

Conceptualising Food Security: Analysing the Diverse Perspectives

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Abstract: Access to adequate, subsidized and hygiene food to the poor and other deprived sections is a key policy concern in India owing to its ever-increasing population, change in preferences in types of crop production and several other new challenges. The poor who do not have adequate access to nutritious food may cause to malnutrition, unhealthy and hunger of individual at the micro level and thus it further impacts the human development of a nation at the macro level. Food security is primarily concerned with two aspects: (i) food availability (production) and (ii) accessibility. As far as the former aspect is concerned, there are various methods and means are being used to address the requirement of food. In particular, with the advancement of science and technology, as well as planned framework of development like import substitution policies have been quantum increased in food production. However, India faces the paradox of abundance of food production as well as starvation deaths. The later aspect argues that the distribution of food among the needy through different policies has failed to reach the weaker sections of the society. Given this context, the paper primarily attempts to conceptualize food security through analysing different perspectives: (i) feminist (ii) human rights (iii) caste and (iv) social development. While doing, it also underlines the problems and prospects in each perspective. The paper explains each perspective from a particular standpoint, especially the fourth perspective emphasizes the progress in all social aspects such as access to food, health, education and social status in a given society. A conscious effort has been made to highlight the point of convergence rather than making these perspectives mutually exclusive of one another.

Key Words: Food Security, Poverty, Gender, Human Rights, Caste.

1. INTRODUCTION:

India is committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, for which social sector development is important. Progress in the social sector is also needed accomplishing a \$5 trillion economy by 2024 (Dev, 2019). In this context, focus on the social sector spending and the efficiency in the delivery system is essential where India ranked 102 in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2019 report which proved that India is not only behind the African countries but even South Asian countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh (GHI, 2019). The social, economic and political exploitation and discrimination, therefore, kept the underprivileged sections to remain in the shackles of poverty and denial of access to nutritious food. Since, India has been acclaimed as a welfare and developmental state, it is the foremost responsibility of the same to ensure food security for the poor to achieve the SDG of Zero hunger. The scarcity of food vis-à-vis social groups is concerned, the proportion of children suffering from undernourishment is relatively higher among SCs and STs as compared to the children of the other categories (Ramaiah, 2015). With reference to access to food and poverty, it is pertinent to understand the correlation between the two as many scholars are of the view that poverty is multidimensional in nature and it can be seen as the denial of a number of recognised rights such as right to food, health, education, and adequate standard of living. In fact, this kind of recognition generated an urge among the policy makers and development practitioners to complement poverty alleviation strategy with a special emphasis on the enhancement of basic human rights including right to food, shelter, education and health (Kurien, 1987, Sen, 1999, Azad 2004, Sengupta, 2007 and Kolloju, 2015).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study intends to conceptualize food security through analyzing diverse perspectives. In this regard, the study is based on descriptive method and depended on analyzing the secondary data. As part of secondary data, the paper accessed both soft and hard copies of different journals, articles; and reports of Government of India, NABARD, World Bank were extensively used for the study.

3. THE CONCEPT OF FOOD SECURITY:

Before conceptualizing food security from different perspective, it is pertinent to define and understand food security. Food Security as a concept originated only in the mid-1970s amid the discussions of international food problems at a time of global food crisis. In particular, the meaning of food security has evolved in the first World Food

Conference held in 1974¹. In the Conference, food security is defined as “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic food stuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (FAO 2006: 1). Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) states that food security exists when all people, at all times, 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 (FAO 2009). According to FAO (2006), food security is widely accepted on the following dimensions: (i) food availability (ii) food accessibility (iii) nutritional utilization and (iv) stability. First, as far as the *food availability* is concerned, the availability of sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality should be supplied through domestic production or imports. Second, *food accessibility* highlights the access by individuals to adequate resources (entitlements) for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Entitlements are defined as the set of all commodity bundles over which a person can establish command given the legal, political, economic and social arrangements of the community in which they live (including traditional rights such as access to common resources). Third dimension highlights the importance of nutritional *utilization* of food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met. This brings out the importance of non-food inputs in food security. Fourth, as far as the *stability* is concerned, to secure the food, a population, household or individual must have access to adequate food at all times. They should not risk losing access to food as a consequence of sudden shocks, for instance, an economic or climate crisis or cyclical events (seasonal food insecurity). The concept of stability can therefore be referred to both the availability and access dimension of food security (ibid: 1).

“Food Security can be defined as a situation wherein all households have physical and economic access to adequate food for all members, and where households are not at risk of deprivation of this basic access, which is linked to the larger question of the survival of humanity” (Das, 2016:1). It is also defined as “access to nutritionally adequate, safe, and personally acceptable foods and the ability to acquire them in a socially acceptable way at all states of lifespan” (Parnell and Smith, 2008:1). The understanding of food security incorporates the idea that access to food includes not just physical availability and affordability, but also requires that individuals do not face social barriers in feeding themselves. Food security implies nutritional security and further acknowledges that in its attainment, it supports the actualisation of individual capabilities (Narayanan, 2015:198). The following section attempts to conceptualize food security through analysing different perspectives.

3.1. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE:

Feminists argues that food insecurity is defined and understood in terms of gender inequality as it primarily prevails and affects at the household level. They attribute food insecurity to the patriarchal relations that underpin family and consequently legitimise women’s insufficient food intake as a sacrifice to the family. Further, they also recognise the participation of women in the distribution of food grains and their contribution in ensuring food security at macro and micro level (Lingam, 1998; Swaminathan, 2004; Choudhary and Parthasarathy, 2007; Rao, 2013). This perspective analyses the arguments of different feminist scholars who examined feminine roles and powerlessness through not owning land and confined to daily wage labourers that led women to food insecurity and deprivation of their rights.

A report of a Committee on World Food Security (2011) highlights that “the heart of the gender challenge in food security and nutrition is the intra-household inequities in labour allocation, resource access, ownership, and control in the household economy, which is intimately linked to the market economy. While men have their key focus on the market economy, women are constantly juggling multiple roles sustaining the household and reproductive economy” (p.3). Although women have the engagement in multiple roles, the food intake is very less as compare to men. It is evident in the work of Choudhary and Parthasarathy (2007) who examine the status of women at the household and how their contribution in ensuring food security affects the nutritional levels of the household. The authors argue that “there is an urgent need for a focused understanding of women’s status and work participation with respect to food security of women for themselves as well as for the family as a whole” (p.523). They are of the view that at the household level, food is not distributed equally as it vary from individuals like men, women, and children. Women are situated as the most disadvantaged individual in a family and disadvantaged section in a society. Thus, household food security is different from individual food security as the individuals’ food security depends on various visible and invisible intra-household factors such as gender, age and occupational status (ibid).

With reference to gender roles vis-à-vis position of women in the family, Rao’s study (2005) analyses the condition of women in public and private sphere especially in private ownership and land rights. In rural areas, most of the households depend upon agriculture. Women have been discriminated in terms of gender wherein the ownership

¹ “Food security” as a concept is younger than “the right to food”. The right to food had already been recognised in the Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, and is enshrined in the Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966 (Mukherjee, 2012).

is always lies in the hands of men. Due to lack of land ownership on their title, the women always depend on men and they remain as agricultural labourers. It significantly affects women's position within and outside the family and has a negative impact on food intake and income consumption. Thus, the author attempts to bring a correlation among gender equality, land or property rights with food security. Gender inequality in land rights increases women's work burden and responsibilities rather than enhancing women's status and decision making power. Gender equality and land rights of women can bring significant changes in the position of women's status in order to improve their living standards including access to food. This also entails food security of the household through women's management in production and decision making authority. Therefore, the gender inequality in terms of land rights can leads to food deprivation among women.

Swaminathan (2004) argues that the SCs and STs, female headed households and women, elderly and children (specially the girl child), landless labourers and casual workers are the most vulnerable groups and also considered as food insecure. With respect to the girl children in particular, the gender inequality places the female child at a disadvantage position compared to males and causes them to suffer more as they are the last persons to eat and considered less important. Girl children have far less opportunity of schooling than men and boys do (Cited in Upadhyay and Palanivel, 2011). These groups are, therefore, more prone to malnutrition, hunger and in need of food security. Thus, food security is threatened not only at household level in specific pockets where poverty is more acute, but also at individual levels within households.

3.2. HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE:

This perspective highlights the Right Based Approach to understand food security. Under this perspective, ensuring food security is considered to be a basic human right. In fact, being a welfare and developmental state, it is the foremost responsibility of the state to protect the human rights of its citizens. Mittal and Krishnan (1997) highlight the importance of the right to food, the politics of exporting food production for international trade and further how the process of exporting impacts hunger. The authors argue that the food production and international trade impact the nation's food security at micro and macro levels.

Rosset (2000) argues that access to food is a human right that is increasingly being violated in this world of free trade and through cutbacks in the national budgets. To put it succinctly, due to the adoption of free trade and unregulated market, the right to food has been violated in many developed and underdeveloped countries. The author asserts that the elimination of hunger is possible only through the implementation of human rights. Food is a basic right of the people and thus the state needs to recognize and provide food as one of the basic requirements of a human being. The author believes that the right based approach to food is possible only when the myths related to hunger are decoded. These myths include: (i) economic globalization with its attendant polarization between rich and poor is somewhat inevitable, and (ii) we need to address that we always need "more" of something in order to alleviate poverty or feed the hunger. In other words, producing more food does not end people's hunger as they go hungry in a world of plenty. It is, therefore, the proper and fair distribution of food and wealth that is important for achieving food security and eliminating poverty (p.21).

Khera (2009) highlights the significance of right to food and explains various issues involved in the process of the implementation of Right to Food Act². The author argues that the Right to Food Security Act plays an important role to avoid food deprivation through access to food at cheaper price and thus it contributes in reduction of hunger and malnutrition. With reference to mid-day meal scheme, it is said that the scheme was started in 1995 by providing dry food, however, cooked food has been providing to the children under mid-day meal scheme since the year 2002. It is estimated that there were 140 million children were benefited under this scheme. The author also brings the issue of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the process of implementing the Food Security Act. She argues that the PDS should form a universal system rather a TPDS³ as it is confined only to the BPL. The result is that the TPDS continues to suffer from large inclusion and exclusion errors, whereby BPL cards are held by the non-poor (as identified by the government's own criterion) and many poor households have APL cards (p.42).

In a similar vein, Mander (2011) highlights the exclusion of disadvantaged sections such as dalits, tribals and other poorest communities in ensuring food security and eliminating hunger in India. It argues that the people from the disadvantaged sections have been discriminated on the basis of their socio-economic conditions. These sections are powerless and unable to access the equal opportunities in terms of gaining the benefits of the welfare and development policies of the government. Due to the marginal socio-economic conditions, these sections are not consuming

² The National Food Security Act, 2013 is also known as Right to Food Act was introduced as a National Food Security bill in parliament on December 2011, it lay quiet there for almost a year and a half before the dynamics of electoral politics intervened. On 5 July 2013 it was promulgated as a presidential Ordinance; later, on 12 September 2013 it was enacted into a law which promised subsidised foodgrains to 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population of our country (Mathew, 2015).

³ The Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) was introduced in 1997 to cover the people who were below the poverty line (Khera, 2009).

sufficient food to meet their dietary needs. From the standpoint of human rights perspective, it argues that the Right to Food Act needs to impose the obligations on government to provide the food security for the poor people. It needs to be exile the hunger from every home and it is possible through the redistribution of resources from the privileged. Agarwal and Mander (2013) argue that when people are deprived of food in any means, a right to food Act is meaningless if it neglects people living with-and dying of starvation. The right to food Act must provide for universal food guarantees for infants and children, maternal entitlements, and special guarantees for vulnerable groups such as those living with starvation, the destitute, persons affected by natural and human-made disasters, and migrants. The food security Act has the responsibility to provide food for the needy; however, it depends upon sufficient and sustainable availability of food. Therefore, the food security Act needs to focus on the agricultural production, sustainable agricultural technology as well. It is also important to ensure nutrition, which includes the universal health care, universal access to clean water, and universal sanitation.

3.3. CASTE PERSPECTIVE:

Third perspective analyses the food deprivation in terms of caste inequality and exclusion. To put it succinctly, this perspective underscores the systemic exclusion of dalits, tribals and other marginalized sections from access to food. It primarily argues for the state provisioning of food, especially adequate, affordable and hygienic food that is free of leakages for the marginalized and disadvantaged sections as a form of distributive justice. Simultaneously, the scholars of this perspective such as Das (2016), Sukumar (2015), Thorat and Lee (2005) etc. do not portray marginalised communities as straightforward “victim” category rather treats them in terms of both vulnerable as well as agents as it is found the way public programmes adopt upper caste food practices and attempt to sanskritise dalits and violate their right to have food on their choice.

Das (2016) asserts that the root causes for the food insecurity among the dalit communities is primarily the disintegration of dalit culture with the general population of India where the structural forces of the society pushed the dalits into the marginalisation and therefore deprivation of socio-economic aspects. These marginalised groups remained/served in the lower position jobs in the government sector, and also as house maids, agricultural labourers, day labourers, etc. He argues that the government’s subsequent policy intervention could not change drastically the life pattern of the dalit particularly providing two square meals in a day due to the major programmes such as PDS, ICDS, AAY, MGNREGS etc. fail to penetrate in every section of the society and hunger continues to thrive among the poor people. In particular, low quality of grains and the poor services at PDS shops has made the poor people to food insecure/malnourished. Another aspect of food insecurity of the dalits and other marginalised groups is the drive to privatize the public sector that has directly hit reservations for the SC/STs where they are deprived of employment in the public sector.

First of its kind, Sukumar (2015) primarily emphasizes the inaccessibility of nutritious non-vegetarian food in vegetarian states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh etc. The author explains it in terms of existential reality of dalits and especially the method of auto-ethnography and experiential reality. He argues from the caste and welfare perspective that any state concerned with the citizen’s welfare would seek to ensure that access to food is universalized. It is the Hindu caste order that is based on the notion of purity and pollution, brings forth the discriminatory nature of food and particularly the unequal nature of food distribution in the family. Looking from caste inequality framework, he argues that the children are not accessible to the nutritious, non-vegetarian food like egg in mid-day meal scheme in primary schools. Due to this, the children may have less nutrition in their body. According to the National Institute of Nutrition Survey (2011), every second child in Madhya Pradesh is malnourished. It means that due to the ban of egg, the children have inadequate nutritious food in their meals.

Sukumar (2015) also contests the ban on beef eating in Indian society as most of the Hindu community people are vegetarians as comparable to the Muslim community. Cow is a sacred animal for the upper caste Hindu community particularly those who have taken a ritualistic position. Eating beef meat is, therefore against their ritual and cultural values. However, dalits eat beef because it is cheaper than the other meat like mutton, chicken etc., as well as essential element for their cultural selfhood. The practice of Hindu rituals makes the students to deprive the nutritious food which is required for the children. He points out that both Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh are at the bottom of the Human Development Index as these two states were considered as the vegetarian states and follow the Hindu rituals in mid-day meal through skipping the nutritious food. It is argued that the primary objective of the mid-day meal programme is moving in a side track rather than providing balanced nutrition to impoverished children.

As a whole it is understood that first, the influence of the upper caste group is much higher in influencing the government policies. Further, the religious beliefs are playing a predominant role in shaping the government policies, especially the welfare programmes. Second, ban of eggs in Anganwadi could be seen as a violation of right to food. Every individual has the right to have food of their own interest. However, some of the states like Madhya Pradesh banned eggs in mid-day meal programme and termed as a vegetarian state. Therefore, there is a need to take provisions for the improvement of nutritional levels of children irrespective of religious beliefs.

With reference to dalit participation vis-à-vis caste discrimination in the food security programmes like mid-day meal scheme in schools and fair price shops are concerned, Thorat and Lee (2005) are of the view that in the case of Tamil Nadu, there is discrimination in primary schools in distributing of Mid-day meals on the basis of the caste. Most of the mid-day meal schemes are held in the dominant caste locality rather than the dalit locality. Especially, Rajasthan has 12 per cent and Tamil Nadu has 19 per cent. Here, it is understood that through the implementation of mid-day meal scheme in dominant localities, the dalits do not have access to the mid-day meal scheme and not able to participate in the scheme. Further, they observed that most of the cooks in mid-day meal scheme are dalits and the organisers of mid-day meal scheme are predominantly from dominant caste. The authors, through their field survey report, reveal that among three states, an average 37 per cent of the respondents concluded that there is caste discrimination and exclusion in food security programmes. The study also observes that in the mid-day meals, the dalit children have to sit separately from the upper caste children and they have been provided separate food. Second, the teachers of the school are also discriminating the children by treating them as inferiors and providing insufficient food for them. Third, the dominant caste children's parents are not accepting serving of the dalit cook in primary schools. They are pressuring the administration to dismiss the Dalit cook from his or her post. In this case, the authors provided examples from Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan states. The main reason for the discrimination is that according to the Varna system, the dalits are situated in the bottom of the Varna system. The dalit community is, therefore, considered as impure and thus, they are not allowed to cook in schools.

Radhakrishna (2009) emphasizes on the tribal rights particularly primitive tribal groups (PTGs) who got special attention by the government. She critically analyses the government policies such as The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, The Forest Conservation Act, 1980 and various policies of central government which are failed to protect the tribal rights. The policies enacted by the central government are declining the food sources of the primitive tribal groups (PTG) where these policies have restricted hunting and gathering. The author argues that as a result of the forest and wildlife protection policies of the government, PTGs are the once who have been slowly and painfully dying of severe malnourishment as their traditional sources of nutrition and subsistence have been taken away some decades ago. The shifting cultivation—which is practised not just in the north-east, but also in Bihar, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, and marginally in Karnataka along with hunting/gathering practices ensured a regular supply of food to a large number of communities. Income from trading items and their derivatives obtained from the forest also allowed these communities to buy food for cash, which is now prohibited. Thus, the forest protection policies enacted by the government are forced PTGs to stop hunting/gathering and cultivation and deprived of multiple traditional sources of food which led them to large scale malnourishment, food insecurity and starvation deaths. However, the author did not focus on the other food security policies which are being setup by the government to make them food secure and how far these policies ensure food security of the tribes. Thus, there is a need to re-examine the food security policies and their implementation at the tribal areas.

3.4. SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE:

The term “social development” draws from Amartya Sen's distinction between growth and social development where the latter refers to sustainability and human development that in turn leads to holistic development. Sen (1999) believes that development means nothing but enhancing people's freedoms rather than achieving mere economic growth. He cites the examples of few countries such as China, Costa Rica and one of the Indian states i.e. Kerala which have achieved significant increase in people's life expectancy despite the slow per capita GDP in their economies. He defines development “as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (p.3). Sen believes that “development requires the removal of ‘unfreedoms’ such as poverty, tyranny, poor economic opportunities, social deprivation, neglect of public facilities and intolerance or over activity of repressive states” (ibid). He characterizes poverty as one of the “deprivations of the basic capabilities rather than simply as lowness of incomes”. Sen's ‘development as freedom’ approach highlights the avoidance of unfreedoms. Expansion of human freedom is viewed as one of the central principles of (human) development that endorse well-being and quality life for every individual.

In a similar vein, it is understood that social development comprehends a wide range of concerns such as social and economic equality, health, universal education, food security, upliftment of weaker section of society, redistribution of wealth, moral development, etc. In this context, on one hand, food security is regarded as one of the prime indicators of social development and therefore given more emphasis to explain food security from social development perspective. On the other hand, the other aspects of the social development such as social and economic equality, health, universal education etc. have become hindrances to achieve food security of the poor. The social and economic inequality in the society as it is discussed in the caste perspective emphasises the discrimination in access to food from the food distributive schemes and its implementation.

People's participation in relation to effective implementation of the PDS, Dreze and Khera (2013) believe that the PDS is an important component in relation to poverty alleviation as it provides or distributes food grains at a cheaper price. However, the authors argue that only few states like Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and

Kerala have shown a significant impact in implementing the PDS. The other states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and West Bengal are still lagging behind in its effective implementation. They are of the view that the success or failure of the PDS depend not only on state mechanism but also active people's participation. Subsequently, apart from the PDS implementation to alleviate poverty, Khara (2013) argues that the MDM programme as a primary objective, made an effort for the universalization of primary education by increasing enrolment in primary schools. Under this programme the government aimed to increase the enrollment as well as improve the nutritional levels of the children. Later in 2001, the Mid-day meal programme was started providing cooked food to the children in primary schools through the order of Supreme Court under the Act of Right to Food. It is worth mentioning that the universalisation of education can be linked with the two aspects: (i) ensuring food security and (ii) promoting school education, which is one of the key components in social development. The author also argues that Mid-day meal scheme is also inclusive in nature as it also significantly reduces gender inequality in education. Despite its drawbacks, in Khara's argument it is understood that there is an increase of enrolment of girl's children in primary school after the introduction of MDM programme.

4. CONCLUSION:

On the whole, it is understood that there are four important perspectives through which one can understand the dynamics of food security. All the four perspectives have its own way of understanding the problems and prospects of food security in relation to SCs, STs, poor, women and other marginalized communities. In particular, the paper attempted to understand gender inequality in terms of access to food at household level. It is argued that due to the gender roles women have been deprived of equal rights in owning property and continues dependency on male counterpart, which in turn adversely affected their food consumption at the household level. Thus, it is understood that poor women, among the poor sections, are the most vulnerable group who are deprived of access to adequate and nutritious food. Similarly, from the standpoint of the both human rights and caste perspective, it is understood that the every individual have the right of access to food as the state has the responsibility to ensure food security of the individual. However, it is evident that still people are deprived of right to food of their choice. It is predominantly because of the imposition of upper caste food practices in the implementation of PDS. The ban on beef-eating and restriction on egg distribution in mid-day meal programmes in some states, for instance, have adversely affected the nutrition levels of the children and other marginalized sections. The perspective of social development analysed the benefits of food security in terms of the multi-sectoral development which includes access to nutritious food, health, education and also the expansion of human freedoms in all the aspects. Thus, it is understood that effective implementation of food security act has a significant impact in different perspectives. However, it is evident from the above studies that still the food security scheme has been suffering from many challenges be it from supply and demand side. In particular, the caste and gender inequalities vis-à-vis access to food security and the poor implementation of MDM scheme have become the major concerns. It is, therefore, the need of hour to address those limitations and challenges with concerted efforts of public authorities, fair price shop deals and as well as the individuals; and failing which, one of the key welfare policies, i.e. food security will remain its significance on paper alone.

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