

Food Security and Agricultural Production in West Bengal

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Abstract

The article deals with the issue of food security in West Bengal. West Bengal is one of the major food producing states, especially rice. The state has attained an impressive growth in agriculture due to some radical policies. Yet, news of starvation and hunger and death in some parts of West Bengal is frequently reported. The present article is a contribution to the formulation of policies and adoption of measures to eliminate hunger, starvation and to provide food security to the people of the state.

Keywords: Food security, agriculture, production, NREGA

Food is one of the basic requirements of human beings for survival. Food insecurity invariably leads to unrest and food riots are frequently reported. Hunger, starvation and the misery of poor and landless farm labourers have provided themes to Bengali plays, short stories, novels, poems and songs. This theme has figured in '*Ananda Mangal*' by Bharat Chandra, in '*Chandi Mangal*'. The subject has been dealt with by Rabindra Nath Tagore in his poem '*Dui Bigha Zami*' (1895). The devastating effect of the two great Bengali famines of 1869 and 1943 has been recorded in '*Ananda Math*' and '*Ashani Sanket*'.

Agricultural development is the sine-qua-non for economic development in West Bengal. Radical land reforms, '*Operation Barga*' and positive development and reforms in Panchayati Raj institutions have significantly increased the productivity in the state. The following Table (1) shows the increased rate of productivity during the past few years in some districts of West Bengal (In percentage)

It should be noted that the enhanced rate of productivity in West Bengal from 1980-81 to 2002-03 is 39 percent and for this twenty three years were required.

Despite claims to increased food production and large food stocks, hunger and starvation for many is a part of life in India, particularly West Bengal. Having enough food stock and increased production is not

Table I. Increased Rate of Production

Name of District	1980-81	1990-91	1995-96	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
Birbhum	136	144	157	136	167	164
Bankura	118	139	148	145	141	120
Burdwan	145	162	157	165	185	183
Cooch Bihar	158	184	191	192	184	187
Hoogly	158	203	216	172	230	212
Howrah	134	203	184	190	209	192
Murshidabad	159	183	190	192	225	228
Malda	140	192	163	206	199	195
Nadia	167	230	236	242	278	276
Purulia	103	106	109	104	106	111
West Bengal	139	159	164	168	177	178

(Source - *Statistical Abstract 2002-03, Govt. of India*)

enough to provide food to the hungry. Sometimes news of starvation death hit the headline of national Dailies. Amartya Sen has rightly observed that ‘hunger’ is not due to lack of food but more due to the inability of the people to buy food. The per capita availability of food grain was 190 kg. per person per annum in 1979-80; it declined to 186 kg. in 2004-05 (Mahajan, *The Statesman*: 22/01/2010). Food security becomes a global challenge today and famine still looms large on many parts of the world. Galloping food prices, increasing consumption of food products and gradual shortage of food articles have brought the issue of food security to the forefront of our policy-makers. The Table No. (2) shows how the prices of food items soar within a year 2009-10 (In percentage).

Table 2. Increased Rate of Prices of Food Items

Month	Essential food articles	Food grain	Vegetables	Fruits	Milk	Fish/Meat/Egg
October’09	12.99	14.75	7.06	5.9	10.03	23.37
November’09	18.66	18.99	18.77	10.19	13.74	30.11
December’09	20.04	20.16	33.99	10.6	13.36	27.68
January’10	18.41	19.32	14.85	7.61	13.99	31.01
February’10	18.11	15.25	9.87	18.02	14.82	30.63
March’10	16.65	13.46	1.56	12.02	13.64	31
April ‘10	16.87	11.93	1.09	13.69	21.93	32.24

Source - *CMIE*

Table -2 shows the sharp rise in prices of essential food articles such as fruits, milk egg, meat and fish pointing towards changing consumption pattern for richer protein diets. Food prices are rising and food insecurity is deepening.

Increasing Problems

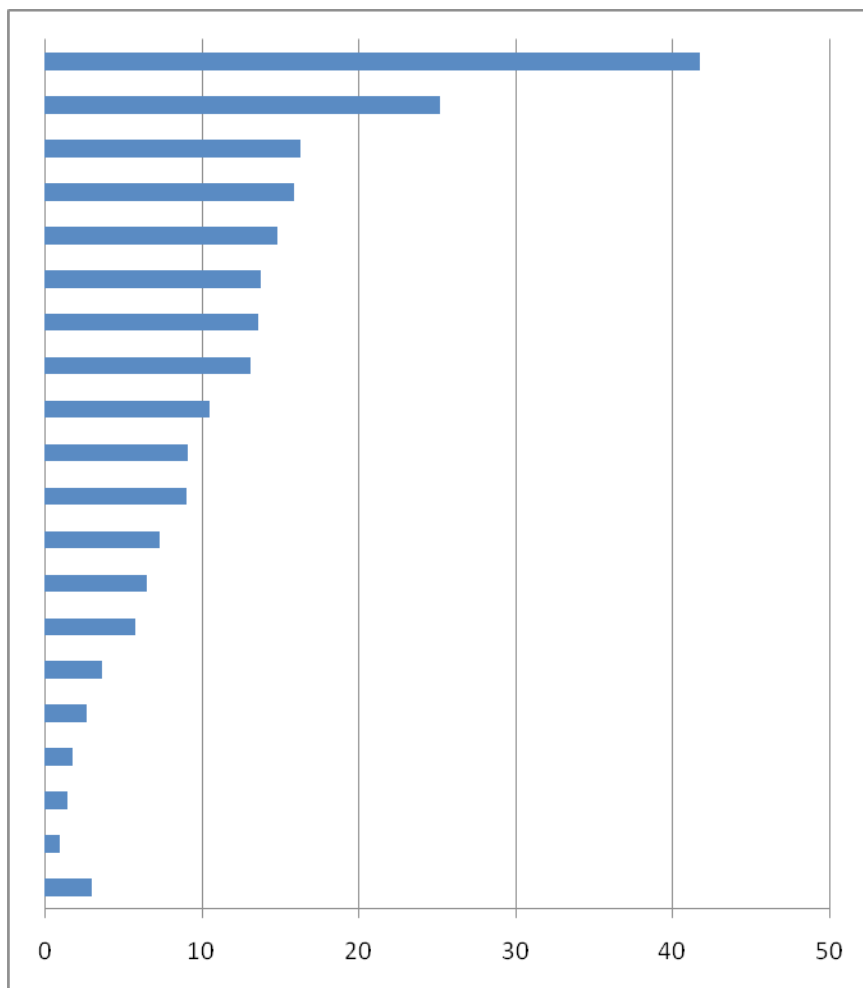
It is true that there has not been a single wide spread famine in West Bengal after independence. But the problem of hunger and starvation rise. The number of landless families is on the rise in West Bengal. In 1995-96, the number of landless families was 42.32 lakh and it was 39 percent of the state's total agricultural families, i.e. 107.79 lakh. But the number rose to 49 lakh in 2001 and in 2010 the number of land less families has risen to 60 lakh and landless farm labourers stood over 90 lakh (Roy, *The Statesman*: 01/07/2010).. As per an agricultural census report, prepared by the *Union and State Government from 1981-2001*, land possessed by small and middle -level farmers, by scheduled casts and scheduled tribes has been on the decline. During the two decades, the marginal and middle-level families have been dispossessed of 7.58 lakh areas of arable land. But the land owned by the big farmers has expanded. The capitalist pattern of agriculture is being reflected in the increasing proportion of marginal land holders, agricultural labourers and very small number of large land owners. All this shows that agriculture sector in West Bengal is being neglected and suffering from backwardness. This neglect and backwardness of agriculture sector in West Bengal has enhanced the insecurity of food and has potential of creating more poverty and hunger. A large number of distressed migrations have been reported from the state. The number of BPL families is rising. The latest NSS survey has pointed out the declining trend in the calorie consumption for poorest groups.

Moreover, 15 lakh acres of farm land out of a total of 145,80,000 acres of farm land of the state remains uncultivated every year due to the financial constraints of the marginal and small farmers. Naturally, there is a wide spread fear that food security in the state would come under threat.

The sense of food insecurity has been further aggravated by the reckless acquisition of cultivable lands for industries and other purposes. A report (2008) prepared by the West Bengal land and land reform department reveals that already 9,000 acres of farm land been converted for setting up industries. The report further reveals that apart from this, a total 1.20 lakh acres of farm land has been converted for non-agricultural use in the state and conversion has been done mainly for residential purposes. This apart, it is not possible to carry out cultivation in a portion of farm land owing to natural disasters like drought, flood etc.

Moreover, the river, Bhagirathi in West Bengal erodes about 530 million hectares each year. All these issues become a major problem for the state in terms of food security

West Bengal occupies 4th rank in respect of food grain production in national level. But, the state produces almost one third production of Uttar Pradesh and 80 percent less of Punjab. Besides that West Bengal is more populated state than the states produce less prod than West Bengal like that Rajasthan, Orissa, Haryana etc. Chart-1 (In Million Tons-MT)



All India level: 216.1 (MT)

The chart-1 shows that India’s food grain production reached 216 million tons in 2006-07. Uttar Pradesh contributed nearly 42 MT, followed by Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Haryana. West Bengal occupies 4th place in respect of grain production at the national level.

MEASURES

To provide food security to the people, some measures may be suggested.

First of all, the Union Government of India has started some inclusive direct action programmes such as Bharat Nirman, NREGA, loan waiver etc., Development of Women and children in Rural Areas etc. These welfare schemes have been rightly formulated. But the crucial point is that money and benefit must reach target groups. Efficient utilization of fund is imperative.

Secondly, food security programme like the subsidized food through the Public Distribution System (PDS) is an effective instrument to provide food security. There is no country in the world which has as widespread PDS network as India has. But corruption and leakages are two major stumbling blocks in the fair distribution of food. Recently, West Bengal had witnessed violent protests against large scale irregularities in the rationing system. This public agitation against the dismal Public Distribution System (PDS) reminds us of the days of food movement of 1966. In fact, West Bengal has attained the low rank of 17th in respect of efficient running of PDS in a study of 24 states by the Public Affairs Centre titled 'The State of India's Public Services'. Tamil Nadu acquired the top and Arunachal Pradesh the bottom rankings. People's resentment should be taken as a wake-up call to revamp the PDS system to avoid its further worsening leading to food riots. The systematic solution to the malpractices and leakages of PDS lies in taking the entire PDS out of the hands of the Civil Supplies Department and to put it under the supervision and control of gram panchayets, regularly reporting to *gram sabhas*. Persons with a high sense of community services and commitment should be selected to maintain the fair price shops.

Thirdly, considerable public investment in agriculture is one of the important requirements for meeting the challenge. Public investment in agriculture sector is one of the important requirements for meeting the challenge. Public investment in agriculture sector is gradually declining. During the 1990s, 8 to 10 percent of the planned expenditure was on agriculture. Over the past decade, it has reached a low of around 2.5 percent, last year; the Government spent a meager sum of Rs. 10,123 crore, which is 2.37 percent of the plan expenditure and hardly one percent of the total expenditure of the Union Budget as per revised estimate. In the 2010-11 budget figure is estimated to be 2.34 percent of the planned expenditure. Development of agriculture infrastructure is necessary for meeting the growing demands for food grain in India. Storage and food processing facilities, irrigation schemes, generation of power, road, transportation and communication facilities should be improved and expanded. Institutional credit facilities should be expanded and made easily available. Public-Private participation for investment in agriculture sector deserves to be endorsed and for this tax laws should be reformed. Neglect of agriculture sector has the greater potentiality of creating more poverty and hunger.

Fourth, higher price for domestic production of food articles would be productive. Increased support prices create a healthy cycle. A higher price paid to the farmer or grower would encourage him to produce more. It will invariably lead to a greater demand for agricultural labourers. This demand will push up the wages of the labourers. The wages of farm labourers varied from Rs.150 to Rs.200 per day in some parts of West Bengal in the last harvesting season. The increased wages have enhanced the purchasing power of the farm as well as unskilled labourers. They are ready to pay high prices to buy food grains from the market. Such step will enhance the country's food security and will minimize our dependence on the global market. There will be no necessity of going around with begging bowl. All the developed countries like the USA, the European Union and Japan provide huge subsidies to their farmers to produce more than their requirements and export the excess production and make other countries dependent upon their exports Mahajan, *The Statesman*: 22/01/2010).. So, any attempt to reduce domestic farm prices will be counter-productive and that will endanger the country's food security. The agricultural and food security policies should emphasize self-reliance in staple food and basic inputs.

Fifth, land is essential for new industries, infrastructure and other projects. But the planning should be carried out judiciously so as to minimize the loss of fertile farm land. Instead of enlarging the cultivatable land to feed an increasing population, arable land is actually dwindling. This may jeopardize the food security of the state. The tendency to grab extra land should be curbed and displacement for non-priority purposes should be restricted. Laws that govern the setting up of ‘Special Economic Zone (SEZ)’ which create incentives for land - grabbers and profiteers should be suitably amended. The movement by the people of Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal is one of the most reliable pointers to this.

There is a silver lining. The Union Government of India is contemplating to enact ‘Food Security Bill’ (NFBS). This proposed enactment will be another sterling piece of legislation of the world after MGNREGS. This Bill would create a statutory entitlement for the included population and a legal obligation for the government. Since the NFBS is going to be one of the most important pieces of legislation for ordinary citizens, it is important that the proposals need to be discussed widely so that the end result will be a better law. This policy should not contend with the problems that confront MGNREGS. Furthermore, the success of the policy depends upon the adequate availability of food and the effective functioning of the state agencies. A recent government report suggested that if food grain damage caused by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and other Government agencies is stopped every family can get 45 kg. of rations every month. The biggest problem of food insecurity would then be solved.

Conclusion

It may be said that agriculture needs priority. Here the slogan of Jawaharlal Nehru deserves to be quoted: “Everything can wait, but not agriculture”.

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