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DISCUSSION PAPER

FOOD INSECURITY IN INDIA: EVALUATING THE CASE FOR DIRECT BENEFIT TRANSFER

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ABSTRACT

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflected in rising unemployment rates and starvation deaths across the country, was met by calls to universalise the Public Distribution System. Recognising that the pandemic served to exacerbate already existing food insecurity in the country, this paper seeks to explore the public discourse surrounding policy responses to the same. In particular, this paper attempts to analyse the case for an increasing role for Direct Benefit Transfers in India's food security policy.

INTRODUCTION

In his address to the nation on June 30, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the extension of the free ration scheme—Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana—till the end of November 2020 (Press Information Bureau 2020a). The scheme, announced as a part of the Rs 1.70 lakh crore Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan relief package on March 26, 2020, by the Union Minister for Finance & Corporate Affairs, had the stated objective of providing 80 crore individuals (i.e. all beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act) with double their current foodgrain entitlements over the next three months, free of cost (Press Information Bureau 2020b).

The scheme, purportedly announced to protect India's poor from suffering "on account of non-availability of foodgrains", achieves salience when one notes the extent of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data compiled from news portals indicates that of the 884 "non-virus" reported deaths in India due to the lockdown, as of July 2, 2020, at least 167 were directly caused by starvation and financial distress (Thejesh 2020). It must be noted that this accounts only for those cases that have been reported in the media, and as such, the total number of deaths could be significantly higher.

Furthermore, surveys by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy indicate that the unemployment rate in India reached 23.5% in April and May 2020, testifying to an undeniable increase in concomitant food insecurity (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy 2020). Additionally, analysis of survey data collected as a part of CMIE's Consumer Pyramids Household Survey reveals that over 80% of the surveyed households reported a decline in income owing to the national lockdown that was ordered from March 24, 2020 (Bertrand et al. 2020).

This sudden loss in purchasing power points to the importance of social security arrangements. Economist Amartya Sen makes a case for social security by the government, stating that developed countries rarely see famines despite rampant unemployment only because of such arrangements and not due to wealth (Sen 1982).

However, food insecurity was an alarming problem in the country even before the effects of the pandemic. Estimates based on the NSSO 68th Round Consumption and Employment Surveys indicate that in 2011-12, the number of undernourished people in India stood at 472.2 million, which is nearly 40% of the Indian populace—ranging from 1.7 million in Himachal Pradesh to 73.9 million in Uttar Pradesh (Rawal et al. 2019). Estimates derived from the Food and Agriculture Organization's 2020 edition of 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in The World' indicate that the number of people living in India with food insecurity increased by 62.1 million between 2014 and 2019 - from 426.5 million to 488.6 million (Bansal 2020). The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2019 Global Food Security Index places India at 72 among 113 countries. The Index's Sufficiency of Supply indicator in this regard ranks India 16th among 23 Asia-Pacific countries, wherein India notches a composite score of 47.3 as opposed to the world average of 62.9 (The Economist

Intelligence Unit 2019). India is also ranked 102nd among 117 countries on the 2019 Global Hunger Index, with a hunger-level categorised as serious (Grebmer et al. 2019). In this context, a more comprehensive public discourse on the policy responses to food insecurity is necessary.

EVOLUTION OF THE PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM

With India historically having one of the world's highest poverty rates in the world, its Public Distribution System (PDS) has been an important policy instrument aimed at the redressal of food insecurity (The World Bank 2019). It has survived as one of the most stable components of the food-security policy in India for nearly eight decades. Its origins lie in the food-rationing concept of the British government developed in 1939 because of the Second World War, which eventually led to the PDS being concretised in 1942 with the setting up of the Department of Food under the Government of India (Planning Commission 2005). It was first introduced in Bombay, but by 1946, over 770 cities and towns suffering from chronic food shortages were brought under the ambit of the rationing system (Nawani 1994).

The objective of the PDS during the immediate post-independence years was to primarily provide for the welfare of a vastly impoverished population and maintain price stability, while also rationing food during times of scarcity (Bhattacharya et al. 2017). With the onset of the Green Revolution, the 1960s saw a marked departure in the manner in which India's food management policies were framed. In 1965, both the Agricultural Prices Commission and the Food Corporation of India (FCI) were set up as permanent administrative structures to enable the public sector to "secure a strategic and commanding position" in the trade of food grains (Saini and Kozicka 2014). This occurred against the backdrop of an increasingly pressing need that was being felt to achieve self-sufficiency in food grain production.

Throughout the Green Revolution, wheat imports decreased substantially—from 6.5 MMT to just 0.49 MMT by 1970-71 while the production of wheat over the same period had increased to 26.41 MMT from 12 MMT. This was a significant turnaround from the drastic drop in wheat production by nearly 15% between 1964-65 and 1965-66 (Government of India 2015). The PDS, from being restricted to urban areas as an emergency measure, was made universal from the early 1970s after recurrent crises of grain shortages and price fluctuations. By the early 1990s, rural India saw a rapid proliferation of Fair Price Shops (FPS), with over 75% of all FPS being in rural areas. Till 1992, the PDS as such was a universal programme (Bhattacharya et al. 2017).

THE REVAMPED PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM (RPDS)

Post the economic reforms of the early 1990s, reduction in food subsidy to contain the fiscal deficit became a prime mover behind matters of food security policy. The change in sentiment in the government at this juncture towards food security is reflected in the 8th five-year plan, which laid emphasis particularly on the need-to exclude non-poor from the PDS (Geetha and Suryanarayana 1993). Thus, in June 1992, the RPDS was launched with a stated aim of increasing the reach of the PDS to remote, tribal, and far-flung areas. Engaging in geographical targeting, the RPDS aimed at universal coverage (Saini et al. 2017).

THE TARGETED PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM (TPDS)

The Government of India launched the TPDS in June 1997. The focus of the TPDS was stated to be on "poor in all areas." Under the scheme, states were to identify the poor for the delivery of foodgrains. To avoid the effects of a sudden withdrawal of benefits under the PDS to above poverty line (APL) families, they were initially allocated a certain quantum of subsidised foodgrain issued at prices that were above those given to below poverty line (BPL) households. From April 2000 onwards, however, allocations to APL families began to be issued at economic cost (Department of Food and Public Distribution 2020f).

THE ANTYODAYA ANNA YOJANA (AAY)

With the stated aim of targeting and reducing hunger among the poorest of BPL families, the Government of India, on December 25, 2000, launched the AAY as an extension of the TPDS. Under the AAY, the entire subsidy was to be passed on to the consumer. As of July 2020, over 8.96 crore beneficiaries have received monthly foodgrain entitlements under AAY (Department of Food and Public Distribution 2020c).

THE NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT

The National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA) came into force throughout the country on July 5, 2013. The Act was envisioned to "provide for food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity". It entitles all households covered under the AAY to 35 kg of grain per month at INR 3 per kg for rice, INR 2 per kg for wheat, and INR 1 per kg for coarse grains. Additionally, the Act entitles persons belonging to priority households to 5 kg of grains per person per month at the same subsidised rates. As such, the Act gives legal entitlement to up to 75% and 50% of the rural and urban populations respectively to receive subsidised foodgrains. As per currently available figures, the NFSA covers 81.35 crore people (Press Information Bureau 2019a).

Chapter 5 under the Act, proposes several "necessary reforms" to the TPDS. These include, among others, leveraging Aadhaar for unique identification, using biometric information of entitled beneficiaries for proper targeting of benefits; and introducing schemes such as cash transfer, food coupons, etc. for targeted beneficiaries. Per the above provisions, the Department of Food and Public Distribution issued two notifications in 2015: the Cash Transfer of Food Subsidy Rules, 2015 and the Food Security (Assistance to State Governments) Rules, 2015. In essence, the two rules put forth two options before the governments of states and UTs to "reform" the food management system:

- Optimise PDS operations using end-to-end computerisation of the System such that authentication of beneficiaries at FPS occurs using a Point of Sale (PoS) device.
- Replace the PDS with a Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme to transfer the food subsidy from the Central Government directly to the entitled households through an electronic fund management system called the Public Financial Management System (PFMS).

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DIRECT BENEFIT TRANSFERS

The proposal for a shift from the public provisioning of food towards a supposedly administratively easier system of cash transfer, such that the poor are made to access essentials through private markets, has been advocated by policymakers across dispensations periodically. Arvind Subramanian, the former Chief Economic Advisor to the Government of India (2014-18), along with Devesh Kapur and Partha Mukhopadhyay, made the following case for direct cash transfers to the poor in a paper published in 2008:

"Indeed, if the government simply gave eligible households the amount of money it spends on the PDS, this alone would entail a monthly transfer of more than Rs 500 to each household...More pertinently, such a transfer allows them to buy the entire monthly PDS entitlement of 35 kilograms of rice or wheat, even at the relatively high current market price." (Kapur et al. 2008)

In his Budget Speech of 2011-12, Pranab Mukherjee, then Union Minister of Finance went on to state that the Government will move towards direct transfer of cash subsidy in a phased manner, to ensure greater efficiency, cost effectiveness and better delivery to people living below the poverty line (Government of India 2011). A case for doing away with food security legislation as a whole was made by Bibek Debroy, the present Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, where he opined that it is a waste of resources, and direct income transfer would save transaction costs and ultimately lead to greater effectiveness (Debroy 2013).

DBT as such was introduced in India on January 1, 2013, with 27 schemes, with the stated aim of bringing about a reduction in fraud and duplication, to ensure that beneficiaries are more accurately targeted, and to simplify the flow of funds and information. Currently, the central government's DBT programme covers 406 schemes across 55 Ministries (Department of Food and Public Distribution 2020d).

The Indian argument in favour of replacing the PDS completely with cash transfers cites several international examples. Brazil's Bolsa Familia programme instituted in 2003 as a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme is one such example. As part of the programme, families with per-capita incomes below the poverty line receive a monthly allowance of USD 19 per child on committing to keep children in school and taking them regularly for check-ups to institutional health facilities (Duarte 2012). Said to benefit over 11 million families, the Bolsa Familia is estimated to have led to a 12-19% reduction in poverty (Soares et al. 2010). Another example is Mexico's now abolished CCT programme, Prospera. Introduced in 1997, it offered, among other things, income and nutrition support to female-headed households and was hailed by The World Bank as "a model from Mexico for the world" (The World Bank 2014). Transfers from the programme said to have benefited nearly 6 million families, constituted between 15% and 25% of the household incomes of Mexico's poor (Dorosh et al. 2011, Lambert and Park 2019).

However, the above cash transfer programmes were effective as redistributive measures at least partly because they were components in the overall repertoire of developmental strategies. Brazil, in particular, has better administrative capacities, much higher rates of urbanisation and literacy, and significantly lower poverty rates than India, and has now put in place additional measures like the supply of subsidised food (Khera 2012). Rather than seeking to replace the public-provisioning and institutionalising of quality education, healthcare, food security, and death and disability benefits, these programmes built upon and bolstered existing mechanisms for the public delivery of essential services (Ghosh 2011). In India, however, this debate has been framed in a rather simplistic manner as is evident from this excerpt from the chapter on Universal Basic Income in the Economic Survey 2016-17:

"A number of implementation challenges lie ahead, especially the risk that UBI would become an add-on to, rather than a replacement of, current anti-poverty and social programs, which would make it fiscally unaffordable." (Ministry of Finance 2017).

Some of the reasons propounded therein behind DBT's continuing acceptance as a tool to address socio-economic inequalities include its supposed ability to enhance financial inclusion and reduce fiscal leakages (Davala 2015). Other advantages that are said to accrue from cash transfers include the strengthening of economic citizenship, improvements in gender relations, limitations on the tendency for bureaucratic discretion, and an overall reduction in poverty (Department for International Development 2011).

DBT IN FOOD: EVIDENCE FROM THE GROUND

With the above-stated advantages in mind, the central government, in accordance with the provisions of the Cash Transfer of Food Subsidy Rules, 2015, ordered the implementation of the DBT for Food scheme in three UTs—Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Puducherry—in 2015. While it was rolled out in Chandigarh and Puducherry from September 2015, Dadra and Nagar Haveli saw the implementation of the same from March 2016 (Department of Food and Public Distribution 2020a).

Notably, the Cash Transfer of Food Subsidy Rules, 2015 mandate that the total amount of subsidy per kg of foodgrain that is payable to every entitled individual or household be 1.25 times the difference between applicable Minimum Support Prices (MSP) and Central Issue Prices (CIP) for the foodgrain.
This effort in the three UTs, however, has met with several challenges. The most prominent of these include:

- **Insufficiency of the subsidy amount transferred:** Studies indicate that the subsidy amount transferred has been insufficient for beneficiaries to meet the consumption levels as under the previous system. Prices are perceived to be continually rising in the absence of Fair Price Shops; the likelihood of such a rise in prices in food-deficit areas has been particularly noted. Studies also show that beneficiaries' out of pocket expenditure on buying the grain equivalent of their PDS consumption has seen a marked increase. Based on the 2017 MSP and CIP, it was estimated that the shortfall in the subsidy amount could be as high as 20%.

- **Last-mile delivery system failures:** Studies also report that beneficiaries now spend more time waiting to redeem the subsidy amounts from their respective banks due to losses in the last-mile delivery system. There have been multiple reported instances of subsidy transfers being made to bank accounts that beneficiaries do not or cannot access. Moreover, apart from processing errors, entitled individuals have to physically visit their respective bank branches to verify transactions due to lack of information on transfers. One study showed that only 16% of beneficiaries across the 3 UTs recalled having received an SMS in the previous month when the transfer of food subsidy was made, despite having seeded their phone number with the DBT database. Other problems in this regard are longer durations taken in withdrawing full subsidy amounts due to lack of ATM cards or ATMs disbursing notes of only particular denominations.

- **Lack of effective grievance redressal mechanisms:** Studies indicate that across the 3 UTs, there is an increase in the proportion of beneficiaries who have grievances against the DBT system. However, it has been noted that there is an abject lack of adequate grievance redressal mechanisms to address some of the above issues (Sharma 2017, Saini et al. 2017, Muralidharan et al. 2017).

Another study conducted by the Right to Food Campaign in Raipur aimed to evaluate the experience among beneficiaries of the Chhattisgarh government's pilot programme to replace the PDS with DBT across three cities—Dhamtari, Mungeli, and Raipur. The study, involving 103 households with ration cards, is illuminating. In the 1st month of the four-month study period, 56% of the surveyed households could not get access to their quota of rice for the month, and 20% households did not receive any money at all. Of the households that did receive cash transfers in their accounts, over 70% reported significant delays. As a result, 43% households reported financial distress over the course of the pilot, with 37% having to take loans in order to buy rice. Significantly, once the PDS was reinstated, over 96% of the respondents reported a preference for the PDS system over the system of cash transfers (Nandi et al. 2016).

A study by the World Bank conducted in Chhattisgarh in 2014 found similar results, with 94% of the respondents reporting a preference for the PDS (Bhattacharya et al. 2017). A primary reason for this could be that the PDS has provided people across the country with significant nutritional safety. An analysis of NSSO data provided by the Food and Nutrition Security Analysis, 2019, India, jointly published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation and The World Food Programme (2019), shows that for urban areas across the country, only 3 states have been able to meet their required daily energy consumption levels by out of pocket expenditures (Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand). Only Punjab has been able to do the same across India for rural areas. Furthermore, a comparison of data between 2004-05 and 2011-12 indicates that the importance of PDS foodgrains to overall consumption levels has seen a significant increase over the years.

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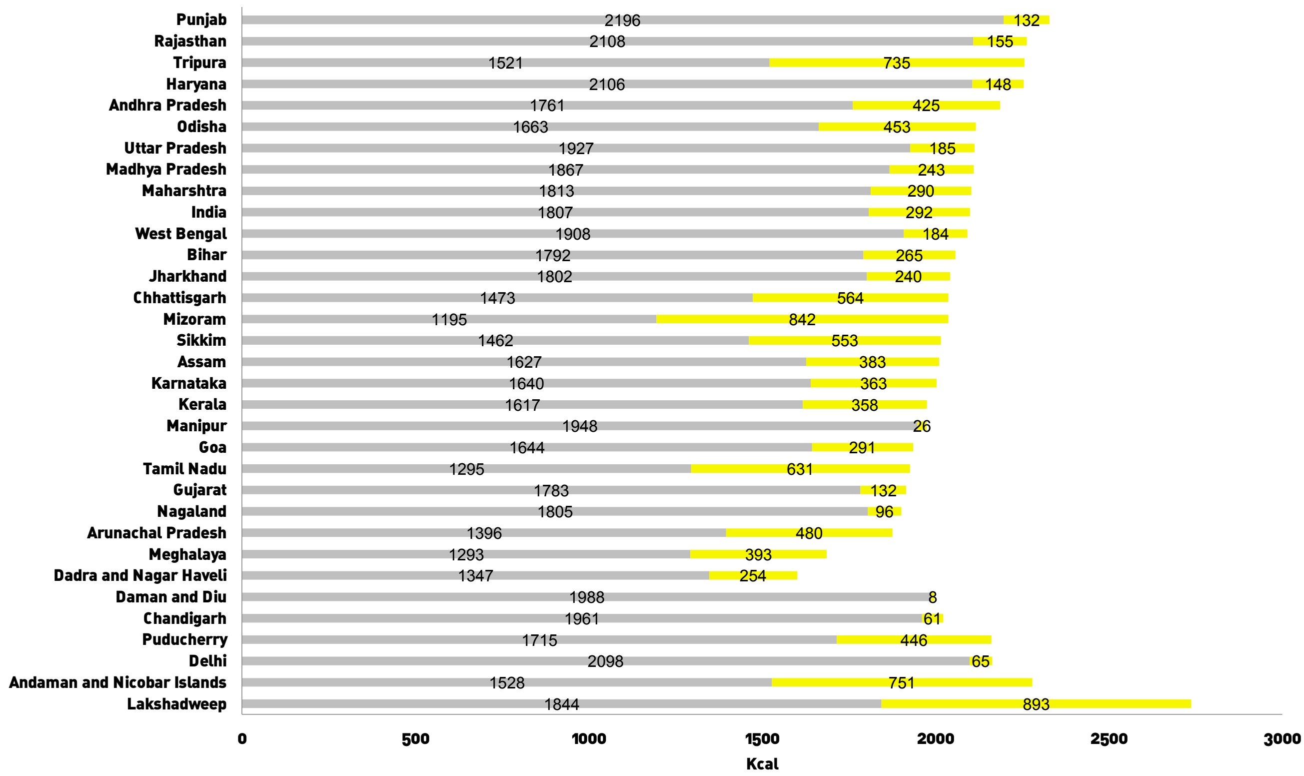

Figure 1: Daily per capita energy from Household Consumption and PDS Supplementation across States in Rural India, 2011 - 12; RDA = 2155 Kcal

Source: Food and Nutrition Security Analysis, India, 2019

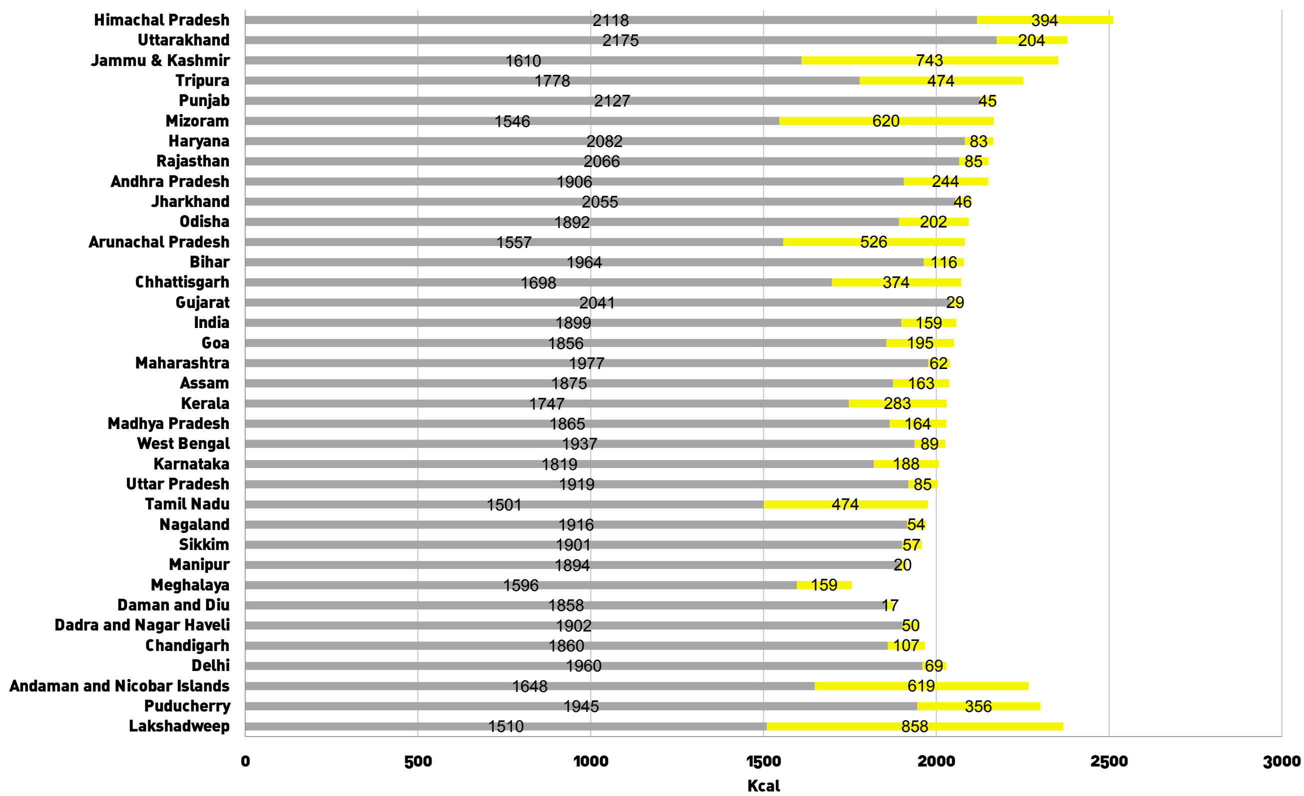

Figure 1: Daily per capita energy from Household Consumption and PDS Supplementation across States in Urban India, 2011 - 12; RDA = 2090 Kcal

Source: Food and Nutrition Security Analysis, India, 2019

Any discussion on food security in India would be incomplete without touching upon what is essentially the most forceful argument that is made against the PDS—leakages. Data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) estimates that leakages in the PDS were at nearly 49% for 2004-05. While undeniably high, it is to be noted that multiple studies indicate a declining trend in PDS leakages over the years. IHDS estimates show a decline in PDS leakages by 2011-12 to 32% (Dreze and Khera 2015). Encouragingly, this decline has been noted to have occurred more drastically in those states that have undertaken reforms to expand PDS coverage and lower prices (Sinha 2015).

Thus, to use the contextual gains made by countries that pioneered the usage of CCTs as a redistributive social policy mechanism, into a movement in India for the wholesale replacement of the PDS is inadvisable at this juncture (Dreze 2015). This is not to say that a progressive, redistributive transfer by the State is undesirable. An unconditional, periodic cash transfer delivered to all individuals without work requirement or a means-test would be a necessary step in this direction. This would enable the attainment of a degree of dignity and freedom for all, independent of the availability of suitable employment or of one's capacity to earn.

The successful implementation of a universal basic income would, in this regard, require the delivery of this money in addition to the expansion in coverage of essential and necessary quality public services in education, health, nutrition, etc. Implemented as such, it would enable a reduction both in inequality and poverty (Patnaik 2019, Ghosh 2017). Cash transfers even in the form of pensions to widows and the elderly, unemployment benefits, minimum income schemes, scholarships for students, or as incentives to bring about the inclusion of marginalised households into institutionalised education and health services are seen as being socially desirable (Ghosh 2016).

Scholars such as Devesh Kapur thus argue that food subsidy cash transfer proposals and technological fixes that are often espoused in India are merely tactical changes that do not consider what ought to be the larger strategy to address food security in the long-term. He goes on to note in this regard: "the promise of cash transfers can only be fully realised if complementary actions in rebuilding public systems and market infrastructure are undertaken—they are not a substitute per se." (Kapur 2011).

PDS AND THE CRISIS OF EXCESS FOOD STOCKS IN INDIA

As has been noted earlier, a significant reason behind the push towards the DBT is to enable a supposed decline in food subsidies owing to fiscal compulsions of the government. However, as noted by the World Food Programme's 'Report on the State of Food Insecurity in Rural India', government policy through the push towards targeting and the resultant decline in foodgrain offtake led to a significant rise in the economic cost of grains. Food subsidy levels from 1997-98 saw an immediate increase to 0.52% of the GDP from 0.44% the previous year. The rise in foodgrain stocks that the government thus possessed as a result of the above was also held to be directly responsible for a significant portion of the government's food subsidy expenditure (Athreya 2008).

In the context of the pandemic, the government has faced criticism from multiple quarters for not having universalised the PDS despite the FCI holding record-high stocks (Sinha 2020, Dreze 2020). As of June

2020, the FCI held combined rice and wheat stocks of 83.27 MMT, significantly higher than the 21.04 MMT and 41.12 MMT that is required to be held as per norms as buffer stock (for 01.04.2020 and 01.07.2020 respectively). This situation has mainly resulted on the part of the government's reluctance to offtake grain from the FCI to keep its fiscal deficit low; the costs are passed on to the books of the FCI which is increasingly forced to rely on borrowings to cover its losses (Rawal et al. 2020).

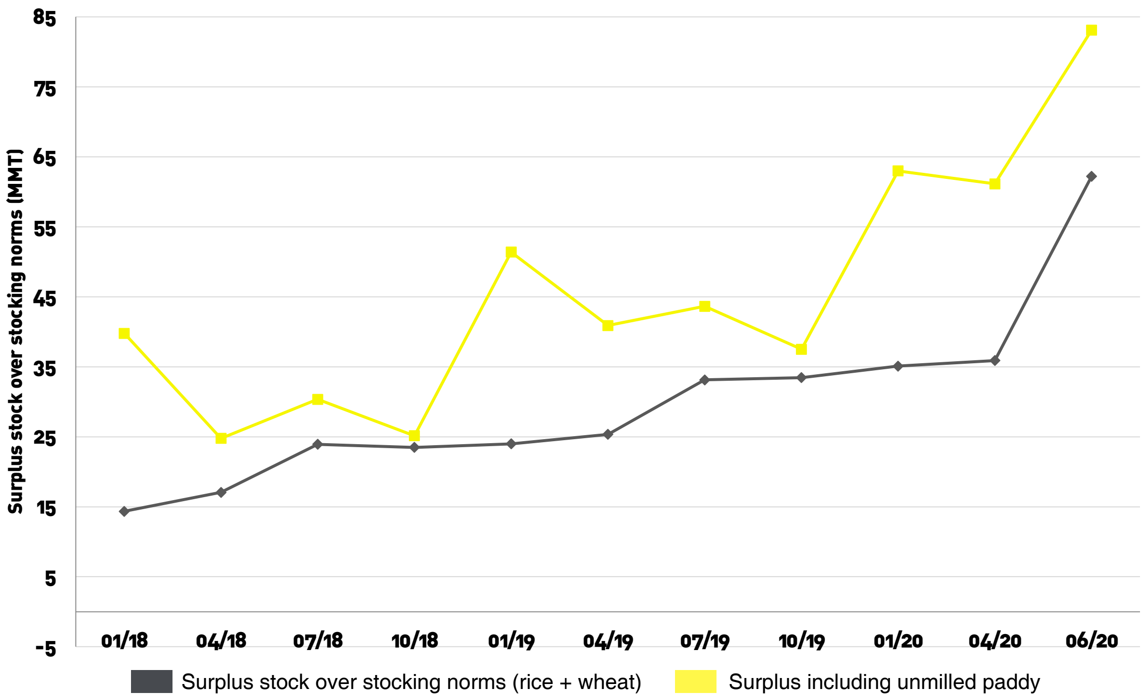

Figure 3: Foodgrain held by the Food Corporation of India in surplus of the stocking norms, January 2018 to June 2020

Source: Food Corporation of India 2020

Table 1: Comparative distribution of foodgrains through NFSA and PMGKAY, April-June 2020

	Distribution of Food Grains Through ePoS devices (MT)	Distribution of Food Grains without using ePoS devices (MT)	Total Distribution of grain through the NFSA (MT)	Distribution of Food Grains Under PMGKAY Scheme (MT)
April 2020	39,50,853.66	4,27,823.97	43,78,677.63	27,52,421.01
May 2020	36,33,781.91	3,31,565.2	39,65,347.11	38,54,871.48
June 2020	38,28,598.06	2,63,209.66	40,91,807.72	34,61,333.12

Source: Department of Food and Public Distribution 2020

The total amount of foodgrain that has been distributed under the NFSA for April, May, and June this year, i.e., for the three months that were initially covered under the PMGKAY, has come up to 124.35 lakh MT. In comparison, the cumulative distribution under the PMGKAY for the same period was 100.68 lakh MT

(Department of Food and Public Distribution 2020g). Merely comparing the distribution under the PMGKAY with distribution under the NFSA however underestimates the overall shortfall. The government's statutory obligations under the NFSA to all entitled stakeholders implies that there ought to be a monthly foodgrain allocation of 43 lakh MT (Rawal and Pais 2020). Taking this figure into consideration, the cumulative shortfall over the three months reaches nearly 33 lakh MT. The total stock, however, including unmilled paddy held by the FCI over the same period notably registered an increase of nearly 220 lakh MT (Food Corporation of India 2020).

It is to be noted, however, that even the above necessarily underestimates the number of people in India who have fallen through the cracks in India's food security policy. Meghana Mungikar, Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera recently estimated that owing to exclusion errors stemming from the intended use by the government of outdated population estimates, over 108 million people in India have been left out of the coverage of the PDS. They note that while 922 million people should be eligible for foodgrain transfers under the PDS based on population projections in 2020, transfers continue to remain restricted to only around 814 million people. As a result, ration card applications of millions of low-income families do not get processed by State governments whose quotas have now expired. In the State of Jharkhand itself, applications of over 8 lakh families are said to be pending (Agarwal 2020). This does not include all those who are also excluded due to other reasons, including the lack of documentation such as Aadhar as is to be expected from any identification exercise. Dreze, in this regard, estimates that the NFSA's actual coverage is only 60% of the population, as opposed to the 67% that it is said to cover.

The Government of India's 'One Nation One Ration Card' scheme in this regard—which as on June 1, 2020, is operational in 20 States and UTs and is slated to be fully operational across the country by March 31, 2021—is said to introduce "nation-wide portability of ration card holders under National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA), to lift their entitlement foodgrains from any FPS in the country without the need to obtain a new ration card" (Press Information Bureau 2019b, Press Information Bureau 2020b). Although a step in the right direction, the scheme by itself would not ensure access to food security to the millions as noted above, who have been excluded from the PDS entirely (The Right to Food Campaign 2020).

CONCLUSION

If the pandemic has therefore taught us anything, it is that there exist millions in India currently subsisting on the margins of penury and destitution who are not entitled to food transfers under the PDS, merely one shock away from starvation. Universalising the PDS at such a juncture such that errors of exclusion are avoided seems to be the only way forward. The argument being made, therefore to replace a system that if reformed has the demonstrated potential to safeguard millions more from starvation is to be questioned in this regard (Somanathan 2015). As Amartya Sen, Raghuram Rajan, and Abhijit Banerjee (2020) have gone on to note in a recent article: “the cost of missing many of those who are in dire need vastly exceeds the social cost of letting in some who could perhaps do without it.”

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