



New Challenges to Food Security in India

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Impending crisis in the food security

India will have soon a food grain reserve touching 60 million tones. Despite this impressive reserves, the actual access of people to food remain severely restricted. Hunger deaths taking place in almost all parts of the country, attest to the fact more prominently than the figures relating to reserves provided by central government and an impressive array of programmes existing to fight the situation. India has 360 million undernourished and 300 million poor people. Growth in food grain production is low rather declining over the last decades. During 1996-2008 it increased by just 1.2 per cent per annum from 199 to 230 million tons as against the annual growth rate of 3.5 per cent achieved during the 1980s.¹ The percentage of children below five years of age remain 42.5% and underweight children below three years of age remain 42%. It is almost axiomatic that most of the interventions begin when the child is three years old, while the medical facts state that the majority of children are prey to the diseases related to malnutrition under the age of three. Many of us are bewildered by the fact that over the period of a decade the malnutrition has come down only by 1 per cent, from 47% in 1999 to 46% in 2009. India is ranked 66th in a scale of 88 countries on GHI brought out by IFPRI. India is placed between countries like Rwanda and Burundi and many comparatively wealthier states in India have pockets of hunger. Madhya Pradesh is categorized as extremely alarming while ten other states remain serious as suggested by the report.

The co-existence of prosperity with extremely alarming hunger leads us to wonder whether there is something seriously wrong with our approach to food security. The answer is an obvious yes. The lack of clarity in defining the problem leads to a situation which is not only misleading but also prevents further ameliorative steps. Our notion of food security only focuses on the definition of poverty and methods to identify the poor. Of course, India has the most measly defined poverty line which defines anybody earning above 20 Rupees in a month in urban areas as rich! Due to this flaw poverty estimates in India vary from 9.25 crore (Tendulkar Committee) to 20 crore (Justice Wadhwa Committee)². The baseline is so crucial in addressing the issues that its ignorance makes any effort

¹ Climate change and food security in India, N C saxena, 2009

² Pathway to food security for all, Ms Swaminathan, the Hindu, Delhi dated 29/03/2010

completely worthless. Secondly, the approaches to food security completely ignore the non-food component critical in ensuring the food security viz. access to water, basic health services, nutrition and hygiene. Food security as internationally understood involves physical, economic and social access to a balanced diet, safe drinking water, environmental hygiene and primary health care. The concept of food security involves as much food components as it involves non-food components.

Food Entitlement Bill

The UPA promised a food security Bill in its CMP and the budget speech of the Prime Minister informed us that the Bill was almost ready. However, the Bill is yet to come in the public domain for discussions and consultation. Till now, all discussions are centered on the concept note circulated by the Ministry of Agriculture. The concept note is the basis of the Bill and if the media reports are to be believed, the Bill would rather prove to be a Food Insecurity Bill. The idea of food entitlement though is laudable; its treatment to the issue is very perfunctory. In the name of food security, it seeks to revamp the already many times revamped PDS. It also, in fact lowers the entitlement to the poorest and also increases the price at which food grains are made available to the poorest as per the guidelines of the Supreme Court. The honorable Supreme Court has interpreted Art. 21 of the Constitution relating to Right to Life to include Right to adequate food and any legislation should not deteriorate from the standards determined by the apex court. The proposed Food Entitlement Bill promises to universalize PDS with a guarantee of 25 Kgs. Of food grains at the price of Rs. 3 per kg. As opposed to this, poorest among the poor covered under AAY are being provide 35 kgs of food grains at Rs. 2 per Kg. an ICMR study suggests that a household should be provided at least 48 Kgs of food grains to cover its dietary needs. Surprisingly when the poverty estimates have been rising consistently, the Bill proposes to cover only 6.5 crore people. It also seeks to club all work for food programmes and similar programmes and seeks to do away with double subsidization which some states provide at its own expense. Last but not the least, the basket contains only wheat and rice when the rising prices have already pushed pulses, edible oils, kerosene, and even salt beyond the purchasing power capacity of the poor. The only good thing about the Bill is that it promises that the states would provide insecurity allowance to household failing to access food grains, but with most of the states strapped of resources to pay the allowance, the provision seems to be hardly implementable.

The BT Mirage

The recent controversy over BT brinjal brought into focus not only the lack of capacity of the government to reasonably vet the neutrality of scientific research, but also the false promise of GM foods to alleviate world's hunger. The Minister of Science and Environment, Mr. Jairam Ramesh has declared two years moratorium on approval of commercial production of BT brinjal, but in the face of simmering discontent and varied opinion in the cabinet the victory is a short lived one. Though many states in India ruled by opposition parties have proscribed the entry of GM foods in their states, however, that may be more due to political expediency rather than respect for science and rights of the consumers to healthy food. The central question is when India has already 2000 varieties of brinjal, why BT brinjal? The answer lies in the question itself. The more number of varieties means

more dependence on the brinjal for vegetable, and that is quite enticing for companies promoting BT. Moreover, when India is a country allowing research in rice (for which India is country of origin, brinjal is a non-issue. Nowhere in the world, research is allowed on a product which has origins in that country for the fear of genetic contamination. There are more than 30 BT vegetables under various stages of research in India, and its environmental and commercial release is a matter of time.

The BT brinjal episode has again made a number of questions highly relevant in the context of GM foods. The first and foremost is the safety of GM foods. There is no scientific consensus on the safety of GM crops for food. The effects of the introduction of BT genes into cotton and food crops do not appear to be fully predictable. Though human have been consuming GM foods for more than 15 years now, but the scientists suspect that it might not be an adequate timeframe for studying its impact on humans, animals or environment. The transgenic modification using Bt has led to the creation of unintended proteins (prions) in the process of genetic modification; some say they are the same in the mad cow disease and in the brain disease in the humans. Some other studies have found differences in the effects of genetic modification that vary according to the processes used in gene insertion.³ The other issue related to the Bt controversy is that is the GEAC scientifically competent enough to have an opinion on issue as complex as genetic modification. The GEAC is composed of 30 members belonging to different disciplines including 9 members from the bureaucracy, including the chairman, Additional Secy. in the Ministry of Science and Environment. The experts include people from economics, agriculture, bio-technology, law, chemistry, health, and environment. It is a multidisciplinary administrative committee, it can seek opinion from experts, but its decision would always be questionable on the sources and basis of its opinion. The most amazing thing in the controversy is to ask the promoter company for proof of safety of the product, which is more likely to be biased and against principles of justice. The moratorium is in the spirit of the precautionary principle of the Cartagena Protocol, which regulates the movement of the LMOs. The labeling issues also form important component of the GM controversy, as there are different standards and requirements. While US, and Canada do not require mandatory labeling, it is required in the EU, Japan, Malaysia and Australia. India does not have facilities for segregation and labeling, which might result in India losing substantial stake in international market. The GM foods potential to rid the world of hunger has always been questionable as there is negligible research on increasing the yield, the last straw in the recent controversy has been Bt cottons failure to ward of insects. Monsanto has recently admitted that in four districts in Gujarat, the latest research has manifested that Bt cotton's insecticide resistance has failed. Experts allege that this might be a case in all the districts growing Bt cotton rather than just four districts.

Perhaps it would be also relevant to discuss new Biotechnology Regulatory Authority Bill here. The Bill to be introduced in the Parliament soon, is more keen on facilitating Agriculture Cooperation and Food security' the MOU signed between the US and India, rather than regulating Biotechnology and will probably open the floodgates for dumping GM food in India. The proposed legislation has no

³ Girijaa Upadhyaya, as cited on [www.....](#)last visited on

provision on public participation in approval. The Bill keeps the information related to research, approval and science of GM products out of the purview of the RTI Act. The three member expert committee proposed under the Bill can over ride any position taken by the state governments. Last but not the least, the Bill also provides punishment for questioning or providing misleading opinion against GMOs, DNA vaccines, cellular products, gene therapy products, stem cell products or other such GE products “without evidence or scientific record”

Climate Change Conundrum

The climate change is another challenge to food security in poor developing countries in South Asia. India is projected to be one of the countries facing significant threats from climate change on its food security, environment, bio-diversity, poverty and economic development. It is predicted that India will lose approximately one third of its production of wheat due to rise in temperature and decrease in the precipitation. The huge population on long coastline of India is also highly vulnerable to extreme climatic events and by now, we have more than enough instances of nature’s fury. The efforts of non-government organizations in talking to farmers, fisher folk, pastoralists, forest dwellers women, and other stake holders have attested to impacts of climate change on production of food grains, reduction in water availability, health hazards due to changing climatic conditions and also impact on their culture and society. A number of women in rural areas have lost their daily routine and do not know what to do because of severe loss of work on the fields and farm outputs. While at the same time, reduction in water table and loss of plant varieties, they spend substantially longer hours in collecting water, fuel wood and fodder. For India as in other developed countries the central concern in climate change debate remains reduction in emission, energy consumption and exploration of renewable sources of energy. The failure of recognize challenges imposed by climate change on agriculture and food security can be critical for sustaining food security of a growing population. Even without climate change, the policy approach to agriculture and especially small holder agriculture needs to change substantially. The recognition of the fact that sustainable agriculture is core to food security in India and other developing countries in South Asia and elsewhere necessitates inclusion of agriculture as major negotiating plank in the climate change discourse. The most worrying factor in agriculture in times of reducing precipitation is the pitiable groundwater situation in India. The GOI has already classified more than one third development blocks in India as semi critical, critical of over exploited in terms of groundwater depletion. These mostly lie in the green revolution region. The appreciation of the fact that more than 70% agriculture in India is dependent on the monsoons, the strategies will have to be built on investing in drought resistant variants, enhancing the adaptive capacity of farmers and specially small and marginal farmers by making agriculture viable and by increasing non-farm and non-agricultural opportunities.