture of a multidimensional crisis and a global food regime that has increased food insecurity across the world, and adds a special vulnerability to Kerala given its food deficit status and relatively greater integration into the larger political economy and food regime.

Kerala, of course, does better than most other Indian states in providing food and social security and related public goods such as education and health. That, after all, is the celebrated "Kerala model of development" has been all about, a development

Joseph Tharamangalam (*jtharamangalam@yahoo.com*) is with the department of sociology and anthropology, Mount St Vincent University, Halifax, Canada.

path that has also supported one of the best PDS in India and in the world. The critical question today is if Kerala's achievements are still being sustained after two decades of neo-liberal reforms. The answer to this is far from reassuring.

To begin with, there is evidence of rising inequality (e.g. rural Kerala having the highest Gini coefficient in India), increasingly unequal access to education, health and other forms of social goods and security which are being privatised at a fast pace. To cite just one example, a recent study (George 2005) using household expenditure data from NSS 55th round reported that 14% of rural and 11% of urban people in Kerala incurred catastrophic expenses (in excess of 15% of their income) for healthcare, and that such expenditures pushed 3.5% of households in rural and 4.5% in urban Kerala below the poverty line. On the critical issue of access to food, Utsa Patnaik (2010) has noted that 12% of rural and 20% of urban people in Kerala fell below the official 2004-05

poverty lines of Rs 430 and Rs 559.4, spending levels that allowed for accessing only 1,475 calories and 1,300 calories, respectively, far below the 2,400 recommended calories. In urban Kerala access to calorie intake actually declined in 2004-05.

Consistent with these are indications of increasing malnutrition among children and an increase in the infant mortality rate (IMR). A National Family Health Survey showed that the number of the state's underweight children had increased from 27% in 1998-99 to 29% in 2005-06¹ and a similar study reported that there was an increase in IMR from 11 per thousand in 2003 to 15 in 2006 (falling to 12 again in 2009), and that the state had lost its first rank to Goa by this time (Pathak 2011).

Extent of Deficit

It is important to examine these figures in the context of Kerala's status as one of the worst food deficit states in India. Kerala now produces less than 15% of its foodgrain requirements, down from over

50% in the 1950s just before Kerala launched its famous land reforms. As Patnaik (2010) argues, its heavy dependence on food imports from neighbouring states, paying a higher cost, is bound to affect intake adversely for the lower fractiles of the population unless their real incomes also rise adequately. But all indications are that the bottom fractiles, especially landless labourers from scheduled caste and scheduled tribe backgrounds, have been the net losers on all accounts during the neo-liberal period. Needless to say, recent changes to Kerala's well-functioning PDS, imposed from Delhi under neo-liberal compulsions, have added another threat to Kerala's food security.

Can Kerala count on the continuing flow of cheap food from other Indian states – "cheap" relative to the high purchasing power of its people and the low purchasing power of those in the exporting states? There is mounting evidence that the exporting states, as India in general, have serious problems of food insecurity themselves.

SAMEEKSHA TRUST BOOKS

Global Economic & Financial Crisis

Essays from *Economic and Political Weekly*

In this volume economists and policymakers from across the world address a number of aspects of the global economic crisis. One set of articles discusses the structural causes of the financial crisis. A second focuses on banking and offers solutions for the future. A third examines the role of the US dollar in the unfolding of the crisis. A fourth area of study is the impact on global income distribution. A fifth set of essays takes a long-term view of policy choices confronting the governments of the world.

A separate section assesses the downturn in India, the state of the domestic financial sector, the impact on the informal economy and the reforms necessary to prevent another crisis.

This is a collection of essays on a number of aspects of the global economic and financial crisis that were first published in the *Economic & Political Weekly* in early 2009.

Pp viii + 368

2009

Rs 350

1857

Essays from *Economic and Political Weekly*

A compilation of essays that were first published in the EPW in a special issue in May 2007. Held together with an introduction by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, the essays – that range in theme and subject from historiography and military engagements, to the dalit *viranganas* idealised in traditional songs and the "unconventional protagonists" in mutiny novels – converge on one common goal: to enrich the existing national debates on the 1857 Uprising.

The volume has 18 essays by well known historians who include Biswamoy Pati, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Peter Robb and Michael Fisher. The articles are grouped under five sections: 'Then and Now', 'Sepoys and Soldiers', 'The Margins', 'Fictional Representations' and 'The Arts and 1857'.

Pp viii + 364

2008

Rs 295

Available from

Orient Blackswan Pvt Ltd

Mumbai Chennai New Delhi Kolkata Bangalore Bhubaneswar Ernakulam Guwahati Jaipur Lucknow Patna Chandigarh Hyderabad

Contact: info@orientblackswan.com

According to the FAO (2010) some 21% of India's people are food insecure, and this figure has slightly increased between 2005 and 2010, and remains among the highest for any country. Every major study that measures human security and well-being provides ample evidence of India's abysmal record in human development, hunger, malnutrition, multidimensional poverty and related indicators. For example, India figures prominently in the Global Hunger Index (IFPRI 2008) as home to the single largest pool of hungry people in the world (255 million or 21% of its population), while according to the new multidimensional poverty index (MPI) used by the *Human Development Report 2010*, 600 million Indians or 55% of the country's population are MPI poor – and in both of these measures India ranks below some of the poorest countries in Africa and even in south Asia. Add to these the not-so-easily predictable dynamics of India's centre-state and inter-regional politics and Kerala's position as a small state with relatively weak bargaining power (often ruled by political parties different from those at the centre), it should not be difficult to see Kerala's vulnerability in regard to its food security. Indeed, this vulnerability was made clearly visible in 2008 when the rice allocation from the central pool was cut by as much as 80%, a harbinger of what can happen in the future.

Finally, food security in Kerala or India cannot be fully examined except within the current historical conjuncture of a global food regime that has integrated the production, distribution and consumption of food across the world as never before. The multidimensional global crisis (food, financial, fuel, environmental), showing no sign of going away soon, affect all countries. Escalating food prices have been noted as causing food riots and social unrest in the recent past, and even some of the still ongoing revolts in west Asia. In the wake of all this a massive land grab, unseen since colonial times, has been under way by an unholy alliance of agro-food corporations and venture capitalists (whose sinister hands are seen behind the food crisis by some) and wealthy states keen to ensure future food security. China alone is reported to have acquired 2.8 million hectares, mostly in Africa (Akram-Lodhi 2011).

In the global battle on the control over the production and distribution of food, the agro-food transnational corporations have a special interest in China and India which they see as "...having the potential for vast market growth if trade could be liberalised. For both agricultural trade liberalisation would exact an enormous social cost" (Weiss 2007: 104). As the World Bank and similar global institutions have now appropriated the discourse of food security to legitimise their support to the land-grabbers and the agro-food multinational companies, grass root movements of peasants and agricultural producers, such as the *compesina*, have changed their discourse and moved the goal of their struggle beyond food security to that of food sovereignty. This latter concept emphasises the idea that the struggle now is for the right to food and for democratic control over a people's food system.

Kerala's Policy Options

At this historical conjuncture Kerala does have options, limited but viable. Clearly it must give high priority to reviving its agriculture with special emphasis on food crops which have not been given the kind of state support and subsidies given to cash crops such as rubber. And it must take all possible measures to preserve the state's rich agro-ecological system, especially its wetlands (making up a larger percentage of its lands than in any other state). As Kannan has noted, there are many factors that favour further agricultural development in Kerala. To those listed by him we add three more. The first of these is Kerala's exceptionally rich ecosystem that comprises tropical rainforests, coastal freshwater and brackish water wetlands (supported also by 44 river systems) one that is well-suited for a much wider variety of agricultural crops and practices than elsewhere such as mixed cropping. Kerala has a tradition of mixed cropping, and combining perennial tree crops with annual vegetable and other food crops in its garden lands, and even in its wetlands which are interspersed with small garden lands in which houses are located. The second is cultural, related to Kerala's ecology, its dispersed village system and the rural-urban continuum. The kind of preference for urban living and the cultural denigration

and prejudice against rural life that characterise many other societies in and outside India is absent here. Third, Kerala's many advantages, including its well-educated people, offers it the possibility of innovative forms of agriculture including backyard and urban gardens, and what has been described as "pluri-activity" or "multi-functionality", combining farming with many other activities. Part-time farming in small urban and backyard plots can be a very well-suited, rewarding and enjoyable activity for large numbers of people employed in services sector and government jobs, especially given the fact that they still live in rural areas and small towns with their roots in their farming background.²

NOTES

- 1 See "Malnutrition on the Rise in State: Survey", *The Hindu*, 9 February 2011.
- 2 Elsewhere we have described the considerable success of urban farming in Cuba; practically all the fresh vegetables in Havana, including those supplied to public institutions and tourist hotels, are produced in such farms in that city. See Tharamangalam (2008).

REFERENCES

- Akram-Lodhi, Haroon (2011): "Land-Grabbing and Agrarian Change in the 21st Century", seminar presentation, IDS (Halifax: St May's University), 4 March.
- FAO (2010): *The State of Food Insecurity in the World: Assessing Food Security in Protracted Crises*, Food and Agriculture Organisation, United Nations, Rome.
- George, Ashish (2005): "Good Health at Low Cost: How Good and How Low?", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 18 June.
- IFPRI (2008): *Global Hunger Index: The Challenge of Hunger*, Washington DC.
- NCBR (2010): "USDA Reports Hunger Reaching Record High", Northern Colorado Business Report, viewed at <http://www.ncbr.com/article.asp?id=54681>, 21 November.
- Nord, Mark, Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson (2010): "Measuring Food Security in the United States: Household Food Security in the United States", USDA, Economic Research Service.
- Pathak, Japan K (2011): "Latest Figures: Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) Drops by 2 Points in Gujarat", Ahmedabad, 4 February, viewed on 8 March at <http://deshgujarat.com/2011/02/04/latest-figures-outinfant-mortality-rate-imr-drops-by-2-points-in-gujarat/>.
- Patnaik, Utsa (2010): "Trends in Urban Poverty under Economic Reforms, 1993-94 to 2004-05", *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol XLV, No 4, 23 January.
- Tharamangalam, Joseph (2008): "Can Cuba Offer an Alternative to Corporate Control over the World's Food System?", Centre for Global Justice, available at: http://www.globaljusticecenter.org/articles/report_cubafood.html
- UNDP (2010): *Human Development Report*, United Nations Development Programme.
- Weiss, Tony (2007): *The Global Food Economy* (London: Zed Books).