



Public Distribution System – A Universal Workers’ Right

Public Distribution of cereals began from a critical food shortage in the 1960s. Till 1992, it was a general entitlement for all registered consumers, where it was essentially a means to control the rise in food grain prices, and ensure access of food for all. Even then, PDS continued to maintain its urban bias and was criticized for its restricted reach. Some states performed better than others and states with higher poverty fared the worst. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in 1987, 98% of the rural population did not have access to PDS while in contrast, the four southern states accounted for more than half of the total PDS off-take. The failure of PDS in the populous states of the country and following the World Bank prescription for reduction of subsidies the Government of India first attempted to do away with the system totally but then buckled under people’s pressure and introduced the Targeted PDS.

Over the years, the income inequality between the rich and the poor has widened. Even though productivity of workers has increased, real wages have declined or at best stagnated. Any household that spends more than 1/3 of its income on food is considered poor in the United States and eligible for food stamps. If this standard is used in India 95% of all households would be considered poor. If one uses the China standard of food share of about 2/3, then 80% of the rural population and 60% of the urban population in India would be poor. A commonly used indicator of undernourishment is Body Mass Index (BMI). This is the ratio of weight (kg) to the square of height (m). 18.5 is normal. Using this indicator, it has been found that 46% of persons chronically deficient in 1991-1992. Severe undernourishment was observed among 9%. In other words one half of the population in the country is malnourished. Of these 53% of children were found to be undernourished and 21% severally undernourished. And given the fact that more than 90 per cent of the workers in India are in the informal sector and are not covered even under the Minimum wages Act, the need for a subsidized provision of food does not need to be reiterated. Hence, the right to access to subsidized food for urban and rural workers has to be universal. Consequently, the Public Distribution System (PDS) is essential for the working class, both urban and rural, to sustain themselves and their dependents in this time of rising food prices and other essentials.

There has been almost total stagnation of food grain production in the country since the first spate of liberalisation. Production of essential items as pulses has declined drastically and India, which was once an exporter of foodgrains has to today import grains. In addition to this there has been a progressive corporatization of agriculture leading to the further marginalization of small and marginal farmers. The swelling of the ranks of the agricultural labourers is indicative of the fact that more and more marginal and small farmers are losing their land holding and joining the ranks of the rural working class. Large numbers of these workers are also forced to migrate to urban centres within the state and outside as the rural economy is unable to absorb this large and ever increasing rural workforce. Further, due to the unrestricted EXIM policy in agriculture promoted by the WTO agreement and the decline of support from the government to agriculture, there has been a huge increase in the input costs in agriculture thereby pushing more and more small and marginal farmers out of subsistence farming.

Demands:

- 1. Political commitment to strengthening the PDS**
- 2. Universal Access to and Applicability of PDS**
- 3. Ensuring better Delivery Mechanism by involving local self government institutions**
- 4. Instrumental to control of prices of cereals and other essential commodities**
- 5. Widening of the scope by bringing in more products under the PDS, Improving the quality of products and the Increasing the quantity of products supplied through PDS**
- 6. Nutritional programmes, such as mid-day meals, supplemental nutritional programmes for pregnant and lactating women, ICDS, should be converged with the PDS for ensure more efficient delivery.**
- 7. Mobile Smart Cards for PDS so that migrant workers can access PDS wherever they go.**
- 8. Smart cards to take nuclear families as the unit for Household. A household may have a single member.**

UNITY ? DEMOCRACY? MILITANCY

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