

## Chapter II

### The Geography and History of Hunger

In the introductory chapter, an attempt was made to understand the ‘Geography of Hunger’ theoretically. In this chapter, we would try to explore the geography as well as the history of hunger in the world in practical terms. To do so, we would go through the narratives of some of the major famines in the history of the world, which would be followed by the discussion of two devastating famines in India during the British *raj*. Moreover, to have an idea of the history of hunger in West Bengal in the immediate decades after independence, a descriptive study of two turbulent food movements of 1959 and 1966 in the state would also be undertaken. Nonetheless, this chapter will also try to showcase the evolution of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) in India for it will help us to expand the horizon of our understanding of the *prime food security mechanism* in India. Finally, we will discuss the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA) and will also undertake a study of the Right to Food movement in India.

#### 2.1. Famines

In this section, we would also try to explore the relationship between famine and politics. To illustrate, many worst famines in human history were caused by poor distribution of food due to various causes like political upheaval or natural disaster. Famines harm purchasing power, especially on the poor population. Hence, it is understandable that famines affect the population in two ways a) it disturbs the regular process of food distribution and b) it decreases the food purchasing power of the population. These two crises can be averted by the strong

initiatives of the political authority/power of a given society. If it fails to do so, then the mass deaths in famines can be attributed to the lack of initiatives/control of the political authority, even if indirectly. Keeping this in mind, let us now focus on some selected famines.

### **2.1.1. The Irish Famine of 1845 to 1849**

In Ireland, after 100 years of silence, the famine of 1740, a great famine surfaced again between 1845 to 1849, known as the Great Irish famine, or ‘potato famine’, which claimed the lives of one million people, approximately,<sup>1</sup> coupled with many famine-related diseases and forced migration. The outward population flow might have reached 2 million and by the time the country achieved independence, its population was barely half of what it had in the early 1840s.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the potato famine’ emerged as a watershed in the history of the demography of Ireland. Although the migration to America started long before the famine, it reached the peak during this famine.

In the 1840s the Irish comprised nearly half of all immigrants to America.<sup>3</sup> It was the worse famine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe caused by potato crop failure in successive years owing to a disease called late blight, which destroyed both the leaves and edible root, or the tubers of the potato plant. Given the erstwhile small size of their land allotment and the various obstacles presented by the land to grow crops, most of the farmers had long existed actually at subsistence level. Of being easy to grow, hardy, nutritious, and calorie-dense crops, the potato became the staple food of Ireland. The tenant farmers of 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, particularly of West Ireland battled both to provide for themselves and to supply the potato to

the market of Britain. Depending on just one crop for both subsistence and economy proved dangerous in this case. Without potatoes, they had no staple food to eat and no money to pay the rent. Therefore, mass starvation started immediately after the crop failure and the relief efforts by the government of Britain were inadequate to deal with this widespread famine. The population continued to decrease in the following decades after the famine. With Ireland, many quarters of the globe had witnessed several famines. However, Amartya Sen revealed that while in famine-stricken Ireland people were dying of starvation, throughout this period potatoes were exported from the country to England!<sup>4</sup> Therefore we can argue that mass deaths in the Irish famine of 1845 could have been averted by distributing the food grains in a proper manner which was the task of the then political authority.

### **2.1.2. The Russian Famines**

Russian history bears the testimony of famines and droughts. In Russian history, famine had been a common feature that often resulted in large scales in humanitarian crises. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first one was the Kazakh famine of 1919-1922 also known as the Turkestan famine of 1919-1922, a period of droughts and mass starvation in the Kirghiz ASSR (Kirghiz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic) present-day Kazakhstan, caused by Russian civil war from 1918-1921 which robbed away 5 million lives.<sup>5</sup> The hardest hitting phase of famine ended in 1922 although a shortage of food, starvation, and illness continued throughout 1923-1924. This famine was immediately followed by another famine that took place in the years of 1930-1933 also known as the Goloshchekin genocide or Kazakh catastrophe claimed the lives of 1.5 million people.<sup>6</sup> Owing to

the recurrence of famine the pastoral semi-nomadic way of life was destroyed, typhus engulfed many lives in the settlements where they heralded, even the cattle had perished.

The year 1933 was indeed a 'year of hunger' in the western world. The street of America and Europe teemed with the populace who had lost their jobs, became habituated to waiting in the line for food. "I saw hundreds and hundreds of poor fellows in single file, some of them in clothes which once were good, all waiting to be handed out two sandwiches, a doughnut, a cup of coffee, and a cigarette,"<sup>7</sup> wrote a journalist when was in New York who struck by the helplessness of American workers, three years into the Great Depression. Here we can observe that hunger does not abide by the manmade cartography and formed its geography by informing its presence in every part of the world.

While the Kazakh people were suffering in the second famine in that region, the Holodomor famine in the Ukraine region appeared. The term Holodomor is a Ukrainian expression that literary means 'died of starvation'. Some scholars have argued that the famine was *artificially organised* to eliminate a large part of people in the Soviet and compared it with the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> The majority of which were Ukrainian peasants. This 'mass starvation' of 1933 was an output of Joseph Stalin's first Five-year plan which stressed upon industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture culminated in a deficit in the procurement of food from the harvest. Wherefrom the 1931 harvest, the state authorities were able to procure 7.2 million tons,<sup>9</sup> in 1932 they had managed only to procure 4.3 million tons besides ration supply in urban areas was drastically cut back. One author

commented ‘his policies had killed tens of thousands by execution, hundreds of thousand by exhaustion and put millions at risk of starvation.’<sup>10</sup>

### **2.1.3. The Nazi Hunger Plan**

The infamous Nazi hunger plan, deployed by the Nazi regime in Germany during World War (II) to seize food from the Soviet Union and distributing it among the German soldiers as a result approximately 4.2 million Soviets were starved to death.<sup>11</sup> The last famine in the Soviet Union occurred in 1946 when a severe drought-the first one in the *post-war period*- affected the largest part of the productive zones of the country.<sup>12</sup> In 1943, the Bengal province of British India also witnessed a severe famine also known as the great Bengal famine. The first famine that occurred in Bengal was in 1774. In the upcoming paragraphs, narratives of these two tragedies in the Bengal province will be narrated.

### **2.1.4. The Great Chinese Famine**

In the years between 1959-1961, China witnessed its worst human tragedy in the form of a massive famine known as the great Chinese famine which was a direct result of the failure of Mao-Tse-Tung's ‘The Great Leap Forward’ initiative. Boomeranged by its policy which embraced new kinds of social equations, new economic policy, and most importantly imposition of regulations on agriculture, the People’s Republic of China found no way to tackle this crisis. Nearly 15-30 million people died owing to the failure of this policy.<sup>13</sup>

### **2.1.5 Famines in Africa**

By early 2000 when the scholars had started to think that their thrust area was fact becoming confined to history, the famine made come back in the African countries and particularly in the region of Sahel, Somalia, Yemen, etc. Nonetheless, famines in Rwanda and Malawi *during World War (II)* are infamous in African history. Many countries in Africa are not self-sufficient in food production, therefore, they are extremely dependent on food imports relying on income from cash crops. Desertification is the perennial enemy to food as well as cash crop production in African countries coupled with other problems like unanticipated droughts and livestock diseases etc, and governments' inability to address these problems exposed many Africans to hunger pangs.

### **2.2. Food Riots during Revolutions**

In our so far discussion, we have observed that how 'food shortages' robbed the lives of millions without generating any protest. However, there has always been the other side of the coin. During 1776-1779, American colonies witnessed more than 30 food riots when as a response to the food crisis furious mob accosted merchants alleged of being overcharging, monopolising, or hoarding food.<sup>14</sup> Even in some cases, women came to the forefront while men were away fighting the war. The situation deteriorated further owing to cut off trade with West Indies that left them only to buy few scarce imports. As a consequence, places like Boston, Beverly Hills, East Hartford witnessed several food riots.<sup>15</sup>

News of turmoil due to a 'food shortage' also surfaced during the French revolution. Not only that in a way the issue of bread helped to ignite the French

revolution. It is obvious that the French revolution was caused by a multitude of grievances but bread played a vital part in stroking popular anger towards ancien régime. A rumour spread in Paris like wildfire that hearing that her subjects had no bread to eat Marie Antoinette had remarked “let them eat cake”.<sup>16</sup> Although it is entirely apocryphal, it in a way epitomises how the question of food could become a flashpoint in the history of France. An author has written that in 1789 when Parisians stormed the Bastille castle, they were not only looking for arms but grains also to make bread.<sup>17</sup> The waves of popular protests over the food crisis also came to know as the ‘flour war’. The introduction of a new form of trade, asymmetrical relation between the rise in population and native grain production coupled with a cereal-based diet of the French population were the causes of the protests. In the ancien régime bread likely accounted for 60%-80% of a budget of a wage earners family. Therefore, even a small hike in the grain prices was enough to spark tensions.<sup>18</sup> The distribution of food remained an important question also in the immediate post-revolution phase in France.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, we find that food riots can occur in the time of great political upheaval/movement/revolutions. In the later part of the present dissertation, when we will be discussing the events of ‘ration riots’ in 2007 in some of the districts in West Bengal, we have to bear this in mind.

### **2.3. The History of Hunger in Bengal**

Before proceeding to our thrust area, it is necessary to have a general historical understanding of hunger in the region. The region has a traumatic history of hunger. During the British raj, the Bengal province witnessed two devastating

famines and after independence two turbulent food movements broke out in the newly formed state of West Bengal. In the upcoming lines, we will try to narrate these tragedies.

### **2.3.1. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770/ Chiattarer Manbantar**

A partial shortfall in the production of the crop in 1768 was followed by much more severe conditions in late 1769. By September 1769, the crisis intensified owing to the annual south-east monsoon, and the December crop was completely failed. The drought became widespread but the East India Company largely *ignored* the ominous signs of the forthcoming disaster. Thus, the decision paved the way for a large-scale famine to occur. In early 1770 there was starvation and by the middle of the same year, starvation deaths started to occur on an amplified scale. Another factor that contributed to famine was the increase in the collection of revenue. The larger part of the revenue used to come from land tax. Thus, the common people had borne the increase in land tax which snatched away money from their hands. Birbhum and Murshidabad were the most affected areas. Many cultivable lands in Bengal, particularly in Birbhum, were returned to the forests as the villages became depopulated. The survivors left home in search of food. There was also an outbreak of smallpox in the Murshidabad district. The solemnity of the time was captured by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in his novel *Anandamath* (The Abbey of Bliss), 1882:

“One day in the summer of 1176 [Bengali year], the temperature at the village of Padachinnha intensified. The village was full of houses but no one to inhabit. There were rows of shops and roofs in the village market,



hundreds of earthen abodes in the countryside sparsely accompanied by edifices of every size. Today all remain silent. The shops at the village market remained closed. No one had a clue of where the shopkeeper had fled. Today is the market-day but the market is closed. The beggars did not turn up to beg. The weaver has shut down his loom and weeping at home, the donors have stopped donating, the professor has closed the toll [Sanskrit school]. In this atmosphere, even the children wept with a sense of fear. The streets were empty of travelers and no one to take bath in the ponds, only dogs and jackals were present in the cremation ground. A building with its large domes was visible from the distance and beautified like a mountain top amidst innumerable small huts in the area. The doors were closed, the house was empty, the soundless air was also facing resistance to enter the house. Inside the darkroom, a couple was sitting in a thoughtful posture like blossoming flowers at night, foreseeing the famine.

In 1174 the crop did not yield up to expectation, therefore, rice became expensive in 1175—people were suffering but the king remained indifferent to the situation and did not grant any concession in revenue collection. The lack of sympathy from the king forced the people to have only one square meal a day. In 1175 it rained well during the monsoon. The people thought that God had shown his mercy. Again, the shepherd sang in the field with joy, and the peasant-wife again started to pestering her husband for a silver owl. Then, suddenly in the month of Ashvina, the deity turned away his face. In the month of Ashvina and Karthika, it did not rain at all, paddy dried up to the straw in the field, wherever a little fruit persisted, the

courtiers brought them for the soldiers. There left nothing for the people to eat. At first, they skip dinner, then started eating half in the evenings, after that they resorted to fast for two evenings. Only a mouthful harvesting was done in Chaitra. But Mohammed Reja Khan, the revenue collector, thought that it was a proper time to show his efficiency. He had increased the revenue by ten percent. Great mourning had enveloped the whole of Bengal province.

In the initial days, the people started to beg but as time passed away there left no one to donate. Hence, they opted for fasting. Cows, plow, yoke, houses everything was sold and paddy seeds were being eaten. They sold off their lands and even girls were being sold. And, then daughter, son, and wife but whom to sell? No one was there to buy everybody wants to sell. Owing to lack of food they started devouring leaves, grass, and weeds. The lousy and uncivilised ones started having dogs, cats, rats. Many fled to new places only to die of starvation. Those decided to stay, ate the inedible or did not eat, fell sick, and died.

A suitable place was found by the epidemics to reign. Fever, cholera, tuberculosis, smallpox became evident. Especially, there was a large outbreak of smallpox. Every household started to witness deaths caused by smallpox. There was no one to give water or to take care of someone. No one treated anyone and the corpses were lying unattended in the edifices. Once smallpox entered the house, everybody abandoned the patient and fled home out of consternation.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.3.2. The Great Bengal Famine of 1943

From 1942 onwards during World War II to counter the Japanese army massive troops arrived in Bengal and were recruited to the Bengal-Burma border. So, the government required additional stocks of foods especially rice to inhibit this excess pressure.<sup>21</sup> And this diversion of rice and other staple foods caused a price hike of necessary food items. The people had to sell their assets (lands, jewellery, utensils, etc.) to generate funds for buying rice which was sold at a sky-high price. As time flew these people left nothing to sell to buy food thus destined to starvation deaths. The avenues of Calcutta (presently Kolkata) were replete with gaunt dead bodies. Poet Sukanta Bhattacharya (1926-1947) in his celebrated Bengali poem '*Hey Mahajibon*' tried to express the spirit of that time in his own words.

“Oh, the majestic life! no more poetry  
 Bring forth the harshness of prose  
 Let ignore the jingling of lyrical elegance  
 Strike the hammer of the prose today!  
 The gentleness of a poem is worthless  
 Poetry I grant you a leave today  
 In the regime of hunger, the world is prosaic:  
 The complete moon appears to be a broiled bread.”<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3.3. The Food Movements of 1959 & 1966

In this section, we will take a tour of the history of hunger and politics in the independent Bengal (West Bengal). During the rule of the Indian National Congress (INC) the state of West Bengal witnessed many popular movements.

Amongst them, the food movements of 1959 and 1966 occupy a central position. In the upcoming paragraphs, we will take a descriptive study of the said movements.

One of the causes behind the food shortage in West Bengal in the immediate decade after impendence was the fertile rice-producing districts that went to East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh). Another negative effect of partition was the inadequate supply of raw materials in leather, paper, and jute industries.<sup>23</sup> These crises were solved by the government only partially and leave ample room for the opposition Left parties, first dominated by the Communist Party of India (CPI) and after the split in the party in 1964 by the Communist Party of India Marxist CPI(M), to mobilise the masses against the government on diverse issues like refugee rehabilitation, anti-tram fare hike, increase in teachers' pay and allowance, food shortage and so on.

Since its inception, the Public Distribution System (PDS) was not in a good condition not only in West Bengal but throughout India owing to a huge gap between production and procurement of the food grains as revealed by the governmental figures. In 1951 while the net food production was 48.1 million tons throughout India, only 3.8 million tons was procured by the government agencies, and only 8.0 million tons were distributed by the PDS and in 1955 the net production, procurement, and distribution through PDS were 61.9, 1.3, 1.6 (in million tons) respectively.<sup>24</sup> In 1965 there was an asymmetry in figures of the above items: 78.2, 4.0, 10.1.<sup>25</sup> Thus these figures only reveal the dilapidated condition of PDS throughout India. This worsened further in West Bengal in early

1959 owing to rampant black marketing and hoarding. In Kolkata, the capital of the state of West Bengal, and some southern districts of the state the rice was sold between rupees 28 to rupees 30 per maund (1 maund=37.124 kg).<sup>26</sup>

Despite the assurance of the government for managing the food crisis, the food especially the rice went more scarce day by day and hoarding and black marketing of food grains by a section of food merchant became the order of the day. The long queues in front of the fair price shops in Kolkata and district towns became a state-wide daily affair and the gulf between the government and the people was expanding in the state which rose the popular anger at its peak.

However, as usual, the official report told a different story. The problem began when the mass formed a rally and decided to lead a procession towards the Writers' building (The erstwhile state secretariat). The Writers' building and the nearly half km area around it was under section 144 Cr PC (The Code of Criminal Procedure) which implied any gathering of more than 4 persons as unlawful and punishable. When the procession decided to march beyond Government Place East, nearly a half km from the building, the police took violent actions to tackle the mob. Ten rounds of tear gas shells had been projectile by the police. As a result, the mob dispersed soon. Drove by the fear, many protestors began to move (some of them had no idea about the geography of the city) in every direction. By that time many sympathisers of the movement gather around Government place East and Esplanade East to cheer the remonstrance. Therefore, once the police resorted to *lathicharge*, not only the agitators but also the sympathisers got affected. Then the sympathisers with the protestors ran to take refuge. These

unusual events on the roads gradually took the common ordinary people on the road, passers-by within its fold and the chaos got bigger. As the evening approached, violence, chaos, and counter-violence engulfed a larger portion of the city. In the days that followed the violence was spread to Howrah, the neighbouring city on the opposite and west bank of the Ganges. Besides some big industries, Howrah was the hub of small and medium manufacturing companies, recognised for being producing quality products both within and outside India. It was populated by a majority of people who mainly belonged to the working-class and other underprivileged sections of the society. Therefore, these people were brutally hit by the food crisis in 1959. Hence, they wholeheartedly took part in the movement. On 3<sup>rd</sup> September on many streets and roads in Howrah, there was a day-long violent clash between the two parties. To bring the situation under control the police opened fire which caused death to at least 11 people and 120 people got seriously injured.<sup>27</sup> Twenty-five police officials were also injured and one was found dead with a throat cut.<sup>28</sup> The popular anger was levitated to such a level that the situation went beyond the control of the local police, therefore, military troops were deployed to deal with the rioters. Many places in the district of 24 Pargana like Khardah and Behala were also on the boil. Many youngsters and even children were also coming to support the protestors by erecting blockades on the streets.

For the three consecutive days, Kolkata had witnessed almost a leaderless chaos since independence and came back to normalcy on 4<sup>th</sup> September. Jyoti Basu, the opposition leader, along with other the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) claimed that in the previous days thousand were missing, about 80 people

were killed and many went missing.<sup>29</sup> However, as usual, the official report told a different story.

In a meeting to discuss the impact of the movement and the government's response to it, on 6<sup>th</sup> September, the Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC) proposed that the next spell (third spell) of the movement would commence soon by arranging street corner meetings throughout the state to maintain public pressure on the government for an impartial investigation into the police action and providing compensation to the families of wounded and killed. In this violent atmosphere, Left MLAs like Jyoti Basu, Subodh Banerjee, Jatin Chakrabarty, Harekrishna Konar, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, Amarendranath Basu, and others took part in assembly debates and criticised the government for the ongoing violence unleashed by the police. Not only the opposition but also the members of civil society also registered their protests. A section of media, party organs like *New Age*, *Ganadabi*, *Swadhinata*, along *Dainik Basumati* made a frontal attack on the government.<sup>30</sup>

The resonance of the 1959 food movement had in the food movement of 1966, however, there are some distinctions between these two. These are:

- a) The food movement of 1959 was initiated by the party and ad hoc organisation. At the initial stages of the movement, the opposition political parties were leading the movement but as the movement gathered momentum, the movement went far beyond their control.
- b) The 1959 food movement started with the rally in Kolkata on 31<sup>st</sup> August, attended by the people from the districts, and then the heat of the movement

transmitted from Kolkata but in case of 1966, the movement was an outburst in the districts and then it reached the capital of the state.

- c) A large number of participants in the food movement of 1959 were refugees, organised by the Left-dominated United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), but in 1966 the differentiation between the refugees and the indigenous Bengali population was almost blurred.
- d) In the 1966 food movement, there was the active involvement of the students.

Although after gathering the momentum the opposition parties came into the scene to show their support for the movement, the movement bloomed and spread without leaderless and party organisation. The heat of the 1965 anti-tram fare hike movement not even calmed down, then the second phase of the food movement broke out which refuelled the enthusiasm of the city protestors.

Therefore, the stage was all set for a food movement to broke out, and then Prafulla Roy, the new chief minister who was the minister of Food and Supply under the ministry of Bidhan Chandra Roy during the 1959 food movement, made a comment which can be seen as a tipping point for the movement. He 'advised' masses to change their food habit to wheat as the rice was scarce and suggested to the people that the green bananas are more nutritious than potatoes therefore, they could live on them.<sup>31</sup> This had made the people furious like never before. The government had also adopted the policy of 'cording' which prevented the transportation of food grains, particularly rice by the merchants. It had a negative on both the common men and the hoarders, therefore, the government had to digest the wrath from both parties. News of conflict between police and black



marketeers on the one hand and clash between police and ordinary people on the other was coming from the places of the districts of Jalpaiguri, Birbhum, and Midnapore.<sup>32</sup> Thus, At Swarupnagar in Basirhat fifteen years old schoolboy Nurul Islam was shot dead by the police when he was found demonstrating against the price hike of essential commodities and scarcity of kerosene. The news spread like wildfire but the people, unlike in 1959, decided to fight the police and administration in their respective localities. As a result, places like Habra, Plassey, Dhubulia, Asansol, Hindmotor, Ranaghat, Chakdah, Baduria, Beldanga and Berhampore, and many others saw a month-long violent episode, from 16<sup>th</sup> February to 14<sup>th</sup> March, of clashes between the police and the protestors. Like 1959, in 1966 too, the issue of price hike of essential food commodities, public anger, the arrest of the opposition leaders, and police atrocities flooded on the state assembly. Not only that, but the spirit of street-fight also engulfed the assembly. A national daily reported that there was a mix-in between the members of the ruling party and the opposition.<sup>33</sup>

Despite being its formal closure with a rally in Kolkata on 14<sup>th</sup> March 1966, the spirit of the movement remained unchanged throughout March. However, as time proceeded gradually the spontaneity of the untrained protestors went under the clutches of seasoned politicians.

## **2.4. The Evolution of Targeted Public Distribution System in India**

To understand the magnitude of hunger in India is essential to have an understanding of the prime instrument that was invented to meet the end; to arrest food insecurity. It is only by an understanding of the latter that we can be able to apprehend the intensity of the former.

Under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, the Public Distribution System of India is an initiative of the Government of India to provide food and non-food items at subsidised rate to India's poor population. The major commodities distributed through TPDS are rice, wheat, edible oil, sugar, and essential fuel like kerosene through Fair Price Shops (FPS) dispersed all over India. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) is a government-owned corporation that maintains (procurement, distribution, and stocking) the TPDS, and both the central and the state governments are responsible for the operation of it.

During the British *raj*, the measures were taken up by the government to help the victims of famines and droughts has been the typical way in which the food security system began to shape (we have already discussed it in detail in the Introduction chapter. Vide "The British Famine Code of 1883").<sup>34</sup> During the Second World War in 1939, the British regime had also taken up the same step. The government selected some cities that were facing acute food scarcity to provide food grains to the poor who failed to afford commodities from the open market. Later, during the great Bengal famine of 1943, the distribution system was extended to some more cities and towns.<sup>35</sup>

After independence up to the mid-1960s, an important characteristic of the food distribution of India was that it was perceived to be a mere rationing system and a fair price system in comparison with private trade, operating irregularly and highly dependent on the imports with little internal procurement.<sup>36</sup>

In the mid-1960's the conceptualisation of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India undergone a paradigm shift for the decision was made to look at the PDS much beyond the management of food supply in critical situations. In the meantime, the supply of PL-480 imports was stopped and this led the government to procure food grains internally that in turn indulge the State to take a giant leap towards providing an institutional food security mechanism. It was in this backdrop that FCI came into being. In the year 1965, the setting up of FCI and Agricultural Prices Commission (APC) now known as the Bureau of Agricultural Costs and Prices Commission (BACPC) can be judged as the beginning of the second phase of PDS in India. Based on the recommendation of price by BACPC the FCI procure food grains that were to be distributed through the PDS all over the country. It is important to mention that a part of the procured grains is kept as '*buffer stocks*' to tackle unforeseen crises. This whole episode of the introduction of new initiatives can be summarised as:

- a) The inception of institutional arrangements and procedures/rules of procurements coupled with stocking and distribution of food grains.
- b) Evolution of food security as an integral part of development strategy.
- c) The selection of food grains, especially rice and wheat, was to be procured and distributed through PDS.

All these in turn provided the farmers with an effective price and market support. Nonetheless, these also introduced a new bunch of techniques to generate employment for the rural poor to improve their level of income thereby securing their *economic and physical access to food grains*.

In the aftermath of the Green Revolution in India that commenced in 1965, there was an increase in the production of food grains and this had resulted in the large-scale accumulation of buffer stock. As a result, the government had shifted its attention from buffer stock maintenance and price stabilisation to an increase in PDS supply. However, it was found that compared to the PDS needs the procure quantities were in excess.<sup>37</sup>

To solve this problem of overstocking in FCI warehouses and to alleviate poverty, schemes like Food for Work (FFW) were introduced during the fifth-year plan (1974-1979).<sup>38</sup> And, gradually this had resulted in the decline of the imports of food from the United States of America (USA). However, the imports were continued though in a low amount to maintain the buffer stock. The government went on to strengthen the PDS during this time so that it could become a stable and permanent feature of its strategy to reduce price fluctuation and achieve an equitable distribution of essential food commodities. However, a major setback of PDS till the late 1970s was, as Madhura Swaminathan noted – its confinement to urban areas and did not guarantee adequate food to the rural population during the time of crisis.<sup>39</sup>

However, the scene soon began to change. During the late 1970s states like Kerala, Gujrat, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu opted for the extension of the coverage of PDS to rural areas and also introduced a targeted grouping approach. This was also because of the dramatic improvement in the food scenario particularly in the decades of 1980s and 1990s.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, by the sixth five-year plan (1980-1985), there was a change in the way the PDS was viewed. It started its journey as *an instrument* to meet the crisis but by end of the 1980s, it became the *prime apparatus* of the State to mitigate food insecurity. So, if we summarise the period between 1978-1992 then it can be seen as the third phase of PDS in India marked by large-scale expansion, domestic procurement, and stock.

In the fourth phase of PDS, which started in 1992 the expansion of the same was taken to another level. In June 1992 the government of India launched Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS) to streamline the PDS as well as to improve its reach to hilly, remote, far-flung, inaccessible areas where a substantial poor section of the population lives.<sup>41</sup> It aimed to cover 1775 blocks, especially where specific schemes like Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP), Desert Development Programme (DDP), Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) were being implemented.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, some Designated Hill Areas were also identified after consulting the state governments for special focus. Under this scheme, the food grains (wheat and rice) were allocated to states and union territories<sup>43</sup> for the RPDS blocks. The grains under this scheme were cheap; Rs. 50/- per quintal lower than Central Issue Prices (CIP) for normal PDS blocks. The state governments were entrusted with the responsibility to ensure that the retail price of these commodities in the said blocks should not be higher than CIPs by

more than 25 paise per kg. The additional commodities like tea, sugar, salt, pulses, and soap were also being introduced at lower prices. Nonetheless, additional requirements like infrastructure development, additional FPS were also being taken care of. It is noteworthy that there was the role of both the Central and State governments in determining the cost of the commodities. For PDS as well as RPDS the CIPs were fixed by the central government whereas the state government used to decide the retail end prices taking into account the transportation cost and the commission of the dealer.

Intending to cement the loopholes in the system, the year 1997 witnessed the introduction of TPDS in India after the government announced it in June same year, and here began the fifth phase of PDS in India. For putting special focus on the poor and vulnerable section of society, the government decided to divide the population into two categories of Above Poverty Line (APL) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) by judging their economic conditions. To illustrate, it was held that the income criterion that is the income poverty line will be used to demarcate 'poor' and 'non-poor' households. Therefore, the role of the state governments increased for it became their responsibility to formulate and implement reliable arrangements for the identification of the poor. Therefore, one can observe the fundamental difference the PDS had underwent, from a universal food securing mechanism to a scheme that aims to target food subsidies to BPL households. In essence, now the fundamental issue was not more how to distribute rather whom to distribute?

The TPDS has a two-tiered pricing structure for APL and BPL households. Besides, in December 2000 Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) was introduced as a sub-scheme for the poorest segments of the poor. The cereals per household per month were made available to the AAY and BPL household at subsidised price. While both the subsidy and allocation under the said categories have been rising over time the prices and allocation for APL households depend on economic cost and availability of stocks that change more frequently.

The commencement of NFSA in 2013 can be observed as the sixth phase of PDS in India. Not only PDS but this act translates other food security schemes like Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MMS) into legal entitlement. The act entitles an individual to 5 kgs food grains (Rice at Rs. 2/- per kg, Wheat at Rs. 3/- per kg, and Millet at Rs. 1/- per kg per month) at subsidised price. Under the act certain category of children, lactating mothers and pregnant women are eligible for daily free cereals. On a theoretical take, we can argue that this was a shift from a welfare approach to right based approach.

## **2.5. Government, Subsidy the Right to Food Case in India**

Despite taking several initiatives from time to time the government had failed to successfully run the PDS. As result news of 'starvation deaths' came to prominence. It was in this regard that the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) came to register its protest.

In the previous chapter, we have briefly discussed how the petition by PUCL drew our attention to the fact that despite huge stocks of food grains in FCI people

were enduring hunger pangs. After having a general introduction to the case and the constitutional obligations of the right to food, in the upcoming paragraph, we are going to discuss these in detail.

A very interesting question to be asked that of was it only the impotent TPDS that resisted the very way by which the food can be distributed to the needy ones or there was something else that bypassed the eyes of the people? It was the Indian government's decision to spent Rs. 10, 000/- crores on the food subsidy that took the food out of the reach of the poor families instead of its very aim of bringing the food within the reach of poor families.<sup>44</sup>

The food subsidy was indeed a deficit on the part of the FCI, whose erstwhile operation chiefly aimed to keep the food prices up rather than down. And, that was achieved by accumulating a massive amount of food grains in the FCI warehouses. On the one hand when the food stocks reached a gigantic figure, the arrival of drought for the second or third time in a row that were to increased starvation and undernourishment on the other. There were two main reasons behind a huge food subsidy at that time.

- The first one was the high operating cost of the FCI; including the cost spend on storage. The cost was so high that it accounted for nearly half of the total food subsidy in the mid-1990s.<sup>45</sup>
- The second logic behind it was that erstwhile FCI was buying far more food than it was selling. Thus, culminated in a net addition to the present stocks, took a giant stride towards building mountains of excess storage.



Ordinary households benefitted very little from the food subsidy. To tell the truth, what they gained in one hand from subsidised food procured from the PDS paled in comparison with what they had to lose in buying food by paying higher food prices in the open market. Hence, we can understand that the households gained nothing from highly subsidised PDS, over the above, they had to bear the burden of high prices of food in the open market. The obvious question arises here is that what prevented the government from using these mountainous stocks to fund a constructive PDS, present food-for-work schemes such as Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), or other anti-poverty programs? The present research is a humble attempt to explore the role if any, of politics that resisted the food security schemes to be implemented properly in our study area.

### **2.5.1. The Constitution, PUCL, and the Supreme Court of India**

Since we are discussing our research problem in the light of the Right to Food, it is essential to take a study of the relevant articles of the constitution. Nonetheless, it will also help us to understand the legal ground on which the Right to Food case took place.

The relevant Articles of the Indian constitution in this regard are mentioned below:

- Article 21: ‘No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law.’

- Article 39(a): ‘The state shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing that the citizens, men, and women equally have the right to adequate means of livelihood.’
- Article 47: ‘The state shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties...’
- Article 32 (a): ‘The right to move the Supreme Court by appropriate proceedings for the enforcement of the rights conferred by this Part is guaranteed.’<sup>46</sup>

The main argument of the petition by PUCL was that the central government and the state government of Rajasthan violated the said right in response to the drought situation in Rajasthan both in terms of policy and implementation, the petition drew our attention to two aspects of the negligence of the state in providing food security. The first one was that of the breakdown of TPDS. The petition pointed out the multi-layered problem regarding the TPDS; a) only the BPL families were entitled to PDS, b) the monthly allocation per family unable to meet the nutritional standards set by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), c) even it was implemented erratically: a survey in Rajasthan indicated that only one-third of the sample villages had regular distribution in the preceding three months, with no distribution at all in one-sixth of them, besides, identification of the BPL families was highly unreliable, all in all, the assistance provided to BPL household through the TPDS amounted less than five rupees per person per month.<sup>47</sup> And, another one was that of the inadequacy of government relief work. Famine codes were in operation in various states governed the

provision of these works which made them mandatory in the situation of droughts and the government of Rajasthan follow a policy of labour celling instead of giving work to every person who came for work on relief work. While arguing these points, the petition also bulldozed one official excuse for both these problems, namely the lack of funds. Because the Supreme Court of India had already declared in the case of *Paschimbanga Khetmazdoor Samity vs State of West Bengal* (1996 4 SCC 37) that lack of funds cannot qualify to be a ground where non-fulfillment of constitutional obligations were justified.<sup>48</sup> It was also argued that given the gigantic availability of food stocks, the state government repeatedly asked the central government for allocating free grains for relief work with little success, however, the non-utilisation of already allotted quantities to it diminished its case. The Right to Food case could be the tipping of the present argument and to a large extent in the history of the Indian judicial system when it comes to secure the basic rights of their citizens.

In the next lines, we will engage in the discussion to explore how this case had directed the role of the judiciary when it comes to safeguarding the prime among the basic rights of its citizens and how this case had shaped the understanding of the common people of their Right to Food.

### **2.5.2. Intervention by the Supreme Court of India**

The Right to Food case was massive litigation and its complications were increasing every year. Till 2005, 382 affidavits have been submitted by the petitioner and respondents, 55 ‘interim applications’ had been filed and 44 ‘interim orders’ had been issued.<sup>49</sup> Interim orders indicate those orders which

remained applicable for the duration of the case. When the Supreme Court gave a final judgment some of these orders were to be clubbed with the judgment. While most of the interim orders were aimed to deal with the specific schemes, some of them applied across the board were called ‘Umbrella Orders’.

**Table:2.1 The Purview of the Two Kinds of Orders**

Interim orders	Umbrella orders
the Public Distribution System (PDS)	Responsibility for compliance
Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)	Accountability to Gram Sabhas
the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education, also known as “mid-day meal scheme”	Access to information
the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)	Dissemination of Court orders
Annapurna	Schemes not to be discontinued
the National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS)	Full utilization of grain quotas
the National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS)	
the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS)	
SampoornaGramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY)	

Source: Constructed by the present researcher from Drèze& Jaishankar (2005)

From the above figure we can see that while interim orders were concerned with the implementation of the schemes, the umbrella orders were relating to the lines of accountability. However, owing to the flexibility of umbrella orders, there was a lack of tight compartmentalisation which was covetable. In the case of accountability, the apex court stated that besides both the central government and state governments the law applied to everyone; hence, it was also a duty of the citizens to abide by these orders. Nonetheless, in an order dated 8<sup>th</sup> May 2002 and in a follow-up order on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2002 the court explicitly stated defined some of the responsibility.<sup>50</sup> Most of these orders were directed against the central and the state governments because from the very beginning the court made it clear that prevention of hunger and starvation is “one of the prime responsibilities of the Government – whether central or the state.”<sup>51</sup> In some particular cases such as starvation deaths, the apex court made it clear that the Chief Secretary himself or herself would be held ‘responsible’ for the violation of orders. Concerning the central government, some orders were addressed specifically to some departments or ministries, like the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution, the Ministry of Rural Development, and the Department of Women and Child Development. The secretaries of concerned ministries and departments were trusted with the responsibility to implement the court orders. Some orders were addressed to the Central Government, were represented in the court by the Attorney General.

Moreover, in an order dated 29<sup>th</sup> October 2002, the court clarified that the injunction of the commissioners included “monitoring and reporting to this court of the implementation by the respondents of the various welfare measures and

schemes".<sup>52</sup> It gave the power to the commissioners that they may scrutinise any aspect of food-related initiatives and schemes even those that were not subjected to any specific order. Another responsibility of the commissioner was to keep the performance of the state governments under surveillance by analysing secondary data, projectile queries to them, picking complaints from grassroots organisations, constructing inquiry committees for verification purposes, and so on. In sum, the role and power of the commissioners were very wide. Although the commissioners were working in full force, the results were mixed.

There were several instances when the commissioners intervened in case of violations of the orders. The apex court in an order dated 29<sup>th</sup> October 2002 stated that the state governments were to appoint assistants to the commissioners after consulting with them to provide such assistance to commissioners as the commissioners may require.

## **2.6. Summary**

After traversing the history of hunger in the different parts of the globe (geography) it can be argued that the issue of 'just' distribution, especially of food, is largely a political question. The famines caused by natural calamities could have been averted by the timely arrangements and interventions by the state. But lack of political will to do so helps famines to flourish. We have also witnessed how even under a post-colonial liberal model of welfare State; the issue of food scarcity can be an important factor in igniting popular protests. In other words, if under a welfare State the *distribution of food* appears malfunctioning then it could become a *political point* of starting protests. Today, after completing

two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we find that hunger has transformed its character: from large-scale famines, it is operative now in the zones of chronic hunger that often goes unnoticed.<sup>53</sup> In the upcoming chapters by focusing on the three case studies we will try to understand the was there any relation between chronic hunger and politics.