

New Age of Political Dependency: The Reality of 'Below Poverty Line' Ration Cards.

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Abstract

Waving the need for people to fend for themselves to get food on their tables might seem a viable strategy for a successful way to combat hunger starvation in India. But little does one think of the long-term effects of it. Effectively there is a creation of a faux debt loop in which the government run by the people in power seemingly empowers the working class plagued with poverty by giving them food in an almost hundred percent subsidised rate thereby creating a strong vote bank. The Ration Cards have a few other perks attached to them which drives the poor further into the vicious cycle of political dependency. Lack of awareness and education among the beneficiaries and the less stringent laws regarding the falsification and catfishing while the initiation of the Ration Card in both the rural and urban context is saddening. *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana* is the current iteration of the food security measures in India. This goes hand in hand with the schemes like *One Nation One Ration Card* (ONORC) that will nationalise a beneficiary's ration card by a process called Aadhaar Seeding. This seeding ensures that the beneficiary can pick up her or his entitled food grain from any fair price shop in the country. So, if the family migrates from one part of the country to another, their claim to food security remains assured. This is one of the biggest steps towards the digitalisation of the Ration Card. But what undermines its success is the lack of proper awareness even among the beneficiaries. This research aims to create awareness, suggest long term alternatives, go through short term substitute courses of actions, discuss the impact of pandemic on the food security proposition in India etc.

Keywords: Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, One Nation One Ration Card, Food security, Poverty line, Political dependency

Introduction

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

The political system in all scheme of things benefits with maintaining a vague and obscure idea of poverty, poverty line and a disproportionate gap between the rich and the poor, especially in the South Asian context. This situation was even more aggravated with the onset of the global pandemic rendering the working class jobless and keeping the behemoth data hoarders blooming. On the backdrop, a total of two lakh crores rupees worth of free food has been distributed for a total of 80 Crore people just during the pandemic itself. The gravitas of the matter is least explored in the context of the ongoing pandemic creating an evident research gap. Questioning the food security system of the country unearths hidden facades of corrupt governance and underlying tension between the governing bodies and the taxpayers and the beneficiaries. The dependencies are multifaceted and to discuss one facet without touching upon the other defeats the narrative and distances the researcher from the bigger picture. Thus, to analyse the success of democracy in maintaining food security in the state, one should view India in the *Global Hunger Index* ranking, which currently is 101 of 116. But before one can encounter the problem of hunger and starvation; he is presented with issues of poverty, unemployment and underemployment etc.

Even though, according to the World Bank 39.8% of the Indian population earns less than \$3.2 a day! Although this percentage of people have been on a steady decline the problem of poverty related hunger starvation is still not over. On the other hand, plagued by Ration card scams, which are not a categorically new phenomenon and have been going on since the centre has implemented various food security acts, which in turn makes the *One Nation One Ration Card* fundamentally flawed. A study conducted in the year 2013 by the *National Council of Applied Economic Research* (NCAER) in six states found that 40% of the BPL cards have been issued to people who are above the poverty line. Implying that the need of the hour is to curb ration cards ending up in the hands of people non eligible for it and to get it in the hands of people who are eligible but not yet able to avail the facilities of it. But one must understand the fact that the more the Government spends its limited resources in food security the lesser it can spend in places like the education sector and defence. For example, the amount of money spent for the subsidising of the food grains for more than 80 Crore beneficiaries is 4 times the total education budget of 54 thousand Crores. Another alarming facet of the food security programs in India has been the availability of subpar food grain quality and also the wastage of it. Moreover, previous researches point to the lack of proper knowledge about the rights and benefits of the ration card system among the beneficiaries or the eligible people who have not yet been made the beneficiary. Moreover, in 2018 Global nutrition report indicated that about 14% of children in India have been the prey to undernourishment.

Public Distribution System, the Creation of a Dependency Feedback Loop

Before the institutionalisation of the Public Distribution System the man had to fend for oneself to get food on the table. Man is inherently born free, free to decide what to do. He evolved to hunt and gather. Later he learnt the art of cultivation and could feed just his family but with invention of better tools, the surplus from agriculture increased multiple times and this surplus of grains led to wars, slavery and inequality. Those who worked harder and were ambitious could produce more and were well off, those who were not able to cultivate much, started to lose the race of production. The reason for not being able to produce much could be anything, disability, laziness or lack of ambition.

The man now is born with the tag of poor or rich, with which he is entitled to get extremely cheap food grains or get the same grains in price ten times higher. His parents have an option to not work much harder to make his life better, and to make him adjust his life according to the amount of food his family gets. They have a choice to limit his dreams and aspirations. Among the poor, the strive to make their lives better, hustle, creativity and aspirations are being killed. Among the rich, the desire to work hard is being killed and the tendency of stealing taxes is also being induced. Villages are full of people who get their children admitted in multiple schools just for double or triple mid-day meals and over that they get ration cards on those children's names, people who can easily afford motorbikes and a better lifestyle but just for the sake of bpl benefit, prefer not to buy one registered on their names. In older times people were enslaved and were not allowed to grow food for themselves and had to depend on their masters, the situation hasn't changed much, now people are being mentally enslaved by giving out "almost free" food. Despite thousands of schools being mushroomed in India, does not ensure higher literacy rate, similarly giving out food in prices which are as good as giving them for free, does not ensure better rank in hunger index.

"Identification of beneficiaries: Studies have shown that targeting mechanisms such as TPDS are prone to large inclusion and exclusion errors. This implies that entitled beneficiaries are not getting food grains while those that are ineligible are getting undue benefits. According to the estimation of an expert group set up in 2009, PDS suffers from nearly 61% error of exclusion and 25% inclusion of beneficiaries, i.e., the misclassification of the poor as non-poor and vice versa.

With subsidies/freebies you are actually nourishing a person so that he can continue to work, he has to have a certain minimum standard to be an effective worker. If he's half starving or he's only having a meal once in two days, he's not going to be a good worker. But if you use it to give it to people to win them over, then it is bad because it will be ruined by inflation. So instead, the government should give those subsidy or free service in the field of education and health care. It adversely affects the economy as then government will rarely shift the resources to (Investment and building infrastructure) consumption or export, so that other sectors can boom through the money which in turn will create the opportunities for the same people.

The capture of the mind that comes out of the certainty, when life becomes a certain thing and you are dependent on it, you get used to it that's what it is. So now in USSR it's not communism but dictatorship, which is the outcome of continuous state provision of freebies. So, freebies a threat to democracy. And this is human nature that if something is free for all then the ambition lessens. Someone who can do something and achieve something would also not want to do it. Human society has to be based on competition, it has to be based on an ambition and on the freedom to exercise your will. So, it should be for a short-term emergency situation only and not a rule of governing society. People have got a lot of brains, give them incentives don't give them freebies, free bees will only spoil them, create incentives.

Incentives are the best way to run a democracy. We have got great human resource we can use them up to their full list potential by educating them and nourishing them. Things which are used as inputs in a production system should not be subsidized, education can be subsidized to the maximum because it's a producer, it's not an input. We should learn from the past that how dependence and trust on government can prove to be deadly because of government's oversight and operational failures, like the terrorist attacks, oil spills and various economic crises. Like the recent warning by experts about Indian economic collapse is an eye opener, they warned how India's economy can crumble like Sri Lanka's, if the governments keep giving freebies. "The reckless spending of the taxpayer's money on freebies is neither a recognised policy/custom nor it is sanctioned in a court of law. It is blatant financial irregularity that amounts to bribing voters using public money solely for gaining advantage in electoral politics. An individual candidate distributing cash or giving liquor bottles (using his own pocket money) to garner votes is treated as corrupt practice, and rightly so, whereas a party bribing voter that too using public money gets legitimacy (albeit de facto). This smack of double standard, all the more so given the intent in both cases is quid pro quo?" (Uttam Gupta) But the politicians still won't stop, just for the sake of votes. They don't care much about the progress of the country, for them their own progress is of utmost importance. Therefore, it is important to not take decisions in a sudden urge of uncontrolled emotions of pity and compassion but should take logical decisions, in this case, by consulting good economists. It is the government's responsibility to reduce the inequality by giving more opportunities and not by unequal treatment of citizens.

If we keep quiet and do not speak or act against the arbitrary orders of governments, it can be very dangerous. Our decision-making power would slowly be seized totally and like the Big Brother we would be watched and told what to do and what not to. Mere spectacle will put humanity on the verge of collective slavery. It would be an Orwellian society, uglier than dystopia. A productive society has healthy competition, where people have the capacity to think, question and create. Where there is compassion but with critical thinking.

The Impact of the Global Pandemic on Food Security in India

With the onset of the Global Pandemic of COVID-19 along with its multiple variants Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy estimates that over 10 million people lost their jobs just due to the second wave alone. This in turn has led to a major setback on the food security of the country and the poor and working classes have had to face the complete brunt of it. The

Government which has urgently asked all states to reach out to the vulnerable sections of the society such as street dwellers, rag pickers, rickshaw pullers, etc. and issue ration cards to them on priority under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) after verifying their eligibility. But here the country now has to face the conundrum of raising investments in the food security sector through the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana* and *One Nation One Ration Card* while combating the falling economy and rising unemployment. The immediate course of action taken by the government was to pour in money (2 lakh crore rupees) to feed 80 crore people (more than 50 percent of the current population of the country). On the other hand, the politicizing of the food security of the country have effectively left the masses dependent on the government to provide for them to meet their basic necessities and the pandemic further aggravates it and with rising scams in the fair price shops, bad quality grains and inappropriate use of the ration card the pandemic has exponentially exasperated the whole system.

The pandemic has also given a scope for the rise in scams related to the ration card, as seen in Udham Singh Nagar's Kichha area of Nainital. Locals of the area alleged that they have been duped of over Rs 10 crore during the Covid lockdown from March-end to October through fake ration cards. More than a thousand fake ration cards have been alleged to exist in Kichha under the PMGKY and food grains worth Rs 5.7 Crore have been distributed on these fake cards. Coupled with the usual allocation the fraud has been alleged to be of 10 Crores. One of the petitioners to the Uttarakhand high court states that this scam has been going on for years. Moreover, there can be seen a subset of the food grains getting lost during the allocation process and the quality control processes pointing towards the slack in the ways in which corruption and malpractices are being kept in check in the country. Adding to that the number of beneficiaries has been on a steep incline even though the economy of the region states otherwise which is indicative of the fact that people above the poverty line are also being portrayed as people below the poverty line and are not surrendering their ration cards. The pandemic has also impacted on the process of safe distribution of food grains under *the National Food Security Act, 2013* without jeopardising the public health and welfare.

Though the Government has enacted *the National Food Security Act, 2013* which has marked a paradigm shift in approach to food security – from a welfare to rights-based approach. The Act legally entitles up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population to receive subsidized food grains under Targeted Public Distribution System. This in turn makes the masses entitled to get food at a highly subsidised rate eliminating the hassle to look for food on a regular basis but also making them highly politically dependent and more so due to the pandemic. Food grains under TPDS will be made available at the subsidised prices of Rs.3, Rs2 and Rs1 per kg of rice, wheat and coarse grains respectively; making them widely accessible to all strata of the society. Moreover, moving the ration card distribution system, data collection for it, transparency check all have now been moved to the online mode. Though the issue of malnourishment in children has declined but we have still got a long way to go in the post pandemic era.

Three other issues faced by the beneficiaries during the pandemic are; Under weighing of Public Distribution System commodities at Fair Price Shops, over charging for PDS commodities by FPS, denying issue of PDS commodities to the genuine card holders. The De-privatization of all Fair Price Shops can be seen as a step towards the right direction in many states during and before the pandemic. The FPSs will be run by Gram Panchayats, Co-operative societies, Self Help Groups, Forest Protection Bodies and urban local bodies. A robust system of computerised and mechanised solutions for food distribution and food transportation need to achieve food security like one sees in the Chhattisgarh model. The transportation vehicles drivers and the respondent in the depots need to run GPS enabled mobile phones which ensure no loss of food grains during transportation especially due to the pandemic.

Though the digitalisation of the Ration Card and use of Aadhaar Seeding in the allocation of food grains has been beneficial towards the recipients but the Aadhaar Based Biometric Authentication (ABBA) has ample loopholes. These loopholes are the hasty and half-baked use of the Aadhaar Card itself moreover instead of operationalising anti-corruption legislation like the Lokpal or implementing grievance redressals and social audit provisions in various laws, the government has been pushing Aadhaar as the ultimate solution to corruption. There is overwhelming evidence to show that mandatory linking of Aadhaar to ration cards has led to large-scale exclusions from benefits guaranteed under the National Food Security Act. Adding to that, in places where Point-of-Sale devices have been installed in fair price shops, if the biometrics of beneficiaries don't match or the cardholder cannot be present in person, they are unable to access their entitlements. The pandemic has aggravated the problems in the PDS systems in unimaginable magnitudes. With the laps of the system, the economists and the analysts have hopefully learnt their lesson as immediate reforms is the need of the hour.

Reforms to Solidify Food Security

Aadhaar Card is an integral part of the Public Distribution Sector. But the system of Aadhaar Seeding is far from perfect but firstly one needs to understand the underlying roles of Aadhaar itself.

- Firstly, amalgamating Aadhaar with Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) helps in better identification of beneficiaries and exclusion errors. Aadhaar are often a potent tool for the govt, in making the PDS simpler across these identified areas.
- One Aadhaar = one beneficiary: Aadhaar is a unique number, and no resident can have a duplicate number since it is linked to their individual biometrics. Using Aadhaar to spot beneficiaries in PDS databases has mostly eliminated duplicate and faux beneficiaries from the list of beneficiaries, hence making identification for entitlements much more effective.
- Portability in identification: Aadhaar may be a universal number, and agencies and services can contact the Central Unique Identification database from anywhere within the country to verify a beneficiary's identity. The number thus gives individuals a universal, portable sort of identification.
- Aadhaar-based authentication to verify entitlement delivered to the beneficiary: Aadhaar enables remote, online biometric and demographic authentication of identity. Such Aadhaar-based authentication can happen in Realtime, and may even be performed through a mobile . Using Aadhaar for real-time biometric identification at the Fair Price Shops, during the

collection of the entitlements by the beneficiaries, more over it also helps governments verify that the advantages reached the person they were meant for.

Aadhar is now the integral part of the country and people must be encouraged and made aware to link their Aadhar cards under the One Nation One Ration Card. Additionally, one can learn from the mistakes of other communities and implement it in their own. Here are a few case studies brought to light which can and must bring in nation wide reforms in the PDS systems.

Adoption of modern technology by Wadhwa committee: -

The Supreme Court appointed a special committee under the leadership of Justice Wadhwa to look into reforms to the TPDS that have been implemented by various states. In its 2009 report, the Wadhwa Committee found that certain states had implemented computerisation and other technology-based reforms to TPDS. Technology-based reforms helped plug leakages of food grains during TPDS. But The Committee also unearthed the fact that the current manual recording of eligibility of beneficiaries and transactions was still prone to human errors and tampering. Furthermore, there was pilferage through the distribution network and no central monitoring system to ensure end-to-end delivery. The Committee observed that a new infrastructure for the end-to-end computerisation could curb large-scale diversion and help track the delivery of food grains from state depots to beneficiaries.

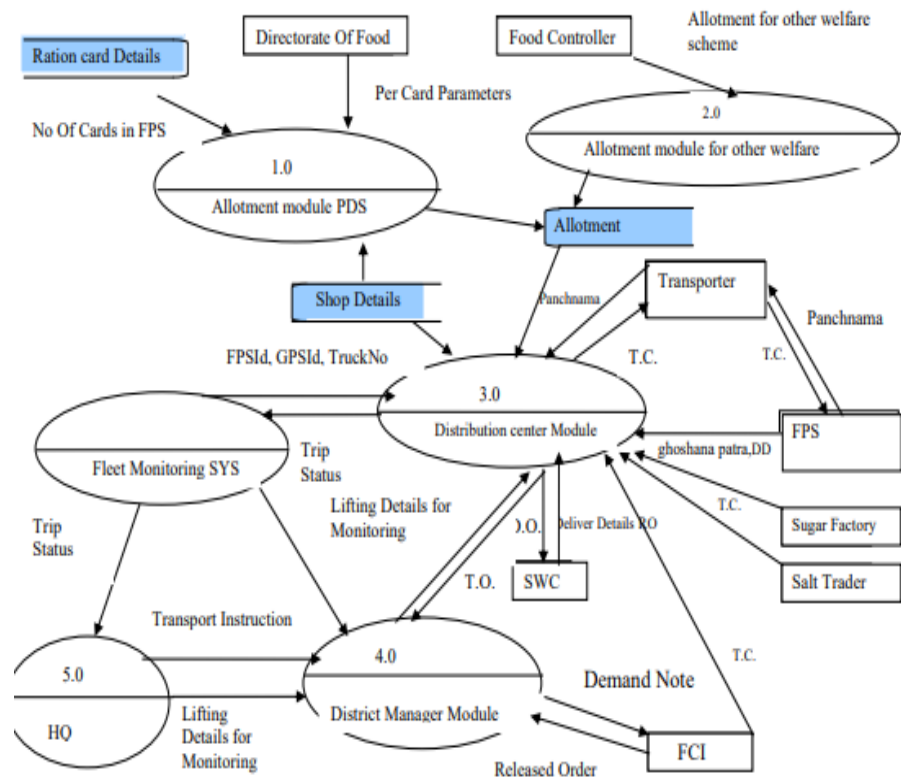
The committee has insisted in the adoption of recent technology, like for example computerisation of PDS beneficiaries, to bring transparency to the system. Besides, it recommended to phase out private individuals not allowing them to be working in fair price shops. Their place was recommended to be taken over by state-level corporations, Panchayati raj institutions or registered self-help groups. Which will help check pilferage in PDS and solidifying food security in general.

To monitor the system, the committee recommended the formation of a Civil Supply Corporation at the state level. Replacing the ongoing system where there are many vigilance committees to monitor the distribution of food grains but they are almost defunct and lack the power and coordination. There is no check on the food grains supplied to the state by the Food Corporation of India or brought by fair price shop dealers for distribution to people below the poverty line(BPL).

The committee recommended a clear division of responsibility between the Centre and States and also more transparent communications between them. While the Centre should be responsible for procurement, storage, transportation and bulk allocation of food grains under PDS, states should bear the operational responsibilities such as allocations to fair price shops, identification of below poverty line families, issuing of ration cards and supervision and monitoring of functioning of fair price shops.

For example, Tamil Nadu implements a universal Public Distribution System, such every household is entitled to subsidised food grains but this is far from ideal in the current scenario where the need of the country is job creation and availability. But States like Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh have implemented IT measures to streamline TPDS, through the digitisation of ration cards, the utilization of GPS tracking of delivery, and therefore the use of SMS based monitoring by citizens.

Case study on Chhattisgarh Food Security Act 2012



Chhattisgarh model of robust, multi-layered and redundant system of Public Distribution System.

Chhattisgarh Food Security Act is another monumental reform in the PDS which was passed on December 1, 2012, by the Chhattisgarh Assembly following the Chhattisgarh Food Security Act, 2012, preceding the National Food Security Act. The Act provides statutory backing to TPDS and the reforms implemented by the state to improve TPDS. Key features of the Act are as follows:

- Beneficiaries of this program include the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) families, priority and general households. Here the state governments shall prescribe guidelines for their identification including guidelines for excluded households
- Entitlements/month for AAY and priority households - 35 kg of food grain, 2 kg each of iodised salt, black gram and pulses (subsidised) and for General households - 15 kg of food grains (subsidised).
- Special groups have also been identified under this program including pregnant women and lactating mothers, children up to 14 years, students in hostels and ashrams, destitute, homeless, migrants, emergency or disaster affected people.

The act has specified its implementing authorities which include local authorities who shall be responsible for: identification of eligible households, issuing ration cards, monitoring and supervision of fair price shops, and conducting social audits of fair price shops. Moreover, the Grievance Redressal Mechanism includes internal mechanism including call centres, nodal officers, etc. Provision of entitlements to eligible households shall be notified as services to be provided under the Chhattisgarh Public Service Guarantee Act, 2011. Important reforms also include doorstep delivery of grains to ration shops, leveraging Aadhaar for targeting of beneficiaries, and maintenance of adequate buffer stocks of food items.

This case study gives us best example of the success of the PDS systems after the implementation of the recommendations by the Wadhawa committee. But these reforms need to be launched nation wide and more effective utilisation of the resources, by creating and helping target groups, is the only way one can combat hunger and malnutrition.

Conclusion

India has come a long way in terms of food security but the need of the hour is to divest from traditional methods of welfare dependences into more ambitious ventures including job creation, education, optimal healthcare, digitalisation, modern agricultural practices, multifront research over the scientific domains and many more. The outdated model of food security and Public Distribution System to a great hit during the pandemic. A new and more stringent plan to curb malnutrition and scarcity needs to be found alongside minimising the wastage of food grains, duplicity of ration cards and various other scams that have been taking place since onset of the PDS system in India. Job creation and sustenance, keeping a check on inflation and easier provision for loans to the farmers is a must to create an airtight system in which people are not dependent on the government, especially for their basic necessities like food grains. Additionally, the implementation of modern and scientific methods of agriculture to increase to effective yield and to strengthen the stock in granaries to avert natural calamities is a welcome reform. Lastly, this research has been considerate of the fast moving development in the Information and Technology sector but more funding and resources need to be allocated for better transportation, hoarding, tracking, identification of beneficiaries, grievance redressal etc are a must for better allocation of the food grains.

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