

## Food Security, Food Sovereignty, and the Farmer

- Krishna Gandhi (25/10/2022)

### **Food Security: an excuse to centralise food production and distribution**

The nations of the world - both developed and developing - are getting obsessed with the idea of Food Security these days. The Covid 19 pandemic, the Ukraine - Russian War, and the effects of global-warming like drought and excessive rains have adversely affected food production and distribution in different parts of the world. Supply chains have been disrupted and many nations are struggling to meet the food requirements of their people. In India, the estimates of wheat production were cut down drastically from previously predicted record production levels of above 110 million tonnes to less than 100 million tonnes. Later, the Indian govt imposed a ban on the export of wheat and even wheat flour, retracting grand announcements of helping many countries meet their wheat requirements. Now, the erratic rainfall pattern this monsoon (2022) in most of north and east India has forced the govt to impose sanctions on the export of rice and even broken rice (used to make animal feed in foreign countries). India's export bans have been curiously questioned by those very countries like the US and the EU who have traditionally been opposed to India's attempts to export food to outside world.

In this uncertain scenario of food production facing the world, there is a renewed emphasis on bolstering food security by many developed countries especially of European Union. Previously they had paid scant attention to this issue, confident as they were of uninterrupted supply of food from countries like Ukraine, Russia and Argentina. Wheat prices shot up to nearly twice the then prevailing rates in the aftermath of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, although they have come down after the agreement between Russia and Ukraine to allow the movement of wheat laden ships through the Black Sea. Food deficit countries like Britain are taking steps to alter the nature of farmer subsidies away from environmental protection to per acre fixed payouts so that farmers use the latest technologies including chemical farming to boost production. Technologically assisted AI enabled precision farming is being promoted to increase food production.

Behind all these proposed policy changes are attempts to introduce high technology in agriculture (pushed at the last Glasgow meet on climate change). Under the capitalist paradigm of development, decentralised and distributed agriculture (DDA), that is, family-owned-and-farmed agriculture, is thought to be an impediment to progress in general and food security in particular. Therefore, DDA is being finished through forces of the market or state or both. In the developed world DDA practised by farmer families are almost extinct, but in the developing countries large farming communities engaged in DDA are stubbornly persisting due to a number of reasons including jobless capitalist growth. Nevertheless, here too global capital is trying its best to introduce big technology and centralised production/distribution systems in agriculture.

This will result in the pauperization of the family-owned-farms and the dispossession of their means of production and resources like land, seeds, water. Also under attack will be the knowledge of decentralised agricultural production that farming communities have passed on through generations. All this dispossession has been done through the mechanism of unequal terms of trade. In the developed countries dairy, poultry and meat industries are already being run in factory mode. Only foodgrain production remains to be completely centralised there. In

the developing countries, this transition has been taking place in a slow and steady fashion so far for mainly three reasons. Firstly, the peasantry, at the forefront in the anti-colonial struggles shared considerable political power when independence was gained. Secondly, post independence, redistribution of land led to some immediate economic benefits for the peasantry (now called farmers). Thirdly, the relative poverty that farmers experienced following the penetration of the capitalist market in agriculture took a few decades to take effect. And when it did, farmers realised that it is the terms of trade and not ownership of means of production that determines their incomes. In our country, capitalist market penetration was mostly confined to the northern, western and southern states where green revolution was effective and cash crops dominated agriculture. So it was not surprising that farmers movement questioning the unequal terms of trade also arose in these states.

The three farm laws that were withdrawn after a protracted movement by the farmers, were intended to facilitate capitalist market penetration in agriculture.

The UPA govt led by the Congress had enacted the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013. Through this Act, the central govt centralised the procurement and distribution of food, which normally should be the responsibility of the state governments. After the BJP came to power it was hoped that the NFSA would be repealed or at least diluted, as it had come into power on promises of minimum government. But contrary to expectations, NFSA has been used to strengthen the powers of central govt and curtail those of the state govts. For example, the West Bengal govt's "Duare Ration" scheme of doorstep delivery of ration was recently struck down by the Calcutta High Court on the ground that it violated the NFSA. Earlier also the AAP government's proposal of doorstep delivery of ration was vetoed by the Lieutenant Governor. At the same time NFSA has placed an enormous financial burden on the central government to the tune of at least 3 lakh crores per year. But the more disturbing feature of NFSA is its debilitating effect on food producing farmers of the country. The subsidised food distributed through the Public Distribution System (PDS) ends up depressing the open market prices of the foodgrains (especially wheat and rice), lowering the incomes of farmers. Under the PM Gareeb Kalyan Yojana, 80 percent of households are being given free or almost free rations. In addition to depressing open market prices, large scale corruption in the form of clandestine diversion of wheat and rice meant for PDS to open markets is another negative factor. Although suggestions have been made to replace the PDS system with cash food subsidies for the poor directly deposited into their bank accounts (DBT - Direct Beneficiary Transfer), these have not been seriously taken up by the central govt. Altogether doing away with the corruption-ridden, wasteful, and expensive operations of procurement, stockholding and distribution of foodgrains involved in the PDS would be the best policy for both farmers and consumers. But apparently, too many vested interests want to perpetrate the PDS system. It is obvious that, the main motive of the govt is not saving money, eliminating corruption or securing food for the poor, but to use the foodgrains procured from farmers as a weapon to exploit the very farmers by keeping the foodgrain prices depressed in the open market. This enables the state to extract and transfer capital from the farming community to the pampered and protected industrial lobby.

The NFSA also empowers the government to control and even ban the exports of food. This is another means of manipulating domestic food prices to deny fair prices to the farming community. Even in times of plentiful harvests, exports are not allowed. And when domestic food prices rise due to production shortages, the central govt immediately imports food even at rates above those prevailing in the domestic market. In effect, the thrust of the NFSA is to

make sure that the urban consumers get cheap food. This is achieved by making food production a loss making proposition for the farmers.

The above discussion makes it amply clear that the Indian government is using the mechanism of unequal exchange to extract capital from the agricultural sector to finance industrialists. The NFSA is one of the major instruments to perpetrate this injustice on the farmers.

### **Food Sovereignty versus Food Security**

The idea of Food Sovereignty has been proposed by different farmer and indigenous people organisations as a counter to the state manipulated market control over food production and consumption. The basic argument is that the decisions of what crops are produced by whom and where and what foods are consumed by whom and where must be determined by the producers (farmers) and consumers (farmers and non farmers), and not by markets manipulated by government and corporations. That is, producers and consumers of food are denied sovereignty over decisions affecting production and consumption of food. Hence the food sovereignty movement seeks to wrest this control back to food producers and consumers.

Theoretically, this demand for food sovereignty appears to be well justified. But the real challenge is the practice of food sovereignty. The crux of the matter is the decentralised and distributed nature of food production and consumption. As a result, only those structures, mechanisms and principles compatible with this decentralised and distributed production and consumption of food can help in the establishment of food sovereignty. But so long as the food markets are dominated by governments and corporations there is little hope that food sovereignty will prevail.

### **Smallest units of local governments (panchayats and municipalities) have a key role in food sovereignty**

Therefore it seems that for food sovereignty to be established, control over food production and consumption must be kept out of the reach of governments and corporations. One way to achieve this could be, in the beginning at least, to transfer the responsibility of ensuring food security to the smallest possible (geographically speaking) entities of local self government. This will necessitate the transfer of subjects like agriculture, food production and distribution from the jurisdiction of the Union govt to that of panchayats and municipalities and local community based producer/consumer organisations. Except in case of emergencies, state and the Union govts must be forbidden from interfering in the decision making processes of panchayats and municipalities bodies in matters of food security.

### **Right to Food**

A more fundamental approach to break the hold of the capitalist market (controlled by governments and corporations) over food production and distribution would be to declare the right to food as a fundamental right of every citizen. The enforcement of the right to food would be the duty of the panchayat/municipality where the citizen resides. The production and distribution of food can thus be taken outside the capitalist market mechanisms. The prices of food produced by farmers will not be determined by market forces of supply and demand. Neither will they be subject to interventions by governments and corporations. Just as a labourer's wages are protected by the statutory minimum wages act, so too the prices paid to a farmer for the food he produces will be protected under statutory laws. The responsibility for

implementing statutorily determined prices of food would lie with the panchayats and municipalities.

Thus the panchayats/municipalities must take over the functions of purchasing food grains from farmers and storing them locally to ensure that supply of food is assured to the needy and destitute living within their boundaries. For this purpose, food grain storage facilities must be established at each panchayat and municipality. The destitute and the needy will be easily identified at the level of each village and ward. The panchayat/municipality will then provide them with food through its own distribution system. Alternatively, food coupons will be provided to the needy by using which they will be able to purchase food in the local market at subsidised rates.

But the bulk non-poor consumers will buy food directly from farmers or traders in the local markets. These local markets will function as per the rules formulated by the panchayats and municipalities and will function independently and separately from the capitalist market controlled by governments and corporations.

### **Local Markets versus Capitalist Market**

One necessary condition for achieving food sovereignty by consumers and producers at the level of panchayats and municipalities is that they have access to local markets as distinct from capitalist markets. The rules of the capitalist market will be in the hands of the national government as is the situation now, but the rules and oversight of the local markets will be in the hands of the local communities as represented by the panchayats and municipalities. The local markets will facilitate the exchange of goods and services produced and consumed locally (within the boundaries of the district, for example, to which the panchayat or municipality belongs). This will not be an unequal exchange, as happens in the government controlled capitalist market. In the capitalist market goods and services are taxed by the government under the nationwide GST system. But the local markets will be governed by different rules of taxation as adopted by the panchayats and municipalities where they are located. These local markets will seek to promote fair exchange of goods between producers and consumers who are members of local communities engaged in modes of decentralised and distributed production and consumption.

### **Following the Gurdwara Tradition of Langars**

It has been said that God appears as food to the hungry. Hence it is most appropriate that the hungry are fed at places of worship. The gurdwara tradition of providing food to the hungry (langar) is a shining example of this. This needs to be emulated by all religions so that every temple, masjid, church or any other place of worship provides food to the hungry. Already many famous shrines in our country provide free food to the devotees going to worship there. This practice needs to be encouraged and extended to all places of worship.

Not just religious organisations, but charity organisations may also be asked to participate in this program so that our country is free of hunger.

### **Delivery of food to the consumer**

Despite the role the panchayats and municipalities are expected to play in ensuring food security to the poor, and that of religious and charity organisations in feeding the hungry, there must exist standard mechanisms whereby most of the consumers of food access food. In the absence of a PDS, it is expected that the consumers individually and collectively buy food

items directly from farmers or from traders in the local market. These traders will be allowed to buy food from the local farmers and sell to the consumers in urban areas.

### **Consumer and producer organisations**

Individual producers and consumers of food are not in a position to contact each other directly and benefit from the reduction in the number of intermediate transactions. However producer organisations and consumer organisations can directly deal with each other and benefit from the elimination of intermediaries in the food chain. Therefore panchayats and municipalities may promote the establishment of producer and consumer cooperatives or organisations that result in better realisations for local producers and lesser costs for local consumers.