

The Political Economy of Food Security in India: A Theoretical Reconstruction

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Abstract

This paper, interrogates the persistent paradox of “surplus amidst scarcity” in contemporary India, where record food grain stocks coexist with widespread malnutrition. Moving beyond the traditional production-centric paradigm rooted in Malthusian concerns, the study reconceptualizes food security as a dynamic political process shaped by power relations among the state, agrarian classes, and corporate actors. Building upon Amartya Sen’s Entitlement Approach, the paper advances a multi-theoretical framework integrating Food Regime Theory, the Agrarian Question, and New Institutional Economics to explain the divergence between aggregate availability and individual access.

The analysis traces the evolution of India’s food policy from the Green Revolution’s productivist model to the rights-based framework of the National Food Security Act (2013), and further to the contemporary phase of digital welfare characterized by biometric governance and direct benefit transfers. It argues that the current regime reflects a shift from “bureaucratic entitlements” to “algorithmic entitlements,” raising concerns about exclusion, accountability, and the redefinition of citizenship.

By examining class dynamics, federal tensions, and the growing corporatization of food systems, the paper highlights how competing interests produce a dual food economy—state-supported subsistence for the poor and market-driven nutrition for the affluent. The study further introduces the concept of “nutritional sovereignty,” emphasizing the need to move beyond caloric sufficiency toward diversified, ecologically sustainable, and nutritionally adequate food systems.

The paper concludes that food security in India must be understood as a question of democratic governance rather than mere policy delivery. It calls for a transition toward a decentralized, inclusive, and climate-resilient “food democracy” that restores agency to citizens while addressing structural inequalities in access and distribution.

Key Words: Food Security, Political Economy, Nutritional Sovereignty, Public Distribution System (PDS), Digital Welfare, Food Democracy

1. Introduction

The paradox of contemporary India is nowhere more visible than in the granaries of the Food Corporation of India (FCI). While the nation’s silos frequently overflow with record-breaking buffer stocks of wheat and rice—often exceeding three times the mandatory stocking norms—India continues to occupy a precarious position on the Global Hunger Index. This “starvation amidst plenty” suggests that food security in the Indian context is not a failure of production, but a profound crisis of distribution, access, and political priority.

Historically, the discourse on food security in India was dominated by a productivist logic. Following the traumas of the 1943 Bengal Famine and the "ship-to-mouth" dependence of the early 1960s, the Indian state entered into a social contract with the agrarian sector. The Green Revolution was the technical manifestation of this contract, transforming India into a food-surplus nation. However, this success anchored the theoretical understanding of food security to a Malthusian framework, where the primary challenge was seen as keeping pace with population growth through technological intervention and centralized procurement.

This paper argues that such a production-centric lens is no longer sufficient to address the complexities of the 21st-century food crisis. To understand why chronic malnutrition persists despite soaring GDP and agricultural surpluses, we must shift toward a Theoretical Reconstruction rooted in Political Economy. This reconstruction moves beyond Amartya Sen's seminal Entitlement Theory—which highlighted the failure of exchange entitlements to incorporate the modern pressures of neoliberalism, the "datafication" of welfare through biometrics, and the growing influence of global capital on domestic agriculture.

The central thesis of this research is that food security in India is a contested political process rather than a static policy output. It is shaped by the competing interests of three primary actors:

1. The State: Balancing fiscal discipline and WTO obligations against the electoral necessity of providing cheap food.
2. The Farm Lobby: Pushing for higher Minimum Support Prices (MSP) and state-guaranteed procurement.
3. The Corporate Sector: Seeking to integrate India's fragmented food supply chains into global value networks.

By deconstructing these power dynamics, this paper seeks to build a theoretical framework that views food security not merely as a caloric requirement, but as a matter of Food Sovereignty. We will explore how the transition from a "welfare state" model to a "market-intermediated" model has altered the agency of the poor, turning "citizens with rights" into "beneficiaries with digital IDs." In doing so, this study aims to provide a roadmap for a more democratic and ecologically sustainable food system in India.

2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

To reconstruct the political economy of food security in India, one must navigate the intellectual transition from viewing food as a commodity to viewing it as a right, and finally, as a site of political struggle. The following framework synthesizes four critical theoretical pillars that explain the divergence between aggregate food availability and individual nutritional deprivation.

2.1. From Availability to Entitlements: The Senian Legacy

The point of departure for any serious study of food security is Amartya Sen's Entitlement Approach. Sen famously dismantled the "Food Availability Decline" (FAD) myth, arguing that famines and chronic hunger occur not because food is absent, but because specific

groups lose their "exchange entitlements"—the ability to command food through legal means (production, trade, labor, or transfers).

In the Indian context, this theory explains why a landless laborer may starve while the local merchant's shop is full. However, a modern reconstruction must extend Sen's framework. While Sen focused on the *legal* ability to acquire food, a political economy lens asks *who* defines those laws. The current Indian crisis suggests an "Entitlement Erosion" driven by the state's gradual withdrawal from price stabilization and the informalization of labor, which renders the "exchange value" of wages insufficient against inflationary food markets.

2.2. Food Regime Theory: The Global-Local Nexus

To understand India's domestic policy, we must situate it within Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael's Food Regime Theory. This framework analyzes the global strategic role of agriculture in the world economy.

- The Second Food Regime (Post-War): India's Green Revolution was part of a global "mercantile-industrial" regime where the state subsidized food to keep industrial wages low.
- The Third (Corporate) Food Regime: Currently, India is caught in a tension between its sovereign food goals and the neoliberal corporate regime. The WTO's "Agreement on Agriculture" (AoA) views India's public procurement (MSP) as a trade distortion.

The theoretical reconstruction here involves analyzing how global trade rules constrain the Indian state's ability to protect its domestic "entitlement" programs, effectively pitting global market logic against local survival logic.

2.3. The Agrarian Question and Class Dynamics

The "Agrarian Question," as posed by Kautsky and Lenin and adapted by Terence Byres for India, remains central. It asks how the transition to capitalism affects the peasantry. In India, food security is deeply tied to the class character of the state. The "Surplus Producers" (large-scale farmers in Punjab and Haryana) have historically held the political leverage to demand high procurement prices.

This creates a "dual-squeeze":

1. The Fiscal Squeeze: The state must pay high prices to farmers to ensure political stability.
2. The Welfare Squeeze: The state must provide low prices to the urban and rural poor to prevent unrest.

The political economy of food security is, therefore, an ongoing negotiation between the "Farm Lobby" and the "Consumer Lobby," with the landless rural proletariat often falling through the cracks of this power play.

2.4. New Institutional Economics: The State as a "Leaky Bucket"

Finally, we incorporate New Institutional Economics (NIE) to understand the "Public Distribution System" (PDS). Traditional theories often view the PDS as a neutral delivery mechanism. NIE, however, views it through the lens of principal-agent problems and

transaction costs. The "leakages" in the PDS are not merely technical failures; they are "political rents" extracted by local elites and intermediaries. A theoretical reconstruction must account for how these "rents" sustain local political patronage networks, making the reform of food security systems a deeply political, rather than just an administrative, challenge.

Summary of Theoretical Synthesis

Theory	Focus	Application to India
Entitlement (Sen)	Access & Command	Explains hunger despite 800+ million tons of grain stocks.
Food Regime	Global Power	Explains WTO pressure on India's MSP and buffer stocks.
Agrarian Question	Class Struggle	Explains why procurement favors certain regions and crops.
New Institutionalism	Governance	Explains why "leakages" persist as a form of political rent.

3. The Evolution of Food Policy: From Productivism to Digital Welfare

The trajectory of India's food policy is a history of shifting state-society relations. It reflects a transition from a state obsessed with aggregate scarcity to one grappling with distributional equity, and finally to a state leveraging digital governance to manage its fiscal and social obligations.

3.1. The Productivist Era: The Green Revolution Social Contract

In the mid-1960s, India's food policy was born out of a "crisis of survival." Facing two consecutive droughts and an embarrassing dependence on US food aid (PL-480), the state adopted a productivist strategy. This era was characterized by a specific political economy: the state subsidized modern inputs (HYV seeds, fertilizers, and irrigation) and guaranteed a market through Minimum Support Prices (MSP).

While this successfully achieved national "self-sufficiency," it created a deep-seated regional and crop bias. The political economy of this period was dominated by the "surplus-producing" peasantry of Punjab, Haryana, and Western UP. This created a path dependency where the state became locked into a cycle of procuring wheat and rice, often at the expense of nutritional diversity and ecological health.

3.2. The Rights-Based Shift: The National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013

By the early 2000s, the failure of the "trickle-down" effect—where high production did not translate into lower malnutrition—led to a paradigm shift. Mobilized by the "Right to Food" campaign and judicial activism (the *PUCL vs. Union of India* case), the government moved from a discretionary welfare model to a rights-based legal framework.

The NFSA (2013) was a landmark in the political economy of food. It legally entitled nearly 67% of the population to subsidized grains. This represented a "social-democratic moment" where the state acknowledged food as a fundamental right. However, even within this framework, the tension between universal rights and targeted efficiency remained, leading to the creation of categories like *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* (AAY) for the poorest of the poor and "Priority Households" (PHH).

3.3. The Neoliberal and Digital Pivot (Onwards 2020)

The most recent phase of India's food policy, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is defined by the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) and a massive digital overhaul.

- The "Free Grain" Paradigm: the government has transitioned from "subsidized" to "free" food grains for over 80 crore people, a scheme recently extended. This represents a unique political economy where "free food" serves as a primary tool for poverty mitigation and electoral legitimacy.
- The Rise of Digital Governance: The "One Nation One Ration Card" (ONORC) and the near-100% Aadhaar seeding of ration cards mark the "datafication" of food security. The launch of CBDC-based (Central Bank Digital Currency) digital food currency pilots in places like Puducherry signifies the ultimate shift toward Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT).

Summary of Evolutionary Shifts

Period	Core Philosophy	Primary Actor	Policy Manifestation
1960s-1980s	Productivism	State & Surplus Farmers	Green Revolution / MSP
2013-2019	Rights-Based	Civil Society / Judiciary	NFSA 2013
2020 Onwards	Digital Welfare	Central State / Tech-Platforms	PMGKAY / CBDC-Pilots

This evolution shows that while the "quantity" of food is no longer the primary concern, the "quality of access" is being redefined by digital infrastructure. The state is no longer just a "procurer" and "distributor," but a "digital architect" of food entitlements.

4. Core Analysis: The Political Economy of Interests

At the heart of India's food security lies a complex web of competing interests. This section deconstructs the power dynamics between class, federal structures, and the emerging corporate influence that dictates who gets to eat, what they eat, and at what cost to the exchequer.

4.1. The Class Character of Food: The "Dual-Price" Dilemma

The political economy of food in India is defined by a perpetual tug-of-war between the producer lobby and the consumer lobby.

- The Surplus Farmer: Concentrated in the "Green Revolution" belt, this class exerts significant political pressure to keep Minimum Support Prices (MSP) high. For them, food security is a matter of income security.
- The Urban and Rural Poor: For this group, food security is a matter of expenditure management. High MSPs, while beneficial for farmers, can lead to food inflation if not heavily subsidized by the state.

The Indian state performs a "balancing act" by maintaining a high procurement price for the farmer and a near-zero issue price for the consumer. With the extension of PMGKAY, this gap

is bridged entirely by the Union Budget, leading to a food subsidy bill that often creates friction with fiscal hawks and international credit agencies.

4.2. Federalism and the "Lab of States"

Food security is a concurrent responsibility, creating a fascinating federal political economy. While the Central Government controls the "macro" (procurement via FCI and funding), the State Governments control the "micro" (identification of beneficiaries and doorstep delivery).

- **Competitive Populism:** States like Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Tamil Nadu have historically outperformed the Centre by expanding the PDS net beyond national mandates. This "competitive populism" has turned food into a primary electoral currency.
- **The Funding Friction:** Tensions often arise when the Centre attempts to move toward Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) or cash transfers, which many states resist. States argue that physical grain delivery provides a more robust safety net against market volatility than cash, which can be diverted to non-food expenditures.

4.3. The Corporate Entry: From "Farm-Gate" to "Plate"

A significant theoretical shift in the 2020s has been the increasing role of private capital in the food supply chain.

- **Warehousing and Logistics:** While the 2020-21 farm law protests temporarily stalled legislative changes, the "quiet" entry of large conglomerates into modern silo storage and cold chains has continued. The state is increasingly outsourcing the "holding" of food stocks to private entities under Public-Private Partnerships (PPP).
- **The Retail Revolution:** The rise of "Quick-Commerce" (Blinkit, Zepto, etc.) and organized retail in urban India has created a dual food system. One system is a state-run, grain-heavy PDS for the poor; the other is a corporate-led, nutrient-diverse, but expensive market for the middle class. This "bifurcation" of the food system is a key feature of the modern political economy.

4.4. Gender and the Political Economy of the Household

The theoretical reconstruction must acknowledge that "The Household" is not a monolithic unit. Intra-household food distribution is deeply gendered.

- **The "Buffer" Role of Women:** In times of food inflation, women often act as the primary "shock absorbers," reducing their own caloric intake to ensure children and male members are fed.
- **Women as Policy Agents:** Modern interventions like the Lakhpati Didi scheme and the involvement of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in running fair-price shops are attempts to "feminize" the food supply chain, acknowledging that women are more likely to prioritize nutritional outcomes over political rents.

Summary of Stakeholder Interests

Actor	Primary Interest	Current Strategy
Central Govt	Fiscal Stability / Votes	Digital tracking (Aadhaar/AI), PMGKAY Extension.
State Govts	Electoral Legitimacy	Universalizing PDS, adding millets/pulses.

Large Farmers	Profit Margins	Demand for legal guarantee of MSP.
Corporates	Market Share	Investing in logistics, processing, and "Fortified" foods.
The Poor	Survival / Nutrition	Relying on "Free Grain" while facing high "non-grain" inflation.

5. Theoretical Reconstruction: A New Lens

To reconstruct the theoretical foundations of food security in India, we must move beyond the 20th-century preoccupation with "grain-centric" metrics. A modern political economy must account for the shift from a "supply-deficit" nation to a "nutritional-deficit" one, while navigating the ecological and digital transformations of the 2020s.

5.1. From Caloric Sufficiency to Nutritional Sovereignty

The historical focus of the Indian state has been on "Energy Security"—ensuring enough calories (wheat and rice) to prevent mass starvation. However, the theoretical reconstruction proposes a shift toward Nutritional Sovereignty.

- The Protein-Micronutrient Gap: Despite record grain stocks, India faces a "hidden hunger" of anemia and stunted growth. The political economy of this gap lies in the PDS-centricity of wheat and rice, which crowds out pulses, millets, and vegetables.
- The Millet Movement (Post-2023): Following the International Year of Millets, the state has attempted to reintroduce "nutri-cereals" into the PDS. Theoretically, this represents a move toward diversified entitlements, where the state recognizes that "food" is not just a belly-filler but a biological necessity for human capital formation.

5.2. Ecological Political Economy: The "Cost of Nature"

A reconstructed theory must internalize the ecological externalities of the current food regime. The Green Revolution model was built on "cheap nature"—unlimited groundwater and subsidized chemical inputs.

- The "Ecological Squeeze": In states like Punjab, the water table is receding at an alarming rate. Food security today is being "borrowed" from the food security of future generations.
- Climate Change as a Political Actor: Climate shocks (unseasonal heatwaves and erratic monsoons) are no longer "accidents" but structural features. The political economy must now account for "Climate-Adjusted MSPs" and the transition to regenerative agriculture, which challenges the traditional industrial-farming lobby.

5.3. The Digital Political Economy: "Algorithmic Entitlements"

The reconstruction also identifies a shift from "Bureaucratic Entitlements" to "Algorithmic Entitlements".

- Biometric Citizenship: With Aadhaar-based authentication (ABBA) becoming the gatekeeper of the PDS, the "right to food" is now contingent on "technological visibility."

- Exclusion vs. Efficiency: While the state frames digitalization as a tool to eliminate "ghost beneficiaries" (efficiency), critics see it as a mechanism for "automated exclusion." The political economy here is about the ownership of data—who controls the algorithms that decide who is "poor enough" to eat?

5.4. Food as a "Public Good" vs. "Merit Good"

Finally, the theoretical reconstruction questions the status of food in a neoliberal economy.

- Is food a Public Good (provided by the state for all, like national defense)?
- Or is it a Merit Good (provided to some based on specific criteria)?

The extension of the "Free Grain" scheme (PMGKAY) suggests that the Indian state has settled on a hybrid: "Populist Universalism." This is a political strategy where food is used as a direct link between the Sovereign (the Centre) and the Citizen, bypassing traditional local intermediaries.

Comparison: Old vs. Reconstructed Framework

Feature	Old Framework (1960–2010)	Reconstructed Framework
Primary Goal	Caloric Availability (FAD)	Nutritional & Ecological Sovereignty
Key Crop	Wheat & Rice	Millets, Pulses, & Bio-fortified Crops
Actor Focus	State & Large Farmers	State, Tech-Platforms, & SHGs
Mechanism	Physical Ration Cards	Biometrics & Digital Currency (CBDC)
Nature	External Resource	Structural Limit (Climate Change)

6. Challenges and Policy Implications

As India moves toward the late 2020s, the theoretical reconstruction of its food security must confront a landscape of "cascading crises." These challenges are not merely logistical but are rooted in the structural contradictions of a developing economy attempting to provide a universal safety net within a globalized market.

6.1. The Fiscal-Welfare Paradox

The primary challenge is the Sustainability of "Free Food." The extension of PMGKAY has created a new political equilibrium. While it has effectively mitigated the worst impacts of post-pandemic inflation, it consumes a massive portion of the Union Budget. The policy implication is a potential "crowding out" of investment in agricultural R&D and rural infrastructure. The state must decide if it is a "Provider of Grains" or an "Enabler of Incomes."

6.2. The Climate-Nutrition Nexus

Climate change is no longer a peripheral threat; as seen in the erratic monsoon and the early heatwaves, it is a primary driver of food inflation.

- Policy Implication: Shift the MSP regime away from water-intensive monocultures (paddy/wheat) toward climate-resilient crops (millets/pulses). This requires a "just transition" for farmers in the Green Revolution heartland who are currently locked into unsustainable cropping patterns.

6.3. The "Digital Divide" in Entitlements

The transition to CBDC-based digital food vouchers and biometric authentication (Aadhaar) promises efficiency but risks "algorithmic exclusion."

- Policy Implication: Implementation of a "Human-in-the-Loop" grievance redressal system. Digital tools should augment, not replace, the physical availability of food at the local level, ensuring that technical glitches do not translate into starvation.

7. Conclusion: Toward Food Democracy

The theoretical reconstruction presented in this paper moves the discourse of food security in India from a narrow technical problem to a broader political project. By analyzing the evolution from the Green Revolution's "Productivism" to the current era of "Digital Populism," we see that the "right to food" is not a gift from the state, but a site of constant negotiation between class interests, federal powers, and global market forces.

India has achieved what was once thought impossible: the elimination of mass famine. Yet, the persistence of stunting and wasting serves as a reminder that "Food Availability" is not "Food Sovereignty." A truly secure India requires a transition from a centralized, grain-heavy system to a decentralized, nutrient-dense, and ecologically conscious "Food Democracy."

The future of India's political economy lies in recognizing that food security is the ultimate public good. Whether through the "Bio-fortification" of crops or the "Feminization" of the supply chain, the goal must be to transform "beneficiaries" back into "citizens" who have the agency to define their own nutritional futures.

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