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The Evolution of Food Security Policies in India: A Critical Examination of the National Food Security Act, 2013

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Abstract

A milestone in India's complex and dynamic food security policy framework is the National Food Security Act (NFSA). Food Security is the very basic need of this time and it is the third country in the world to legislate the constitutional commitment besides Brazil and South Africa. This study analyses the evolution of the NFSA. Initially it analyses historical and legislative sources to fully understand the Act's essential elements, complex effects, and on-going difficulties. The objective of this study is to assess the Act's importance in India's food security policy framework. The retrospective begins with a thorough look of India's pre-independence food security efforts. This study extensively investigates the Green Revolution and agricultural dynamics and targeted public distribution systems in post-independence India and how economic liberalisation affects food security policy. The legislative section details the NFSA's history and implementation. This section describes the extensive drafting, consultations, and amendments that led to its enactment. It also thoroughly explains and analyses the Act's fundamental provisions and rights. The next phase of the study examines how the NFSA affects food security in India. This study evaluates the Act's effectiveness in alleviating hunger and malnutrition and its socio-economic effects on vulnerable groups. Furthermore, this study objective is to examine how subsidies, procurement, and distribution improve food security. An NFSA review should include post-implementation issues and disagreements. The current discussion covers beneficiary identification errors, budgetary constraints, fiscal feasibility, and implementation obstacles. The methodology adopted in this study is based on the secondary data which includes the research studies, news articles, government reports and other relevant studies. The study concludes with findings of summary of the key results, emphasising NFSA's lasting impact and offering policy solutions to its shortcomings.

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Introduction

A. Brief Overview of Food Security in India

Food security is a very serious issue in India due to the country's large population, with over 1.3 billion citizens. While among the largest food-producing countries of the world, India still faces so many challenges, aiming at securing access for its population to adequate, safe, and nutritious food. Food insecurity in India manifests itself by high levels of general hunger, nutritional deficiencies, and poverty. As per the Global Hunger Index, 2022, India secures the 107th rank out of 121 countries in the list related to hunger and malnutrition. History, geography, and socio-economic dynamics are deeply embedded in these food security challenges facing India.

Agriculture is the most important sector, where roughly half of India's workforce finds their employment-the sector is heavily dependent on monsoon rains; thus, vulnerability to climate change is very high. Rapid urbanization and economic growth have meant a change in the pattern of food consumption, which further places pressure on the food system.

B. Importance of National Food Security Act (NFSA)

The NFSA is an enacted landmark legislation in overcoming the challenges of food security in India. NFSA is a comprehensive act enacted in 2013 to ensure that there is adequate food and nutritional security for all citizens of this great country, but with a primary interest in vulnerable populations such as children, pregnant women, and poor people. The Act recognizes food security as a fundamental right-a privilege extended to the citizens of few countries of the world. NFSA's importance lies in its potential to:

1. Reduce hunger and malnutrition
2. Improve access to food for vulnerable populations
3. Strengthen India's food system and agricultural sector
4. Enhance the country's global standing on food security and human rights

C. Objective of the Study

In line with the above argument, the critical review of the evolution and impact of the NFSA on India's food security policy framework would be the main objective of this study. More precisely, the study looks forward to: Analyze the historical and legislative context of NFSA, to Evaluate the effectiveness of NFSA in addressing hunger and malnutrition, and to Assess the socio-economic impacts of NFSA on vulnerable populations. The present study explores these objectives with a view to deepening an understanding of the food security policy landscape in India and the place of NFSA in shaping responses to food insecurity within the country.

2. Historical Context of Food Security in India

▪ Pre-Independence Food Security Efforts

Food security in India, before its independence in 1947, was a huge concern. Most of its policies put in place by the colonial government were for cash crops and not for food. The colonial administration of Britain concentrated on exportation; therefore, it deals with raw materials. As a result of this emphasis, food crops tremendously went downhill, hence widespread famine and food shortages. The Great Bengal Famine of 1943, which took millions of lives, underlined the appalling outcome of less-than-adequate food security measures and ineffacious agricultural policies. Greater emphasis had to be placed on improving agricultural productivity and increasing the availability of food through many attempts. Agrarian reforms and self-sufficiency in food production were emphasized by the Indian National Congress during the freedom struggle. More so, because of a felt need to guard against famine and provide people with enough nutrition to sustain themselves, the government needed to establish a strong food security architecture after independence.

▪ Green Revolution and Agricultural Dynamics

The Green Revolution that was initiated in the 1960s heralded a revolution in Indian agriculture. With the active efforts of

agricultural scientists such as Dr. M. S. Swaminathan, it sought to achieve self-sufficiency in food production for the country. Under the Green Revolution, HYVs of staple crops, especially wheat and rice, came to be introduced in the fields along with improved irrigation facilities, fertilizers, and pesticides. This would prove to be a big stride toward solving the chronic shortage of food in most years since independence. The Green Revolution substantially raised the production of food grains and turned India from a food-deficient into a food-sufficient and even exportable country. Wheat production doubled between 1965 and 1980, while rice production increased similarly. However, this agrarian transformation was not devoid of problems related to environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, and increasing dependence on chemical inputs, raising serious concerns over its long-run sustainability and health impacts.

▪ Targeted Public Distribution Systems in Post-Independence India

It was in the post-Green Revolution era that the Government of India marked the Public Distribution System as one path to attain food security for the poor and destitute classes of people. The Public Distribution Systems (PDS) was thus born to sell commodities at subsidized prices to the needy so as to alleviate both access and affordability issues. Over the years, it gradually evolved into a targeted system, especially with the implementation of the Antyodaya Anna Yojana in 2000, which aimed to more accurately target the poorest households and provide a greater quantity of food grains. In spite of many successes, inefficiencies, corruption, and issues on correct identification also led to the advent of the National Food Security Act in 2013.

▪ Impact of Economic Liberalisation on Food Security Policy

The institution of economic liberalization policies in the early 1990s marked a sea change in the dynamics of food security in India. While such liberalization evidently led to economic growth and increased efficiency, it also brought about massive changes in agricultural policies and food security strategies. The increased orientation toward market-oriented policies raised competition and investment in agriculture but also brought several issues regarding the marginalization of small-scale farmers and the poor in rural areas. This liberalization supported diversification in crops and modernization of agriculture practices, leading to improving productivity. But this also means greater dependency on world markets and, therefore, makes Indian agriculture more vulnerable to changes in international prices and trade policies. A balancing act that policymakers had to perform was to balance these gains of liberalization with the needs of food security for all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable sections. Thus, food security in India has been an interrelationship of a host of legacies from the colonial past, agricultural innovation, targeted distribution systems, and economic reforms. Interpreting this historical configuration gets to be a basis for a critical investigation into the National Food Security Act as a way out to solve the continuing food security challenges of India.

3. Evolution of the National Food Security Act

▪ Legislative History of NFSA

The NFSA's Legislative process began against the backdrop

of India's chronic problem of food insecurity and malnutrition. Owing to the underlying need for a sweeping legislation, the drafting of the bill had been entrusted with the National Advisory Council. Broadly, the NAC draft was underpinned by a rights-based approach wherein the Right to Food was seen as an entitlement of the citizen at the core. Large-scale consultations and debates within NAC preceded the drafting of the initial draft of NFSA in 2011. But the actual drafting was non-linear. It required big negotiations among various stakeholders, including Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (PMEAC) and the Planning Commission. PMEAC threw its reservations on the sustainability of an ambitious food security act, which emerged after substantial changes in the draft. The finalized NFSA, when it went to the Lok Sabha in 2013, compromised on the suggestions of the National Advisory Council (NAC) with the more conservative views stemming from the PMEAC, particularly with regard to the provisions for vulnerable women and children.

▪ **Drafting, Consultations, and Amendments Leading to Its Enactment**

Large-scale consultations were undertaken with a multitude of stakeholders, including civil society organizations, state governments, and experts in the field of food security. In the drafting process, several drafts and revisions were made, with the NAC at the forefront in shaping the original outline. The essential recommendations of NAC provided for universal food access, nutritional support to the deprivation groups of the population, and strengthen the Public Distribution System. While drafting the act, the government constituted several expert committees and invited professional inputs from them, one of which was the Expert Committee under Dr. C. Rangarajan that provided critical input from the feasibility point of view and implementation of the proposed measures. In this stage, changes were meant to respond to various concerns raised by the PMEAC so that the Act is both ambitious and practical. The final draft was presented to the Lok Sabha for a passing, which made it through in August 2013-an important milestone in India's food security policy framework.

▪ **Fundamental Provisions and Rights Under NFSA**

NFSA embodies several core provisions to guarantee food and nutritional security to the population of the country. Salient features of the Act:

1. Legal Entitlement to Food: NFSA legally entitled two-thirds of the Indian population to receive food grains at subsidized prices, including priority households comprising the poorest of the poor and eligible households under AAY.

2. Subsidized Prices: The Act defines that the prices at which the food grains are to be given to beneficiaries shall be: rice at ₹3 per kilogram, wheat at ₹2 per kilogram and coarse grains at ₹1 per kilogram. This pricing is designed to ensure that food actually reaches the economically deprived sections of society.

3. Nutritional Support: NFSA makes nutritional support mandatory for the pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children through various programs, such as the Integrated Child Development Services. This provision is absolutely imperative to address the issue of malnutrition and highly essential to achieve good maternal and child health.

4. Strengthening the Public Distribution System: The Act

calls for reforms in the PDS, which encompasses computerization of records, transparency in operations, and grievances redressal. This is aimed at making food distribution more efficient, and it is accountable.

5. Grievance Redressal Mechanism: NFSA provides procedures for beneficiaries to report grievances in regard to the denial of entitlements or any irregularity with respect to accessing food grains. This facility should therefore be provided at all levels to ensure beneficiary rights and give them recourse where there may be an issue with the process of distribution.

In all, the unfolding of the National Food Security Act represents a complex interplay of historical context, negotiations in the legislature, and a prioritization of food as a fundamental right. Its provisions thus tend to be ambitious regarding tackling the multifarious challenges of food insecurity in India, hence laying emphasis on an all-inclusive and rights-based approach to food security.

4. Impact of NFSA on Food Security in India

▪ **Effectiveness in Alleviating Hunger and Malnutrition**

The NFSA was enacted in 2013 to provide a sufficient amount of food grains at an affordable price to a large part of the population as a means of addressing the chronic problems of hunger and malnutrition in India. NFSA attempts to incentivize hunger reduction and improvement in nutritional indicators, particularly for the most vulnerable demographic group consisting of women, children, and the elderly, through legal entitlements to subsidized food grains for approximately two-thirds of the population. Early reviews on NFSA's effectiveness indicate encouraging impacts in terms of food security metrics. In fact, the Act has been credited with improved food access, as evidenced by rising numbers of beneficiaries getting subsidized food grains under TPDS. There have been reports that NFSA has contributed considerably to reducing the prevalence of undernourishment and improving food consumption patterns among poor households. Yet, there are still challenges ahead. Despite the tall order laid out by NFSA, the rates of malnutrition remain alarmingly high, especially in children. The Act has been criticized for its orientation toward quantity rather than quality. Indeed, questions have been raised about the nutritional adequacy of the food so provided. While subsidized grains are important for improving caloric intake, they may not meet other nutritional requirements, which also include vitamins and minerals. While the NFSA has thus been reasonably successful in addressing hunger, it still needs to go a long way in improving its effectiveness in efforts against malnutrition, particularly through integrated programs on dietary diversity and nutritional education.

▪ **Socio-Economic Effects on Vulnerable Groups**

The NFSA thus bears enormous socio-economic relevance for the vulnerable groups of India. Legally entitling millions of people to food grains at subsidized costs, the Act attempts to meet food requirements and uplift the socio-economic status of the marginalized populace. Its benefits are not confined to food provision alone but also extend towards social stability and economic empowerment. Access to subsidized food grains reduces the economic burden of food expenditure in poor households and allows them to diversify resources into other basic needs, such as health and education. This could have the resulting effect of improving

health and education outcomes-particularly for children-and eventually breaking the poverty cycle. Moreover, NFSA emphasizes women's participation in food security. It recognizes maternal health as a critical factor for the development of the child by providing nutritional support to pregnant and lactating women. Bringing better health and nutrition for women could mean generations to come are treated positively. The NFSA also recognized the central problem: identification of beneficiaries and related exclusion errors and their consequence on marginalized groups. As a result of those reports, it seems that some eligible households have fallen through the cracks and some ineligible households may have been allowed. These discrepancies perpetuate the disparities it was partially enacted to dispel.

▪ **Role of Subsidies, Procurement, and Distribution in Improving Food Security**

Subsidies, procurement, and distribution mechanisms are the backbone for an improvement in food security within the NFSA framework. The Act has provisions to provide food grains at subsidized costs to economically disadvantaged populations of the country, thereby making food available. The pricing structure provides for rice at ₹3, wheat at ₹2, and coarse grains at ₹1 per kilogram, with such food items to be made available at affordable costs towards reducing hunger. Procurement, therefore, has a very major role in the NFSA's success. The government procures food grains from farmers at MSP so that the latter get an adequate remunerative price for their produce, while on the other hand, the buffer stock meets the requirements of TPDS. Therefore, this can be stated as a dual approach: supporting agricultural income and food supply stabilization contribute to overall food security. The distribution system thus becomes an intrinsic part of the NFSA, especially the TPDS. The Act brings to attention the reforms that are needed in the PDS regarding computerization of records and the creation of grievance redressal mechanisms for better transparency and efficiency. Such reforms will help in reducing leakages and corruption so that food grains actually reach the target beneficiaries. Even with such measures, the challenges in distribution are not entirely eliminated. Inadequate infrastructure, inefficiency in logistics, and corruption are some other big concerns that might hamper the effective delivery of food grains. Besides, physical distribution systems lead to delay and discrepancies at the local level over the availability of food. For example, in general, NFSA has increased the food security of India as a whole through the policy of food access with subsidies targeting vulnerable groups, and conducting a planned procurement and distribution system. However, the Act can achieve its full potential only by overcoming malnutrition, socio-economic inequalities, and implementation inefficiencies, so that the right to food is guaranteed for all citizens.

5. Challenges and Controversies

▪ **Beneficiary Identification Errors**

Beneficiary identification is considered one of the major challenges with which NFSA faces. The Act targets food security for about two-thirds of India's population, but this target of correctly identifying eligible households has been a tough job since its implementation. For identification of beneficiary criteria have mostly been based on the 2011 Census figures, which do not reflect the current population

dynamics. This has resulted in anomalies in the identification process, with lists that have managed to exclude eligible households while including ineligible ones. The state governments were supposed to select beneficiary identification criteria in tune with prescribed numbers, rather than pre-determined socio-economic indicators. An "upside-down formula" is the result, with states hard-pressed to make their criteria conform to the central government's directives. Due to this, many states have had to change their identification criteria more than once in order to match the "magic numbers" specified by the central government. This indeed brings confusion and inefficiencies in implementing the NFSA. For example, framing comprehensive NFSA State Rules has been done belatedly in some of the states such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan, leading to incongruous implementation of the Act. This ambiguity in the identification of beneficiaries runs contrary not only to the tall ambitions of NFSA but also reinforces existing inequalities in food access.

▪ **Budgetary Constraints and Fiscal Feasibility**

The second major reason for this ineffectiveness in implementing NFSA relates to the challenges on the budgetary front. While the Act prescribes subsidized food grains for such a huge populace, the actual financial allocation for implementation has been inadequate on many occasions. Indeed, an analysis of the budgetary allocation for various NFSA programs leads to the following observations: one does observe mixed trends in the cases of declining funding patterns for some of the most important programs. At the same time, the budgetary allocations for Integrated Child Development Services have been decreasing, thereby directly affecting the nutritional support extended to children and mothers. The per capita allocation at NFSA for essential services is quite inadequate to meet the nutritional requirements of the population. To cite an example, INR 1,790 is the total allocation per child per year for children in the age group 0-6 years, which is grossly insufficient to prevent malnutrition. Similarly, school-going children are entitled to only INR 523 per annum, which is barely sufficient to meet the requirement of a nutritious and balanced diet. Maternity Benefit Scheme at a mere INR 63 is abysmally inadequate compared to the proposed INR 6,000 under the Act. The foregoing budgetary limitations restrain NFSA from addressing hunger and malnutrition, thus raising questions over its fiscal viability and long-term sustainability.

▪ **Implementation Obstacles**

But, in reality, the implementation of NFSA is encompassed with a set of stumbling blocks that hinders the performance of NFSA. The most pertinent problem is the utter lack of transparency and accountability in PDS. The spurious beneficiary lists of many states were revealed in the 2016 audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General, after which ineligible beneficiaries benefited under NFSA, leaving eligible households bereft of access to food grains. Lack of transparency not only results in integrity but erodes public trust in the ability of the government to deliver on its promise. Apart from these, leakages within the PDS are also big concerns. These leakages may occur at higher magnitudes at various levels, which includes pilferage during transportation, diversion of food grains at the fair price shops, and exclusion of the entitled beneficiaries in the lists. Such

leakages result not only in food grains not reaching the genuine beneficiaries but also add to the general inefficiency in the system. Storage capacity is another critical concern. The quantities allocated to most of the storage facilities are not accommodative, which leads to wastage and deterioration in quality. Complaints over the quality of the grains, such as those on the contents of non-food particles, further worsen the situation since the beneficiaries receive products that do not meet their nutritional needs. In short, the NFSA was an ambitious step to solve the problem of food insecurity in India, but controversy and the challenges largely impeding the effectiveness of NFSA must be seen. The errors in beneficiary identification, budgetary constraints, and implementation obstacles will have to be overcome to realize full potential under NFSA. Addressing these issues would lessen the load of the Act and make it more effective in guaranteeing food security, thus addressing its commitment to making food a right of all its citizens.

6. Conclusion

Analysis of NFSA brings out the significance of the Act but also the challenges the latter faces in securing food for all Indians. The Act is a seminal landmark in the food security policy framework of India, legally entitling an overwhelming majority of its population to subsidized food grains and nutritional support. However, NFSA has faced a myriad of problems in its implementation process, which influences the effectiveness of this act on minimizing hunger and malnutrition. Key findings from the study include the following:

1. NFSA has ensured greater food access, with the growth in beneficiaries receiving food grains at subsidized prices through TPDS. But much remains to be done regarding malnutrition, more so in the case of children, which is a clear indication that the quality of food provision under the Act remains a big task.
2. Exclusion of eligible households and inclusion of ineligible households at the beneficiary level are because of identification errors, which defeat the NFSA objectives and further crystallize the existing inequalities in food access.
3. Budgetary constraints coupled with inadequate allocations to vital NFSA schemes hamper its potential for adequately addressing hunger and malnutrition, thus raising questions about fiscal feasibility and sustainability.
4. Lack of transparency, leakages in the PDS, and incomplete storage facilities present the implementation challenges for effectively delivering food grains to the target beneficiaries.

▪ Lasting Impact of NFSA

Whatever the challenges may be, this NFSA has left its indelible mark on the food security landscape in India. It has established food as a justiciable right and laid a platform for further reforms in the PDS and other food security programs. It has brought into focus the combat against hunger and malnutrition as a national priority and is hence supported by various stakeholders—both civil society organizations and international agencies. The rights-based approach of NFSA empowered the beneficiaries to claim their entitlements besides establishing a system for grievance redressal. The Act has also facilitated the strengthening of PDS, with the onset

of reforms such as computerization of records, and the introduction of the One Nation, One Ration Card scheme, with a view to enhance its transparency and efficiency.

▪ Policy Solutions to Address Shortcomings

Dealing with these gaps to make NFSA functionally effective—to provide food security—needs the following few policy solutions:

1. **Better identification of beneficiaries:** Use a more dynamic and transparent identification system based on updated socio-economic data and clear identification criteria. This process should involve local communities so that it is as accurate and inclusive as possible.
2. **Improve budgetary allocations:** Ensure that NFSA, particularly its key programmes such as ICDS and Maternity Benefit Schemes, receive adequate and periodic funding. The rise in budgetary allocation should at least match the rate of inflation and population growth.
3. **Accountability and transparency:** Strengthen NFSA grievance redressal mechanisms, especially regarding the setting up of an effective, accessible complaint mechanism. Regular social audits and third-party evaluation should highlight and support efforts to address implementation gaps.
4. **Food basket diversity:** The NFSA's grains-centric approach must be incentivized to transcend beyond cereals and cover a wide gamut of nutrient-dense foods rich in nutrients such as pulses, millets, and micronutrient-fortified foods to address the multidimensionality of malnutrition.
5. **Convergence of food security with agricultural policies:** NFSA should be aligned with proposals aimed at sustainable productivity enhancement of agriculture and improving farmers' welfare for the long-term security of food.

Implementation of these policy solutions and addressing the identified challenges from this study will enable the NFSA to hold true to its promise of providing food as a fundamental right and help in eradicating hunger and malnutrition from the country.

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