

A Step Towards Food Security in India: Performance and Policies

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Abstract

Food security means that all individuals have reliable access to food that is available and affordable. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to achieve food security and eliminate hunger. According to the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the International Labour Organization, 'food security' means guaranteeing that everyone always has both physical and economic access to essential food. When considering physical access, one can assess it by comparing the population and food growth rates of a specific country using mathematical calculations. India was encountering difficulties in attaining food security when a fresh obstacle, globalization, arose to present a challenge to its agricultural industry. The complex task of defending against international competition in the cost and standard of farm goods, alongside maintaining domestic price steadiness and food autonomy for the impoverished emerged. India needs to tackle this new challenge by utilizing WTO rules for developing countries to support their small-scale farming through tailored trade policies and allowing agricultural imports, while also focusing on the industrialization and commercialization of the agricultural sector.

Keywords: Food security, access to food, self-sufficiency, price stability

Introduction

As defined by the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the International Labour Organization among other international bodies, 'ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to basic food is the situation of food security'. To the extent that physical access is concerned, it may be checked mathematically by comparing the population and food growth rates of a particular country. Meaning, if there is a lag in the production of food, that particular country is not secure in terms of food. Yet, the issue of economic access to food is slightly more complex. If the entire population does not have the reach or access to food {whatever may be the reason}, it also means that the country lacks food security. In the last five years, India's food grain (i.e. staples such as wheat, rice, jowar, bajra, maize and pulses) has witnessed a growth rate of around 1.00 percent while the population growth stands at 1.67 percent - showing a clear lag in physical food security. As far as economic access to food is concerned, India has seen great variations. In fact, surveys have indicated that almost half of the Indian population lacks food security today, and the country needs more than 275 million tons of food grains if each of its citizens was to eat! Not only that, India ought to maintain a buffer stock of over 22 million tons and almost 10 million tons of food-grain to meet its mandatory export requirement.

Largely, it is distribution-related problems that have hampered people's reach to food (in fact this is also why the country has not faced enough heat on the physical scarcity front). Yet at the time when all Indians will be provided food it will also be when food-grain scarcity becomes a serious problem for the country. In all probability, this situation may arise if and when the National Food Security Act makes it obligatory for the State to supply food to all- perhaps India may also need to import food grains. As per the recent ICAR and Planning Commission projections, India would need to produce over 340 million tonnes of food grains by 2020 in view of its population growth and, more significantly, increased purchasing power of its people (a clear indication of increased demand). Not to mention, all this would have to be achieved in the backdrop of weather anomalies and reducing availability of land and water (for irrigation).

The Evolving Philosophy of Food Security in India

To understand the current challenges to food security in India, it is crucial to examine the country's foundational approach to this issue over time. India's philosophy on food security can be traced through three distinct phases:

- **The First Phase:** This period lasted for the first three decades after independence. The primary aim was to produce enough food grains to adequately feed the Indian population - in other words, to ensure physical access to food. The Green Revolution strategy, adopted towards the end of this phase, helped India achieve self-sufficiency in food grain production by the end of the 1980s.
- **The Second Phase:** As India celebrated its success in the first phase, a new challenge emerged - ensuring economic access to food. By the early 2000s, the country faced a paradox - it had massive buffer stocks of food grains, yet people in several states were dying from food scarcity. This highlighted the failure to translate food availability into food affordability for all. After a public interest lawsuit, the government established a national Food for Work program, and even resorted to exporting wheat at low prices to manage market prices - ironically, exporting the very food that many Indians could not afford to consume.

Regarding the Green Revolution (GR), since the inputs were more costly, the outputs were naturally more expensive as well. To address this dilemma, there should have been support from a time-bound and target-oriented macroeconomic policy that would have increased the purchasing power of the masses (to make the food affordable for them). However, India failed in this regard. Instead, the crisis was poorly managed through ever-increasing subsidies, which ultimately affected government spending on agricultural infrastructure. Even after providing higher food subsidies, some people were still unable to afford food and were left to die of hunger. Adding to this problem was the political pressure to regularly revise the Minimum Support Prices (MSP) of food grains, with farmers still complaining that farming was not a remunerative profession.

As for the second phase, India is still trying to solve the crisis through a two-pronged approach: first, by creating maximum gainful employment, and second, by reducing the cost of food grains (by adopting the biotechnological means advocated by the Second Green Revolution). However, it must be noted that India's food self-sufficiency was only temporary. By the mid-1990s, the country's food grain production was lagging far behind the rise in its population, meaning that India's fight to achieve physical access to the required quantity of food grains was not over yet.

- **The Third phase:** By the end of the 1980s, experts began questioning the very way the world was carrying on with different modes of production, including the heavily industry-based agricultural activities (such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, farming equipment, or irrigation means). Several countries began opting for ecologically-friendly methods and techniques to develop their industrial, agricultural, and services sectors. Even the much-hyped Green Revolution had been declared ecologically untenable, and the world was headed towards organic farming, green farming, and other sustainable means of production.

India's current agricultural practices have led to numerous problems, including degraded soil quality, falling water tables, polluted water and air, and elevated toxin levels in the food supply. These unsustainable methods have compromised both physical and economic food access, while also threatening the country's precious ecology and biodiversity.

Clearly, India requires a new kind of "green revolution" - one that can deliver not just physical and economic food security, but also ecological sustainability. In other words, the nation needs a comprehensive, holistic approach to agriculture that addresses all these critical concerns. Only then can India truly achieve food security without devastating its environment.

The Current Scenario: India's agriculture sector is the largest employer, accounting for 58.2% of the workforce. Yet, it contributes only 14.1% to the GDP, making it an unrewarding sector despite being the fundamental source of food for the nation. This irony is compounded by the fact that 8 out of 10 impoverished families reside in villages, and 3 out of 4 rural Indians depend on agriculture for their

livelihoods. Investing in agriculture could be up to 4 times more effective at alleviating poverty compared to other sectors, directly impacting the lives of 500 million Indians.

In a world of growing population and shrinking resources, agriculture presents a prime opportunity for India. The country possesses significant agricultural advantages - 52% of cultivable land versus the 11% global average, the world's largest livestock population, and 15 major climates with 46 out of 60 soil types. With 20 agro-climatic regions and 10 bio-diversity zones, India is primed for diverse, year-round crop cultivation.

The need now is to transform agriculture from subsistence to vibrant growth, from low-value to an efficient economic engine. Industry forecasts indicate agricultural products, especially food grains, will emerge as major trading items worth \$300 billion within the next decade. Prioritizing this sector is crucial not just for food self-sufficiency and security, but also to generate surpluses for boosting exports and individual incomes, thereby strengthening the Indian economy as a whole.

The challenge before India is to transform agriculture into a more efficient, productive, and remunerative sector, while also making it a respectable profession. While the government has taken significant steps in this direction, the results have yet to be fully realized at the ground level.

Some of the key initiatives and incentives include

The New Agriculture Policy (NAP) in 2000, which designated agriculture as an industry. This meant that agricultural products would now be treated as market commodities, similar to other industries. However, given the lack of equitable purchasing power among the poor, the Indian government has had to intervene to regulate the pricing of these goods.

Additionally, compared to other industries, agriculture has not yet attracted large-scale investments, which have been limited to the individual farmer level. To truly emerge as a full-fledged industry, the sector needs greater participation from big, limited liability companies to handle the investment aspect.

To facilitate this industrial-level investment, the NAP also allowed for corporate and contract farming. Yet, the idea of corporate farming, where land is owned by corporate entities rather than small farmers, has failed to gain traction due to various reasons. In contrast, the potential of contract farming remains in its nascent stages.

One key reason why corporate farming has struggled to take off is the fact that in India, land holds not just economic value, but also defines an individual's social standing. As a result, people are often reluctant to sell the land that is integral to their status in society. Furthermore, the lack of alternative avenues for gainful employment for those not engaged in farming has also hindered agriculture's transition to an industry-like status.

India has struggled to effectively implement policies that could benefit both corporate and contract farming through labor laws. The National Agriculture Insurance Scheme (1999) aimed to provide comprehensive coverage for agricultural risks, similar to industrial goods, but the follow-up Seed Insurance Scheme failed to gain traction due to a lack of farmer awareness and the regressive nature of industrial-scale farming practices. Today, India does offer a more complete insurance package for the farming sector, covering risks from production to storage to marketing.

In 2002, the Indian government declared agriculture would become the prime driver of the economy, replacing industry's previous dominance since 1948. This signaled agriculture would now receive the same level of priority and investment as industry. However, the major obstacle has been channeling sufficient investment into the agricultural sector. This can only be achieved through greater private investment, as the government grapples with reducing various agricultural subsidies. Initiatives like the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana and Micro Management of Agriculture aim to boost public investment in the sector, with some encouraging results, but they have yet to generate the level of funding needed to truly strengthen the agricultural system.

Agricultural extension and R&D is another area requiring redefinition with increased private sector participation. Corporate private investment will be crucial to improving extension services and attracting effective private investment overall. This must be balanced with efforts to reduce subsidies for agricultural inputs like fertilizers, power, and irrigation, while simultaneously boosting the purchasing power of the masses through employment programs and other schemes.

Conclusion

India was facing challenges in achieving food security when a new threat, globalization, emerged to pose a challenge to its agriculture sector. The dual challenge of fending off global competition in the price and quality of agricultural products, while also ensuring internal price stability and food self-sufficiency for the poor population arose. India must now address this new challenge by:

- making use of WTO regulations that cater to developing nations to back their subsistence farming with specific trade regulations and permitting agricultural imports
- working towards the industrialization and commercialization of the agriculture industry.

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