

**RESIST CASH TRANSFERS
AND
PRIVATISATION OF
NUTRITION PROGRAMS**

**Expand and Strengthen
the
National Food Security Act, 2013**

Kiran Moghe

AN AIDWA PUBLICATION

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and
Privatisation of Nutrition Programs**

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Notified in September 2013 during the last leg of the UPA-II Government's tenure, the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013 has now been existence for more than 30 months. Although it kick started with 11 states, viz. Bihar, Chandigarh, Chattisgarh, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthian and Punjab, its progress has been slow and tardy. It is only after repeated extensions of the deadlines imposed by the Government of India that additional states have come on board. At present, only 25 of the 36 states are actually implementing the Act, and that too partially. For example, in Orissa, only half the districts will be initially covered in Phase I. Interestingly, Gujarat, the Prime Minister's own state remains 'offline' and will be one of the last to join up – along with large and important states such as Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. We need to understand that the reluctance to implement the Act is not merely a bureaucratic failure, but has to do with the approach of the BJP-led NDA government to the NFSA.

"Do you want to break away from the Union of India? Can a State say it cannot implement a law passed by Parliament? Are you saying you are not part of India? What is the Government of India doing about this?" caustically enquired the Supreme Court Bench. It was responding to the counsel for Gujarat who told them that the implementation of the law was "under active consideration".

The laudable objective of the Act is "to provide food and nutritional security by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people." However, as was noted in the several debates that surrounded the passage

of the Act, in which AIDWA played an active role, the biggest flaw of the Act is that it remains grid locked in the framework of targeting. It stipulates that a) 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population would be covered by it and b) that the entitlements would be 5kg per person per month (when ICMR guidelines state that an adult requires at least 14kgs per month).

Less, in the Name of More!!

To make matters worse, the erstwhile Planning Commission even decided on the state-wise proportions. The TPDS Control Order issued on of 20th March 2015 clearly states that the total number of eligible households "shall not exceed the ceilings prescribed" (in the order). Further, it has fixed the allocation of subsidized food grains from the Central government till the population data of the next 2021 Census becomes available. In effect, the Order has frozen the number of beneficiaries for the next 10 years, so how can the Act be expected to meet the food security needs of a growing population? This in itself puts a big question mark on its effectiveness.

In Kerala, 47.7% of the population resides in urban areas, but the proportion covered under the NFSA is only 39.5%. Instead of the earlier universal Public Distribution System, only 46.37% of the population will now be covered under the NFSA. Another highly urbanized state, Tamilnadu has been given an urban coverage of 37.7% and rural coverage of 62.55%, whereas the State government has been implementing a free scheme of supply of 20 kgs of rice to every household for several years.

An Exercise in Exclusion

The implementation of the Act has therefore basically become an exercise devoted to devising a set of criteria to decide which households should be included (or conversely excluded) from

its purview. Different States have adopted different criteria for inclusion or exclusion in the set of "Priority" households that will get the stated 5kgs. Some like Maharashtra have simply stopped giving any entitlements to the earlier APL card holders, thereby excluding more than 1.77 crore households from the NFSA. Karnataka also no longer gives grains to the APL households. Orissa has a set of 8 criteria for automatic exclusion, which includes any household with a member earning Rs 15000 as income or pension in urban areas, and Rs 10000 in rural areas.

Some have waited for the Socio Economic Caste Census (SECC) data to be published, hoping to use it as a basis for selection. There have been huge delays and to date, lists of 149 out of the total 640 districts in the country are yet to be finalized. However, the SECC methodology is problematic because the deprivation criteria on the basis of which households are ranked are likely to exclude the poor and needy. They cannot be used to target a program that aims to provide something as fundamental as food.

For example, although Adivasi households are amongst the most disadvantaged section of rural India, many possess (may not own by holding a title) a little bit of land, dry and often unproductive, and a mud house with at least two rooms, and are most likely to have an able-bodied male adult aged between 16 and 59 years in the family. As per the SECC deprivation criteria, they will not qualify for inclusion as "Priority" households for the NFSA.

Confusion and Corruption

Consequently, there is a huge amount of confusion, with different types of cards co-existing ('Priority', 'BPL', 'APL', 'Antyodaya', 'Annapurna' etc) along with other state-specific categories (for eg Andhra Pradesh has a category of weavers, or West Bengal has a special package for the areas affected by Left Wing Extremism (LWE), or Delhi has a type of card titled

"Fresh"). Therefore at the ground level, different households are getting different quantities at different prices.

Such type of multiplicity inherently creates immense scope for corruption, pilferage and siphoning off, especially when the beneficiaries are poor, often illiterate, and most of all, unaware of the different categories, and most importantly, which category they have been fitted in. It is easy for any unscrupulous fair price shop owner to tell them that they are "not included" in a particular category and deny them their entitlements, or short-sell to them, or charge higher prices. Their entitlements are then sold on the black market at higher prices.

Secondly, a plethora of categories divides the beneficiaries, to the advantage of the bureaucracy that often pits one against the other. When confronted with complaints of exclusion, the local officials often tell organizations like AIDWA leading ground level struggles to submit a list of those who are seen to be "wrongly included". Since the total numbers are fixed, a genuine case can be included only at the expense of excluding another household. The struggle gets diverted into proving the "genuineness" of the household to be included and the relative ineligibility of the others who have been included. Indeed this is a successful strategy of pitting the poor against the poor and ensuring that they do not unite against the patently unjust policy of using targeting in a scheme that is meant to ensure food security.

Hardship in the Name of Reform

Not content with automatically excluding large numbers of households from within the purview of the NFSA by restricting it to 50% urban and 75% rural households, the Government of India has made its implementation conditional on the State governments putting in place what are euphemistically termed

"Reforms in the TPDS." These include door step delivery of foodgrains (to the Fair Price Shops), end to end computerization of the entire system, the use of Aadhaar for biometric identification and proper targeting of beneficiaries, and the introduction of schemes such as cash transfers, food coupons, etc. Subsequently, a nine point action plan was put in place and implemented vigorously by the state governments.

Our understanding of the term "reforms" is an improvement in the system of governance that will ensure timely and quality supplies of the prescribed entitlements in the fair price shops, a proper grievance redressal mechanism to take care of complaints, and a system of vigilance to check pilferage and corruption at all levels. The Food Security Allowance Rules of January 2015 have an elaborate detailing of how a food security allowance will be paid in cases of non-supply of foodgrains. Although there is a universal complaint that most people are not getting their monthly entitlement of 5kgs, not a single case of payment of this allowance has been recorded in the country (much like the MNREGA payments of unemployment allowance).

However, the emphasis of these particular reforms has been on elimination of bogus card holders and the end to end computerization of the TPDS. Although we have no quarrel per se with computerization and digitalization, it is necessary to understand how the primary objective of these so called reforms is actually a further exclusion of the poor and needy. It has also led to huge hardship at the ground level.

The Road to Food Security is Paved with Electronic Devices

In its bid to appear pro-women, the NFSA stipulates that the eldest adult woman in the household shall be the ration card

holder. But it did not account for the fact that some of them may be very old and unable to handle the paper work and the monetary and physical resources for the several trips that are necessary to fulfill the requirements of officialdom. There is absolutely no recognition of the fact that many women (for that matter, even men!) do not have the requisite skills or easy access to facilities required to fill online forms, which are often in English and require details that are not readily available. In any case, a formal title does not ensure in any way that women will in fact be in control.

In Uttar Pradesh, all ration card holders are mandatorily required to register with an online form. A voter ID, an Aadhaar card and a mobile number are essential. AIDWA activists report how server failures were a cause of great hardship. The mandatory on-line system has given birth to several touts who charge anything between Rs 200-400 per form. It is only after an AIDWA delegation met the Food Commissioner that camps for offline registration were set up. It was found that many migrant workers especially domestic workers do not have and are also unable to get Voter ID cards. There is a grave danger of all these households being excluded from the NFSA.

Aadhaar cards, electricity bills, land records, voter IDs are some of the documents that have been made mandatory for enrolling under the TPDS.

In Andhra Pradesh, for example, it is estimated that 9 lakh ration cards have been excluded in the process of Aadhaar linkage. Further the government there decided that those with power consumption bills of more than Rs 500 will be excluded from the NFSA.

Very often the instructions are verbal, and conveyed through the FPS owner. Moreover, there is no uniform policy across states, and sometimes even within the state. We find the women 'heads of household' running from pillar to post trying to get

the necessary paperwork done. An additional requirement is bank account details. In some places, there are instructions that details of joint accounts in the name of both the husband and wife should be submitted. The "Know Your Customer" (KYC) norms of most banks are equally exclusionary. Accounts in local cooperative banks are not accepted and the insistence on nationalized banks means more time and energy spent for opening a new account. Although many people opened Jan Dhan accounts during the drive, they have become inoperable due to lack of transactions after they were opened.

Perhaps the largest section to benefit in the process has been the local photocopy shops! Instead of making the PDS more transparent and user-friendly, computerization has encouraged a network of agents and middlemen who in league with corrupt officials can easily get around the so called rules, of course for a hefty fee. It is well known that one can get a 'BPL' card in the country for anything from Rs 500 to 2000. This again puts a question mark on the selection process, since those who can use their social and economic clout to beat the system are included and those who cannot are simply out of the picture. An analysis of the so-called 5 crores "bogus ration cards" that have been weeded out in the process in the last three years will probably reveal that most of them were unable to produce the necessary proofs. They are not bogus, but ineligible.

Only Grievances, No Redressal

On the other hand, important aspects such as display of beneficiary lists at the FPS, involvement of Panchayat Raj institutions in delivery, giving FPS licenses to cooperatives and self help groups, strict action against those found involved in leakages from the system and training of vigilance committees have been put on the back burner.

In fact the TPDS order of March 2015 has detailed instructions about how the list of eligible households shall be displayed in the public domain, the licensing and regulation of fair price shops, their timings, display of samples and information about stocks and prices, their inspection, setting up of a state level Food Commission, etc. Most of the states show compliance on paper. The Vigilance Committees usually consist of members of the ruling party and function only on paper. Even the grievance mechanisms are online, putting them out of reach of ordinary people, and women in particular!

FPS owners Rule the Roost

The proximity of the ruling party with the trading class, many of whom are FPS owners hardly needs to be spelt out. In rural areas, they are usually the upper caste landowners, and none of the poor are likely to complain against them. In many states, due to lack of adequate staff, the surveys have been carried out through the FPS owners, who have filled up the forms on behalf of the beneficiary households. Many shop owners continue to keep the ration cards with them although it is patently illegal. They never issue receipts, making it difficult to prove malpractice. It is only where women's and workers' organizations have continuously intervened that the delivery mechanisms at the local level have been responsive to people's needs. Most of the time, there is a huge diversion of foodgrains, and at a time when open market prices of cereals are at an all time high, the black marketing of PDS grains is a highly lucrative business. Any action that is taken is temporary, and in a few days, its business as usual.

Pushing Cash Transfers

It is precisely this thriving black market that is being used to push cash transfers into the PDS. In fact, that is clearly the

primary objective of the end to end computerization, the insistence on Aadhar, seeding with bank accounts, all of which have preoccupied the administration, rather than ensuring full quotas of quality food grains. The PDS Control Order (March 2015), read with the Food Security (Assistance to State Governments) Rules and the Cash Transfer of Subsidy Rules, both issued in August 2015 make the game-plan of the Modi Government amply clear. They came immediately on the heels of the August 2015 Supreme Court order that states that Aadhar can be used for the PDS and for the distribution of foodgrains, kerosene and LPG distribution. The order has no doubt come as a huge shot in the arm to a Government that is hell bent on pushing the Direct Benefit Transfer in the PDS as part of its intensified neoliberal agenda.

The Cash Transfer Rules provide for the payment of food subsidy in cash (to be computed as 1.25 times the difference between the Minimum Support Price and the Central Issue Price) to eligible households, contingent on a digitized beneficiary data base of the beneficiaries, seeded with their bank account and Aadhar details. Already the scheme has started on a pilot basis in Chandigarh and Puducherry since September 2015. The government claims that digitization of ration cards is complete in 34 states, and that over 10 crore cards have been seeded with Aadhar.

The Food Security Assistance to State Government Rules specify the norms and pattern of Central assistance to the states for intrastate movement and handling of grains, and the margins payable to Fair Price Shop (FPS) dealers. What is to be noted is the additional margin provided for what is called "sale through point of sale device", which is defined as a "device to be installed and operated in the FPS for identification of entitled persons and households based on Aadhaar or other authentication tools." Already 62,680 such 'PoS' devices have been installed,

though of course there is no information about how many are actually functional.

In Hyderabad (Telengana) the failure of biometric machines led to their physical destruction by people and a demand to return to the conventional system.

Biometric cards and machines were introduced in Sangli district of Maharashtra but in many places the system collapsed due to the inferior quality of the machines. Even where shop owners were willing to issue a physical non computerized receipt, the computerized system would not accept it for issue of foodgrains.

Towards Food Insecurity

So an ordinary woman beneficiary has to cross several hurdles to benefit from the NFSA, from producing the requisite papers to prove her eligibility and enrolling online, to ensuring that the machine works and recognizes her biometric details. With rural branches of banks closing down rapidly, it is likely that she will have to further depend on a Banking Correspondent to get her actual subsidy payment. Of course there is no assurance that she will actually get it if her account is held jointly with her husband. And finally, even if she does, there is no guarantee that the amount will be spent necessarily on food.

In West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, biometric cards were issued in 100 Fair Price Shops. Of the total 73000 cards issued, 10241 cardholders have not drawn the grains, resulting in a "saving" of Rs 5 crores per month. On the basis of this, it was projected that West Godavari would save Rs 107 crores, or the entire state would save a total amount of Rs 974 crores if biometric cards were introduced.

The purpose of the Reforms is therefore quite clear – a progressive exclusion from the PDS and its ultimate transformation into a system of Cash Transfers. Within two

years of the commencement of the NFSA, there has been a 45% decline in offtake, which corroborates the everyday experience that nothing is available in the ration shops. Whatever does reach the shops is systematically siphoned off into the black market.

As per the Food Ministry's Annual Reports, the offtake of foodgrains under the TPDS has actually declined from 658.46-lakh metric tonnes (mt) during 2012-13 to 598.17 lakh mt in 2013-14 and further to 365.01 lakh mt during 2014-15. There was only a marginal increase in allocation under food subsidy in absolute terms in the 2015-16 budget to Rs. 124,419 crores as against the Revised Estimates for 2014-15 of Rs. 122676 crores. Further, food subsidy as a proportion of GDP and the total Union Budget has remained around 1% and 7% respectively.

Predictably, targeting is leading to further food insecurity. The solution is equally obvious – a universal Public Distribution System offering all essential commodities at controlled prices.

Other Nutrition Programs under the NFSA

Given the fact that the NFSA is an overarching legislation to deal with food security in general, we also need to review the implementation of three other important programs, viz. the ICDS (Anganwadi supplementary nutrition), the Mid Day Meal Scheme and the Maternity Benefit Programs that are covered under the NFSA.

Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)

The NFSA provides for a free meal for all children from 6 months to 6 years through the local Anganwadi. As per current norms, that were reiterated by the Supreme Court in a landmark judgment in 2006, an Anganwadi centre should serve a minimum of 300 and a maximum population of 1000. The SC

also ordered the Government of India to sanction and operationalise a minimum of 14 lakh Anganwadi Centres in a phased manner ending by December 2008, prioritizing SC and ST habitations. As per latest data, this coverage has not yet been achieved. Yet, in 2015-16, the allocation to ICDS was Rs. 12,354 crores including Rs. 3,600 crores in the Supplementary Budget as against Rs.18,391 crores in BE 2014-15, prompting a public protest from no other than the Minister for Women and Child Development! This represents a savage cut of 33% over the previous year, and as much as about 50% of the 12th Plan allocation of Rs 26,533 crores. Further, as per the latest Finance Commission proposals, the Central Government will pay only towards capital expenditure, leaving cash-strapped states with the burden of providing for the supplementary nutrition component. This is already taking its toll in several states, such as Bihar, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, where supplementary nutrition is not being supplied for several months.

Privatization of ICDS!

The Government's strategy is the same as with the PDS – to create a crisis and then find a neo-liberal solution for it! In this case, the plan is to hand over the Anganwadi Centres to large corporates or their funded NGOs. For this, the program is being converted into an "ICDS Mission." For this the UPA government has signed an agreement with the World Bank for implementation of the ICDS in 162 high – malnutrition districts across the country. In return for a relatively small loan of Rs 583 crores from the Bank, the Government has agreed to Public Private Participation, corporate adoption of Anganwadi centres, targeting of beneficiaries, privatization of the Supplementary Nutrition Program along with increased working hours for the workers and helpers without extra remuneration and their forcible retirement without any benefits.

The WCD of the Government of India recently signed a memorandum with Cairn India Ltd, a subsidiary of the MNC Vedanta to develop and modernize 4000 'next gen' Anganwadi Centres across the country. These Centres to be renamed 'NandGhar' will run as Anganwadis during some part of the day, and as "women's skill development centres" for the rest of the period. They will become sources of rural women's cheap labour for the so called 'Make in India' program. Even more dubious are the credentials of the company, which has reportedly been issued by the Income Tax department for nonpayment of capital gains tax.

Already, in different parts of the country, the ICDS worker's trade unions have launched struggles against this Mission mode. Since the ICDS is an integral part of the food security system envisaged by the NFSA, we too will have to mobilize all the parents whose children are beneficiaries of the ICDS, along with women who as pregnant and lactating mothers, are entitled to supplementary nutrition under the ICDS against the corporatization of the scheme.

Take Home Ration (THR)

The other issue of concern is the Take Home Ration. The NFSA specifies that 500 calories will be provided to children from 6 months to 6 years, with an additional 300 calories for those who are malnourished. Pregnant and lactating mothers are to be given 600 calories. This nutritional standard is to be met either by a hot cooked nutritious meal or in the form of "Take Home Ration" (THR). The THR is basically a dense ready-to-eat dosage of 10 minerals and vitamins in specific proportions, with proteins and carbohydrates provided in a packaged form. It is actually a poor substitute for a hot cooked meal. Nevertheless has been pushed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development because it provides the entire multinational packaged food industry a chance to enter the rural markets.

Despite a Supreme Court ruling that there should be no contractorisation of the supply of supplementary nutrition, several states have found ways to continue to give out contracts for THR worth hundreds of crores of rupees. In Maharashtra for example, the orders are given to cooperative federations who are actually a front for private contractors. The program has become a source of huge corruption with poor quality and irregular supply of the THR.

However the most important problem with the THR is its poor acceptability by the beneficiaries. As ICDS workers and their trade unions have repeatedly pointed out to the government, the THR is not used by the beneficiaries, leading to huge wastage of resources. Most importantly, since it is not consumed, it does not help to improve the malnutrition levels, which continue to persist at high levels. Reasons include lack of information about how to utilize the ready-to-eat food, divergence with local food habits, especially in terms of taste and texture, lack of time to process the packet, poor quality and lack of timely supplies, etc. However, the state governments continue with the THR, and then blame the ICDS worker for not being able to reduce the malnourishment.

In a study conducted in Pune, Nandurbar and Gadchiroli districts of Maharashtra, 60% beneficiaries reported that they received only 2 packets, and 40% reported getting only 2 packets against a quota of 3 packets of THR per child per month. Moreover, only 11% children used the THR frequently. 79% of the non-users gave it to animals or used it for fishing, while another 11% actually threw it away.

Complaining about the contents (*Upma and Sattu*) 69.4% said it tasted bitter, 22.4% felt it was too salty and 58% thought it emanated a bad odour.

In comparison, among beneficiaries who were getting hot cooked food in two highly malnourishment-prone districts of Amravati district (Dharni

and Chikhaldara) usage was higher at 88%. Respondents felt that the taste of the khichadi could have been improved.

However, the main finding is the average levels of protein and calories consumed in a serving by a child is far lower in the THR (at 113 calories and 3.7gms of protein) compared to 253 calories and 9.2 gms of protein in hot cooked food.

(Incidentally the nutritional norm is 800 calories and 20-25 gms of protein as per the NFSA)

From a Report by Nutrition Right Coalition, Maharashtra

Thus the policy of contractorisation and corporatization of the ICDS through the THR route and by handing over the Centres is of no use in tackling the problem of malnutrition. No wonder the levels of malnutrition continue to be high and there is no progress towards meeting the various goals set in international conferences. The point to be noted is that the NFSA actually gives sanction to these policies.

Corporates in the Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)

The Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) started initially as a pilot program in August 1995 in 2408 selected blocks in the country as a measure to tackle child malnutrition and simultaneously tackle the question of school dropouts as well as social discrimination. After a Supreme Court order in 2001, it was developed as one of the 'Flagship Programs' of the Government of India and by 2008-9 was extended to the whole of the country. It presently covers approximately 8.24 crores of primary and 3.5 crores of upper primary school children, from class 1 to 8 in around 12 lakh government and government aided schools.

Several studies have indisputably established the success of the program in terms of retention of poor children in school, improving their performance, and contributing to the total

calorie intake of households. However, they have also brought out cases of caste discrimination with children and also the workers from socially oppressed castes. Its major weakness has been its total dependence on the "cheap" labour especially of women, or their self help groups, and lack of proper infrastructure such as kitchen, storage space, utensils, cooking fuel, drinking water, etc. Poor quality of food grains supplied is also a big problem faced in the implementation of the scheme.

The NFSA talks of providing a free hot cooked mid day meal for every child every day except on school holidays as per specified nutritional standards - 450 kcal and 12gms protein for primary and 700 kcal and 20 gms of protein for upper primary children. It also says that every school will have facilities for cooking meals, drinking water and sanitation, with the proviso that schools in urban areas may utilize centralized kitchens.

The Mid Day Meal Rules that were notified in September 2015 reiterate the nutritional standards and specify the responsibilities, funds, and testing of meals. They authorize the state governments to pay a Food Security Allowance in case the meal is not provided on three consecutive days or at least 5 days in a month. This is to be calculated on the basis of the cost of the quantity provided per child and the cooking cost in the state. However, in the case of centralized kitchens, this allowance is to be recovered from the centralized kitchen, and here the government has absolved itself from all responsibility regarding the quality of the meal. This should have been put on the Education Department with special staff appointed for the purpose.

However, the main purpose of the centralized kitchen is to open a channel to further the neo-liberal agenda of privatising the program. These kitchens are being pushed in the name of hygiene, but are in fact a means of allowing the entry of

corporates and NGOs into the scheme. The concept of a centralized kitchen sabotages its main objective, which is to provide a freshly cooked meal. Several experts have pointed out the loss of nutritional value of food prepared several hours in advance. The 2015 MDMS Rules clearly state that "no claim shall lie with the State Government or Centralised Kitchen for reasons of quality of foodgrains and meal."

It was reported in Delhi in 2012-13 that only 50 out of the 280 school food samples met quality standards. That means over 83% of the food provided by the centralized kitchens run by NGOs was not good enough to eat by the children.

In August 2015, two separate incidents of food poisoning of students in government schools were reported in Delhi, one from a Jahangirpuri and another from Seelampur. Strangely, the FIR was registered against unidentified persons. According to a report, a RTI query revealed that the quality testing of the food served under the midday meal programme in Delhi government schools is on hold since four months due to non-empanelment of testing labs!

Therefore, although it is shocking, it is hardly surprising that as with the ICDS, the budgetary allocation for the MDMS was slashed from Rs 13215 crores in 2013-14 to Rs 7775 during 2015-16, representing a decline of 42%. It creates further space for the corporate funded NGOs who have already made an entry in the name of Corporate Social Responsibility. This so called "social entrepreneurship" is actually a profit making exercise. For one, organizations such as Nandi and Akshay Patra receive the food grains and cooking costs as per norms from the government. As not-for-profit organizations, they also get tax concessions. Then in the name of the children they collect national and international donations! Organisations like Vedanta also deviously use the program to gain the goodwill of the people in the forest areas they are trying to appropriate for mining purposes. And then they also get

awards for their social contribution!

Nandi Foundation is floated by four corporate giants — Dr Reddy's Laboratories, Satyam Computer, the Nagarjuna Group and Global Trust Bank (GTB). Amongst the Board of Trustees of the Akshay Patra Foundation are the Chairman of the Manipal Global Education Services (India's first private university conglomerate), a Vice-President of Infosys, Founder of the Exfinity Technology Fund and Founder CEO of the Kondur Corporation.

The next step that is being taken is the entry of the global "UN-recognised" NGOs such as GAIN (Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition) that is presently holding several meetings with the Central government. GAIN is funded by amongst others, the Gates foundation, USAID, the Governments of Canada, Netherlands, Irish Aid, UK Aid, etc. Its present Director is known to have served multinational food businesses such as Cadbury, Coca Cola, Britannia, etc. As per their website, it has made "strategic investments" in the government of India's Integrated Child Development Services and Mid-Day Meal programs to the tune of 15 million US Dollars. As per reports, they have entered in projects in AP and Odisha to feed thousands of children with fortified food which has not been clinically tested and according to nutritional experts may even cause health problems in children.

The World Economic Forum brings together political and business leaders to shape global, regional and industry agendas at Davos. This year in January 2016, GAIN, along with Unilever, SUN (Scaling up Nutrition) and others held a breakfast briefing titled *Harnessing Business Solutions to Scale-Up Nutrition* in the World Food Programme Tent. Speakers included representatives of USAID and several business organizations. They emphasized that "the private sector has a key role by harnessing its strengths in marketing, communication, product development, agriculture, and supply chain management to create sustainable solutions to malnutrition."

The experience of both the ICDS and MDMS programs makes it quite clear that the government's approach is to rapidly hand over these programs to the corporate sector in the guise of efficiency. Provisions already made in the NFSA by the Congress led UPA-II government are being reinforced by the various Rules passed by Modi Government, and the huge cuts in budget expenditure. Nutrition security is no longer going to be the responsibility of the government, but in future, will depend on the profit motives of business corporations.

Where is the Maternity Benefit Program?

The third and equally important program for nutrition security covered by the NFSA in its "life cycle" approach is the Maternity Benefit program. As per the NFSA, every pregnant woman and lactating mother (with the exception of those who are government employees or benefit from any other maternity benefit program) should get a maternity benefit of not less than Rs 6000. However, the details of the program have not been spelt out in the Act, and the Government of India is yet to notify specific Rules regarding Maternity Benefit entitlements under the NFSA. However, pregnant and lactating mothers are also entitled to a free meal during pregnancy and six months after the child birth through the ICDS program as per nutritional standards specified under the Act. This aspect is already being implemented, but the cash transfer is yet to materialize.

The cash maternity benefit transfer will be of immense value especially to women working in the unorganized sector, and all those who are not covered by the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961. High levels of anaemia, hard manual labour till the last few days of pregnancy, lack of institutional deliveries and a return to work without adequate rest are some of the problems faced by working women in the country. This leads to

unacceptably high levels of maternal mortality, and creates obstacles in the achievement of exclusive breast feeding for the first six months. This in turn leads to infant mortality and malnourishment in children, setting off a vicious cycle of malnourishment and child mortality. A universal cash transfer in this critical period will allow women some rest and better nutrition, help to reduce maternal morbidity and mortality and promote breastfeeding. However given the steep increase in inflation, especially during the last 2-3 years, it would be in order to increase the entitlement and make it at least Rs 2000 per month and for a period of three months before and six months after the pregnancy.

Under the National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS) which started in 1995, pregnant women from only BPL households were given Rs 500 before delivery with the intention of meeting the cost of the delivery. Later in 2010, the Government of India launched the Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana, in 53 districts of the country. This is a scheme to transfer a total of Rs 6000 in three installments, each installment depending on the fulfillment of certain conditionalities, which include registration with the local Anganwadi or health centre, registration of birth of the child, its immunization schedule, exclusive breastfeeding and attending counseling sessions. However a recent study concludes that the scheme requires to be redesigned to meet the basic objectives of a maternity benefit program.

Since there has been no additional budgetary allocation for the program in successive Union Budgets after the NFSA was legislated, it appears that the government is in no hurry to universalize the program as per the mandate of the Act.

Conclusions:

The National Food Security Act passed by the Congress led UPA – II government has been a weak piece of legislation due to its inherent approach of targeting its benefits to a certain section of the people. Given the poor nutritional status of the majority of the Indian people, and particularly the poor, women and children, which has been well documented in different international and national reports and studies, it is necessary to have nutrition programs that will reach out the largest majority of those who need them. The targeting approach, however well intentioned and well-designed it may be, ends up excluding those very sections who need to access them. There is therefore a pressing need to universalize these programs and provide the necessary financial and administrative support.

However, the BJP led government at the Centre is going a step further and moving towards a system of cash transfers and privatization and corporatization of all the food security and nutrition programs in the country. At a time when the prices of essential commodities are rising relentlessly, such policies will further imperil the nutrition security of the vast majority of the Indian people. We need to mobilize the widest sections of the people to resist these policies and struggle to fulfill the following demands.

Core Demands:

Do not substitute cash transfers for material entitlements under the National Food Security Act.

Stop the privatization and corporatization of nutrition schemes, particularly the ICDS and MDMS.

Put in place a near universal PDS with exclusion of only income tax payers. Provide a minimum entitlement of 35 kgs or 7kgs

per person per month (whichever is higher) of foodgrains to every household at a price of not more than Rs 2 per kg.

Expand and Strengthen the Public Distribution System. Provide sugar, pulses, coarse grains, salt, tea, edible oil, milk, kerosene and other essential commodities at controlled prices in fair price shops.

Universalise the ICDS program and ensure there is an Anganwadi for every 1000 population. Provide a budgetary allocation of least Rs 25000 crores per year. Do not substitute fresh hot cooked food with Take Home Ration (THR). Do not privatise the program and handover to NGOs and corporates.

Extend the Mid Day Meal Scheme to cover all students upto Standard 12. Provide fresh, hot food cooked at site. Do not privatize the scheme by handing it over to NGOs and corporates.

Implement a universal scheme to provide a minimum of Rs 1000 per month to pregnant women and lactating mothers as Maternity Benefit for 3 months before and 6 months after pregnancy.

Make adequate allocations for the implementation of all food and nutrition schemes in the forthcoming Budget 2016-17.

No compulsory linkage of Aadhar and use of biometric systems to distribute benefits under the NFSA.

Increase food subsidy substantially to at least 2% of the GDP.

Ban futures trading of all essential commodities.

Use the Essential Commodities Act to effectively control black marketing and hoarding and ensure market price control of essential commodities.

Ensure a Minimum Support Price to farmers, to be calculated

as 50% margin over and above the Cost of Production of each agricultural commodity.

No privatization and dismantling of the Food Corporation of India.

Increase the sale margin/commission and transport costs paid on commodities sold in fair price shops. Ensure door-step delivery especially in remote areas.

Pay minimum wages and social security benefits such as maternity benefit and pension to all workers employed in the ICDS, MDMS and other government food and nutrition programs.

Other Demands

Exclude only income and payers in the NFSA.

Ensure adequate stocks of commodities in the fair price shops.

Prosecute shop-owners who do not provide the full quota, overcharge beneficiaries and sell poor quality adulterated stocks through the PDS.

Set up the prescribed grievance redressal and vigilance mechanisms in every state and ensure the selection of activists associated with food security movements.

Widely publicise entitlements under the NFSA.

Ensure regular and quality supply of components necessary for nutrition programs.

Appoint adequate staff and provide proper infrastructure for cooking meals for the ICDS and MDMS. Provide subsidized LPG for cooking these meals.

Entitlements under the National Food Security Act, 2013

Entitlement	Target group	Entitlement	Price	Coverage
Food grain	Household	Priority household- 5kg wheat or/and rice per person per month	Rice @Rs. 3/kg & Wheat @Rs. 2/kg	Rural Areas- 75% & Urban Areas- 50%14
		AAY households- 35 kg per household per month		
	Pregnant and lactating women during pregnancy and six months after child birth	Take home ration 600 kcal and 18-20gms of protein	Free	Universal
	Children between 6 months-3 years	500 kcal and 12-15 gms of protein		
	Malnourished children between 6 months-6 years	800 kcal and 20-25gms of protein		
	Children between 3-6 years	Morning snack and hot cooked meal at Anganwadi 500kcal and 12-15gms of protein		
	Children between 6-14 years Lower primary Upper Primary	One hot cooked meal at school 450 kcal and 12 gms of protein 700kcal and 20 gms of protein		
Cash Transfer	Every pregnant and lactating woman	Not less than Rs. 6000		Universal

After 68 years of Independence.....

The International Food Policy Research Institute categorizes hunger in India as 'alarming'.

As per the 2015 UNDP Human Development Index, India ranks 55th out of 76 countries in the Global Hunger Index.

The World Food Programme counts that each minute, five Indians die of hunger which makes 7000 each day and 2.5 million people dying of hunger in India every year.

The latest NSS data that 80% of rural and 64% of all urban households consume less than the recommended calorie norm; 54% rural and 75% of all urban households consume less protein than recommended.

The average consumption of calories has come down from 2246 per capita per day in rural areas in 1972-73 to 2020 in 2009-10. The corresponding figures for urban areas are 2107 and 1946, respectively.

Infant mortality rate is 48.9 and the under-five mortality rate is 59.2. Almost half of India's children under age five years (48 percent) are chronically malnourished and are too short for their age or stunted.

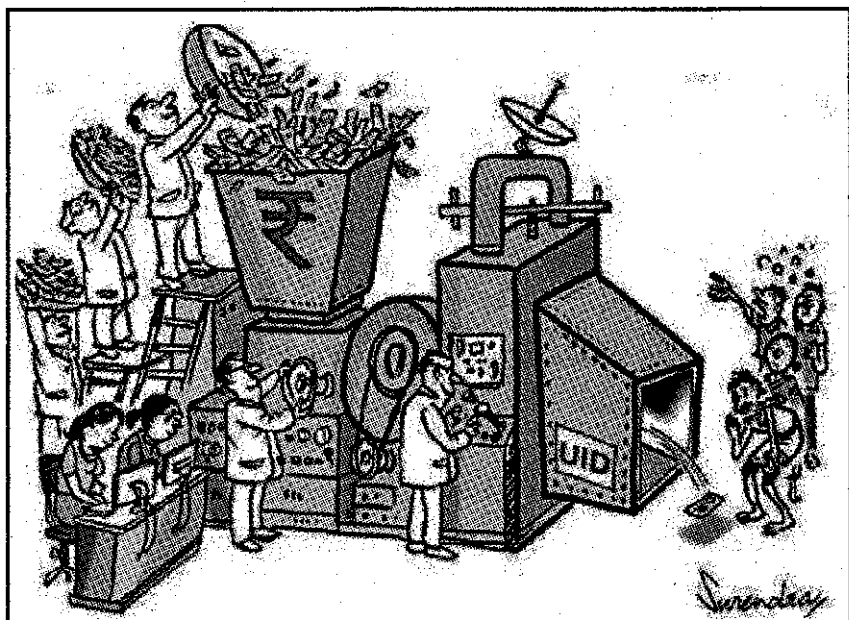
One out of every five children in India under age five years is wasted i.e. the child is too thin for his or her height.

43% of children under age five years are underweight for their age.

Seven out of every 10 children age 6-59 months in India are anaemic.

36% of women and 34% of men are undernourished, with a BMI less than 18.5, indicating a high prevalence of nutritional deficiency.

Over half of women (55%) and almost one-quarter of men (24%) are anaemic.



Courtesy: The Hindu, 26th February 2013

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