

THE LOOSE THREAD MAGAZINE

UNEQUAL VOICES

Food Security and the
COVID-19 Pandemic



UNEQUAL VOICES: FOOD SECURITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

An Analysis

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Have you ever stood in or caught sight of a long queue of people in front of ration shops? Humans with their empty appetite, shouting and screaming waiting for their turn, sweating in the fierce parching heat. Few waiting calmly with their children soaked in wet clothes, with the rest behaving aggressively. We see these infinite lines while passing through the ration shops, where a single member sacrifices his patience, kindness, and humanity to serve the rest of the family. That single human not showing a sign of compassion suffers to get the one thing, *khaana*.

One could imagine this as a cold situation, where there is a cut-throat competition and an unsparing feeling; but when looked deeper, one can see the poignant state of the nation.

These people, whom India titled as "Ultimate Sovereign" in its preamble, have torn themselves to get their living source, nutrition. They have continuously believed that their nation will provide them with adequate supplies to fulfil their everyday consumption. Seeing the nation as their homeplace, they have put faith in the government that it will meet the limit of food security where everyone has equitable access to sufficient, safe, affordable and nutritious food.

But has India been able to reach the target of food security? Has the pandemic affected India's food security? To have a better understanding, let us look at the term 'food security' and its relation to the citizens.

For a country to be economically stable with adequate infrastructure and reliable internal politics, its mass should progress towards human resource development. As long as a big chunk is an earning source, the nation will thrive on the path of development. However, it is important to realize that this earning section of the population needs necessities for its livelihood, so that all people, regardless of a crisis or pandemic, (1) "have physical, social and economic access to adequate amounts of nutritious, safe and culturally appropriate food" for an active and healthy life.

Food security measures a country's economic growth, and the best factor to calculate it is the Per Capita Income (PCI) of that country. High PCI means that the country is a developed country, while low PCI refers to the underdeveloped or developing country. This means a secure and steady nation with heavy economic development would generate more employment opportunities, giving people more purchasing power to satisfy their demands. In a way, it boosts the human resource bank and stabilizes food security in the country.

In a country like India which is still developing, these ration shops or public distribution shops sell the food ingredients such as wheat, rice, dals at a lower rate than the market price, also called issue price. The past shows Indians striving for food, waiting for cheaper food because of not having much income and savings. This comparative price led many people to compromise on both quality and quantity, thus affecting the food security system.

And the pandemic has worsened this state.

(2)According to the Global Hunger Index (GHI) Report 2020, jointly published by Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide of Ireland to indicate the hunger status at a national and international level, India ranked 94th out of 107 countries. By the set rank, we can see how the pandemic has resulted in a hunger crisis due to a rise in unemployment, income loss, overloaded healthcare system and a disruption in the food chain affecting the supply and demand.

The second wave of COVID-19 has immensely damaged India's economic recovery. The country saw disruption in the Food Supply Chain (FSC) which resulted in high prices and low demands. Prices of commodities such as mustard and soya oil rose to Rs 170 and Rs 157 from Rs 138 and Rs 117 respectively as of July 1, 2021. Further, prices of crude oil such as petrol and diesel also skyrocketed up to Rs 98.91 and Rs 89.18 respectively as of July 1, 2021.

Now, the country is moving towards cost-push inflation. Unlike demand-pull inflation, the prices in cost-push

inflation rise when the supply of goods or services is limited while the demand remains constant. It is primarily the result of supply-chain disruptions.

According to the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell, (3)"India's dependence on crude-oil import is as high as 85%." RBI's latest financial stability report predicted that for India, which is a net commodity importer, the increase in international prices would lead to inflation. In India, retail inflation measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose to 6.3% in May from 5.52% in March. This rise is also currently seen as the result of supply disruption during the lockdown, overburdened healthcare system, rise in fuel and transportation costs, high global inflation leading to high domestic prices and a weaker rupee. Notice how the value of the rupee is depreciating because of (4)"Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s measures to keep the interest rate on government bonds low." The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) in India also grew to 7.39% in March because of the increase in the value of chemicals, metals, rubber, and textiles.

RBI is the central bank that plays a vital role in the economic stability of India by keeping inflation low and steady around the target set by the government. (5)'India adopted a formal "Inflation Target regime" in 2016 under the new monetary policy framework which mandated keeping inflation at 4% (=/-2%).' While rising inflation means faster economic recovery of India, too much inflation would have severe consequences. The RBI has to increase the interest rates in the Central Bank's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) that would leave citizens with fewer savings and high demand, further rising demand-pull inflation.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the four pillars of food security are “availability, access, stability, and utilization.” The covid pandemic has disturbed all four aspects. In 2020, during the nationwide lockdown, the pandemic heavily impacted the vulnerable farmers and the workforce with restrictions on transport and interruption in the food supply chain. Moreover, the socio-economic inequities in the Indian economy created havoc amongst informal workers, making them question the accessibility of food for a sustainable livelihood. Due to the fragile system, over a million migrant workers, working in micro, small and medium enterprises had to leave for their hometowns to earn an income and assist their families. Even the farmers faced critical situations as decline in demands caused a huge loss of production.

The income disparity and emerging health issues in the pandemic affected the utilization capacity of an ordinary citizen, as less purchasing power and unaffordable retail prices led him towards more calorie intake. This has greatly reduced dietary and nutritious food intake in an ordinary person.

Considering India’s condition in dealing with the pandemic, the government ensured schemes and initiatives to serve the poor and vulnerable. The government announced Rs 1.74 lakh crore to provide extra rations to the needy through its Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). The initiative "One Nation, One Card" meets the requirements of 60-80 million migrant workers. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) provides children under six years of age and pregnant women with cooked food. The Ministry of Human Resource Development asked (6)"all States and UTs to continue providing mid-day meals or food security allowance of food grains and its cooking cost to fulfil nutritional requirements of eligible children under the scheme." Many NGOs, government relief camps, and private sectors, such as “Amma canteens in Tamil Nadu, Aam Aadmi canteen in Delhi, Annapurna Rasoi in Rajasthan, Mukhyamantri Dal-Bhat Yojana in Jharkhand" provided extensive support in meeting the food demand of the local poor.

However, experts believe that the virus is here to stay, which means a rise in malnutrition and a threat to Sustainable Development Goals. The news outlet *TheWire* reported, “the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey suggested that a third of Indian children are stunted and overweight. The International Labour Organisation has estimated that around 400 million Indians in informal sectors are likely to be pushed into deep poverty due to covid.”

To overcome the prevailing situation, India needs to have vigorous measures set in place. Various think tanks, policymakers, and economic advisory bodies have to work consistently towards employment schemes, agriculture and allied sectors, migrant laborers, rural industrialization to uplift India’s recession and bring back the nation to the same pace.

SOURCES

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