

Privatization of Food and Water Security Systems: An unequal Social Bargain

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Managing the National Food Security System

Shri Rajiv Gandhi understood the wisdom of Gandhiji's doctrine that **Gram Swaraj** is the pathway to **Purna Swaraj** and launched the Panchayati Raj movement. Schedule 11 of Constitution Amendment 73 entrusts Panchayats with the responsibility of managing natural resources and fostering sustainable agriculture. Representative democracy through elected members, one third of whom are women, and participatory democracy through **Gram Sabhas**, are powerful tools for ensuring a pro-nature, pro-poor, pro-women, and pro-livelihood orientation to all rural and agricultural development programmes.

The National Commission on Farmers (NCF) in its 4 reports submitted to the Union Minister for Agriculture so far, has emphasized the need for community managed food and water security systems promoted with the help and oversight of Gram Sabhas. The gram Sabha can serve as a **Pani Panchayat** to ensure that rainwater is not only harvested, but is used in a sustainable and equitable manner. The trend now is to bypass these grassroots democratic structures, which represent the vision of Rajiv Gandhi for a peaceful and prosperous India, and to resort to depending on private trade to manage our food and water security systems. Unfortunately, this will result in an **unequal social bargain** since those who control the market place are both rich and politically powerful. The Indian enigma of the coexistence of great technological and intellectual capability on

the one hand, and extreme poverty, deprivation and malnutrition on the other, will continue to persist if we do not revitalize and empower the grassroots democratic institutions.

In a country with a high prevalence of poverty and malnutrition, the Government of India should always retain a commanding position in the management of the food security system. This will call for a grain purchase policy, which takes into account the changes in the cost of production, (such as a rise in diesel price), subsequent to the announcement of a Minimum Support Price (MSP). Traders will give a price above MSP when they expect that prices will shoot up within a few months. As Prof Amartya Sen has often stressed, we should not forget the lessons of the Bengal Famine of 1942-43, where millions died out of starvation not because there was no food in the market, but because the surplus food stocks were in the hands of private merchants. **Building a sustainable food security system will require attention to both the availability of sufficient stocks and who controls them.** The global wheat stocks are down this year and the political leadership of the country should decide how to ensure the food security of 1.1 billion children, women and men in an era where much of the food grain stocks will be controlled by national and international grain traders and cartels.

Launching a Second Green Revolution

The year 1968 marked the beginning of the first green revolution when Indira Gandhi released a special stamp titled “Wheat Revolution”. Green Revolution implies enhancing food production through raising productivity per units of land, water, time and labor. The productivity pathway is the only one available to population rich but land hungry countries like ours for achieving a balance between human numbers and food production. Even early in 1968, I called for the mainstreaming of environmental concerns in agricultural research and development to avoid the adverse ecological consequences of exploitative agriculture. Later, I coined the term “**ever-green revolution**” to indicate the pathway to improving productivity in perpetuity without associated ecological or social harm. This term has now come into widespread use internationally.

Our Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh has been calling for a **second green revolution. It will be appropriate to restrict the use of this term to enhancing the productivity, profitability and sustainability of dry land farming, i.e., raising crops solely based on rain water.** If the first green revolution benefited farmers in irrigated areas, the second should help farm families in rain fed, semi-arid areas. In both cases, the pathway used for yield enhancement should be the evergreen revolution approach.

If we are to achieve a second green revolution covering rain fed areas, **the first important requisite is opportunity for assured and remunerative marketing for dry land farm products like pulses, oilseeds, millets, vegetables, fruits, milk and meat.** Due to shortage of wheat and rice in government stocks, the Government of India plans during 2006 to purchase millets, **ragi, bajra and jowar** for use in the public distribution system (PDS). These “underutilized crops” are rich in micronutrients and minerals and should be referred as “nutritious cereals” and not as “coarse cereals” as is being done now. **The decision to purchase and include ragi, bajra, jowar and other millets in PDS should be a permanent one.** This will help to enhance nutrition security on the one hand, and the productivity and economic sustainability of improved dry land agriculture, on the other. There is a large untapped reservoir of dry land farming technologies and we can see a drastic rise in the productivity and production of crops in these areas if farm families are supported by credit, insurance, a fair price and assured market for their produce, as happened in the eighties when Shri Rajiv Gandhi launched a Technology Mission in Oilseeds.

The country can produce as much pulses and oilseeds we need through a synergy between technology and public policy, since there is a stockpile of improved varieties of dry land crops. The new hybrid **arhar** strains (Pigeon pea) can trigger a pulses revolution. The largest section of consumers in India is the farming population. By helping farmer-consumers to have greater marketable surplus because of higher productivity, we can eliminate substantially poverty induced hunger and malnutrition in the country.

Lester Brown has recently pointed out that the world carry over stocks at the end of this crop year are projected to drop to 57 days of consumption, the shortest buffer since the 56 day low in 1972 that triggered a doubling of grain prices. **While import of wheat, pulses, sugar and oilseeds may be necessary during 2006 in order to prevent an undue rise in prices, we should avoid the danger of making this a habit.** Our food budget should be managed with home grown food, since agriculture is the backbone of our rural livelihood security system. **The proposed National Rain fed Authority can have as its sole mandate the launching of a second green revolution in dry farming areas beginning with pulses and oilseeds. The present policy, if continued in the long run, may help some traders and multinational companies to become rich, but will render millions of farmwomen and men in rain fed areas paupers.**

Another step that should be taken in dry farming and tribal areas is the establishment of community managed food and water security systems. Such a system will involve the establishment by local self-help groups, grain and water banks. The grain bank could be built with local staples and could help to avoid distress sale as well as panic purchase. The Water Bank can be established by Community water harvesting. Conservation, cultivation, consumption and commerce can become an integrated food management system under the control of local communities. By promoting such decentralized community management systems, with the Gram Sabhas providing policy oversight, we can address concurrently endemic hunger caused by poverty, hidden hunger arising from the deficiency of iron, iodine, zinc and Vitamin A in the diet, and transient hunger caused by natural calamities like drought, floods, cyclones. It will also be prudent to develop such a system in the context of potential adverse changes in temperature, precipitation and sea level arising from climate change and global warming.

Increasing privatization of our food and water security systems has important implications for the food, income and work security of small and marginal farmers and agricultural labor. The WTO agreement entered into at Marrakesh in 1994 resulted in an unequal trade bargain. **The growing privatization of food and water security systems**

is already leading to an unequal social bargain. The poor will not be able to withstand the tragedy of distress sales and inundation of low cost foods and fruits from rich countries whose agriculture is driven by heavy inputs of subsidy, capital and technology. We will never be able to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goal in the area of hunger and poverty elimination, if we do not insulate the farmer-consumers from unfair trade and social bargains.

An **Universal Public Distribution System**, which alone can save the economically underprivileged sections of the society from chronic under-nutrition, will need annually approximately about 40 million tonnes of food grains. If we assume that about 160 million families will use PDS, and that each family gets an allocation of 20 kg per month, we will need annually about 38 million tonnes to support an Universal PDS. By enlarging the minimum support price to a wider range of food grains and purchasing them for use in PDS, we can launch both a second green revolution and a universal public distribution system. Also, through Community Grain and Water Banks, we can help to start a “Store Grains and Water Everywhere” movement. **The prices of essential commodities will then remain stable and affordable to resource poor consumers.** Market manipulation of prices of essential commodities can also be checked. While food grain imports will provide a breathing spell in controlling price rise and inflation, a second green revolution in dry farming areas, stimulated by assured and remunerative marketing opportunities will help to promote simultaneously food and livelihood security to millions of small and marginal farmers and landless labor.

Conclusion

To conclude, import/ export of pulses, oilseeds and wheat may be necessary in years of shortfall or surplus. **What is important is to recognize that imports of pulses and oilseeds serve as indicators of our failure to launch a green revolution in dry farming areas, inspite of having the technologies and resources to do so.** This is not just a matter for national pride or shame, but a human tragedy of vast dimensions where millions of children, women and men are condemned to a life of malnutrition and

poverty. **Imports of crops of importance to the income security of farm families in rainfed areas imply generating more unemployment and misery in such areas.** The mindset where the term “consumers” applies only to the politically powerful urban population and ignores the 70 % of the population living in rural India, who are both farmers and consumers, will have to be destroyed if our country is to achieve “**Purna Swaraj**”.