

Food Security vs. Nutrition Security

K.R. Venugopal

"Food Security for whom?" This question has been asked year after year. An honest answer has never come from the Government of India or from a majority of the state governments. Hunger is the first threshold of poverty! And if the poor are not helped to cross that threshold there is no way poverty can be eradicated.

Ensuring good nutrition is not just equivalent to avoidance of hunger

The Public Distribution System (PDS) in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala enabled millions of poor households to have access to their cereal needs for years together. A significant dimension of their success was that these states eliminated the urban bias of the PDS. In addition they showed the relevance of an affordable price in the economic scheme to the poor, particularly where food security was concerned. Their successes have inspired other states like Gujarat, Karnataka and Orissa.

PDS is only one aspect of the vastly complex question of Food Security. Its definition should include other major aspects such as redistribution of and access to productive resources (like land and credit and other inputs), dry land agriculture, wages, employment (especially linked to waste land development), and above all 'Nutrition Security'. Now, nutrition security goes well beyond food security. Food security is the availability and the economic and physical access of food to all people at the household and individual levels. "Nutrition security", in the words of eminent nutritionist, Dr C. Gopalan "will demand the intake of a wide range of foods, which taken together in judicious combination (in a well-balanced diet) can provide the essential nutrients that we need. Ensuring good nutrition is not just equivalent to avoidance of hunger. While understandably we may be immediately concerned with efforts to stave off hunger among the poor, our long-term

goal must be the achievement of an optimal state of nutrition for our people which will help them find full expression to their genetic potential. Nutrition Security is much more than Food Security; the former will involve our having to broaden and diversify our food base".

"Nutrition Trends in India", published in 1993 by the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) of the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) in Hyderabad, showed that in rural areas every 5th man and every other alternate women is an agricultural labourer. The NNMB Survey points out that while production of pulses showed an increase of 19.5% during the period 1970-71 to 1990-91, in reality, the per capita availability actually dropped from around 52 gms per capita per day in 1971 to 40 gms per capita in 1991. The increase in production of coarse grains like bajra, jowar, maize and ragi, over these two decades was a minimal 8.5% compared to 129% in wheat and 76.8% in rice.

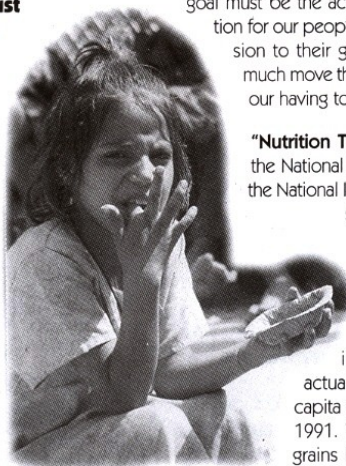
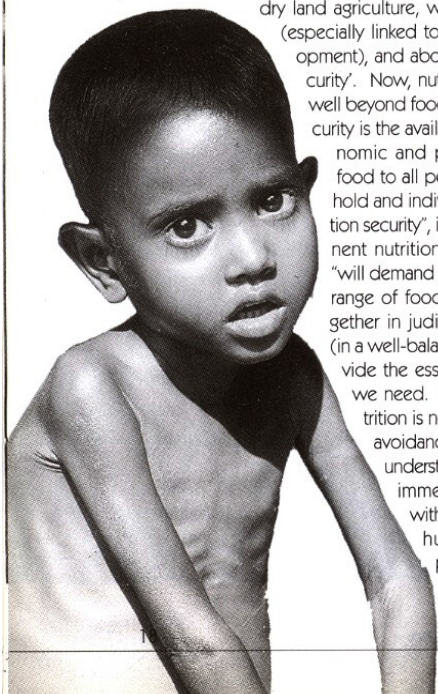
Around 60 paise of a rupee spend on food

The rural Indian spends relatively more on food - a 64 paise out of every rupee spent while his urban counterpart spends 57 paise out of every rupee. The rest of the rupee was spent on non-food items. Income levels bear a positive relation to consumption of protective foods like pulses, milk, fruits, flesh foods, oil and sugar.

The average dietary intake in India is 2280 calories, less than the recommended dietary intake. We should remember again that this is the average and not what the poor consume. And in as many as 9 major states out of the 15 in the country, average dietary intake was less than the 2400 calories suggested to define poverty.

The most unhappy findings of the NNMB Survey 1988-90 of rural children for their nutritional status in the 1-5 year age group is that only about 10 per cent are "normal" by Gozez classification - based on weight for age, with weights above 90 per cent of the NCHS standards. The magnitude of malnutrition was similar among boys and girls, contrary to the general belief that boys have a better status than girls.

Only 50 per cent of adults have normal nutritional status measured by Body Mass Index (BMI) defined as weight for



height - both male and female.

The rest suffered from different degrees of Chronic Energy Deficiency (CED). As for anaemia, it is not confined to pregnant women alone, being higher in rural areas than in urban areas. The Iodine Deficiency Disorders (IDD) picture is alarming. No state in India is free from iodine deficiency. 167 million people are at risk of IDD, of whom 54 million have goitre. Lack of food and nutrition security for the poor reflect themselves in the birth weight of the babies born, which in turn determines their very survival. About 30 per cent of the infants born in India over the years are born less than 2500 gm which is the cut off level to determine low birth weight (LBW). LBW infants have little chance of survival.

The NNMB survey pointed out that a major portion of the income of an average Indian is spent on food - a clear sign of underdevelopment.

Policy Contradictions

The entire question of Food and Nutrition Security at the individual, household, state and national levels is really a function of the cross-sectorial influences that various policies of the government bring to bear upon the population in general and particularly on the poor. But these policies of the government, unfortunately, have tended to contradict one another and carried internal contradictions, ignoring the basic interests of the poor. There are contradictions between agricultural policies and PDS pricing which have ensured the total failure of the PDS and jeopardized the food security of the poor, in recent years.

The Agricultural Policy

Agriculture is key to poverty eradication in India and, therefore, this focus in the new draft Agriculture Policy is timely. In the draft Agricultural Policy, the emphasis is on rain-fed farming, unemployment and malnutrition in rural areas, revitalizing the cooperatives, locating specific technologies for rain-fed and drought prone areas, development of rain-fed horticulture, enhancing the efficient use of marginal lands, strengthening local institutions of the farming community in the decentralised context, and increasing the involvement of the NGOs.

Issues of Concern

However, there are certain other things in the Policy, which cause concern.

- The Policy speaks in isolation about Government's responsibility for ensuring remunerative agriculture prices. To achieve this objective Government should continuously review the price structure and trade mechanisms.
- Another concern is the reference in the Policy to diminishing size of land holdings (and fragmentation), leading to restricted management operations and lower income levels. There is no merit in this point as has been demonstrated all over the world. In East Asian countries and Japan land reforms and small holding led to higher

productivity, which in turn protected the poor and helped the reforms process itself. Land reforms in their varied forms are the key to food and nutrition security.

- The virtual stagnation in dry land farming and in the evolution of drought resistant seeds has to be urgently overcome if the essential obstacle to food security has to be removed.

The draft Policy refers to both food security and nutrition security as objectives and speaks about the diversification of agriculture and promotion of horticulture, fisheries, dairy, livestock, poultry, bee-keeping etc. to answer malnutrition in rural areas. However, the Policy does not spell out any specific strategies to improve the conditions of the poor. In the draft

Agricultural Policy there is absence of the priority that is required for domestic needs, especially in the context of large sections of population living below the poverty line.

Promotion of the already existing inequalities?!

The most damaging aspect of this Policy is the promotion of the already existing inequalities in the rural sector. When it declares that while the objective of the Policy will be to "bestow similar benefits on agriculture as existing in industry, care would be taken to ensure that agriculturists are not subjected to the regulatory and tax collecting machinery of Government". This objective is calculated to promote the interests of the rural rich and deepen the already existing inequalities. Policies of this kind do not promote the food and nutrition security of the poor in any way.

The needs of the poor themselves are Rights or Entitlements for poverty eradication. For efforts to be meaningful the only way is to have the poor at the centre. Since the concerns of the poor are not only confined to food and nutrition security, absolutely important as they are, we have to look at other immediate dimensions of poverty which pertain to work, which give them dignity and income as well as shelter, health, education and information for food security to become real.

An NGO- research institutions coalition, which leads the efforts to a cost-effective strategy of autonomous food and nutrition security at the village, household and individual level is an urgent need of the hour. A string of micro-level experiments needs to be launched based on the concept of Entitlement so that on a broad front ideas can be tested out on the ground to make this a reality before the country and its poor are overtaken by the coming events.

K.R Venugopal I.A.S (Retd.)

is former Secretary to the Prime Minister of India
This write-up is an excerpt from the Key Note Address given by the author at a Workshop on Food Security on 26-27 October, 1998 at Hyderabad.