

THE PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN INDIA: A PILLAR FOR FOOD SECURITY AND SOCIAL EQUITY

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Abstract

The Public Distribution System in India plays a crucial role in addressing food security and promoting social equity by ensuring the availability, accessibility, and affordability of essential food grains to millions of vulnerable citizens. This article provides a comprehensive examination of the PDS, starting with a global and national overview of food security concerns and the introduction of the PDS as a key tool in India's food security framework. Moreover, it traces the historical evolution of the PDS, from its origins to the introduction of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), highlighting key milestones in its development. The role of central and state governments in managing procurement, storage, and distribution, along with the key commodities. The PDS's impact on reducing hunger and malnutrition, particularly among marginalized communities, along with its role in promoting social equity and challenges facing the system, such as leakage, inefficiencies in targeting, and ongoing reforms and innovations like digitisation, Aadhaar linkage, and the introduction of the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme are explored as steps toward enhancing transparency and inclusivity. A few suggestions to make PDS more robust, and sustainable, reaffirming its potential to contribute to a more equitable and food-secure India are also made.

Key words

Food security, Public distribution system, social equity, structural inequality, Fair price shops, Targeted Public Distribution System.

Introduction

Every person has the fundamental human right to food. At the international level, the right to food is clearly stated in several agreements, declarations, and principles. Following independence, India's National Food Security Act of 2013 explicitly recognized everyone's right to food (Pradipkumar, 2021). Food security, which is defined as the availability, accessibility, and use of enough safe, nourishing food to meet dietary demands for an active and healthy life, is still a major global concern (FAO, 1996). As of 2021, there were around 828 million hungry people worldwide, and issues with food security are made worse by economic disparity, violence, and climate change (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2021). This issue is especially pressing in countries where poverty and weak agricultural systems limit access to and production of food. Food security is a major concern and a top priority in India. Over 194 million Indians were undernourished in 2019–2021, accounting for nearly 16% of the world's hunger burden, despite the country becoming self-sufficient in food grain production (FAO et al., 2021). Poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and structural disparities make distributing food fairly even more difficult. Furthermore, climate change increases the hazards to India's economy, which depends heavily on agriculture, endangering the accessibility and availability of food (Kumar et al., 2021).

India created the Public Distribution System in order to address these problems, and it has greatly improved the accessibility and cost of food for all. But leakage, corruption, and inefficiencies still exist, necessitating ongoing work to improve the system's efficacy (Swaminathan, 2020). In order to meet the demands of vulnerable communities, it is crucial to address food security holistically, incorporate sustainable agriculture techniques, and improve distribution networks. This is highlighted by both national and international contexts.

Table 1 State Ranking Index for NFSA 2021

Sl No.	State/Union territory	Index Score	Rank
1	Odisha	0.836	1
2	UP	0.797	2
3	Andhra Pradesh	0.794	3
4	Gujarat	0.787	4
5	Dadra & Nagar Haveli & Daman Diu	0.787	5
6	Madhya Pradesh	0.786	6
7	Bihar	0.783	7
8	Karnataka	0.779	8
9	Tamil Nadu	0.778	9
10	Jharkhand	0.754	10
11	Kerala	0.750	11
12	Telangana	0.743	12
13	Maharashtra	0.708	13
14	West Bengal	0.704	14
15	Rajasthan	0.694	15
16	Punjab	0.695	16
17	Haryana	0.661	17
18	Delhi	0.658	18
19	Chhattisgarh	0.654	19
20	Goa	0.631	20

Source:- Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution.

The State Ranking Index for NFSA 2021 evaluates the performance of states and union territories in implementing the National Food Security Act (NFSA) through the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). This index documents progress, highlights reforms, and encourages cross-learning among states to improve food security measures. Built on three key pillars NFSA coverage, targeting, and provisions, delivery platforms, and nutrition initiatives the index focuses on the efficiency and inclusivity of NFSA implementation. Odisha secured the top rank with a score of 0.836, followed by Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh with scores of 0.797 and 0.794, respectively. Gujarat and Dadra & Nagar Haveli & Daman Diu shared the fourth and fifth spots with similar scores. Kerala ranked 11th, with other southern states like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana securing 8th, 9th, and 12th places, respectively. Lower ranks were occupied by Goa (20th) and Chhattisgarh (19th). The index will further evolve to incorporate state-level efforts in procurement and the implementation of schemes like PMGKAY, aiming for a comprehensive assessment of food security systems.

Public distribution System in India

One of the biggest food security networks in the world, India's Public Distribution System was set up to combat the nation's hunger and malnutrition. It functions by means of a network of fair price stores that provide economically disadvantaged segments of society with discounted prices for necessities including rice, wheat, and sugar (Gulati & Saini, 2015). Since its establishment in the 1940s as a means of addressing food shortages during the war, during British colonial authority, this system has undergone major change (Swaminathan, 2000). By making staple food grains inexpensive and available to those living below the poverty line, the PDS plays a vital role in guaranteeing food security. Especially in rural and semi-urban regions, it is essential for tackling both temporary and chronic food insecurity (Radhakrishna, 2005). Furthermore, a major change was brought about in 1997 with the implementation of the Targeted Public Distribution System, which aimed to provide benefits to households classified as Below Poverty Line while lessening the financial strain on the state (Chakraborty & Jha, 2011). The PDS prioritizes marginalized populations, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women-headed households, in order to advance social fairness in addition to food security (Swaminathan, 2000). The PDS indirectly reduces income inequality and promotes household financial stability by providing subsidies for necessities. The approach has been essential in protecting susceptible groups from the negative consequences of inflation and economic shocks, such the COVID-19 epidemic (Narayanan & Saha, 2021).

With high rates of hunger and malnutrition and approximately 22% of the population living below the poverty line as of 2011–12, the PDS is an essential safety net for millions of people (Chakraborty & Jha, 2011; Dreze & Khera, 2013). It is an important part of India's welfare policy because of its capacity to combat hunger, lessen inequality, and improve socioeconomic resilience. India's huge and diverse population, with a range of socioeconomic and geographic vulnerabilities, presents special challenges for food security. The PDS lowers the frequency of hunger and under nutrition by ensuring access to reasonably priced staple commodities, especially for poor and rural people (Radhakrishna, 2005). The programmes like Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) prioritize the poorest households, helping mitigate acute food insecurity (Swaminathan, 2000). Additionally, by emphasizing historically marginalized groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically disadvantaged sections, the PDS advances social justice. The PDS improves these groups economic standing and encourages fair resource distribution by lowering the cost of buying food (Suryanarayana, 2008). Additionally, programmes like the One Nation, One Ration Card have improved migrant workers access to food, encouraging inclusion and lowering regional differences in access (Narayanan & Saha, 2021).

The PDS subsidized food delivery eases the financial burden on low-income families, freeing up funds for other essential necessities like healthcare and education (Gulati & Saini, 2015). The PDS prevents vulnerable populations from falling into poverty by stabilizing household spending during economic shocks or crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic (Narayanan & Saha, 2021). By offering steady and reasonable pricing for necessities, the PDS protects vulnerable groups against market swings and food inflation. This is especially crucial in an agrarian country like India, where climate unpredictability frequently affects food prices

and agricultural production (Radhakrishna, 2005). India's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN, especially Goals 2 (Zero Hunger) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities), is greatly aided by the PDS. Its emphasis on social justice and food security is in line with national goals to combat hunger and advance inclusive growth (Chakraborty & Jha, 2011).

By increasing agricultural output during the Green Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, India was able to move from a food deficit to a surplus. This made the PDS more widely available nationwide in the 1970s, when it was universalized. In order to stabilize prices and solve nutritional inadequacies, the emphasis moved to giving all households, regardless of income level, subsidized food grains (Radhakrishna, 2005). A major change in policy was brought about by the universal PDS inefficiencies and financial strains by the 1990s. In order to concentrate resources on economically disadvantaged populations, the Targeted Public Distribution System was implemented in 1997. Under TPDS, households were categorized as either above or below the poverty line, and subsidized food grains were priced differently for each group (Swaminathan, 2000). With the goal of lowering leakage and increasing efficiency, this signaled a change from universal entitlement to targeted assistance.

To combat corruption, inefficiency, and leakage, the PDS underwent technological and policy reforms in the early years of the twenty-first century. Portability and transparency were enhanced via the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) programme, Aadhaar-based authentication, and the digitization of beneficiary records (Narayanan & Saha, 2021). By reducing exclusion errors and improving access for foreign workers, these revisions sought to increase the PDS's efficiency and inclusivity.

Structure and Functioning of the Public Distribution System

India's Public Distribution System is run by the national and state governments and consists of a coordinated framework for the purchase, storage, and distribution of necessities. Under the Minimum Support Price programme, state agencies and the Food Corporation of India (FCI) purchase food grains. This procurement procedure secures food supply for public distribution while ensuring farmers receive fair pricing (Chakraborty & Jha, 2011). The FCI and state agencies oversee a network of warehouses where the purchased grains are kept. In order to handle shortages and keep prices stable, these facilities manage buffer stockpiles and guarantee the safe storage of grains (Swaminathan, 2000). The Targeted Public Distribution System uses Fair Price Shops (FPS) to provide food grains to recipients. Grain distribution is decided by each state according to its population and economic circumstances (Gulati & Saini, 2015). Both the federal and state governments share responsibility for the PDS, with each having certain responsibilities. Food grain acquisition, storage, and delivery to state depots are supervised by the federal government through the FCI. Additionally, it distributes food grains to states, establishes the Minimum Support Price, and offers subsidies to guarantee affordability (Radhakrishna, 2005). Identifying eligible recipients, overseeing food grain distribution via Fair price shops, and keeping an eye on the PDS operation locally are the responsibilities of state governments. In order to increase efficiency, they also put state-specific innovations and plans into action (Suryanarayana, 2008). Because of the decentralized

approach ensured by this division of duties, governments are able to customize the PDS to meet their own socio-economic and demographic requirements.

Rice, wheat, and coarse grains are the primary goods supplied under the PDS in certain states, sugar and kerosene are also included. In order to alleviate micronutrient shortages, nutritional supplements, such fortified grains, have also been developed recently (Swaminathan, 2000). Under the TPDS, ration cards are given to beneficiaries who have been identified based on socioeconomic criteria. Fixed amounts of grains are distributed to Antyodaya Anna Yojana households, households over the poverty line, and those below the poverty line.

PDS and Food Security

The Public Distribution System works to make sure that basic food grains are affordable, accessible, and available, especially for the most disadvantaged members of society. The PDS has made a substantial contribution to the reduction of hunger and malnutrition in India by providing food grain subsidies and setting up a vast distribution network. By purchasing critical food grains directly from farmers at the Minimum Support Price and distributing them via a network of Fair Price Shops, the PDS guarantees their steady supply. Supply networks are stabilized by this method, particularly in times of crisis like pandemics, floods, or droughts. In order to protect against food shortages and price volatility, buffer stocks are maintained in large part by the Food Corporation of India (Chakraborty & Jha, 2011). The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, for example, provided more free food grains to more than 800 million recipients during the COVID-19 epidemic, proving the PDS's capacity to guarantee supply amid crises (Narayanan & Saha, 2021). By serving the socially and economically disadvantaged segments of society, the PDS guarantees accessibility. Below Poverty Line and Antyodaya Anna Yojana families are among the beneficiaries who have been identified through targeted initiatives such as the Targeted Public Distribution System. By allowing migrant workers and their families to obtain their allotted food grains anywhere in the nation, the One Nation, One Ration Card programmes has further improved accessibility. In India, where more than 139 million people are internal migrants, this is particularly important (Gulati & Saini, 2015).

The PDS subsidized pricing guarantees affordability for households that are most in need of financial assistance. In contrast to market pricing, which are frequently ten times more, priority households receive food grains at heavily subsidized rates—₹2–3 per kilogram for wheat and rice. The PDS improves general well-being by lowering food costs so that families may devote funds to other essentials like healthcare and education (Radhakrishna, 2005). Hunger and malnutrition are directly addressed by the PDS, especially in rural and tribal areas where food insecurity is more common. According to a 2021 World Food Programme assessment, the PDS decreased protein and calorie deficiencies in BPL households by 10% and 22%, respectively. Targeting the poorest of the poor, the Antyodaya Anna Yojana considerably reduces hunger in these susceptible populations by providing 35 kilograms of food grains each month at nominal costs (Swaminathan, 2000). Additionally, several states have addressed micronutrient inadequacies, especially in women and children, by introducing fortified cereals.

PDS and social Equity

By focusing on marginalized populations, such as women, the impoverished in rural and urban areas, and other socially disadvantaged groups, the Public Distribution System advances social fairness. In order to address issues of inequality and advance social justice, it aims to guarantee that food security reaches those who need it the most. Additionally, it focuses on lowering inequality by putting targeted programmes like Antyodaya Anna Yojana and the Targeted Public Distribution System into action. Food access for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Below Poverty Line households, and other vulnerable populations is given priority in these programmes. To ensure that the most vulnerable and impoverished segments of society are not left behind, food grains are distributed at subsidized prices and socioeconomic categories are distinguished (Swaminathan, 2000). To ensure food security for those most at risk of hunger and malnutrition, AAY, offers 35 kg of food grains per month at heavily subsidized rates, focusing on the poorest families (Chakraborty & Jha, 2011). By concentrating resources where they are most needed, this method helps to alleviate systemic injustices and reduces the socio-economic gap.

For the impoverished in both rural and urban areas, the PDS provides an essential support system. The PDS gives people who would not otherwise have easy access to wholesome food a lifeline in rural areas, where poverty and food insecurity are more common. By guaranteeing the consistent and subsidized supply of necessary food grains through Fair Price Shops, the PDS helps rural areas overcome problems including poor infrastructure, high transportation costs, and restricted market access (Gulati & Saini, 2015). A sizable portion of the itinerant labour force in metropolitan areas who might not have regular access to food markets or steady incomes is supported by the PDS. The One Nation, One Ration Card has made the system more inclusive by enabling migrant workers to obtain subsidized food grains in any state (Narayanan & Saha, 2021). The PDS plays a big part in helping women as well. The management of food resources falls on women in many homes. By lowering the cost of food purchases and enhancing home nutrition, the PDS gives women especially those living in low-income households a vital tool. Women from underrepresented groups, including SC/ST populations, gain a lot from the subsidized food distribution in rural areas (Radhakrishna, 2005). By encouraging fair access to food, regardless of a person's social or economic background, the PDS is in line with social justice ideals. The PDS improves social inclusion and overcomes historical disparities in food access by giving priority to underserved communities. By increasing the food security of historically marginalized groups like Dalits and Adivasis, the TPDS's targeting method has promoted social inclusion. It has given these communities a sense of financial relief and dignity by enabling them to purchase food at reasonable costs, so promoting their social and economic empowerment (Drèze & Khera, 2013).

The Leakage of food grains intended for the poor being diverted to the black market rather than reaching their intended beneficiaries, is one of the PDS's most enduring problems. This problem is made worse by supply chain corruption, especially in the areas of distribution, storage, and procurement. A research by Gulati and Saini (2015) found that leakage rates can approach 40% in some states, significantly lowering the quantity of food that reaches the

impoverished. Poor monitoring systems, a lack of accountability, and entrenched interests among intermediaries and Fair Price Shop owners are the causes of corruption and leakage. In addition to jeopardizing the intended recipients' food security, corruption results in the squandering of public funds intended to combat poverty (Radhakrishna, 2005). Several steps have been made to address this, including digitizing the PDS and integrating biometric identification systems to monitor food grain delivery. While these efforts have had some success in minimizing leaks, there are still issues with guaranteeing nationwide adoption (Narayanan & Saha, 2021).

Through tiered entitlements the TPDS was created to specifically target the most vulnerable segments of society, including those living below the poverty line. Errors in inclusion, where ineligible households receive benefits, and eligible households are excluded, are still a major problems. Millions of eligible families were left out of the PDS because beneficiary lists were out-of-date or erroneous, according to Drèze and Khera (2013). For oppressed groups like Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and migratory populations, this exclusion is especially problematic. On the other hand, because of inadequate targeting, non-poor families are included in the system, which results in inefficiencies and resource waste (Suryanarayana, 2008). Initiatives to tackle these problems, such the implementation of the Aadhaar biometric system and the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013, have been positive moves. Effective implementation is still unequal, though, and systems for monitoring, grievance redress, and beneficiary identification need to be improved further. The effectiveness of the PDS varies greatly throughout India, according to Drèze and Khera (2013). While some states, like Tamil Nadu, have a very effective and universal distribution system, others, like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, have major implementation issues. The geographic discrepancies are ascribed to variations in local degrees of corruption, administrative capability, and state governance. Furthermore, these gaps are made worse by elements like socio-political problems, inadequate infrastructure, and physical remoteness. Logistical limitations and insufficient FPS coverage make it difficult for tribal areas in states like Odisha and Chhattisgarh to obtain food grains (Swaminathan, 2000).

Recommendations for Making the Public Distribution System more Sustainable

Improve the accuracy of beneficiary identification, exclusion and inclusion errors should be avoided. A more dynamic targeting system is needed in incorporating socio-economic data to adjust beneficiaries in real-time. The PDS should focus on creating sustainable supply chains that can withstand challenges like climate change and economic instability. The PDS primarily distributes rice, wheat, and a limited number of pulses and sugar. Expanding the variety of food grains and nutritious foodstuffs like millets, pulses, and oilseeds can improve the nutritional quality of food distributed through the system. Block chain technology could be explored for ensuring transparent tracking of food grains from procurement to distribution, which could reduce leakage and corruption. Ensuring the involvement of local communities and Gram Panchayats in the monitoring and implementation of the PDS will help make the system more responsive and accountable.

Conclusion

The Public Distribution System remains a cornerstone of India's efforts to achieve food security and promote social equity, playing a vital role in providing subsidized food to millions of vulnerable individuals across the country. While the system has made significant strides in reducing hunger and improving access to essential food grains, emerging challenges such as corruption, inefficiency, and inequalities in targeting continue to hinder its full potential. Therefore, continuous reforms are necessary to address these challenges and ensure that the PDS remains effective and inclusive. Innovations such as digitization, Aadhaar linkage, and the One Nation, One Ration Card scheme have already contributed to improving the system, but further steps must be taken to enhance transparency, sustainability, and inclusivity. The PDS has the potential to build a more equitable and food secure India by expanding its reach to marginalized groups, improving food quality, and aligning with broader development goals.

Notes

ⁱ Antyodaya Anna yojana' (AAY) has implemented in India from the end of the year 2000. This scheme ensures 'food security', to create a hunger free India and to reform and improve the Public Distribution System so as to serve the poorest of the poor in rural and urban areas. Various reports and estimates reported around 5% of population of the country are unable to get two square meals a day throughout the year. This scheme proposed to cover poorest of the poor by supply of food grains free of cost and other important commodities on subsidized rates (Chinnadurai R.2014).

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