

# With 45% of Indians excluded from the food security net, it's time to universalise the PDS

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Children stand in queue to collect food in Kolkata in April 2020. | Dibyangshu Sarkar / AFP

Have you ever closely watched ants foraging for food in the kitchen with remarkable ingenuity, teamwork and dedication? They meticulously gather food – crumbs and grains of sugar – to re-distribute to the entire colony. In addition, they store excess morsels to tide over future shortages. Bees are equally industrious. Why can't humans learn from insects?

In theory, the National Food Security Act, passed in 2013, was designed on similar principles – to systematically procure and store seasonal harvests from farmers and guarantee re-distribution to households each month.

However, the final version of the law did not ensure universal coverage of all Indians nor did it guarantee a minimum support price to farmers for their crops. Instead, the legal guarantee extended to only 5 kg of foodgrains at subsidised prices to 75% of Indians in rural areas and 50% in urban areas.

## Vast exclusions

In March 2020, to withstand the fury of the pandemic, the government announced the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana to provide an additional 5 kg of free foodgrain to the same 800 million Indians who already benefit from the food law. It has been extended till Diwali and is undoubtedly welcome. But it exacerbates rather than mitigates inequality. Millions of families without National Food Security Act ration cards have been left completely high and dry.

Typically, urban migrants do not carry or possess ration cards, which fuelled their desperation to leave the cities in which they were working when lockdown was announced last year. Even as India's population is projected to grow to 1.3 billion in 2021, NFSA ration card lists have not been updated for the last decade.

Millions have not been included, especially children under the age of ten. Simple calculations show that currently 45% of India's population is excluded from the National Food Security Act.

### Estimated Population Excluded from NFSA Rations

	<b>Antyodaya Anna Yojana beneficiaries for poorest Indians</b>	<b>Priority beneficiaries</b>	<b>Total National Food Security Act beneficiaries*</b>	<b>Projected population (2021)**</b>	<b>Population without NFSA ration cards (2021)</b>
Bihar	11680	75588	87269	123083	35814
Haryana	998	11252	12252	29483	17231
Himachal Pradesh	727	2103	2744	7394	4650
Punjab	352	14727	14963	30339	15376
Uttarakhand	674	5376	5964	11399	5435
Chhattisgarh	1992	18278	2,02,73	29493	9220
Jharkhand	3635	22489	26153	38471	12318
Odisha	3812	28620	32328	45696	13368
Uttar Pradesh	13025	135088	147776	230907	83131
West Bengal	5487	54688	6,01,75	98125	37950
Goa	45	500	545	1559	1014
Gujarat	3670	31120	34802	69788	34986
Madhya Pradesh	5881	41129	47010	84516	37506
Maharashtra	10712	57168	67667	124437	56770
Rajasthan	2386	42044	44572	79281	34709
Andhra Pradesh	2475	24284	26758	5,27,87	26028

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Telangana	1540	1,76,29	1,91,69	3,77,25	18556
Karnataka	4620	35643	40784	66845	26061
Kerala	2216	13156	15390	35489	20099
Tamil Nadu	6689	29594	36432	76402	39969
Arunachal Pradesh	150	694	844	1533	689
Assam	2808	22309	25117	35043	9926
Manipur	1767	1684	1860	3165	1305
Meghalaya	291	1854	2145	3288	1143
Mizoram	71	608	683	1216	533
Nagaland	158	910	1098	2192	1093
Sikkim	58	316	374	677	303
Tripura	475	1996	2469	4071	1602
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	13	47	60	400	340
Chandigarh	663	283	286	1208	922
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	20	182	202	608	406
Daman and Diu	4	183	68	469	401
Delhi	281	7042	7321	20571	13250
Jammu and Kashmir with Ladakh	900	5646	6635	13705	7070
Lakshadweep	4	18	22	67	45
Puducherry	83	550	631	1571	940
Total (All India)	110024	682859	792883	1363004	614666

Source: Author calculations. Note: \*NFSA beneficiaries based on the government's National Food Security portal. \*\*Projected 2021 population is based on 'Population Projections for India and the States 2011-2036 based on Census 2011, Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections' of the National Commission of Population in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, released in July 2020.

Currently, half the population in Gujarat, 49% in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, 48% in Uttarakhand, 39% in West Bengal and 36% in Uttar Pradesh have completely been left out of National Food Security Act lists. These families will neither benefit from the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana bonanza nor the hyped "One Nation One Ration" scheme.

Further, of the 800 million Indians currently eligible, only 793 million have actually been enrolled on the government's portal. That is why, on June 2, the Central government urged states to give National Food Security Act ration cards to the most vulnerable people. Fourteen states have already completed 100% coverage of their quota. Simultaneously, exclusions due to schemes being linked to the Aadhaar biometric identity programme continue to be rampant.

The series of starvation deaths in the last five years are also testimony to the extent of exclusion faced by the most marginalised families. The majority of these deaths have occurred in Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim households. None of these deaths are likely to have occurred if the families had ration cards.

## **Pandemic of hunger**

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To make matters worse, this year, 97% of Indian families have suffered a decline in their income. Unemployment is at the highest level in three decades. The Indian economy contracted by 7.3% in 2020-'21. Two hundred and thirty million Indians are estimated to have fallen into poverty. Several surveys indicate that due to the pandemic not only are Indians earning less, they are also eating less and skipping meals.

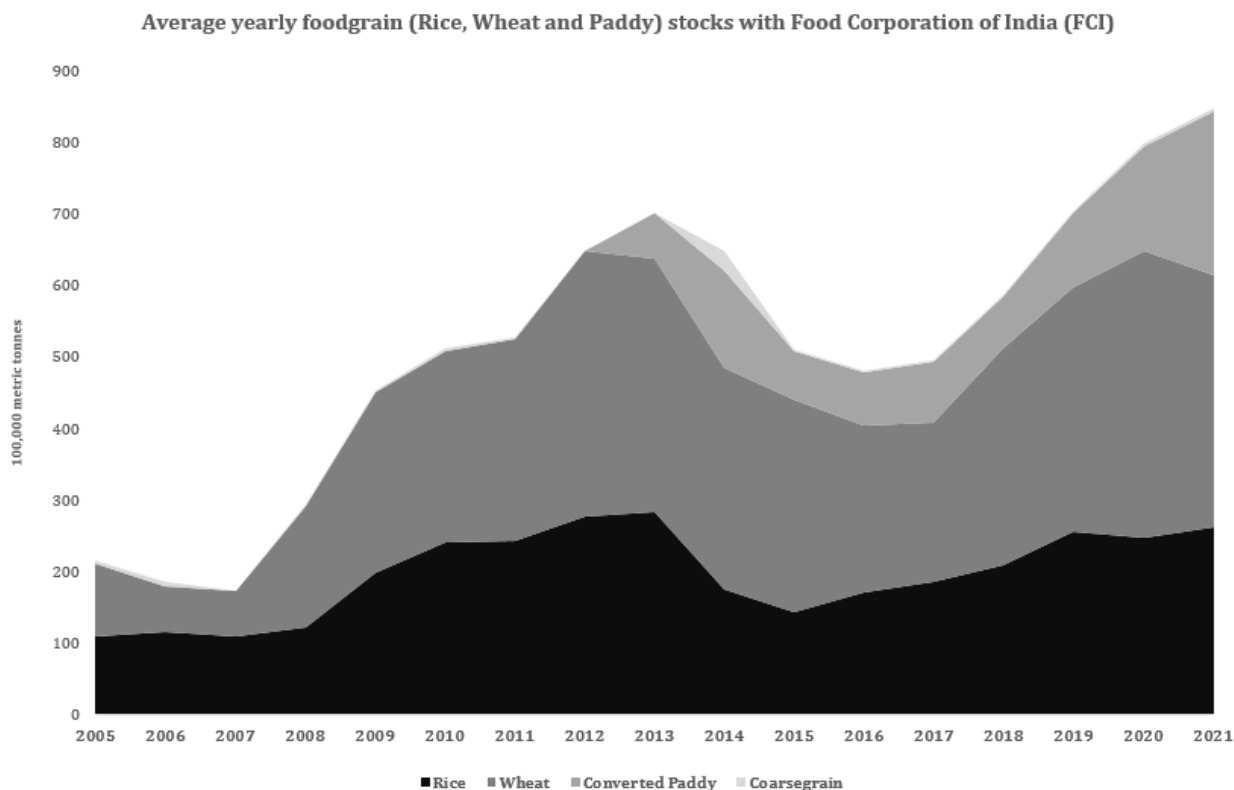
In such a cataclysmic period, rather than exporting foodgrain, shouldn't it be imperative on the government to first address hunger within India?

Especially in times of mass impoverishment, providing universal public goods is considered to be an effective strategy to prevent exclusion. That is because the wealthier households in the programmes, with their greater political clout, are able to ensure better accountability and quality of services. On the other hand, targeted systems are invariably more vulnerable to elite capture to the exclusion of poor households.

The near-universal public distribution system in Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and other states has proved to be highly effective. However, state government budgets remain severely constrained. To expand coverage, they need to procure foodgrain from Food Corporation of India reserves at near-market rates, rather than subsidised prices.

Despite the nationwide farmer protests against the new farm laws, this has also been a year of record harvests. India's foodgrains production in 2020-'21 crop year, is expected to be an unprecedented 305 million tonnes. This is after four consecutive bumper

harvests. In May, Food Corporation of India granaries were overflowing with a record 100 million tonnes of foodgrain. There is more than enough grain to not only support the extended Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, but also to universalise the Public Distribution System for all Indians, except income taxpayers.



Source: Based on FCI data on stocks in Central Pool for the years 2005-2021 \*Converted Paddy is Custom Milled Rice that can be derived with an out-turn ratio of 67% from unmilled paddy as the norm specified in the FCI monthly Foodgrain Bulletins. The data on paddy procured has not been made available on the FCI website before 2013.

Earlier this month, the Delhi government, in compliance with Supreme Court orders, began distribution of foodgrains in schools to families without ration cards. But nearly every day, stocks have fallen short as large crowds have gathered to receive food.

Social crises are periods of rapid change that typically expand the “Overton window” of acceptable public policies. Previously unthinkable radical options suddenly become not only acceptable, but also necessary for survival.

For instance, after severe criticism, the Central government has finally assumed responsibility for the procurement of majority vaccines. Similarly, the time has come for the Centre to guarantee subsidised foodgrains to nearly every Indian.

The human population has been brought to its knees by a microscopic virus. So, now may also be the best time to humbly learn from social insects – to equitably feed all Indians.

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