

Food insecurity in incredible India

By Kathyayini Chamaraj

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In 'Incredible India', which sports a growth in GDP of 8 to 9 per cent, what is incredible is that it ranks 66th in a list of 88 countries on the World Hunger Index; almost 50 per cent of its children suffer from malnourishment and 75 per cent of its women from anaemia.

The current Public Distribution System (PDS) in the country does not seem to be fulfilling any criteria for ensuring a right to food expected of a just society.

At present, a single parent with four children, if her income is, for instance, Rs 3,500 per month, is eligible for an Above Poverty Line (APL) ration card. To be eligible for a Below Poverty Line (BPL) card, the single parent needs to be earning less than Rs 17,000 per year or about Rs 1,500 per month which works out to Rs 45 per day per household or about Rs 10 per person per day. This is just about half the minimum wage of about Rs 88 (which itself is inadequate). Today, rents for a measly 100 sq ft in a city like Bangalore alone are upwards of Rs 1,500 per month. So, to be considered poor, the state is expecting its citizens to be living on air and not have any other needs!

Differentiation

A single parent with six children pleads for an Antyodaya card, which would entitle her to 35 kg foodgrains. But the single parent doesn't get it because the parent is eligible for only the BPL card. The BPL card fetches the single parent of six children a maximum of 25 kg, or about 3.5 kg per person per month in a household of seven.

Dietitians and nutritionists say that a person needs 10 kg of cereals per month to get 2,400 calories per day merely to exist, leave alone getting balanced food containing pulses, edible oil, fruits and vegetables. The present PDS expects you to become food secure by eating an inadequate quantity of mere cereals.

But in this gloomy scenario, comes the hopeful promise of a 'National Food Security Act'. A Concept Note of the Government of India says the Act is "to ensure food security to all citizens based on rights approach, with individual household members as the focus (emphasis added). But what follows these pious statements is more a preamble to a 'National Food Insecurity Act'.

While Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen called recently for the universalisation of the PDS, without any distinction between BPL and APL, the Concept Note seeks to make the Targeted PDS statutory. So what happens to the aim of covering all citizens?

The Concept Note seeks to take away the freedom the states enjoyed until now to determine their own numbers of the poor, the amount of foodgrains that they wish to issue and also their rates. The Concept Note plans to restrict the PDS only to 27.5 per cent of the population, considered BPL by the Planning Commission, and do away with the APL category. This, while it is estimated that 70 per cent of the population is unable to meet their requirement of 2,400 calories.

Shying away

The Centre is proposing to reduce even the existing entitlement of 35 kg, fixed by the Supreme Court, to 25 kg per BPL household. Given the ceiling of five units per household, what happens to the guarantee of having the “individual as the focus” if there are over five members? Equally diabolical seems to be the Centre’s intent to do away with several other food-related schemes in the name of avoiding multiplicity of schemes.

The lack of adequate pulses, oil, fruits and vegetables in the diet is what is causing the high levels of malnutrition among Indians. But there is no thinking in the concept note on this. In fact, the word ‘malnutrition’ is completely missing in it. It also blissfully avoids any discussion on who is poor and what constitutes ‘adequate and nutritious food’. It concentrates wholly on how to reduce the numbers of BPL families, reduce entitlements and reduce subsidies. A great way indeed to ensure food security!

But the piece de resistance of the concept note lies in its statement that states unable to distribute the entitled foodgrains to families can pay cash in lieu thereof. With this, the government seems to wash its hands off any duty to ensure the right to food of its citizens