



FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA- THE REALITY CHECK

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ABSTRACT

Food security has always been a concern for India. With ever growing population, in spite of some positive slowdown in population growth rate as emerge from the Census 2011, the ongoing efforts to make food production at farm level and food security at household level seems not sufficient. A concerted effort and out of the box thinking is needed. Recently released National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) brings out that more than half women and nearly a-quarter men in India are anaemic. The food production data too shows only marginal increase in terms of per capita food availability. This all in spite of India having a National Food Security Act in place to ensure food and nutritional security for individuals, including women and children. This paper using the official data of last six decades demystifies the sustainability aspect of food security in India and highlights the challenges to overcome.

1.0 Overview

Inadequate food availability for consumption is a major concern for the future. In spite of a general belief that India is a food sufficient country maintaining a huge buffer stock, a large population remains deprived of sufficient food. To add to the grim situation in which a significant proportion of India's population live, regular exposure to natural disasters like floods,

heatwave, drought add to the food shortage and deprivation. Ironically high levels of food supply and huge levels of child and maternal malnutrition co-exist in India. The country is home to one quarter of the world's undernourished people. The statistics on hunger and deprivation, particularly among women and children shows that around half the children are undernourished and stunted; 33 percent have a low birth weight. India rank 20th amongst leading countries with a serious hunger situation. Amongst South Asian nations, it ranks third behind only Afghanistan and Pakistan with a GHI score of 29.0 ("serious situation")- (Global Health Index, 2014)

Goal 2 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) aims to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition by 2030. It also commits to universal access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food at all times of the year. This will require sustainable food production systems and resilient agricultural practices, equal access to land, technology and markets and international cooperation on investments in infrastructure and technology to boost agricultural productivity. Can India achieve this- a big question looming high on Indian government and policy makers?

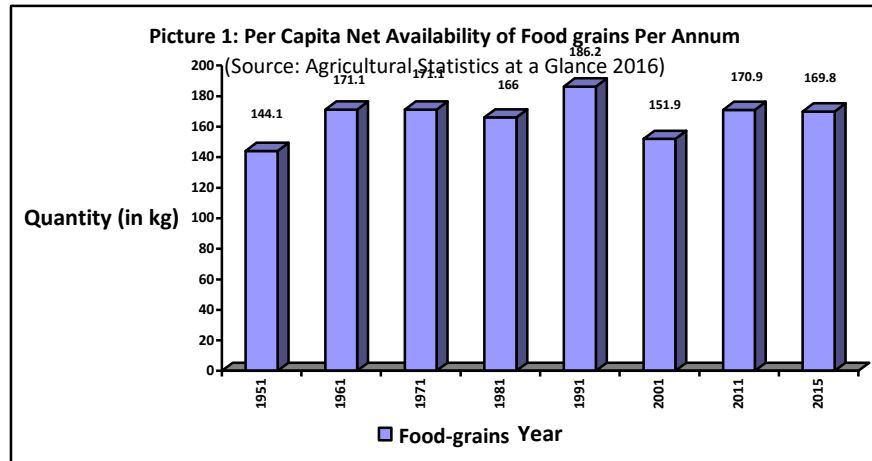
India's five-decade-old food based social protection measures and their efficacy in delivering food security to the population has definitely reduced, if not completely eradicated famine and starvation deaths in the country. It is also important to mention that due to regional agro-climatic diversity in our country, it is not possible for all regions of the country to be self-sufficient in terms of food. However, in terms of per capita availability of food in recent years, the situation has actually been less satisfactory than per capita production.

Food security is not only availability of food grains but also accessibility to it. As put by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), "Food insecurity exists when all people, at all times, do not have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life". Despite efforts and claims about India's self sufficiency in food grains, the ground reality differs at the family level.

As emerges, from the data released by the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmer Welfare, Government of India, per capita net availability of food grains per annum has over the years

gone up and down. In fact, in last 25 years, per capita food grains availability has come down from 186 kg per year in 1991 to 170 kg in 2015 (*Picture 1*). One probable reason could be per capita food production not keeping pace with the population growth. Uncertainty with

agriculture in terms of drought, lack of irrigation facilities and lack of interest among younger generation to opt for farming are some of the reasons for this situation. According to NSS (59th round), 27 percent of



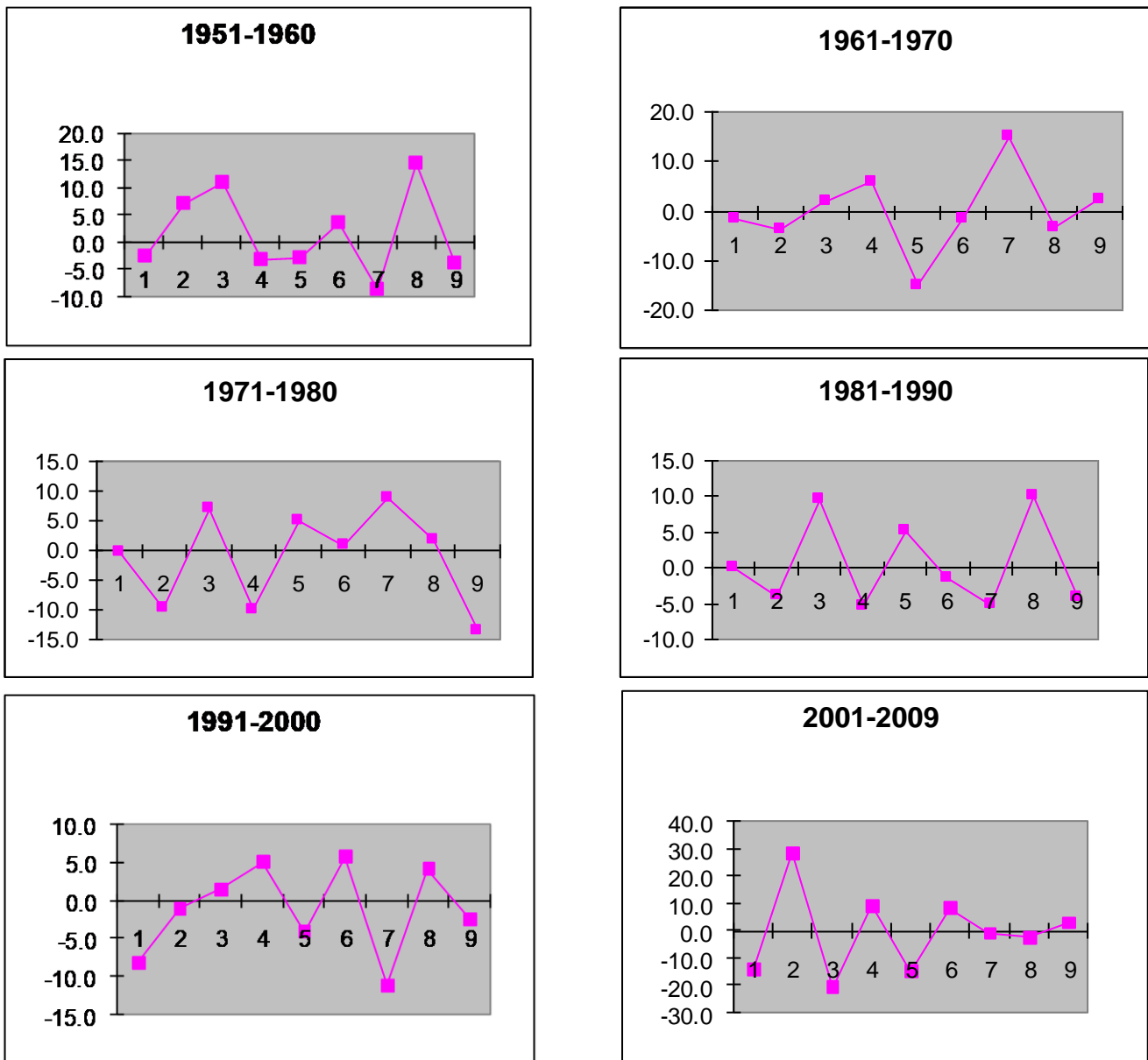
farmers at all India level did not like farming; they felt that agriculture was not profitable. In all 40 percent of the farmers felt that given a choice, they would take up some other employment. But this in no way justifies the severity of the food crisis faced by common man. In terms of per capita per day availability of food grains, the decrease is alarming as it has its impact on the nutritional status of the population, particularly women and children. With almost 65 percent of India's population being less than 35 years of age, decrease in per capita availability of food grains cannot be taken lightly as it not only affects at individual level but at nation's level where it has its impact on the efficiency of the available workforce. The seriousness of the issue could be further gauged from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) report released (NFHS,2017), which shows that 53% women aged 15-49 years in India are anaemic while among men, the percentage is around 23%. This seems to have no correlation with the government figures on population below poverty line, which stood at 37% in 1993-94, and 27% in 2004-05 (*website of Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, accessed in June 2017*). Percentage of Population below Poverty Line - 2011-12 based on Tendulkar Methodology, is calculated to be around 21.92 (www.data.gov.in, accessed in June 2017).

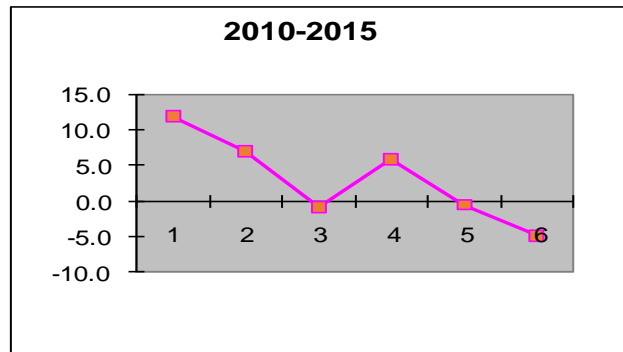
2.0 Per Capita Availability of Food Grains

Over decades the per capita availability of food grains has shown only slight increase (*Picture 1*). But this was not found to be consistent, when we see the yearly trend in availability of food

grains. Using the per capita availability of food grains, year wise percentage increase/decrease over previous year in the per capita availability of food grains brings out the inconsistency in food availability (*see Picture 2*). The 1961-70 and 1971-80 periods, which include the Green Revolution phase, too show sharp fluctuation in per capita availability of food grains.

Picture 2: Percentage Increase/Decrease in Per Capita Availability of Food grains over Previous Year





The trend demystifies the claim that we are inching towards food sufficient nation. According to Sen and Himanshu (2004) and Ghosh (2004), the bottom 80 percent of the rural population who now number almost 600 million, have seen declining per capita consumption since 1989-90. The averages of the parameters of wealth ownership may look impressive but they obscure a serious problem of the rising number that go hungry every day.

At the same time, it is important to mention that apart from making India food sufficient in terms of food production, for sustainable availability of food for all, the management of food distribution is equally important and critical (Dreze 1989).

2.1 Food Security Programmes in India

To reduce the food insecure population in country, governments after governments in India on its own and in partnership with many national and bi/multi-lateral agencies such as UNWFP, Oxfam, has taken many initiatives from time to time. Several poverty alleviation programme were launched to provide employment to the vulnerable population. Government of India prior to making food as a rights of a citizen of India by bringing the National Food Security Act had initiated a number of food assistance programme with the aim at equitable availability of food. An important initiative of government to meet the food needs of the poor households has been through Public Distribution System (PDS) or commonly known as 'fair price shop'. How 'fair' has been the system in reaching the targeted population is anyone's guess? The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India's reports, Supreme Court's Commissioners Report and the Union Government's Food and Civil Supplies Department reports have reflected upon the poor

functioning of PDS and prevailing pilferages in food distribution system. Though government is making effort to reduce the subsidy burden on them through PDS by implementing targeted PDS for BPL households only but at the same time criteria for identifying below poverty line families has excluded many 'needy' and poor households. Moreover, problems with targeting in the PDS have often left vulnerable rural population out whereas the urban population has seen better distribution of grain. The unavailability of Fair Price Shops (FPS) has resulted in a further lowering of the off take of grain among these poor communities (Shankar 2004).

A close look at various food assistance schemes and programmes suggests that these programmes launched at different point of time have targeted specific sections of the society. Correctly enough, these schemes aim at the needs of the vulnerable population. Research and Assessment studies conducted from time to time by government as well as different external agencies and voluntary organizations have however, brought out that due to lack of proper and regular monitoring and check, many a times the benefits have not reached to the needy ones.

At the same time one cannot ignore the fact that mismanagement of food grains stock and flawed distribution policies and not necessarily a lower output of food grains that make famines as devastating as they are.

As emerges from the data on area under food grains cropping, production and yield, a constant increase in yield per hectare is noticeable but the time series data on per capita net availability of food grains in India between 1951 and 2015 suggests that the increase is marginal- less than 70 grams per capita per day in 64 years. The average per capita net availability of food grains per day in India in 1991 was 510.1 grams/capita/day, which has in fact come down to 465.3 grams/capita/day in 2015. This clearly indicates that per capita food availability could not match with the population growth. Enactment of the National Food Security Act, 2013 with the objective to provide for food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity,

Table 1: Per Capita Net Availability of Food grains (Per Day) in India	
Year	Food grains (<i>in grams</i>)
1951	394.8
1961	468.8
1971	468.8
1981	454.8
1991	510.1
2001	416.2
2011	453.7
2014	489.3
2015(P)	465.3
<i>P=Provisional</i>	
<i>Source: Agriculture Statistics at a Glance, 2016</i>	

is a milestone step in this direction. The Act provides for coverage of up to 75% of the rural population and up to 50% of the urban population for receiving subsidized food grains under Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), thus covering about two-thirds of the population. The eligible persons will be entitled to receive 5 Kgs of food grains per person per month at subsidized prices of Rs. 3/2/1 per Kg for rice/wheat/coarse grains.

The Act also has a special focus on the nutritional support to women and children. Besides meal to pregnant women and lactating mothers during pregnancy and six months after the child birth, such women will also be entitled to receive maternity benefit of not less than Rs. 6,000. Children up to 14 years of age will be entitled to nutritious meals as per the prescribed nutritional standards. In case of non-supply of entitled food grains or meals, the beneficiaries will receive food security allowance. The Act also contains provisions for setting up of grievance redress mechanism at the District and State levels. Separate provisions have also been made in the Act for ensuring transparency and accountability.

Thus the challenge for the government and policy makers in India is to ensure availability of sufficient quantity of good quality of food grains, which constitute the staple food for most. At present, however, the scenario looks grim because the average net availability of food grains has not increased significantly. NFHS-4 (2015-16) findings showing a large proportion of all women and men's being anaemic too raises a big question on present efforts being made towards food and nutritional security, which is sustainable for a long term.

3.0 Conclusion

Looking for Sustainable and long-term solution to reduce food insecurity, it emerges that not just increasing the food grains production or bringing in to force Right to Food Act will be sufficient in a country like India. Rather, creating job opportunities and thereby improving people's purchasing power could be the solution. Undoubtedly, government after government has made efforts or at least claim of making efforts to improve the economic status of the vulnerable population by providing them income-generating opportunities.

With 70 percent of population residing in rural India, the regular employment opportunities for this section of population is essential for their economic inclusion, bringing them out of debts and loans, and thereby ensuring food secured population. Alarming, the data on unemployment rate in rural area of India generated through various rounds of National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) reports show an increase in the unemployment rate over the previous rounds. The unemployment rate was more on the basis of current daily status implying a high degree of sporadic employment, which could be due to absence of regular employment for workers.

Indian government made right to work an act for rural unskilled workforce by introducing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) in 2005 with the aim to provide 100 days of unskilled manual work to households in rural India. However, we are far off from the target of providing 100 days of wage labour to families (*see Table 2*).

Table 2: Employment Status under MGNREGA

Parameters	Financial Year				
	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14
Average days of employment provided per Household	36.93	46.01	48.85	40.17	45.97
Total No of HHs completed 100 Days of Wage Employment [In Lakhs]	10.02	39.92	48.48	24.93	46.59
Total Households Worked [In Crore]	4.37	5.12	4.81	4.14	4.79
<i>Source: website of Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India</i>					

The national average is less than 50 working days per household in a year and less than 10 percent households have got the mandated 100 days of work in one financial year. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India in its performance audit of the implementation of MGNREGA have found significant deficiencies. To add to it, households under MGNREGA have faced problems due to delay in payment of wages or calculated at a rate less than the fixed wage rate. The concern is that ineffective implementation of right to work act will have its impact on the food security status of families and their right to have at least two square meals a day leave aside for the moment, the nutritive contents of the food intake.

Round-the-year Food Grains Availability: Numerous studies has brought out that non-availability of food grains at PDS shops when needed most i.e. when the poor families have money to buy food grains but PDS shop owners turn them back with the excuse that the quota of this month is over or the family has come late to collect the entitled quantity of food grains, is one of the main reasons of dissatisfaction with PDS amongst the target population, particularly poor and destitute. This need to be given utmost attention and streamlining the public distribution system is critical for the success of the Right to Food and its objectives. The benefits reaching the last one in the row, when needed most will be one of the critical parameters for the success of the efforts towards ensuring food security. It is expected that households should be able to purchase the entitled quantity of food grains on any day in the month throughout the year i.e. 365 days a year, as per their requirement and purchasing power. Connecting PDS ration cards through Aadhaar (Unique Identity Number) will help to remove fake ration cards issued and ghost beneficiaries, but how quickly this can be achieved is to be seen. No doubt once done, this

will ensure reaching the needy, and thereby more food insecure households moving towards ‘food secure households’ category.

Virtual Payment Facility: Majority of the households, which will be the first ones to avail benefits under Right to Food Act fall in the ‘food insecure household’ category, one of the solutions for timely and quick transfer of wages could be virtual transfer of part wage earned by the individual/family, which any authorized member, preferably an adult female could use to buy essential food items or for that matter even buy other essential items such as medicines. This will on one hand, keep the families away from the grasp of money lenders and on the other hand, will reduce the incidences in the families, when the members either skip one meal or reduce the quantity of essential food items in a meal. Efforts of Government of India through its Digital India is a right move in this direction.

Packed Food grains: The Right to Food Act should ideally not only aim towards providing food grains to households across the year but quality of food grains should be of equal concern. To avoid malpractices related to weighing and rotten food grains being distributed, the government should plan to involve Self Help Groups (SHGs) or Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) at district level for packaging of food grains in packs of different sizes such as 500 grams, 1 kg, 5 kg and 10 kg.

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