

Politics of Food Security

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The revelation by the Union Food and Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar in the Lok Sabha on 26 July 2010 that over 11,700 tonnes of foodgrains worth Rs 6.86 crore were found "damaged" in government godowns is astonishing in a country where many people go without food. According to data submitted by the Minister, of the foodgrains damaged, 9,141 tonnes was rice while 2,486 tonnes was wheat, while the rest of the 81 tonnes was paddy. The maximum damage of 7,066 tonnes of foodgrains was reported from Punjab, followed by 1,846 tonnes from West Bengal and

1,457 tonnes from Gujarat.



Antiquated food storage methods and technologies have been costing India dearly. The chairman of the Food Corporation of India (FCI), Siraj Hussain, admits that food worth Rs 50,000 crore is wasted every year. This comes roughly to 20 per cent of the total food produced by the country.

Though this figure includes food that is lost in processing, packaging, transportation and even marketing, yet a substantial portion of it is lost as rotten because of antiquated storage techniques.

Expressing serious concern over reports that a huge stock of foodgrains is being wasted in the absence of adequate storage, the Supreme Court Bench of Justices Dalveer Bhandari and Deepak Verma has asked the Centre to consider releasing the grain to the deserving people rather than allowing it to rot.

According to the Bench: "If food is rotting, don't waste it. In a country where admittedly people are starving, it is a crime to waste even a single grain. The official statement made by the government indicates that there is wastage of foodgrains at many places. The government may consider constructing adequate warehouses or food storage facilities on a long-term basis. On a

short-term basis, they can also consider hiring warehouses or putting up water-proof tents to save the grain. But all-out efforts must be made to ensure that not a single grain is wasted.”

Inadequate Storage Facilities



According to media reports, inappropriate storage facilities and poor maintenance has caused destruction of 10,688 lakh tonnes of foodgrains over the years. Despite allocation after allocation to the tune of thousands of crores of rupees towards food safety and food subsidy, foodgrain stocks worth Rs 50,000 crore had to be disposed of as waste over the past few years due to inadequate storage facilities.

Despite having knowledge about these damages, the concerned officials failed to take adequate measures to improve the storage facilities. Ironically, the reliance is placed on tarpaulin storage facilities for foodgrains, and currently more than 170 lakh tonnes of foodgrains are stored in tarpaulin facilities.

Foodgrains stored under tarpaulin facilities not only have a low shelf life but also are exposed to frequent attacks by rodents and other insects. Media reports indicate that in the past, it was found that FCI's godowns in a locality in Jaipur were found storing liquor for Rajasthan State Breweries Corporation, while wheat stocks were left in the open. The possibility of similar instances occurring in other parts of the country could not be ruled out. Good and normal monsoons over the years have helped produce foodgrains output to 231 million tonnes in 2008. The rampant malnutrition and prevalence of anaemic children and women to the extent of 48 per

cent of population is a definitive indicator that we have failed to feed the empty stomachs. Under such critical circumstance, it is a criminal act to waste foodgrains.

In tropical climate, there is acute need to invent methods of food storage that can deal with the high moisture content leading to fungus and damage by rodents.

Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) made the Central and State Government aware of the problems of food storage way back in 1956. According to Dr. Parpia, former director of CFTRI: "If the problem persists after warning was issued more than five decades ago, it only means that government is not serious in shoring up the storage facilities to keep up with the expanding production." Obviously, the Government was warned in advance of the impending storage crisis, but the intentional neglect on the part of the food and civil supplies ministry and the causal approach of the Planning Commission is a clear indicator of non-performance. They have miserably failed to provide policy support towards strengthening the food security.

The Food Ministry is hiring space from private operators to store food by paying higher rent. At the same time there are reports of state warehousing corporations renting out the storage facilities to multinational corporations. These contradictory facts reveal the failure of the ad hoc policies of the food ministry in augmenting the crisis of food storage. These facts prove the insensitivity of the ruling elite and the bureaucrats in dealing with the essential commodities like food crops. They neither care for the farmers who produce the food nor are they interested in helping the poor to ease their hunger. The farmers produce food with their hard-earned labour and scarce financial resources, but instead of feeding the hungry stomachs it gets destroyed thanks to the policies of the government.

Farmers' Woes



Shortage of farm labourers, the increasing prices of other inputs, like seeds, fertilisers and water, higher wages have made growing food more expensive. The bulk of India's agriculture is dependent on rains. Farmers have no option but to depend on an increasingly erratic rainfall. They grow crops for subsistence; their very existence is threatened. One poor rain or flood can push them down the vicious spiral of poverty and destitution. They cannot afford expensive food. So, there is no easy way ahead. This brings to fore two critical facts. One, that growing food will be costlier and secondly, that farmers cannot be expected to afford expensive ways of growing food. If the Western nations have flooded the food market, it is not because their ways of farming are more efficient or their farmers are more learned, but because their governments pay handsome amounts as subsidy to underwrite the costs of growing food. According to broad estimates, the European Union doles out US \$51 billion each year to its farmers to keep them in the market. European sugar farmers are paid four times the world market price. Then the surplus is dumped in world market using an additional US \$1 billion in export subsidy, which depresses global prices. Almost similar situation rules the roost in the corporate-run US farms.

This scenario in India calls for redesigning agricultural subsidy policies to pay directly farmers the real cost of growing food. There is need to revamp the fertiliser subsidy, which pays companies to make fertilisers, not farmers to buy it. There is also need to cut the cost of growing food as well. Longing for high crop yields is fine, but the fact that high-input farming is based on just one principle: increased cost of production should not be ignored. Due encouragement to marginal agriculture should be given. This entails watershed development to recharge

groundwater and decentralised water harvesting to improve irrigation. This also means better seeds and procurement of locally grown food at good prices for food distribution programmes. Such measures can be instrumental in mitigating farmers' woes to some extent.

Is Food Security Act the Answer?



Ostensibly, the ongoing debate on the National Food Security Act has not moved beyond the quantity of grains to be made available to each household falling under the category of 'below the poverty line' (BPL). While the Ministry of Food and Agriculture has expressed its inability to provide subsidised grain to those living above the poverty line, the National Advisory Council too is at a loss to find a suitable pathway to address hunger.

Viewed in a broad spectrum, hunger, agriculture and food security are inter-related and cannot be viewed in silation. The National Food Security Act in reality does not look beyond food entitlements, the monthly ration quota that the poor needs to be given at a subsidised rate. Food Security on the other hand cannot be viewed without sustainable agriculture and it is here that the National Food Security Act fails miserably to draw a linkage.

There perhaps prevails some confusion on the food security front. On the one hand the government is thinking of encouraging the private sector to cultivate oilseeds and pulses in neighbouring countries like Myanmar, and also in Latin America and then import it into India; and on the other it has launched an Rs 4,883-crore National Food Security Mission to bolster production of wheat, rice, oilseeds and pulses.

Strangely, the National Food Security Mission has nothing to do with the proposed National Food Security Act. Not many experts who swear in the name of food security ever relate it to the National Food Security Mission.

In fact, setting up a time-bound National Food Security Mission by enhancing production of wheat, rice, pulses and edible oils comes at a time when the present government itself is lowering the custom tariff thereby allowing cheaper imports. For instance, India was almost self-sufficient in edible oils in 1993-94. Ever since the government began lowering the tariffs, edible oil imports have multiplied turning the country into the biggest importer. Small farmers growing oilseeds and that too in the rainfed areas of the country had to abandon production in the light of cheaper imports.

Something is seemingly wrong somewhere. The government has been steadily reducing the import tariffs on edible oils to make it cheaper for the domestic consumers thereby destroying the production capacity within the country. At the same time, it intends to pump in resources to improve productivity of oilseeds in the hope that the imports of edible oils can be reduced in the years to come. Such contradictory policies need to be rectified.

Conclusion

Adequate storage and systematic distribution infrastructure is the need of the hour. There is also need for convergence of traditional and modern methods of storage. Besides, decentralised production, procurement and storage of foodgrains at village level with community support and large-scale grain silos in regions like Punjab and Haryana is an ideal solution. Adopting these policies can help reduce the losses and store food stocks for a longer time. The Supreme Court Bench's suggestion for total computerisation of the PDS system all over the country would be an important step in arresting the problem of corruption and pilferage.

The Bench further said the “government may also consider that instead of giving fair price shops to private individuals, let all fair price shops be operated by the State Public Warehousing Corporations/State Government Corporations. The government may also consider providing ration and other items according to the [number of] members of the family, instead of on a card basis. If there is one member in the family, he must be given ration accordingly and if there are five members, then they must get five times more. The State government can fix the maximum limit.”

There is also need for introducing the mechanism of Social Audit of the FCI and PDS shops by the civil society to prevent corruption and pilferage. Besides, convergence between the Union Ministry of Agriculture and state governments is also called for.