



"Evaluating The Effectiveness Of The Public Distribution System In Mitigating Food Insecurity: A Case Study Of Kapashera"

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Abstract

Food security is a pressing challenge in urban India, particularly in economically vulnerable areas. The Global Hunger Index 2023 ranks India 111th out of 125 countries, highlighting significant food insecurity issues. This paper explores the theoretical foundations and socio-economic consequences of rising urban food insecurity, with a focus on marginalized communities. Through a case study of Kapashera, a low-income locality in Southwest Delhi, we assess the effectiveness of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in alleviating food insecurity.

Our research employs primary data from fieldwork, including interviews and participant observations, alongside secondary sources to contextualize the findings within broader national PDS dynamics. The study highlights residents' grievances, this paper seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the socio-economic implications of neoliberal reforms in India's PDS. The analysis underscores the urgent need to critically examine the impact of these reforms on the most vulnerable populations and to recognize that it's high time for the state to focus on its citizens rather than weakening them through bureaucratic hurdles, surveillance and other restrictive measures.

Keywords: Economic vulnerability, Food security, Grievance, Marginalized communities, Public distribution system

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Introduction

Food security remains a critical issue in urban India, particularly in areas with high population density and economic vulnerability, as evidenced by the Global Hunger Index 2023¹, India ranked 111th out of 125 countries, highlighting ongoing challenges in food security and nutritional adequacy.

The paper seeks to focus on the theoretical underpinnings, and the socio-economic consequences of the rising urban food insecurity, particularly as they affect marginalized communities, while evaluating the effectiveness of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in mitigating food insecurity through a case study of Kapashera.

The basic concept of food security globally is to ensure that all people should always get access to basic food for their active and healthy life and is characterized by availability, access, utilization and stability of food.² Historically, the understanding of food insecurity has evolved significantly, now being influenced by broader systematic factors such as policy decisions, economic structures, and so on. For instance, urbanization and industrialization often change how food is produced and distributed, which can affect low-income populations. Moreover, economic crises and inflation can further strain food access. When the economy falters or prices rise, people's money doesn't go as far. This decrease in purchasing power means that even if food is available, it becomes more expensive and less affordable for those with low incomes. As a result, marginalized communities often struggle more to secure enough food, impacting their overall well-being and quality of life.

Though the Indian Constitution does not have any explicit provision regarding right to food, the fundamental right to life enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution has been interpreted to include right to live with human dignity, which may include the right to food and other necessities. This interpretation was affirmed by the Supreme Court in the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) vs. Union of India (2001) case, where the Court held that the right to food is an integral part of the right to life under Article 21.

¹ Global Hunger Index. (2023). Global Hunger Index 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.globalhungerindex.org>.

² FAO. (2006). Food Security: Policy Brief. Issue 2. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Historically, many people have relied on ration provisions, but this reliance does not mean they were starving. However, by obtaining their ration cards through proper registration, they can save money, and this money can be redirected towards other essential needs, such as education, healthcare, or improving their living conditions. Moreover, the savings accrued from ration provisions can help in building a financial safety net, allowing families to cope better with unforeseen expenses.

The focus of this research is the locality of Kapashera in the Southwest District of Delhi, an area categorized under the F, G, and H Colony Category by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). Kapashera is home to a significant number of poor, marginalized, and working populations, whose grievances regarding the PDS have come to our attention through extensive fieldwork and community engagement. The PDS of India is considered one of the most robust mechanisms of food security, globally, and the weakness of the local administrative personnel severely weakens the efficacy and the desired impact of ensuring the right to food. As a consequence, many families face significant challenges, struggling with access to proper and nutritious food, often going to bed hungry multiple times a month. By incorporating both primary and secondary sources, this paper aims to provide numerous loopholes and flaws that severely undermine the effectiveness of PDS, which was designed to support the very people or rather was meant for the people.

Our research is based on primary data gathered through fieldwork conducted in Kapashera, utilizing interview schedules with local residents and participant observation. This work was undertaken for campaign purposes, with support from the Society for Labour and Development in New Delhi. In addition to the primary sources, these insights are also supported by secondary sources that provide a broader context for understanding the PDS at the national level. By highlighting the specific grievances of Kapashera's residents, this paper seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the socio-economic implications of neoliberal reforms in India's PDS. The analysis underscores the urgent need to critically examine the impact of these reforms on the most vulnerable populations and to recognize that it's high time for the state to focus on its citizens rather than weakening them through bureaucratic hurdles, surveillance and other restrictive measures.

Historical context: Expansion and Reforms

The roots of the PDS can be traced back to the British colonial era, specifically the early 1940s, during World War II, when food scarcity and rationing became pressing issues. A significant and tragic event during this period was the Bengal Famine of 1943, which resulted in the deaths of an estimated 2-3 million people due to widespread starvation and malnutrition. The famine highlighted the urgent need for a systematic approach to food distribution, leading the British government to establish the Rationing System in 1942 to manage food supplies and stabilize essential commodity prices (Ghosh, 2009). This rationing system, though born out of a crisis, laid the foundation for what would later become the PDS. This system was inherited and formalized by independent India, leading to the establishment of the PDS as a mechanism to ensure food security and manage economic stability.

In the early years of independence, the PDS was primarily focused on addressing food shortages and inflation through various schemes. The First Five-Year Plan (1951-56) introduced the Integrated Food Scheme, aimed at distributing food grains to the poorer sections of society (Bhattacharya, 2010).

The 1960s and 1970s saw significant expansion of the PDS, driven by the need to address persistent food shortages and inflation. The Green Revolution, which began in the 1960s, played a crucial role in increasing food production and stabilizing prices, thereby supporting the PDS (Siddiqui, 2011). Despite such an advancement, India's performance in today's time addressing hunger and malnutrition remains a critical issue.

The 1990s marked a period of major reforms, particularly with the introduction of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) in 1997. The TPDS aimed to address inefficiencies in the universal system by targeting subsidies more precisely towards the poor. This reform involved categorizing beneficiaries into below-poverty-line (BPL) and above-poverty-line (APL) groups and delegating the identification of beneficiaries to state governments (Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, 2014).

The early 2000s saw further reforms with the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013. This act sought to provide a legal entitlement to food grains for two-third of the Indian population, ensuring food security as a fundamental right. Specifically, the NFSA covers up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population, identifying them as eligible for subsidized food grains. Under the NFSA, beneficiaries are categorized into Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households, which receive 35 kg of food grains per month, and Priority Households (PH), which receive 5 kg per person per month at subsidized rates.

As per information available on the government website, over 19 lakh ration cards have been issued and over 72 lakh people are provided grains under the PDS through a network of 2257 Fair Price Shops (FPS or ration shops). As highlighted by Shri Prashant Bhushan, learned counsel, the ongoing implementation of the 2011 census data in determining ration eligibility fails to reflect the current population realities, thereby excluding millions from receiving their rightful share of food security.

The NFSA mandated the distribution of subsidized food grains at highly subsidized rates and sought to strengthen the targeting mechanism through biometric and digital technologies (Government of India, 2013). The One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme, initiated by the Government of India in 2019, which allows individuals to use a single ration card nationwide, the ONORC scheme aims to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of the PDS, reflecting a shift towards a more cohesive and responsive social welfare system. (Government of India, 2019). However, the irony of this initiative lies in the fact that, despite having the necessary documentation and technological advancements, many individuals still struggle to avail themselves of their rations. The ONORC scheme, while promising in theory, has not entirely resolved the difficulties faced by individuals in availing themselves of their rations, revealing a disjunction between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities.

Methodology

Research Design: This study employs a mixed-method approach to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Public Distribution System (PDS) and its role in addressing food insecurity. The research design integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the multifaceted nature of the PDS, including its historical development, structural challenges, and impacts on marginalized populations. Special attention is given to identifying loopholes within the PDS, and analyzing how state functioning, including policy implementation and bureaucratic practices, is hindering the delivery of food security.

Data collection: The study is a mix of both primary as well as secondary data. To validate and substantiate the findings from the literature review, primary data collection was conducted. The primary data was collected from

different sources to understand the status of social security and health rights needs of internal migrant workers and was collected through well-structured questionnaire. A structured survey questionnaire was administered to 100 individuals in kapashera to capture the PDS functionality and its impact on food security. The survey covered aspects such as access to PDS, food security and nutrition intake. Qualitative data were gathered through in- depth interviews with key stakeholders, including government officials, and beneficiaries to explore their experiences with PDS and the challenges residents encounter in accessing and utilizing its services.

Sampling: A random sample method was used to select individuals from kapashera, a high concentration of migrated population facing issues with public distribution system. The sample comprised of 100 participants, the majority of whom work in the informal sector, are daily wage earners, factory workers, home-based workers and domestic workers. This constitutes the reason why many avail ration at subsidized prices as and when their circumstances compel them to.

Anecdotes and major findings: In analyzing 100 cases through thematic analysis, we found that the Public Distribution System (PDS) significantly affects food security. Many individuals, despite having all the required documentation, have been unable to receive their ration cards, with some waiting for over a decade. Common issues included arbitrary cancellations, pending applications and difficulties adding family members to existing ration cards.

1. Systemic Failures and Bureaucratic Challenges

- **Pending Ration card applications:** We have conducted thorough investigations into the functioning of the PDS and we have documented 28 individual cases, whose ration card applications have been pending, some of which have been unresolved for nearly a decade. Moreover, the lack of timely action and transparency makes beneficiaries feel ignored and excluded. Many individuals, including those who have applied as far back as 2014, face heightened economic and social stress due to the uncertainty surrounding their applications. This situation highlights a systemic failure to address and alleviate the hardships faced by our most vulnerable citizens. Many families, including those of domestic workers, daily wage laborers, and other marginalized communities, are left without access to their rightful food entitlements. Such a situation directly impacts their nutritional intake and overall well-being. The toll on health and nutrition is significant, with many individuals resorting to borrowing money or skipping meals altogether, leading to malnutrition and other health issues. Such hardships exacerbate the already precarious living conditions of these families, forcing them into cycles of poverty and deprivation. This creates a vicious cycle where the lack of adequate nutrition and health exacerbates poverty, and poverty in turn reinforces food insecurity.

- **Arbitrary cancellations of ration cards :** In our research, we have documented around 28 individual cases of arbitrary cancellations of ration cards in Kapashera. We were informed that these cancellations had mostly occurred on grounds that the ration card holder was not found to be residing on the address mentioned on their cards and the respondents alleged that they had never shifted residence or moved, and no official had ever come to inspect the same. One such case involves a ration card that was cancelled in 2018 without any proper notification. Despite submitting a new application in 2021, the request was rejected, with the status showing that the applicant could not be found at their address. The individual asserts that they have neither moved nor were they notified of

any inspection. We were told by the authorities that cancellations had occurred due to a certain order by the Govt. of NCT of Delhi to cancel dubious ration cards.

One such case involves a family whose ration card was arbitrarily cancelled after the head of the household passed away. Despite having all the eligible documents, they were told by local authorities that their ration card could only be reissued in their hometown as the distribution of ration benefits in Delhi had allegedly been stopped. This is particularly concerning given the implementation of the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme, which is designed to ensure that beneficiaries can access their entitlements regardless of their location within the country. Such discrepancies highlight serious issues in the ONORC scheme and raise questions as to why such barriers continue to exist. Additionally, we found cases where biometric issues led to ration card cancellations and instances where cards were cancelled during transfers from the husband's name to the wife's after his death or separation. These abrupt terminations of benefits, despite meeting eligibility criteria, have significantly worsened the families' hardships.

One of the respondents shared

“Mera ration card cancel kar diya hai 2018 se koshish kar rahi hu ration card banane ki, ek daftar se doosre daftar ke chakkar kaat kaat ke thak gayi hu...” “mai akele kothi mein kaam karke apna ghar chala rahi hu aur sarkar humse humara haq cheen rahi hai”

The impact of these cancellations is severe, particularly for women who are often the primary caregivers and bear the brunt of economic instability. Since as far back as 2013/2014, there have been cases where people's ration cards have been cancelled and despite reapplying it has remained unresolved.

- **Challenges despite having functional ration cards:** According to our research, 11 respondents are facing significant challenges in adding family members to their ration cards, even though their ration cards are otherwise functional. These issues are hindering their ability to access the benefits they are entitled to, despite having valid and active ration cards. For instance, one such respondent who had last applied in 2015 for addition of family members, but despite being told it would take six months, her updates have not been processed, even after complaining online. Similarly, many residents are receiving rations for fewer family members than they are entitled to, creating significant gaps in the benefits they receive.

Many respondents reported significant bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining ration cards. Several individuals mentioned that their applications were not accepted when submitted offline,

“Ration Ke daftar jao toh vo log kehte hai Delhi mein koi ration card Nahi bana Rahi hai sarkar”

government officials stating that no new ration cards were being processed in Delhi. In response to this, some respondents attempted to submit their applications through cyber cafes, incurring fees of 500-800 rupees per application. Despite these efforts, there were no updates on the status of their applications.

In some cases, FPS dealers have been found to engage in corrupt practices, such as selling rationed goods on the black market or providing less than the allotted quantities to beneficiaries.

“5 logo Ke 25 kilo ration hota hai par ration Wala 5 kilo Kaat Ke deta hai”

One of the respondents shared her experience, stating that although her ration card lists five members, the fair price shop (FPS) dealer consistently provides 5 kg less ration than what she is entitled to.

“Ration card pe ration lo to khrab quality ka ration deta hai, aur usi ko paise mein lo tab achha deta hai”

Another respondent shared her experience, highlighting the corrupt practices of FPS dealers. She explained that when she uses her ration card to collect the subsidized ration, she often receives poor-quality grains. However, if she pays for the ration out of pocket, the dealer provides her with better-quality grains.

2. Impact of Technological and Policy Interventions

- **KYC Mandate:** As of 2024, the mandatory e-KYC process, which involves Aadhaar seeding and biometric verification, has proven to be a major obstacle. In states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where Aadhaar seeding has been widely implemented, informal and daily wage workers, who are often part of the migrant labor force, face severe difficulties in completing the e-KYC process due to their constant mobility. One respondent mentioned they were advised to travel back to Bihar, despite having completed biometric verification earlier, due to a malfunction at the local Fair Price Shop (FPS). Another respondent, while currently receiving ration, anticipates needing to travel to Bihar for family-wide KYC updates. Another individual noted having to pay ₹100 at a local temple to complete biometric updates, despite their family's longstanding registration. Some respondents face pressure to complete KYC within soon else their ration cards would be cancelled, all of this without any official notification.

“Agar hum biometrics phir se nahi karte, toh ration card cancel ho jayega.” “FPS dealer ne bola ki mujhe KYC Ke Liye Bihar wapas jana padega; mai bhot Preshan ho gayi hu kyunki mai pehle bhi ek baar biometrics Karwa chuki hu.”

shared one respondent. Such cases highlight how the e-KYC process, intended to simplify ration access, instead imposes significant logistical and financial burdens on migrants and daily wage workers, causing delays and confusion in obtaining essential food supplies.

- **First In-First Out (FIFO) Mode and Quota Issues:** In addition to the complications of e-KYC, many migrants face significant delays in receiving their ration cards. Despite applying as far back as 2014, many individuals have yet to receive their cards and are left with only FIFO (First In- First Out) numbers. The backlog of pending applications is overwhelming, and many have not even been assigned a FIFO number due to the high volume of requests.

Adding to these challenges, the food minister has issued instructions to cancel inactive ration cards, including those belonging to beneficiaries who have left Delhi. The process of creating new ration cards now follows the FIFO mode, aiming to address older applications first. While this policy is designed to streamline the process, it

inadvertently creates challenges, including the risk of arbitrary cancellations. Legitimate beneficiaries may lose access to their ration cards as the system focuses on clearing the backlog and accommodating new applicants. This situation exacerbates the difficulties faced by marginalized populations, particularly migrants who are already dealing with bureaucratic obstacles and delays.

A major issue with the Public Distribution System (PDS) is the outdated quota set at 72,77,995 based on the 2011 Census. This number no longer reflects the current population, which has increased substantially since then. As a result, new ration card applications cannot be processed without canceling existing ones. The entitlements under the Act are also based on the 2011 Census data, which urgently needs updating to account for the population changes up to 2024. The population growth in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi is projected to be the highest in India, at 58% between 2011 and 2036, according to the "Population Projections for India and States, 2011-36" report by the National Commission for Population published in 2020. In Kapashera, the population has also surged since the 2011 Census, which recorded 74,073 residents. Given the growth rate of 342.6% between 2001 and 2011, the estimated population in 2021 would be approximately 2.5 lakh people. Despite this significant increase, the fixed quota remains unchanged, complicating the processing of new ration card applications and exacerbating the difficulties faced by the local population in accessing essential resources.

The grievance redressal mechanisms designed to facilitate access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India, including helplines and digital portals like the e-services portal of the Government of NCT of Delhi, are currently plagued by significant dysfunctionality. These systems, which are intended to simplify the process of accessing benefits and addressing issues, often fall short in practice. The helplines are mostly unresponsive, while the digital portals suffer from technical glitches and user interface problems. Consequently, these issues not only hinder the ease of access for citizens but also contribute to further delays and frustrations.

3. Nutritional Deficiencies and food security

• The Urgent Need for Addressing Food Insecurity and Nutritional Gaps:

The Public Distribution System (PDS) in India, while crucial for providing subsidized staple foods like rice and wheat to low-income households, often fails to meet the comprehensive nutritional needs of its beneficiaries, especially women and girls. The focus on caloric intake rather than nutrient density neglects specific nutritional requirements related to menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation, leading to widespread deficiencies. This issue is more among women in labor-intensive jobs, such as domestic work, who experience significant nutritional gaps. Nutritional deficiencies can severely impact women's productivity, leading to reduced physical and cognitive functioning, increased absenteeism, and decreased overall well-being. Addressing these deficiencies requires a shift towards more nutritionally balanced food options within the PDS, ensuring that women receive the essential proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals necessary for their health and productivity. Survey data indicates that 86 women are not receiving a balanced diet, and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS, 2019-2021)³ highlights that 57% of women of reproductive age in India suffer from anemia. These deficiencies adversely affect women's productivity, physical and cognitive functioning, and

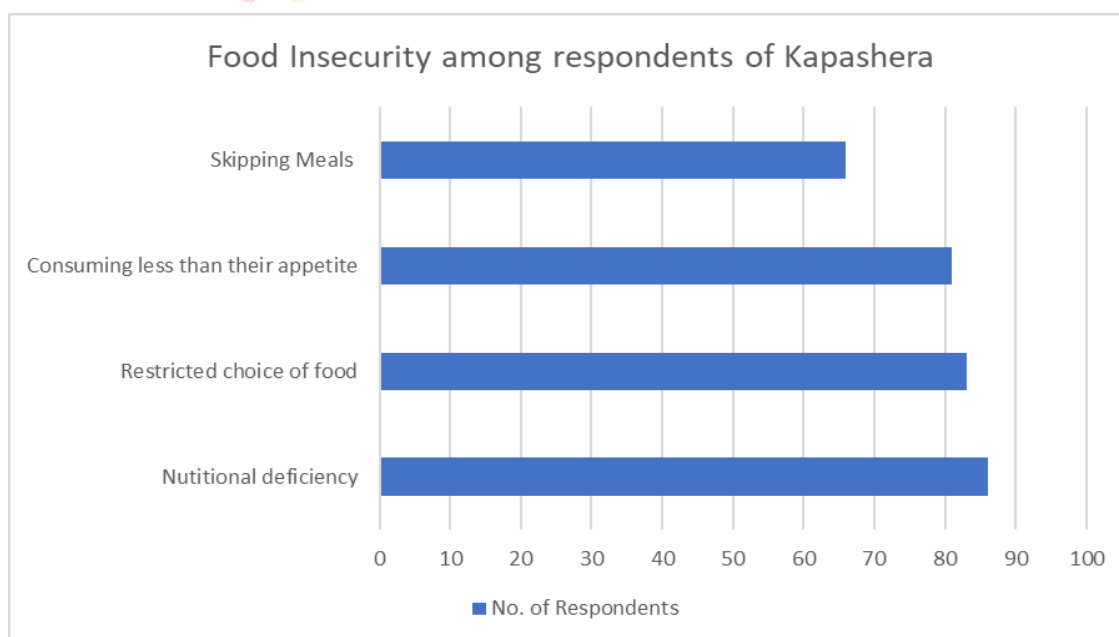
overall well-being, underscoring the need for the PDS to incorporate more nutritionally balanced food options to address these gaps.

The right to food, as recognized under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, is fundamentally linked to the right to live with dignity. This principle was notably affirmed in the case of PUCL v. Union of India (2001)⁴, where the Supreme Court acknowledged that adequate nourishment is an integral component of living with dignity. However, our research reveals a stark reality for many migrants in kapashera. Our findings reveal that 86 out of 100 surveyed individuals are at risk of nutritional deficiency, particularly affecting vulnerable groups like children, women, and lactating mothers. Due to insufficient resources and difficulties accessing the Public Distribution System (PDS), 66 respondents are forced to skip meals, often eating only once a day. Additionally, 81 respondents are consuming less food than needed, which poses severe risks of starvation and potential death. Furthermore, 83 respondents face limited food choices, resulting in significant nutritional deficiencies. This critical situation not only undermines their right to adequate nutrition but also infringes upon their constitutional right to live with dignity. Also, one needs to understand that food insecurity often results not from a lack of food but from structural

³ <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR375/FR375.pdf>

⁴ Murthy, Y. S. R. 12 Right to Food in Indian Constitution and Case Law.

inequalities and especially during the pandemic, these inequalities were magnified as lockdowns and economic disruptions led to job losses and reduced income, leaving many unable to afford basic necessities. During the pandemic, the commodification of food was starkly evident in the way when food prices soared, and availability diminished determining the treatment of food as a market commodity rather than a basic human right. The systemic flaws in the PDS highlighted how, even with a safety net in place, the underlying structural inequalities and market-driven commodification of food can undermine efforts to ensure equitable access.



The Limits of Movement Building in the Context of the Public Distribution System (PDS)

Over the years, movements and advocacy groups have sought to strengthen the PDS by addressing its inefficiencies, corruption, and barriers to access. However, the efforts to build a robust movement around the PDS have encountered significant limitations, particularly in the face of the increasing power of the nation-state and the coercive role of the police. Various welfare policies, whose intention might be to streamline access and ensure portability of ration cards, have also led to increased state surveillance and control over the distribution of food grains.

Historically, social movements have relied on collective action, public demonstrations, and the mobilization of local communities to advocate for their rights. For instance, one of the most significant efforts in this regard is the Right to Food Campaign, launched in 2001. The campaign sought to address the various issues faced by people by mobilizing communities, engaging in public demonstrations, and conducting legal advocacy. Its goal was not only to reform the PDS but also to ensure that food security was recognized as a fundamental right. The campaign played a crucial role in pushing for the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013, which aimed to expand and strengthen the PDS by providing subsidized food to a larger segment of the population. However, in contemporary times the landscape has shifted, with state mechanisms evolving to suppress dissent. In recent years there have been reports of police intimidation, where individuals are coerced into not signing petitions or participating in movements aimed at improving the PDS. As a result, there is a noticeable decline in the willingness of individuals to sign documents, petitions, or even attend meetings that challenge the status quo. This use of coercive state power aligns with Louis Althusser's concept of the "Repressive State Apparatus"⁵, which underscores how the state maintains its dominance through force and repression. The intersection of state power and welfare policies thus creates a complex dynamic where the very mechanisms intended to improve access can also serve to reinforce state dominance and suppress movement building. The food riots observed during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate how such collective actions can serve as a means of resistance. As food insecurity intensified due to economic disruptions, these riots became a powerful expression of public discontent.

Judicial Interventions and Right to Food in India

Legal precedents further underscore the need to address these issues urgently. In October 2021, the Government of NCT of Delhi informed the Delhi High Court, under the guidance of Hon'ble Justice Rekha Palli, that the threshold of approximately 72 lakh beneficiaries under the NFSA 2013 had been met, aligning with Section 3, Sub clause (2) of the NFSA⁶. Local authorities have cited this as a reason for not issuing new ration cards. However, we would like to highlight the

⁵ NI, O. P. (1971). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation).

⁶<https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/already-reached-limit-set-by-centre-on-issuing-ration-cards-delhi-govt-to-hc-101635612002060.html>

directive by Hon'ble Justice Subramonium Prasad in July 2023, which instructed the Government of NCT of

Delhi to survey all pending ration card applications to address the right to food security⁷. Additionally, it is important to note that the criteria for entitlements under the NFSA were based on the 2011 census. Given the significant population growth since then, particularly in the NCT of Delhi, which has seen the highest growth rate in India, a revision of these criteria is necessary. The population data from 2011 is outdated, and updating this information to reflect the current demographic trends is crucial to ensure that the food security needs of the population are adequately met. Further, in the landmark case of *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India & Others* (2001), the Supreme Court of India directed all state governments to ensure that no eligible person is denied access to food due to bureaucratic inefficiencies. The Court emphasized the right to food as an integral part of the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Additionally, in a significant development, the Supreme Court of India has issued critical directives to address the challenges in issuing ration cards to migrant and unorganized sector workers. On July 16, 2024, the Court, during the hearing of petition MA 94/2022⁸ in the case 'Re Problems and Miseries of Migrant Labourers,' directed that the Central Government must allocate additional food grains to states that have issued ration cards to workers registered on the E-Shram portal. The Court has mandated that all states complete the issuance of ration cards within four weeks and file compliance reports. Failure to comply with this directive will result in proceedings against the relevant officials. The Supreme Court also highlighted that the issuance of ration cards should not be constrained by the NFSA quotas, which are based on the outdated 2011 census data. A significant legal development concerning the issuance of ration cards emerged on October 4, 2024, through the court's order in M.A. No. 94/2022.⁹ The order mandates that all eligible individuals, identified as per the National Food Security Act (NFSA), must be issued ration cards by the respective States or Union Territories by November 19, 2024. Additionally, the court ordered that food grains be provided to these individuals without delay.

⁷ <https://www.livelaw.in/high-court/delhi-high-court/delhi-high-court-survey-ration-card-applications-food-security-allowance-delhi-government-233966>

⁸ <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/complete-verification-of-migrant-labourers-for-ration-cards-in-1-month-supreme-court-to-states-3107752>

⁹ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2024/Oct/05/hungry-cant-wait-sc-poser-to-centre-states-on-migrant-workers>

Failure to comply with this directive will result in serious consequences. The court warned that in States where ration cards have not been issued by the given deadline, the Secretaries of Food and Civil Supplies will be required to appear in person to explain the non-compliance. The matter has been scheduled for further hearing on November 19, 2024, underscoring the urgency of the issue. These judicial pronouncements highlight the responsibility of the government to uphold the right to food and ensure that the Public Distribution System functions efficiently to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. The arbitrary cancellations and delays in issuing ration cards not only violate these judicial mandates but also the fundamental rights of individuals to live with dignity. Immediate corrective measures are necessary to address these systemic issues, ensuring that all eligible beneficiaries receive their rightful entitlements without unnecessary obstacles.

Way Forward/Suggestions:

To address the inefficiencies and challenges faced by the Public Distribution System (PDS), the following suggestions outline key areas for reform to improve the effectiveness, equity, and accessibility of the PDS:

- **Revision of Quota allocation:** The government should update the PDS quotas using the most recent population statistics, preferably by conducting the census or projected population estimates. This revision will ensure that resources align with the current demographic realities, preventing exclusion of eligible beneficiaries due to outdated data. Implement strict timelines for the processing and issuance of new ration cards, with applications being processed within a maximum of 30 days. Also, implement a prioritization system that addresses applications pending for extended periods, ensuring that applicants waiting for several years are attended to promptly.
- **Inclusion of Nutrient-Rich Foods:** Expand the range of commodities distributed through PDS to include pulses, edible oils, and fortified foods, addressing specific nutritional deficiencies prevalent among vulnerable populations.
- **Enhance Transparency and Accountability:** Implementing clear and accessible channels for beneficiaries to track the status of their applications and complaints can significantly improve the system's reliability. Importantly, government officials must be required to provide clear, consistent answers and solutions rather than simply redirecting individuals from one office to another. This approach will prevent beneficiaries from experiencing bureaucratic runarounds and ensure that their issues are addressed effectively and efficiently.
- **Strengthen the grievance redressal framework:** Strengthen existing grievance redressal systems by establishing dedicated helplines, online complaint portals, and local facilitation centers where applicants can report issues and receive timely assistance.

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