

Towards Inclusion by Food Security for Migrants: An Overview of 'One Nation, One Ration Card' Scheme

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Abstract: *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is seeking to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. It guarantees every citizen with access to adequate food throughout the year through sustainable food systems, the doubling of smallholder productivity and income, and zero food loss or waste. Though India has made considerable progress in tackling hunger and undernutrition in the past two decades, Global Hunger Index indicates that India suffers from a level of hunger that is 'serious'. This shows that food security, accessibility to food and related development are uneven and in this process many have been left behind. To address the issue of hunger and malnutrition, India is working at various policy levels. The recent initiative of government of India is 'One Nation, One Ration Card' to ensure the food security and accessibility to the vulnerable population. The main beneficiaries of this scheme would be migrant workers working in unorganized sector across the nation. The scheme is a significant step towards the inclusion of poor people and ensures that no poor person will be deprived from right to food due to its migratory status. The beneficiary can avail food in any part of the country. This portability of ration card would surely be able to address the need of a vulnerable migrant population who many times face hurdles in availing food at new workplace or their destination. The paper discusses the food security status in India, public distribution system, portability of ration cards and its benefits to a vulnerable section of society particularly migrant workers in unorganized sector. The research paper focuses on the present scheme as an inclusive policy along with its challenges.*

Key Word: *Food security, One Nation, One Ration Card, Migrant workers, Inclusion, Digital Exclusions.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

'Our world has enough food to feed every man, woman, and child. Yet, 870 million people go hungry. People across the world share my outrage and are taking up the challenge to end hunger in our lifetime (Ban Ki-moon: 2016). For the fulfillment of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to achieve a comprehensive, integrated transformation in society, it is extremely significant to deal with hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. Indian Saint Kabir says in couplets 'Bhuke Pet Bhajan Na Hoye Gopala' which means with an empty stomach the best of people cannot perform as per their potential.

2. FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA:

Availability of food has been a major concern of India since independence. For that, India took major steps towards agricultural development and reforms. Still today, it's heavily depending on monsoon and traditional methods. Undoubtedly, economic reforms and structural adjustment programs which were launched 1991 affected agriculture indirectly. This all are associated with food situation in India. The Global Hunger Index presents multidimensional measure of global hunger and ranks countries by their score. In 2016, India ranked 97 out of 118 countries and in 2018, 103 out of 119 countries and reflected 'serious hunger' position. United Nations noted that though India produces enough food to feed its population, the country is home to 25 percent worldwide's hungry population. According to 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report', 195.9 million people are undernourished in India. By this measure 14.8% of the population is undernourished in India. Also, 51.4% of women in reproductive age between 15 to 49 years are anemic (India Food Banking Network, 2018). This shows that India is facing the issue of hunger though it is a one of the largest producer of food. There is a huge population which is remaining excluded in the process of access to enough food and nutrition.

In 2012, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 launched 'The Zero Hunger Challenge'. It recognizes that eradicating hunger is multi-dimensional and that countries need to move beyond an approach that focuses on food production, to work towards achieving progress on five pillars. First is 100% access to adequate food all year round, second is zero loss or waste of food, third is 100% increase in smallholder productivity and income, fourth is all food systems are sustainable and fifth is zero stunted children less than two years (Zero Hunger

Challenge: United Nations). In brief, it is the urgent need to make the world free from hunger, malnutrition and rural poverty to achieve sustainable development goals. With a five-fold increase in food grain production from 50 million tonnes in 1950-51 to about 250 million tonnes in 2014-15, India has moved away from dependence on food aid to become a net food exporter. Still, India is struggling with a problem of hunger and poverty.

3. PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM (PDS) IN INDIA:

PDS in India is probably the largest distribution and safety networks in the world providing subsidised basic items such as rice, wheat, sugar, and fuel to the poor. It is a significant attempt to deal with hunger and nutritional deficiency among its citizen. It was launched to address the food shortage raised after independence. In 1997, the government launched the targeted programme with a focus on poor citizens, below the poverty line and the programme was Targeted Public Distribution System. In this initiative, the beneficiaries were categorized as being below the poverty line and above the poverty line and food grains were given in different prices and quantity. In 2000, Antyodaya Anna Yojna was launched aiming the poorest of poor, included in TPDS. Another milestone in achieving food security in India was the National Food Security Act, 2013 that expanded the scope and mandate of TPDS at much extent. It made right to food as a legal right. The NFSA combines entitlements from three core programs: the TPDS, which targets food-insecure households; the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, a school-based feeding program targeting children ages 6-14 years; and Integrated Child Development Services, a supplementary feeding program targeting children between 6 months and 6 years and pregnant and lactating women. The NFSA entitles half of the urban population and 75 percent of the rural population to receive food benefits under the TPDS, which is the largest of these programs (Bhattacharya, Falco and Puri 2017).

4. ONE NATION, ONE RATION CARD AND MIGRANT LABOURS:

The internal migration in India is huge is evident from the 2011 Census data. It indicates that 45.36 crore people or 37 per cent of the total population of India are migrants (The Financial Express 2019). In the urban growth, migrants play a significant role. Migration and urban development are associated with each other. Internal migration is an integral part of development and cities are important destinations for migrants. The rising contribution of cities to India's GDP would not be possible without migration and migrant workers (Bhagat 2012). Despite of internal migrant's contribution in the development process, very low attention is paid by the government towards them. Various studies show that rural labours migrate in search of better employment opportunities. There is a pattern of labour migration in India. Lead source states of internal migrants include Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttarakhand and Tamil Nadu, whereas key destination areas are Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab and Karnataka (UNESCO 2013). Rural-urban migration though it is seasonal, cyclic or temporary is a livelihood strategy adopted by labours for their existence. It is an attempt to come out of poverty. However, what migration brings for labour that can be questioned. The expectation that by moving they will find appropriate employment and enjoy a better standard of living does not always materialise and subsequently, those who are poor and migrate can end up in the category of the chronically poor (Kothari 2002). Therefore, there is a possibility that labours who migrate for employment and generally work in unorganised sectors in an urban area may remain chronically poor. One of the problems faced by migrants is access to food. The poor migrants experience difficulties in the access to food at various destination places in different states.

UNESCO's report on Social Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India (2013) stated that findings of the Disha Foundation, Nashik (Maharashtra) indicate that due to irregular employment, many migrant families face acute food scarcity, with some migrant families acknowledging that women and children are often forced to beg in the streets to supplement the family income. Further, as Aajeevika Bureau suggests, most migrant families are unable to find low-cost fuel options for cooking, including access to Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), since it is relatively expensive and again requires proof of residence. They end up paying exorbitant costs to purchase kerosene from the black market, which constitutes a major drain on their incomes. This shows that due to migration and non-transferable ration cards, migrant face many problems at the destinations. It leads to vulnerability of different kinds and different levels. There are huge numbers of families depending upon such food security schemes.

Category	Number of beneficiaries (crore families)	Entitlement of food grains (kg/family)
Antyodaya Anna Yojna	2.43	35 kg
Below Poverty Line	4.09	35 kg
Above Poverty Line	11.52	15-35 kg
Total	18.04	-

Table No 1: Number of beneficiaries and entitlements

Sources: Balani, Sakshi (2013). An Analytical Report on Functioning of the PDS

Above table will reveal the status of beneficiaries entitled to subsidised food gains. Addressing the need of food security and inclusion by access to food, the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution recently announced that the government is working on intra-state access to Public Distribution System and planning to launch 'One Nation, One Ration Card' scheme from July 2020. The scheme will provide portability of subsidised food grain for a vulnerable population. Internal migrants will be direct beneficiaries under this scheme. One of the major issues in getting the benefits of subsidised food grain under PDS was that it could be used within a state. Considering this major hurdle, the government planned the intra-state portability of ration card. This is going to be beneficial for migrant poor who are large in number, migrate seasonally or temporary and prone to be excluded from the benefit due to their migration.

The main purpose of this initiative is to ensure no migrant is deprived of food due to the inaccessibility of food grains from PDS shops. It is an inclusive policy by providing intra-state access to Targeted Public Distribution System under online database of ration cards i.e., Integrated Management of Public Distribution System (IMPDS) to ensure that no person due to poverty will be deprived of their right to food. In India, states like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Telangana and Tripura already are providing inter-state portability of ration cards (The Hindu, 2019). This scheme is about digitalization of ration cards and also about its portability. Wadhwa Committee, which was appointed by Hon. Supreme Court, in its report (2009), found that few states have adopted digitalization process for TPDS. Undoubtedly, the technology based uses in TPDS has its own effectiveness in order to maintain the data and minimize errors especially when a large number of needy population is depended on it.

5. CHALLENGES AND GAPS:

'One Nation, One Ration Card' can be a game changer for migrant workers. However, there are certain challenges related to an institutional processes, access, and identification of beneficiaries. These challenges and gaps are discussed as follows:

- Various studies and reports shown that Targeted Public Distribution System suffers from Inclusion and Exclusion errors and failed to reach to the needy people. Inclusion error means that ineligible beneficiaries got included in the list and getting benefits and exclusion error means the exclusion of actual entitled beneficiaries. This is the major hurdle in the implementation process of 'One Nation, One Ration Card' scheme. In 2009, an expert group, which was set up to advise the Ministry of
- Rural Development estimated that about 61% of the eligible population was excluded from the BPL list while 25% of non-poor households were included in the BPL list (Balani 2013). Today in Chhattisgarh, the exclusion of BPL families from TPDS is quite low which is 2 percent while in Bihar it is 30.5 per cent. Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal showing high exclusion which is more than 20 per cent. Identification of needy and right beneficiaries is the most important challenge and major gap which have to be addressed earliest and effectively. Otherwise, the scheme will be failed in serving its purpose.
- Existence of Ghost Cards also an important challenge related to the administration of TPDS. Mukherjee Dabes noted that in 2008, 10.28 crore FPS cards had been issued though there were only 6.52 crore BPL families. By 2014, this number went up to 4 crore. This shows the extent of fake cardholders and also the lacuna in the system. The present scheme will definitely minimize the number of ghost cards because of digitalization but it will remain a challenge to a certain duration.
- Another institutional challenge before the scheme is to minimize the leakage of food grains which most of the time is associated with ghost cards. It is estimated that in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh shows a high rate of such leakage. Digitalization of ration cards will be extremely useful in reducing such leakage.
- The Digital Exclusion is the major challenge in digitalization process in One Nation, One Ration Card scheme. In Jharkhand, many have been denied food under the public distribution system. Right to food activists in that area have listed in detail twenty deaths between 2017 to 2019 due to hunger and malnutrition because of alleged irregularities in the PDS (The Hindu, 2019). The EPOS (electronic point of sale) machine through which the delivery is carried out works only if there is internet connection. Digitalization will give an entire data of beneficiaries but at the same time there is a possibility of exclusion of beneficiaries if data is not update, irregular internet connectivity or biometrics issues. Jharkhand experience is an alarm for the further necessary steps to deal with digital exclusion.

- The next challenge is about the inclusion of a single migrant. Because not all migrate along with all family members and food grains are provided to the household. Therefore how to include those who left behind or single migrant is a major challenge before the scheme. Otherwise, individual ration cards needed to be issued.

To conclude, the government insisting the use of information technology and digitalization right from the purchase of food grains till its distribution. The right implementation and execution of *One Nation, One Ration Card* will be a significant step towards the inclusion by food security for poor, especially a group of poor people who migrate from one state to another. The portability of ration card will definitely address the challenge faced by migrant labours in form of hunger, malnourishment and exclusion from getting a food.

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