

The Techno-Politics of Food Security in New Delhi: The Re-Materialization of the Ration Card

Guillaume Dandurand

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Abstract

In the early 2000s, millions of households suffered from starvation as waves of drought repeatedly hit the northern states of India. Despite the famine, the Indian authorities remained shockingly unresponsive to the needs of starving populations. In the ensuing decade, a unique configuration of experts, activists, law-makers and lay-persons occupied key spaces and institutions to formulate a right to food law that establishes the biopolitical duties of the state—that is, improving people’s well-being—in the domain of food security. This legislation was enacted in 2013: the National Food Security Act (NFSA).

Based on 17 months of fieldwork in New Delhi, this dissertation ethnographically explores the productive tension between the ethico-political nature of the NFSA and its rather technical implementation in urban centres. I ask: How do biopolitical interventions, designed to make the state transparent and accountable in the delivery of food entitlements, reconfigure bureaucratic practices and subjectivities? Articulated at the intersection of the analytics of governmentality and an anthropological reading of science and technology studies literature, I scrutinize the re-materialized ration card deployed in the aftermath of the NFSA to render bureaucratic practices transparent. I examine how the ration card mediates governmental attempts of policing relations of patronage, monitoring practices of corruption, and shaping empowered bodies. I argue that while the NFSA was formulated to improve the lives of the Indian population, the distribution of re-materialized ration cards contributed to make the population into a collection of individual bodies empowered to combat chronic hunger on their own. This dissertation probes the gap between what ration cards seek to accomplish, what they do, and the unanticipated effects of these bureaucratic instruments on people’s lives.

First, through a reading of India's policy archive, I document the historic and political trajectory of food policies to contextualize the emergence of right to food discourses in India. Then, I scrutinize how and why notions of governmental accountability and transparency took a predominant place in the formulation of the food security legislation. Finally, I examine how key documents and devices used to implement the NFSA have mediated norms of accountability and transparency in different urban contexts.

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List of Acronyms

AAP	<i>Aam Aadmi Party</i>
AAY	Antyodaya Anna Yojana
AC	Assistant Commissioner
APC	Agricultural Prices Commission
APL	Above the Poverty Line
BJP	<i>Bharatiya Janata Party</i>
BPL	Below the Poverty Line
CACP	Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices
CESCR	Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
Congress-I	Congress-Indira
DDA	Delhi Development Agency
DFSCA	Department of Food, Supplies, and Consumer Affairs
DRRAA	<i>Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan</i>
DSCSC	Department of State Civil Supplies Corporation Limited
EAS	Employment Assurance Scheme
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FCI	Food Corporation of India
FPS	Fair Price Shop
FSO	Food and Supplies Officer
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoI	Government of India
HRLN	Human Rights and Law Network
HYV	High-Yielding Variety
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services

ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
ICMR	Indian Council of Medical Research
ID	Identification Document
IFIP	International Federation for Information Processing
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INC-O	Indian National Congress (Organization)
INC-R	Indian National Congress (Ruling)
IRDP	Integrated Rural Development Program
IRFA	Indian Research Fund Association
ISBT	Inter State Bus Terminal
ITO	Income Tax Office
JRY	<i>Jawahar Rozgar Yojana</i>
MDMS	Mid-Day Meal Scheme
MFAL	Marginal Farmer and Agricultural Labourers
MKSS	<i>Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan</i>
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MoRD	Ministry of Rural Development
MSP	Minimum Support Price
NAC	National Advisory Council
NCPRI	National Campaign for People's Right to Information
NCT	National Capital Territory of Delhi
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NFFWP	National Food For Work Programme
NFSA	National Food Security Act
NFSB	National Food Security Bill

NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NIC	National Informatics Centre
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NREP	National Rural Employment Program
NSS	National Sample Survey
NSSO	National Sample Survey Organization
OTP	One-Time Password
PAEG	People's Action for Employment Guarantee
PAN	Permanent Account Number
PDS	Public Distribution System
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
PL-480	Public Law 480
PoS	Point of Sale
PR	Priority
PR-S	Priority-Sugar
PUCL	People's Union for Civic Liberties
RTFC	Right to Food Campaign
RTI	Right to Information
SAP	Structural Adjustments Program
SFDA	Small Farmer Development Agency
SGRY	<i>Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana</i>
STS	Science and Technology Studies
TDPS	Targeted Public Distribution System
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UID	Unique Identification
UIDAI	Unique Identification Authority of India

UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFS	World Food Summit
WSF	World Social Forum

Glossary of Hindi and Local Terms

<i>aadhaar</i>	foundation
<i>Antyodaya Anna Yojana</i>	Poorest of the Poor Scheme
<i>anganwadi</i>	<i>crèches</i> or <i>kindergartens</i>
<i>basti</i>	local colloquialism for illegal settlements
<i>bazaar</i>	market
<i>bidi</i>	eucalyptus cigarette
<i>bijli, sadak, aur pani</i>	electricity, roads, and water
<i>Bharat</i>	India
circle	constituency
<i>chai</i>	tea
<i>computer ki dukaan</i>	Internet café
<i>Dalit Shakti Kendra</i>	Empowerment Centre for Dalit
<i>dharna</i>	protest, march
<i>garibi hatao</i>	remove poverty
godown	storage facility
<i>gram panchayat</i>	local institutions ruling over villages
<i>jan sunwai</i>	public hearings
<i>jhuggi</i>	habitation in informal settlements
<i>Jhuggi Jhopdi</i>	illegal settlement
<i>kachcha</i>	wobbly, incomplete, raw, temporary
<i>Lok Sabha</i>	Parliament of Government of India
<i>mandir</i>	temple
<i>Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan</i>	Workers and Farmer Power Union
<i>masala</i>	spices

<i>narangua</i>	brand of local moonshine
<i>pakka</i>	solid, complete, ripe, permanent
<i>Panchayati Raj</i>	local governance
<i>peepal tree</i>	<i>Ficus Religiosa</i>
<i>pradhan</i>	leader, chief
<i>rickshaw wallah</i>	rickshaw puller or driver
<i>Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan</i>	Right to Food Campaign
<i>Rozgar Adhikar Yatra</i>	Campaign for Employment Rights
<i>roti, kapda, aur makaan</i>	food, clothing, and housing
<i>sammelan</i>	convention
<i>sarpanches</i>	elected leaders of <i>panchayat</i>
scheme	program
<i>yatra</i>	pilgrimage, journey

Chapter 1: Introduction

On a sunny day in Winter 2015, my research assistant Ritesh¹ and I found ourselves sitting in a small one-room house painted in bright shades of yellow, located in the maze of households close to the Hazrat Nizamuddin railway station, in Sarai Kale Khan. We sat in a corner and opened our notebooks in front of us. In the opposite corner, a fridge covered with a multicoloured shawl sat adjacent to a single bed, on which a young man was sleeping. He had been working all night and did not seem disturbed by a dozen women of all ages who had gathered in front of us. Our host, a young woman named Maawa, had just brought us a glass of water. However, while pulling my phone out of my pocket, I awkwardly spilled most of its contents on my notebook and the mat beneath us. I picked up the glass and set it aside as if nothing had happened, while Maawa raised her voice above the low chattering.

As soon as she spoke, the room fell silent. The man, still sleeping on the bed, turned to face the wall. Maawa introduced us. She explained that I was a student of anthropology, from Canada, studying the distribution of rations in Delhi and that Ritesh was assisting me. All eyes turned to me. I briefly described my project, explicitly mentioning that I was not a member of the bureaucracy or the government, and asked permission to record our conversation on my phone. I planned to write a book on food and ration cards in Delhi, I further explained, the focus of which would centre on ration card holders. As I finished my sentence, a chaotic eruption of voices filled the room at once:

1 Throughout the dissertation, to preserve the anonymity of interlocutors I encountered, I use pseudonyms to refer to many of them, especially in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. The pseudonyms have been chosen to reflect each interlocutor's religious identity. However, when I refer to interlocutors who occupy a public function or engage publicly in political debates, I use their real names. For bureaucrats, I refer to their positions rather than their identity. For all of my research assistants, though I had multiple research assistants, I use a single pseudonym (Ritesh) to refer to all of them for the sake of simplicity and coherence throughout the dissertation.

- Woman A: Yes, I have an old ration card. I've been to the office twice [to get a new ration card]. But it hasn't been delivered.
- Woman B: And what about those cards which just have one or two names on them?
- Woman C: My ration card is here, but my children's names aren't on it. They asked us to come after elections. Look, this is my old card. And this one is new.
- Woman D: We've been told that this might take months or even a year or two before getting new ration cards. These cards won't work after two years or so. Then our old ones will be used again.

During the 17 months of fieldwork that I undertook in Delhi in 2014-2015, I learned that open-ended interviews, or encounters with interlocutors such as this one, are rarely conducted in an organized manner. After a short while, Maawa summarized the situation as the rest of the women turned towards her: "Everyone has the same problem. Some cards don't have names, some people aren't getting rations." As a starting point for our discussion, I then proceeded to ask what seemed to be the most elementary of questions: "Why do you need a ration card? Why do you want a ration card?" A short moment of awkward silence ensued. The response appeared to be so self-evident to everyone, including Ritesh, that the question threw off most of interlocutors. Ritesh would later ask me how I could ask such a trivial question. After what seemed to be a too long pause, Maawa broke the silence: "For rations," she said.

Maawa's reply was not the answer I was necessarily fishing for. In the past, I had visited other *basti* (informal settlements),² where I had asked a similar question that led to radically different answers. Uma, for instance, a grandmother working seven days a week as a maid for a middle-class neighbour, used to bring her ration card to the *rashan ki dukan*, commonly called a Fair Price Shop in English (hereafter, referred to as FPS or ration shop), to

2 Following Kalyani Menon-Sen and Gautam Bhan (2008, 3-4), I avoid using the terms *slum* or *Jhuggi Jhopdi* (JJ) colony to designate high-density settlements that lack minimum standard services typically located on occupied land. The former has a pejorative connotation, and the latter falls under the category of bureaucratic terminology. Instead, I use *basti*, to mean "urban settlement," as most interlocutors colloquially used it.

collect her monthly allotment of subsidized rations (hereafter, referred to as rations or entitlements). But she also recalled times when her ration card had functioned as collateral for default of payment in various transactions, including when her husband had been unable to pay his tab at a bar he regularly visited or when a relative had contracted a debt to a local moneylender. In another *basti*, Ritesh and I had met a young man from the state of Bihar, Rehaane, in a labyrinth of hundreds of rickshaws behind a newly erected metro station in the heart of Old Delhi. Rehaane had migrated to Delhi at the age of 14 years and had since then occupied a myriad of daily-wage jobs. He was in his late teen years, and he lived, slept, and ate in the *basti* of rickshaw pullers that was surrounded by small eateries and other little shops. At night, he told us, it was not uncommon for him to hang out in the streets adjacent to the rickshaw park with other pullers. On occasion, especially when some of them were drinking, police officers would raid them. Typically, he explained, police officers put drunk pullers who lacked identification documents (IDs) in jail. However, when one holds an ID, he explained, that is sometimes enough of a deterrent for police officers who would rather let the offender go (after doling out some of their infamous bamboo stick blows), rather than fill out the necessary paperwork to put someone with an ID in jail for a minor infraction.³

To Uma and Rehaane, ration cards embodied what Veena Das has called “the right to urban dwelling” (2011, 327; see also Harms 2016), whereby the rationing document grants legal recognition of urban residence to holders that live in *basti*. The notion of “urban dwelling,” Das notes, refers to the incremental practices through which *basti*-dwellers gradually find their

3 Most pullers listening to our discussions agreed, with the exception of an older migrant worker. Playing devil’s advocate, he made the point that for a migrant worker, holding a ration card in Delhi was counterproductive. He had come to Delhi to provide for his family, to send remittances to his home village, and holding a ration card in Delhi would strip an additional set of rations away from his family that had stayed behind.

legitimate footing in the city. An ID that locates its holder in a *basti* certainly contributes to that effect, as the rich literature on urban citizenship or belonging in Delhi illustrates (Baviskar 2010; Ghertner 2010, 2015; Routray 2014; Rao 2010a; Rao 2013). But it also gives its holder, especially if they are a member of the poorest populations of the city, access to a range of informal practices through which one can better navigate the impetus of urban life. Accessing small loans or dealing with police forces are just two instances among many in which holding an ID, such as the ration card, makes urban dwelling easier.

With that said, as Maawa and other women were quick to remind me, access to subsidized rations from FPSs remains perhaps the most significant right embodied by the ration card. While anthropology entails detailed examinations of the mundane aspects and elements of everyday life, anthropologists tend to emphasize or fetishize the informal, illegal, or unfamiliar. However, in this process, material objects under study tend to take what Matthew S. Hull calls “something different from or more than” (2012a, 254) the meanings they are typically associated with. It is important to document, as I explore in Chapter Four, how objects such as the card are imbued with multiple and conflicting meanings and how they act on variegated practices; however, I argue it is equally important to carefully attend to the very materiality of these objects—their visual aspects, particularities, and qualities—and what they do. Thus, while the ration card helps to establish identity and belonging in the city, or the right to dwelling, it is also essential for most interlocutors for securing access to staple foods at a cheap rate.

In Maawa’s home, Alka, a grandmother, explained how a functioning ration card makes living in the city easier:

See, now, I’m not getting any ration at all. I used to get 25 kg of wheat and 10 kg of

rice every month. That's all I want, just like before they [the Indian state] change everything. They've just cancelled that system, and now, my ration card does not work. I am a widow. I just have children. I can't just expect people to give me things [or food, in this context]. I have four daughters and granddaughters. So getting rations makes a difference. I had a card, but it was cancelled. I used to get ration. Then I went to the village. There was some work happening related to ration cards renewal then [in Delhi]. [When I came back,] I went to the governmental office, but they didn't listen, and so my card is now cancelled. This was three years ago. I haven't got ration for four to five years. I eat grain worth ₹ 20/kg. It's really expensive. (Personal Communication, 4 February 2015)

It was rather expensive, considering that subsidized wheat and rice were sold in FPSs at a respective rate of ₹ 2 and ₹ 3/kg. According to Alka, she had on a few occasions visited a governmental office to pry information from bureaucrats, all in vain. “They ask for proof every time,” Alka said. “Different forms have to be filled. We're illiterate. So I don't get the things, the paperwork, and it becomes difficult.” Alka had submitted a form to obtain a ration card, but had no idea if her application had been accepted or processed. As a result, Alka was left waiting, hoping she would eventually receive her ration card by mail.

Alka had been living in the settlement since “Nehru’s time,” a few doors down the alley from where we were all sitting in Maawa’s home. When she first settled in Sarai Kale Khan, the *basti* was surrounded by farm fields, where she used to work and pick her own vegetables. By the time of my fieldwork, the fields had been replaced by informal housing, which had developed into multi-story buildings. When we met, Alka was a matriarch and a widow. Her husband had passed away a decade ago. Since then, she had had to find suitable husbands for her older daughters and ensure that her family could eat at least once a day.

Although she was still in charge of buying vegetables, pulses, and oil for her family, Alka did not cook anymore, nor did she work. Her younger daughters prepared meals for the

family. Her oldest son was the main breadwinner. However, a couple of months before we met, her oldest son had broken his arm and lost his ability to work. Alka had borrowed money at a usury rate from a neighbour to pay the medical bills. Her younger son, in his late teen years, was trying his luck in the daily-wage market to help support his family while his brother recuperated.

In the meantime, bills were stacking up. Alka had not paid a single electricity bill while reimbursing her interest to the moneylender every month. This was a source of concern, especially for the three grandchildren she had to feed every month. Alka was also losing sleep over her two younger daughters. Soon enough, she would have to find them husbands, but without an enviable dowry and with skyrocketing debts, their prospects seemed uncertain. Understandably, access to monthly entitlements would help to reduce their financial burden—or at least help to feed the household.

As she shared her woes with us in Maawa's home, Alka burst into tears. Stories like hers were not uncommon, but they were always hard to listen to. She finally said: "I wanted to ask you... are you just going to ask questions about our situation or will there be benefits at all?" The question blindsided me. I muttered something, but another woman began to share her own misfortunes, cutting me off. Minutes later, Alka left the meeting. On her way out, she grabbed Ritesh by the arm and politely but firmly asked him if we would do anything about her problems. If not, she would have to leave; she had chores around her house that needed her attention.

About 15 months before Ritesh and I had met Alka, in September 2013, the Indian state ratified the National Food Security Act (NFSA), a law set to legally protect four distinct entitlements: lunch for children of six years old or less and for pregnant or new mothers; midday meals for school-goers; maternity cash entitlements; and monthly rations to the poorest two-

thirds of the Indian population—about 740 million people (GoI 2013). Access to monthly rations has been provided since India’s independence through the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), a national ration distribution scheme that channels food grains from Indian farmers to points of distribution in the FPSs. Since the Second World War, the TPDS has become the cornerstone of the country’s postcolonial strategy to alleviate hunger and poverty (Mooij 1998). As I explore further in Chapter Two, the TPDS has maintained the same welfare function—distributing commodities subsidized by the central state—but has evolved over the years, reflecting the ideological inclinations of consecutive regimes. In the wake of the economic liberalization of the 1990s, a decade that profoundly changed the Indian welfare landscape as much as Indian politics and policy more generally (see Kohli 2006a, 2006b), the TPDS has remained a moving target for defenders of fiscal responsibility and budgetary restraint. Advocates for modulating welfare have framed corruption practices as a hindrance to the system’s efficiency and effectiveness in reaching its targeted beneficiaries and, more generally, as significant failures of governance (Basu 2011). In 2005, the Indian state published a study on the performance of the TPDS that revealed alarmingly high levels of corruption and diversion of food to the black market—euphemistically referred to as “leakages” (Planning Commission 2005, xiv). Even though the study’s data was out-dated by the time the NFSA was drafted, it remained a widely cited source among neoliberal supporters who argued for the replacement or the scaling down of the TPDS (Khera, personal interview, New Delhi, August 2015). In response, activists and scholars fighting for the revitalization of the TPDS in the NFSA engaged in an important production of knowledge on the critical role of the TPDS in the Indian welfare landscape (Drèze and Khera 2013; Khera 2011; Himanshu and Sen 2011; Mander 2012b, 2012a; RTFC 2011b; Svedberg 2012). However, even these activists and scholars have identified high levels of

leakages as a predicament of transparency for a government seeking to secure the well-being of hungry populations. In other words, as welfare programs have been increasingly reformed to be more efficient and effective, leakages have continued to pose a significant hindrance to the government's efforts to optimize available resources and provide food to members of the poorest population. The enactment of food security legislation presented an opportunity to overhaul the food welfare landscape and to solve the leakage problem in the TPDS infrastructure.

The NFSA includes a clause that mandates the modernization of the entire TPDS infrastructure to render transactions at FPSs more transparent. Under chapter five of the legislation, entitled “Reforms in Targeted Public Distribution System,” the NFSA calls for the use of “information and communication technology tools,” including the “end-to-end computerization” of the TPDS, to establish “full transparency of records” (GoI 2013, 5–6).⁴ Materially, according to the NFSA, government transparency is to be realized through an economy of new tools that will help to lift the veil on how exchanges at FPSs are conducted, recorded, and monitored. In the aftermath of the NFSA, these tools have carried a particular kind of bureaucratic power—one that can, in due course, reform the TPDS infrastructure. Since the TPDS network has been, at least in part, discursively constructed as a site of leakages rather than a critically important welfare program that has helped to sustain food consumption for millions of households across India (as the discussion mentioned above illustrates), the formulation of the NFSA has presented an opportunity to simultaneously modernize the TPDS infrastructure and as

4 Interestingly, chapter five of the NFSA includes eight clauses: (a) doorstep delivery of food grains; (b) end-to-end computerization of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS); (c) the use of biometric information to authenticate targeted beneficiaries; (d) full transparency of records; (e) preference for public entities rather than private entrepreneurs to operate FPSs; (f) diversification of commodities offered in FPSs; (g) support of other models for the TPDS; and (h) the introduction of other measures, such as cash transfers or food coupons, to support the TPDS. During my fieldwork in Delhi, when the NFSA was gradually being implemented, clauses that emphasized greater exertion of bureaucratic power on rationing practices (i.e., clauses [b], [c], and [d]) were prioritized over other clauses, which were more generally abandoned or ignored.

I argue the re-materialization of the ration card constitutes a governmental strategy to eliminate corruption from the TPDS. In the implementation of the NFSA, old ration cards were re-materialized into new ones that are better equipped to monitor the exchange of rations in FPSs. Before their re-materialization, ration cards had been bureaucratic documents made out of paper—booklets—in which written inscriptions were made to chronicle the monthly distribution of rations. In the aftermath of the NFSA, ration cards were re-materialized into digital documents made of plastic that enable the state to closely track and record the allotment of entitlements. What is more, the Department of Food, Supplies, and Consumer Affairs (DFSCA) has also set up a web portal, called the Food Security Portal, which publicly documents the movement of grains, the identification of beneficiaries, and the production of ration cards. As a result of these changes, old ration cards have lost their most basic functionality. For Alka and other interlocutors, getting a new ration card has become a priority—a necessary task for them to undertake in order to access their rightful entitlements. In Chapter Four, I analyze the transition from the old ration card to the new one. But suffice it to mention here, the transition to a more transparent TPDS has not been a smooth one for Alka and many other ration card holders.

Between the time she had submitted her application for a new ration card and the day we met with her, Alka had been waiting for close to nine months. In that time, she had exhausted every avenue she could think of to put her hands on one of the new re-materialized ration cards. On our way out of the *basti*, after our meeting in Maawa's home, we found Alka cleaning the front steps of her bright blue-bricked house. After exchanging a few words, she welcomed us inside. She sat down on a *charpai* (a traditional woven bed), pulled a silver box from a shelf within reach, and opened it up. She proceeded to fold for each of us a *paan* (a betel leaf

containing areca nuts, spices, and tobacco), before chomping on one herself. We began to talk about Alka's recent trip to the DFSCA field office. However, not used to *paan*'s effects, my head began to turn. I had not expected it to be so potent and had to quickly take my leave.

Before we left, however, Ritesh and I asked for Alka's personal information. Since the Food Security Portal enables members of the TPDS's targeted population to track their ration card applications, we explained that we might be able to log in to the portal and learn whether her ration card had been approved or not. She happily agreed. She sprung off the *charpai* and grabbed a plastic bag, hanging from a hook on the wall. The bag contained various IDs, electricity bills, passport pictures, and a photocopy of her ration card application. The three of us stood in the middle of the room, around the open bag. Using my smartphone, I inputted Alka's information and logged in to the Food Security Portal. It took a few seconds for the webpage to load and for us to discover that Alka's application had been approved six months previously—six months during which she had been unable to draw her rightful entitlements as legally secured by the NFSA. On the screen, Alka's ration card number appeared, along with other information, such as her occupation, her household's annual income, a list of registered family members—which included only herself—and her assigned FPS. With my lips turning red from half-chewed *paan*, I promised Alka that we would come back later in the day with a printed copy of the information we had just retrieved.

On our way out of the *basti*, we paused at the local post office. In the morning, a few women had accused mail carriers of failing to distribute ration cards sent by the DFSCA. The person in charge at the post office assured us, however, that almost all ration cards had already been distributed. When they were first issued, he explained, political pressure had been put on in

the post office staff to distribute the cards as soon as possible. As a result, the clerks had confirmed to governmental authorities that all of the cards had been distributed immediately following their arrival at the post office. In reality, however, it had taken a few weeks to distribute them all. In urban spaces such as Alka's *basti*, addresses are irregular, sometimes incomplete, and ever changing. "See, the locality is very crowded and complicated," the clerk told us. "People don't know each other, so it's difficult to deliver. All live on rented houses [and may have moved. Sometimes,] there is no name of the house owner." After a pause, as if he was unsure as to whether he should continue or not, he added: "We want our delivery percentage to be high . . . 98 to 99%. If the mail carrier knows you, then he keeps the envelope with himself unofficially, and then when he sees you, he'll give it to you. But only in case if he knows you." Clerks also tried to call applicants at the phone numbers listed on envelopes, but sometimes, they found the listed number was not in service anymore. "Calls also we have made from our personal mobile, not official mobile," the clerk explained. "Otherwise, we would be questioned as to why the bills were so high by our superiors. So, we did from our own mobile just so that the people get their ration cards."

After having received 2,000 new ration cards from the DFSCA, this particular post office had delivered almost all of them over the ensuing four months, with the exception of about 60 envelopes. Since the post office staff had already registered all of the ration cards as delivered, they did not want to be caught red-handed with undelivered cards. Affably, the clerk allowed us to have a peek at the 60 envelopes that remained, but Alka's ration card was not among them.

Months later, in May 2015, I accompanied seven right-to-food activists from the Delhi *Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan* (DRRAA) in a locality of North Delhi to a local office of the DFSCA.

Like Alka and Maawa, residents of this neighbourhood had also struggled to get new ration cards. After spending a few hours on the Food Security Portal to verify that residents' applications had been approved, we arrived unannounced at the DFSCA office to share residents' concerns. It was closed, but a clerk unlocked the door to let us in so we could find some relief from the scorching heat while he fetched his superiors. In a corner of the office, one of the activists discovered transparent garbage bags replete with unsent envelopes containing new ration cards. Once the Director of the field office returned, the activists questioned him on the matter. It became clear that the Delhi state had stopped the distribution of new ration cards as a way to entice cardholders to download a softcopy of their cards—the e-ration card—directly from the Food Security Portal. When we had met Alka months earlier, this e-ration card system was not yet operational. It was implemented shortly afterwards. In retrospect, however, it was not clear to me when and how exactly the Delhi state decided to inform applicants that they had to download the e-ration card.

After leaving the post office, we found an Internet cafe where we printed the screen capture of Alka's ration card information on an A4 white sheet of paper. We headed back to her home, found her on her *charpai* and gave her the A4 white piece of paper. We proposed to accompany her to her assigned FPS so she could tentatively collect her first entitlements with her fabricated rationing document. The FPS was located down the street from her blue house—a ten-minute walk away. She accepted and led the way in the streets of Sarai Kale Khan.



Illustration 1: These were the bags replete with envelopes containing the new ration cards.

The FPS was closed when we arrived. On the street, members of the Indian National Congress (hereafter, the Congress), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)—three political parties that competed for 70 seats in the Delhi Legislative Assembly—followed one another to reach out to voters, just a few days prior to the Delhi Legislative Assembly elections on February 7, 2015. Amid a cacophony of music, chants, klaxon, and speeches projected over speakers, we phoned the FPS owner. According to DFSCA regulations, the FPS was supposed to be open. We threatened to denounce the owner to the DFSCA if she did not come to unlock the door and hand over Alka’s rations. I had witnessed other activists using similar tactics with some degree of success. It worked: she promised to be on site within 30 minutes and politely asked us *not* to report her to the authorities. While we waited for the FPS owner to arrive, delegates from the AAP and the Congress promised Alka that once in power, they would do everything they could to eliminate corruption from the TPDS and to expedite the

distribution of ration cards. Given Alka's experience with navigating bureaucratic worlds, I doubt that she believed them. Long after the political parties' parade had ended, the owner finally reached her shop, and unlocked the door.

As soon as the owner arrived, she glanced at Alka's A4 sheet of paper and immediately refused to sell her rations. To her defence, the rationing document did not seem very legit. Alka pleaded that for months, her rations had been dispatched to the FPS, but she had been unable to collect any, since her ration card had not been mailed to her. Getting angrier, Ritesh tried to convince the FPS owner that the information on the sheet of paper was genuine. However, the owner argued that without a genuine ration card, she could not sell entitlements to Alka, even though her application appeared to have been approved by the DFSCA. She would not budge but she did express some empathy in response to Alka's pleas. On the sheet of paper printed from the Food Security Portal, it was clearly stated that Alka's entitlements had been delivered to the FPS for (at least) the past two months. Behind Alka, people began to line up. As the queue lengthened, the FPS owner agreed to distribute entitlements to Alka *if* her sheet of paper was authenticated by a bureaucrat from the DFSCA. She told Alka to come back a few days later with her authenticated, yet quite unique, rationing document and promised to sell Alka her rightful entitlements.

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Application	Application	Application Without Aadhaar	Modification	FSL Point Chand(Circle #1)
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Application Detail of

1. Card Category: 233588
2. New RC No.:
3. Mobile No.:
4. Old RC No.:
5. HOF Name:
6. Nationality:
7. Occupation:
8. Full Address:
9. Family Annual Income:
10. Date of Application:
11. Circle:
12. Pending With:
13. Reason of Registration:
14. Date of Approval/Rejection:
15. Assigned FPS (Approved):

List of Family Members

SNo.	Member ID	Member Name	Gender	DOB	Relationship With HOF	Aadhaar No.	EID No.	Data Verified From UID	Edit(Only at DEO/FSI level)
1	297698	Devi	Female	14/09/1946	SELF			Yes	Edit Record

Inspector
Circle #1, Chandpur
Date: 14/06/2014

Design and Developed by NCC Delhi State Unit

http://04.100.100.100/.../app/HTA/CDR

Illustration 2: This is the ration card/A4 piece of paper that was later signed by a DFSCA bureaucrat.

When we met with Alka a few weeks later, she had finally collected her rations from the FPS: 4 kg of wheat and 1 kg of rice. An inspector from the local DFSCA office had stamped and signed her otherwise useless sheet of paper, giving it enough clout to compel the FPS owner to deliver to Alka her food grains. In the celebrated piece “The Signature of the State,” Das (2004) explores how bureaucratic inscriptions on paper engender a circulation of state power that finds its way into the lives of the governed. She writes:

The examples of . . . ration cards, and other hundreds of other such documents show how the state comes to be present in the everyday life of its subjects. Because it can be multiplied, literalized through court papers, certificates, and forged documents, it can enter the life of the community. . . . It is precisely because the documents can be forged and used out of context, and because the bureaucratic-legal processes are not legible even to those responsible for implementing them, that the state can penetrate the life of the community and yet remain elusive. (Das 2004, 245)

For Das, it is within the productive tension between the comprehensible and elusiveness, the

legible and illegible, the legitimate and illegitimate, that the state not only manifests itself but also produces the modalities through which bureaucratic practices can exert its presence. For Alka, the signature of the DFSCA bureaucrat materialized the state's presence onto an otherwise impotent piece of paper. It gave her access to her rightful entitlements, from which she had been otherwise excluded, despite her repeated attempts to get them. In postcolonial India, Das notes, documents are “bearer of rules and regulations,” as much as they materialize the “spectral presence” of the state (2004, 251). Through the navigation of documents' (il)legibility and (il)legitimacy, the signature of the state shapes the agency of objects and how they act on a range of practices (see Das 2011). In Alka's case, the bureaucrat's signature brought the state into her everyday life: it determined whether or not her sheet of paper would allow her to enjoy her rightful entitlements.

Along with the experience of Alka with her ration card, this framing of documents and the power they bear offers a stark contrast to the ideas and assumptions of the state found in the very constitution of the right to food entitlement as formulated in the NFSA. Take this statement of a former civil servant, human rights activist, author, and prominent architect of the NFSA, Harsh Mander:

The idea of the *right to food* . . . is that it places at the centre the role of the State to ensure food security for *all* residents, at all times. . . . The advantage of the rights-based approach to food-security issues is that it transforms people from passive recipients of State benevolence to active agents who claim and enjoy their legal and equal human rights as citizens. (2012a, 232; italics in original)

Here, Mander asserts that a human rights approach to food security signals “that the state is the primary institution to which claims must be directed” (Edelman et al. 2014, 925; Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011), inasmuch as people voice their claims to keep state interventions in check.

This position foregrounds a set of assumptions about the state, its roles and functions, the society it governs, and the transformative potential found in the production of specific types of subjects that do not necessarily reflect the experiences of targeted populations. In the implementation of the NFSA, Mander's assertion will certainly be put to test. As Alka's story illustrates, a right to food entitlement does not mean much until that right is materialized into documentation embodying the power of the state. It also shows that the power of the state is distributed along a large association of humans and things, all acting on one another: a foreign researcher, a FPS owner, a bureaucrat, a piece of paper, a digital infrastructure, a smartphone, and so on, and so forth.

In this dissertation, I recognize that the NFSA was not formulated and implemented to mechanically "end hunger" (Mander 2012a, 235). Instead, building on Mander (2012a, 2015) and others (Drèze and Sen 2013; RTFC 2011b), I situate the NFSA as a normative and political project enacted to compel the state to act on the issue of chronic hunger, but also as a public call against the indifference of the wealthy to the situation of the poor and hungry. In such a project, the construction of "active agents" is key: governmental interventions are established to provide the necessary, or adequate, resources so that poor citizens can empower themselves to overcome the (economic) barriers that have systematically hindered their access to a dignified life without hunger (Drèze and Sen 2013; Mander 2012a). I contend that the implementation of the NFSA has resulted in a series of government mechanisms deployed in such a way as to make the state into a seemingly caring entity set out to arrange the population as a collection of empowered individual bodies left out by themselves to navigate bureaucratic sites to find their way out of chronic hunger. In light of this, I argue that the development discourse of "empowerment" that echoes

with the production of “active agents” does not fit well with the experience of the interlocutors I encountered. In the anthropological tradition, my argument relies on ethnographic description to translate these complex experiences and enrich overly simplistic understandings of the right to food entitlement that frame it as an authoritative solution to the perennial issue of chronic hunger that has accompanied India’s history (Davis 2001; Sen 2013).

Ethnographic representations are always partial, selective, and incomplete, yet they typically open a window on unfamiliar experiences and practices that are imbued with meanings. In the following sections, to properly shed light on and expand these situations, practices, and meanings, I situate my argument at the intersection of an anthropological literature on governmentality and science and technology studies (STS), allowing the literature to frame my discussion and substantiate my claims, as I conceptualize the range of analytical tools used throughout this dissertation. More precisely, I engage with the concepts of governmentality and techno-politics not necessarily to argue against the ways in which the right to food entitlement was formulated, but rather to elucidate the relation between the discursive formation of the right to food entitlement, the mechanisms of government it has generated, and the effects they have had on the population.

1.1 “The Will to Improve”⁵

The NFSA commitments on food security followed events in 1966, when the right to food became a legally binding principle for the 162 states that ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). India was one of those states. The ICESCR stresses state obligations to recognize “the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger”

5 The title and content of this section are respectively inspired and informed by the lucid and ground-breaking work of Tania Murray Li (2007b) in her book *The Will to Improve*.

(UN General Assembly 1966, sec. 11.2). Contrary to the ICESCR, though, the NFSA does not grant a fundamental right to be free from hunger. What it does is secure a right to four legal entitlements: food grains entitlements through the TPDS; free lunch programs for school-going children; one meal a day for children aged six or less and their mothers; and maternity cash entitlements. As such, the right to food entitlement guaranteed by the NFSA should be understood as the right to access entitlements through welfare. The right to food entitlement emphasizes the delivery mechanisms of these entitlements. One could reasonably argue that this set of entitlements may well protect a large section of the population from chronic hunger (see Mander 2012a). However, in this dissertation, I do not engage with such claims. Instead, I am interested in the relation between the discursive formation of the right to food entitlement and its implementation. As Alka's experience illustrates, the deployment of the right to food entitlement is contingent on a myriad of mundane situations and circumstances, most of which are shaped, in the context of the NFSA, by a governmental obsession with rendering rationing practices transparent and accountable—or devoid of corruption.

For the right to food entitlement to be taken seriously, or to be “consequential,” as Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat put it, “the practices of solemnly encoding certain rights in constitutions, of entrenching and interpreting these rights in judicial practices and invoking them in political rhetoric also hinges on the efficiency of the imagination of the state as a guarantor of these rights” (2001, 18). The appeal of a human rights-based approach to solving social issues makes sense only if the state is imagined to be able to deliver on its obligation to implement these human rights. The ability to secure the right to food entitlement, for instance, depends on the state's capacity to impose a legal system on its population and to abide by an

ensemble of obligations. A rights-based approach, which includes the provision of transparent and accountable mechanisms of entitlement delivery, emerges as a change of culture in governance (Sharma 2013). If a state is imagined to be unable of undertaking this change, then it makes little sense to resort to a rights-based approach as a solution to chronic hunger in the first place. As such, the need to eradicate corruption from bureaucratic practices has been granted a prominent position in the formulation of the NFSA. Anthropology and ethnographic research, Mark Goodale notes, are “uniquely positioned” (2006b, 26) to study how ideals of human rights are made intelligible (and implementable) in local contexts, and how these ideals are enacted in practice. It is thus important, I believe, to turn our attention to how the Indian government appears as the caretaker of the population as a whole (Gupta 2012). In this section, therefore, I examine how normative ideals of government, informed by a rights-based approach, are carried over in bureaucratic interventions to empower the governed. For this reason, I explore a grid that encourages us to think of interventions in the lives of the population as attempts to “make live” rather than to “let die” (Li 2010)⁶ through Michel Foucault’s “analytics of governmentality” (Li 2007b, 12).⁷

The definition that Foucault ascribes to “government” is the “conduct of conduct,” described by Colin Gordon as “a form of activity aiming to shape, guide, affect the conduct of

6 In an article entitled “To Make Live or Let Die? Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations,” Tania Li (2010) explores how governmental interventions can literally make live or let die of surplus populations—those who struggle to make a living wage. Li shows that the biopolitical responsibility to “make live” interventions for the surplus population is a situated object of contentious politics. Li contends that “social forces” (2010, 67), which includes among others labour movements, communist parties, and activists, play a key role for “the activation of a biopolitics” (2010, 67) leading to a meaningful implementation of make live interventions. Pitted against observations drawn from her field site in Central Sulawesi in which the surplus population do not enjoy the make live interventions of the government, Li examines how right-to-food activists in India have struggled for the implementation of right to work and right to food policies.

7 On “the analytics of governmentality,” Tania Li writes that it can be “used to examine the practices of rule [that] articulate elements of government, discipline, and sovereignty” (2007b, 12). This section examines this articulation in the context of the implementation of the NFSA.

some person or persons” (1991, 2). To govern is to administer the relationships of human and nonhuman agents, to properly dispose of humans and things (Foucault 1991, 95), within the confines of their natural and cultural environment. Here, the object of government is the population, its well-being, and its biorhythms: birth rates, pandemics, natural disasters, wars, economic prosperity, political division, extreme poverty, chronic hunger, and so on, and so forth. To maintain its sovereignty within the borders of the nation-state, the government manages potential risks that may destabilize the biorhythm of a population. Thus the exercise of government is “knowing and improving the condition of the population” (Li 2010: 79; see Li 2007a; 2007b)⁸ or what Foucault calls “biopolitics of the population” (Rabinow and Rose 2006, 196). The establishment of a right to food entitlement falls in line with such an exercise of government: it embodies, at least in principle, what Tania Murray Li has framed as “mak[ing] live interventions” which are interventions aimed towards “the activation of a biopolitics that places the intrinsic value of life—rather than the value of people as workers or consumers—at its core” (2010, 67). Turning our attention to the governmental interventions enables us to explore how the right to food entitlement are intricately embedded in fields of power.

“Governing people,” Foucault suggests, “. . . is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between

8 To illustrate the mechanisms of biopolitics, I borrow this citation from Tania Li (2010), but in reality, Li explores the modalities of biopolitics in greater depth in her book *The Will to Improve* (2007b; see also 2007a). Probing the analytics of governmentality and development in Central Sulawesi, Li shows how technical interventions are always intricately embedded in situated relations of power. Through a sophisticated ethnographic account, Li attends to not only the rather technical making of development project blueprints by experts, but also to the practices and processes of governmental interventions that invariably shape the lives of the targeted populations. In *The Will to Improve*, however, these populations are not mere objects to be improved; these subjects have agency, they engage with, interrogate, and contest development projects deployed to improve their life. In light of Li’s contribution to the study of governmentality, this dissertation seeks to emulate such an ethnographic approach by exploring what the right to food entitlement seeks to accomplish, how the techniques of government are designed to improve the lives of the population, and uncover the unanticipated practices and processes produced following the implementation of the NFSA.

techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself” (in Lemke 2000, 5). However, it is impossible to police or discipline every single individual in a population. To govern thus requires that power be manufactured in such a way as to conduct individuals’ conduct at a distance: to organize the population through both the coercive and regulative (or panopticonic) mechanisms of the law from which behaviours are observed, judged, and examined or normalized—an operation of power that results, in the words of Li, in “educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs” (2007b, 257).

The shaping of these desires, habits, aspirations, and beliefs depends upon a grid of reason, a rationality of government that operates within modalities of power that Foucault calls “governmentality.” Governmentality, a neologism coined from the contraction of *gouvernement* and *mentalité*, provides a foundation for analyzing the interrelation between the exercise of government (*gouvernement*) and the rationality (*mentalité*) that informs government actions (Gordon 1991; Legg 2007; Lemke 2001; Rabinow 1984). As Gordon succinctly explains: “governmentality is about how to govern” (1991, 7). It describes a “rationality of government,” he adds, “a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government . . . capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practiced” (Gordon 1991, 3). Governmentality, in a nutshell, is an exercise of government that imbues its own rationality into individuals’ intimate practices and affairs. As a result, individuals consent, knowingly or not, to be governed (Li 2007a). Inherent to the exercise of government is thus an attempt to transpose a rationality of government onto a grid of conventions, meanings, morals, and ethics of the population (Gordon 1991, 48).

Interventions such as the NFSA are not simply articulated out of thin air. They are

designed and implemented in relation to a rationality of government that makes development projects intelligible. Two interrelated practices are central to this process: (a) problematization, which refers to the formulation of a problem and the identification of solutions; and (b) “rendering technical,” which consists of the transposition of solutions into the design, implementation, and evaluation of development projects (Li 2007b, 7–10; Rose 1999). Here, the rationality of government plays a critical role because it produces knowledge—a discourse—that frames the formulation of what the population may need and how the government may satisfy those needs. As I show in Chapter Two, the problem of chronic hunger has remained an issue of governmental concern in postcolonial India; however, the history of food policy in the country indicates that different governmental interventions have been undertaken in successive discursive regimes, according to changing sets of conceptions and practices about the world and how it works. As Li notes, the “identification of a problem is intimately linked to the availability of a solution” (2007b, 7). The rationality of government works on the ability of planners and experts to formulate solutions to a problem. For instance, soon after India gained independence in 1947, experts and planners worked to dramatically increase food production to meet the nutritional needs of the (urban) population. Decades later, in a populist move, the emphasis of governmental interventions was shifted to the distribution of entitlements as a strategy to raise people above poverty.

This is not to say that the rationality of government determines the practices of problematization and rendering technical—or that they are both apolitical (see Ferguson 1990). In a rather elegant series of feminist essays on the “politics of need interpretation,” Nancy Fraser (1989, 113–87) captures the political nature of the interrelated practices of problematization and

rendering technical as contending needs claims. As Fraser points out: “the interpretation of people’s needs is itself a political stake, indeed sometimes *the* political stake” (Fraser 1989, 145; emphasis in original). The perceived needs of the population often go without saying, unnoticed. But they are imbued with meanings that find their way into development projects. For Fraser, therefore, a closer look at the politics that animate the formulation of a population’s needs can shed light on the underlying norms and assumptions that give credence to governmental interventions. Fraser unpacks the politics of need interpretation to devise a discursive approach to studying the exercise of government—that is, not an approach emphasizing “the distribution of satisfactions” (1989, 163) but rather on “what various groups . . . really need and whose interpretation of . . . needs should be authoritative” (1989, 145). Fraser’s contribution to the analytics of governmentality gives us a framework to analyze conflicting views in the process of discourse formation. As I explore in Chapter Three, when analyzing the NFSA, the politics of need interpretation lead us to chart how certain solutions to chronic hunger—such as the elimination of corruption—have remained central throughout the formulation and implementation of the NFSA, while others—such as reverting the TPDS back to a universal welfare program of food distribution—have been rapidly excluded. It prompts us to question how the right to food entitlement generates, in its techniques of government, conditions of inclusions and exclusions. In other words, it leads us to interrogate how the right to food entitlement creates situations in which targeted populations may be included or excluded from these entitlements either through targeting mechanisms or in the delivery of entitlements. Thus, I turn my attention to how conditions or situations of exclusions are intertwined in the implementation of development projects.

In his book, *Red Tape*, Akhil Gupta defines structural violence as “a capacious term that encompasses not only the exclusion from entitlements such as food and water, but also the exclusion of certain groups from particular forms of recognition (citizenship rights, equal rights before the law, rights to education, representation, and so on)” (Gupta 2012, 20; see also Das 1996). Navigating between biopolitics and systematic exclusion from governmental interventions, Gupta tries to make sense of how bureaucratic practices of welfare arbitrarily produce detrimental outcomes for a segment of the population—a process that he calls “the production of arbitrariness (Gupta 2012, 24). To illustrate the workings of governmentality on the production of arbitrariness, Gupta compares two development projects that were implemented before and after India’s economic liberalization. In 1991, India approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to participate in the structural adjustment programs (SAPs), reformed its domestic economy, and opened its borders to global trade (see Kohli 2006a, 2006b). Gupta ties these neoliberal market-friendly reforms to a dramatic switch in governmental rationality that hinges on the end of the welfare state and the emergence of neoliberalism. For Gupta, this departure marks the emergence of neoliberal governmentality—that is, a domain of economic knowledge based on an ambiguous market-friendly “grab bag” (Kohli 1989, 306) of inconsistent measures from which governmental interventions are made intelligible.

Gupta goes on to ethnographically explore the modalities of the two development projects, coming to the conclusion that “there are substantial continuities in biopolitics and violence across the period that divides neoliberal governance from earlier forms of rule” (2012, 272). Moreover, Gupta notes that different rationalities have indeed informed policy formulation within these programs; while neoliberal development projects seek to improve well-being by

emphasizing notions of citizen empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and fiscal responsibilities (Sharma 2006), earlier projects in India were formed around the making of a benevolent state lifting the poor out of poverty. Yet, in their deployment, Gupta argues, both types of projects resulted in upsettingly similar practices. As it turns out, structural violence is consistently experienced across forms of rule, often in normalized ways. More critically, Gupta notes the lack of urgency to alleviate the experience of structural violence as an absolute governmental priority (Gupta 2012, 273–75).

There are, of course, shortcomings to Gupta’s analysis. Neoliberalism is an ideology that has informed policy reforms in India since the 1980s, but it has also resulted in a range of processes—what Noel Castree (2010a, 2010b), among others, calls neoliberalization—that have a direct influence on the lives of people and things.⁹ In other words, to refer to neoliberalism as a single and cohesive set of ideas informing laws, policies, and welfare programs is misleading, especially since neoliberalization processes impact the population in manifold ways, on multiple scales (see Castree 2010a, 2010b; Hoffman et al. 2006; Kohli 2006a, 2006b). Second, while development programs of empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and microcredit have risen in popularity in South Asia in the neoliberal age (Rankin 2001, 2002; Sharma 2006), what has populated the development landscape in India since the turn of the millennium is a series of rights-based laws that, according to Shannon Speed, have been designed specifically “as a

9 Neoliberalism is a popular, and a rather ubiquitous, “label of critique” (Ganti 2014, 99) in anthropology and elsewhere (see, among several others, Duménil et Lévy 2011; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Harvey 2005; Hirsh 2010; Guthman 2008a; 2008b; Ong 2006; Rankin 2001; Rao 2010; Sharma 2006; 2013). However, as Nastree (2010a; 2010b) and others (Elyachar 2012; Ferguson 2009; 2015; Ganti 2014; Hoffman et al. 2006; Kohli 2006a; Ortner 2010) have suggested, this label of critique also indexes a large realm of ideas, practices, phenomena, and political economic contexts that are not necessarily monolithic or even coherent (Ferguson 2010). Informed by this discussion (see Hoffman et al. 2006), this dissertation aims to explore how “neoliberalism [is] doing its work” (Ortner 2011) on targeted populations by focusing on the processes it generates in the dispensation of entitlements (see Chapter Five).

response to neoliberal globalization and important discourse of resistance movements” (2005, 31). Speed adds: “this conceptualization is shared by human rights activists” (2005, 31). In response to governmental inertia to address the most basic and urgent nutritional needs during a period of intense economic liberalization, Indian right-to-food activists have debated on, and formulated a series of, propositions for more than a decade to pressure government authorities to adopt accountable and transparent measures in their interventions (see Chapter Three). Such claims were eventually co-opted by the Indian state. After the enactment of rights to information (2004) and right to work (2005), the right to food entitlement secured by the NFSA (2013) figures as the latest governmental attempt in India to provide a range of legal protections against chronic hunger and the endemic practices of corruption in the delivery of entitlements. These demands for rights and entitlements by activists and civil society initially had some radical underpinnings, however I show how in the context of neoliberalization, such rights-based laws, including the NFSA, are not revolutionary (see Brown 1995).

In the design of these laws, as my discussion of the politics of need interpretation illustrates in Chapter Three, radical political claims that tend to challenge the structure of capital accumulation (and structural violence) are largely ignored, and in the implementation of these laws, techniques of government tend to depoliticize both the hold of the state on society and the existence of poverty—or chronic hunger (cf. Ferguson 1990). In the case of the right to food entitlement, for instance, techniques of government seek to create economic opportunities for individuals by providing a range of entitlements, along with bureaucratic pathways, such as grievance redressal and monitoring mechanisms, that allow for individuals to challenge the state if and when it fails to secure those entitlements. But in the implementation of the right to food

entitlement, as Alka's experience shows, access to entitlements depends on a series of contingencies. In this regard, techniques of government are not elaborated to tackle structural problems that afflict one particular group over another, nor are they deployed to ensure that every single individual who suffers from chronic hunger has access to entitlements; rather, they are designed to help empowered bodies to help themselves¹⁰—to “instantiate or develop agency where it did not exist before” (Brown 2004, 454).¹¹

In this constellation of governmental techniques and glossary, “empowerment” is certainly a buzzword in human rights and development discourse in the neoliberal age. But its meanings are somewhat equivocal. For Aradhana Sharma, who has studied the governmentalization of women's empowerment in neoliberal development projects:

“empowerment is a moving target whose meaning is constantly redefined through subaltern women's struggle. It has an ambiguous and open-ended quality that manifests itself in multiple and conflicted ways in women's lives” (2006, 81). This is not necessarily surprising, since the literature on the governmentality of development emphasizes the gaps between the design and implementation of projects—the unanticipated and unaccounted effects of development blueprints on the lives of people (Ferguson 1990; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Gupta 1995; Li

10 I borrow the expression from Michael Ignatieff: “human rights matter because they help people to help themselves” (2000, 57 in Brown 2004, 454).

11 In this sense, the implementation of a right to food entitlement echoes what James Ferguson (2015) terms the “politics of distribution,” a form of distributive politics that has emerged in recent years, “rooted in a conviction that citizens . . . are the *rightful owners* of a vast national wealth . . . of which they have been unjustly deprived” (2015, 26; italics in original). Ferguson writes that global capitalism has restructured its labour force and now needs fewer and fewer low-waged workers who, in turn, become even more marginalized and impoverished. Ferguson thus argues that, in the absence of employment, the democratic state must take care of its most vulnerable segments of the population through the distribution of social payment—cash transfers—to keep the poorer class out of abject poverty. Ferguson's insightful argument explores the relation of capital to biopolitics and empowerment. My argument echoes Ferguson's, but centres not so much on capital and the reproduction of surplus population (see Li 2010), but on the intricate interrelationship between structural violence, discourse of good governance, and biopolitics that are, as I show in this section, key features of the discursive formation of the right to food entitlement.

2007a, 2007b; Sharma and Gupta 2006). In Sharma's (2006) ethnographic study, the governmental program of women's empowerment in Northern India sought to produce empowered bodies that are aware of gender and class inequalities. Yet Sharma's empowered interlocutors did not hesitate to use narratives of empowerment in their struggles against hierarchies of power and structural exclusion, including with local bureaucrats: "[empowered women] learn statist language and practices and use them as potentially subversive tools for demanding accountability" (Sharma and Gupta 2006, 81). Sharma builds her analysis on Partha Chatterjee's theorization of political society in postcolonial contexts. In a nutshell, Chatterjee argues that the exercise of governmentality results in the making of a population—the political society—that is located in the margins of the rules of law (2004, 2011). In order to avoid creating a dangerous legal precedent for the stability of the rule of law, the ruling of a political society is always conducted on an exceptional basis in which each governmental intervention is an object of negotiation. This awkwardly results in the making of political subjects who, voluntarily or not, "make claims on the state, negotiate entitlements, and contest social hierarchies" (Sharma 2006, 81). Consequently, Sharma concludes, the making of empowered subjects is conducive to creating a political domain for subaltern women who would otherwise have difficulty voicing claims about structural violence (such as gender inequalities) that extend beyond the objectives of development projects. In the words of Sharma, the governmentalization of empowerment "open[s] the door for a meaningful democratization of civil society and state institutions" (Sharma 2006, 81).

And yet, since ethnographic analysis is always situated (Haraway 1988), Sharma's views on empowerment are not readily translatable to all development projects. The making of

empowered women as political subjects may well differ from the making of active agents entitled to food entitlements. Producing empowered bodies oftentimes signals the production of agential individuals capable of working their way out of poverty, or chronic hunger. But there is also another side to this narrative. In this framework, when empowered bodies fail to better their own lives, it is not necessarily taken as an indication that the governmental intervention has failed. Oftentimes, empowered bodies are held responsible for successfully engaging with techniques of government, and failure to do so is interpreted not necessarily as a failure of governance, but as a misfire, a statistical inevitability, or a trait of character that simply cannot be regulated by authorities. In evacuating structural violence from the discursive formation of governmental intervention, therefore, failure to improve the lives of certain individuals is normalized—or worse, ignored (Gupta 2012). Statistically speaking, when an intervention improves the lives of the population, even marginally, it is deemed to be a technical success to be emulated. When it does not, it is taken as an indication that the practices of problematization and rendering technical have not been properly conceptualized—a process that compels actors to return to the drawing board to develop another project blueprint (Ferguson 1990).

Different techniques of government operate on different populations in different ways. As such, it is important to attend to the formulation of perceived needs, to the conditions of deployment of techniques of government, and especially to the instruments used to conduct people's conduct. In this section, I have explored the contours of the analytics of governmentality as a way to present how fields of power/knowledge animate the mechanisms deployed to improve the lives of people. I have highlighted how for the production of empowered bodies, the techniques and instruments used to implement development projects such as the NFSA matter. In

the next section, therefore, I posit that these techniques and instruments are of cardinal importance for the realization of a right to food entitlement. My argument, and the contribution of this dissertation more generally, rests on the assumption that instruments of government mediate—that is, “transform, translate, distort, and modify” (Latour 2005, 39; Hull 2012a, 253)—the rationality of government, which here consists of objectives of accountability and transparency that distinguish the NFSA from previous governmental food security interventions. Thus, in the next section, I chart what instruments of government are and what they do.

1.2 Infrastructures of Improvement: Mediating Accountability and Transparency

In the previous sections, I introduced the analytics of governmentality as a grid of analysis that helps us explore the field of power that informs the exercise of government through bureaucratic procedures. I situated the NFSA as a governmental project responsive to a discursive approach to human rights that emphasizes principles of good governance, deployed to render bureaucratic practices accountable and transparent. I have used the term “techniques of government” to encompass the myriad tactics employed by the government to improve the population. “Instruments of government,” on the other hand, are the metrological tools used to do so. In this section, I turn my attention to these instruments.

Instruments are critically important in the deployment of governmental projects. They are used to measure and configure the biorhythm of a population. For instance, for Foucault, statistics is the science of government that generates knowledge about the population (1991, 96). To produce such knowledge requires a large number of statistical instruments for regulating and monitoring the population in order to direct appropriate action on it.

However, instruments are not only mere tools. They do not simply provide metrics

about the population: they also frame cultural understandings of the government and the population. They embody meanings and configure the exercise of government. Scholars have investigated how the state shapes natural and social landscapes through the (mis)use of science (Scott 1999), or “how the state works,” thanks to the instruments of statistics (Corbridge et al. 2005, 18). I take a different approach. Building on Timothy Mitchell (2002), I argue that the positivist qualities of scientific discourse—what gives knowledge its *truthness*—and the power of the state are simultaneously constituted in social practices.¹² Taking a closer look at instruments and infrastructures of governmentality, I believe, enables us to decode these processes.

According to Mitchell, infrastructures and instruments of governmentality are examples of techno-politics: a “technical body, an alloy that must emerge from a process of manufacture whose ingredients are both human and nonhuman agents, both intentional and not, and in which the intentional or the human is always somewhat overrun by the unintended” (2002, 42–43). Building on Bruno Latour’s (1993, 2005) insights on the critical importance of nonhuman agency to understand social phenomena, Mitchell debunks the idea that humans and things are passive objects waiting to be organized by governmental interventions—or passive recipients of a rationality of government. For Mitchell, scientific knowledge (which he refers to as technoscience) generates passive categories, which the government can then claim in order to rule over the population. The object of critique here is the very function of government rationality. Mitchell contends that by insisting on the formulation of subjects and things as

12 In a footnote, Mitchell positions his concept of techno-politics in opposition to ideas presented in James C. Scott’s monograph, *Seeing Like the State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Mitchell states:

While I admire many of Scott’s arguments, my own analysis differs from his in important ways. In particular, whereas Scott is concerned with the way modern states have misused powers of science, and distinguishes this misuse from proper science, I am concerned with the kinds of social and political practice that produce simultaneously the powers of science and the powers of modern states. (2002, 312)

constructs, technoscience fails to capture the social reality of “the amalgam of human and nonhuman things and ideas” (2002, 43). This is what he means when he points to the fact that “the intentional or the human is always somewhat overrun by the unintended.” Since people are more than *homo oeconomicus*, or rational individuals, and since things are more than passive objects isolated from a pristine nature, scientific categories always fail to adequately capture the complexity of the world, leading rationalities of government to impose on the population frames of reference that are ill-adapted or skewed. In *Rule of Experts*, Mitchell identifies some of these technical bodies that have shaped the dynamics of Egypt’s social, economic, and political life during the 20th century. A map, a 1980 World Bank report, or a model village are some of the constitutive elements that form the technical body of modern-day Egypt. These are intricately inserted in an association of humans and things that act on one another: an elusive mosquito, a peasant, a plot of land, or Timothy Mitchell himself. In following closely the trace left by the alloy of a technical body when inserted in a network, Mitchell situates sites of struggles in which instruments of government shape and are being shaped by (human and nonhuman) actors.

In the previous section, I discussed governmental rationality that both informs and renders interventions intelligible. As Gordon discusses, the engineering of governmental rationality has been partly the affair of economists who have pioneered and expanded a field of knowledge—political economy—that “inaugurates a new mode of objectification of governed reality, whose effect is to resituate governmental reason within a newly complicated open and unstable politico-epistemic configuration” (1991, 16). Historically, in anthropology, research on the meanings of economic practices has taken a prominent position, at least for a few decades of the 20th century, animated by two approaches called formalism and substantivism. The latter has

argued that economic practices are embedded in broader cultural domains, while the former has defended universalistic concepts of what constitutes the economy and economic practices (Hann and Hart 2011).¹³ This debate came to a halt when Mark Granovetter suggested that economic practices are “closely embedded in networks of interpersonal relations and that such an argument avoids the extremes of under- and oversocialized views of human action” (1985, 514). Scholars of science and technology studies (STS) who are interested in economic practices have built on Granovetter’s insights to conceptually frame network not as a cultural context, “but a network which configures ontologies” (Callon 1998, 8). Here, the network either frames the relationships between agents or it shapes the constitutive association of various sorts of agents. For anthropologists interested in the analytics of governmentality, this theoretical development provides a rather potent entry point for exploring the agency of instruments of government and how they configure the association of humans and things—to which I now turn to.

From an STS perspective, what is at stake is not the question of whether pre-existing fields of expertise inform governmental rationality, but rather how these fields of expertise, embodying certain metrics over others, are mediated by instruments of government. Take the construction of the economy, for instance (see Mitchell 2002). Economic knowledge establishes key categories that shape our cultural understandings of what is deemed to be economic and what is not. Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon (2009, 2010) argue that operationalization in worlds of economic knowledge—economization—generates economic practices. Just like other analytical objects, such as the state, the economy does not pre-exist economic practices: it is a fabrication

13 Two schools of thought have dominated the debate on the question. Following Karl Polanyi (1967), a substantivist approach focuses on the particular and localized circumstances of economic practices, while a formalist approach emphasizes the traction of universal political economic concepts in different locales. The substantivist vs. formalist debate has helped to accentuate the orientation of anthropology as a discipline that has historically thrived on documenting the particular nature of human experiences within the universal essence of human existence (see Hann and Hart 2011, 55–71).

that results from a series of analytical categorization and reification of everyday practices (Callon 1998; Mitchell 2008). As such, for Çalışkan and Callon, what is central to their analysis is “[the identification and characterization of] entities that have been ‘economicized’” (2009, 391), entities that are rendered economic. Here, infrastructures and instruments play a critical role since they enable the discursive formation “of relations between politics and the economy. . . . Discourses draw boundaries, exclude and reject, and it is in these mechanisms that the political dimension [of the formation of the economy] lies” (Callon 2010, 164-65). For Çalışkan and Callon, the economy is always locally and technologically engineered and is “aimed at describing, analysing and making intelligible the shape, constitution and dynamics of a market socio-technical arrangement [or *agencements*¹⁴]” (2010, 3). This led Çalışkan and Callon to contend that infrastructures and instruments—what they call socio-technical *agencements*—enable the enactment of economic knowledge into everyday practice.

Socio-technical *agencements*, one should note, have all been engineered to design, implement, or maintain markets or the economy, Çalışkan and Callon argue, and as such, these *agencements* carry with them an assortment of economic knowledge. Socio-technical *agencements* help human agents, or stakeholders involved in these configurations of networks, to make calculations in the process of valuing and exchanging commodities, and as such, these socio-technical *agencements* enable the performance, the enactment, or the mediation of the calculation of exchange. In other words, these socio-technical *agencements* (hereafter, instruments or “devices,” which are objects that “do things . . . [they are] objects with agency” [(Muniesa, Millo, and Callon 2007, 2)]) help to bring into reality a number of economic

14 *Agencement* is a French word that does not translate well in English. It refers to notions of arrangements or assemblage, but it connotes notions of agency (Callon, Millo, and Muniesa 2007).

conceptions about economic processes. Çalışkan and Callon have thus produced a critique of economics as a discipline, and economic knowledge more generally, by proposing a reflexive research program that explores the impact of economic reification, and other forms of economic knowledge production, on human calculation and processes deemed economic more generally. Central to this research program is the emphasis on socio-technical *agencement*, or how instruments act on a network of humans and things.

This research program has indeed inspired anthropologists to explore how governmental rationality, through the agency of various infrastructures, instruments and other devices, shapes the operation of technologies of government on populations. Here, as Brian Larkin points out, infrastructures are not simply “out there” (2013, 329) like pre-given categories of material configuration, such as functional roads and working electrical networks, that stand out in and of themselves. Instead, they are constituted through the use and manipulation of infrastructures or instruments that take shape as socio-technical *agencements*. Thus, conceptually, infrastructures comprise elements of governmental rationality, techniques of government, and bureaucratic practices; they are conduits, in other words, that reveal the exercise of government underpinning plans, programs, and projects (Anand 2011; Larkin 2013; Mitchell 2002). For instance, Stephen J. Collier (2011) has argued that city building or the provision of electricity during the Soviet era exposes the practices of government in a planned economy, which are radically different from those in, say, the West, which depend on user demands. Building on the STS literature, Collier shows how infrastructures are sites of techno-politics that foreground the organization of people, things, and their relationship according to the scientific knowledge imparted to those relationships.

Other anthropologists have pioneered creative ways to explore in detail the formation of one single site of techno-politics by heavily drawing on actor-network theory and its emphasis on associations between heterogeneous networks (Callon 1998; Hull 2012b; Latour 1993, 2005). For instance, in his ethnography on water supply in Mumbai, India, Nikhil Anand (2009, 2011) shows that two networks are connected to ensure water delivery: (a) the material conduits (pipes, pumps) and expertise stemming from different domains (engineering, political, economic) that regulate the flow of water in the city; and (b) the social network that rules people's connectivity to the water supply network. Anand's account is in fact a brilliant ethnographic analysis of a formation of techno-politics, which presents in great detail the problems and failures of water delivery that are integral parts of the infrastructure. But it also critically documents the sense of belonging to the city manifested through urbanites' claims to water, or what he calls "hydraulic citizenship." Following Collier (2011) and Anand (2009, 2011), Antina Von Schnitzler (2008, 2013, 2014) delves even deeper in her analysis of techno-politics by focusing on a single instrument, the water meter—a device or object with agency that articulates actions once inserted in a network of techno-politics (Muniesa, Millo, and Callon 2007). Von Schnitzler argues that while the water meter has a governmental and an economic function, its imbrication in the techno-politics of water provision reveals a larger governmental rationality. Water meters are deployed to produce a specific kind of citizenry: rational individuals who do not waste water. Both Von Schnitzler and Anand show that infrastructures and instruments are reactive to biopolitics, but they also have unanticipated effects on the networks in which they are inserted. Building on Çalışkan and Callon's (2009; 2010) insights, infrastructures and instruments are far from neutral sites of disposition or arrangement of humans and things; they form the grounds on which plans, programs, and projects are produced and contested (Larkin 2013, 331).

If to govern is to administer, one could, as Anand (2009, 2011) and Von Schnitzler (2008, 2013, 2014) have done, carefully scrutinize the instruments used to conduct the conduct of people. Against this discussion of infrastructure and instruments as mediators of governmental rationality, I situate my account of the modernization of the TPDS and the re-materialization of the ration card. When the right to Indian food entitlements was first discussed in the years leading up to its ratification in 2013, debates raged on what the overall needs of the population are and what types of interventions should be implemented to address them. Central to these debates were concerns over the overhaul of the TPDS, the vast infrastructure of subsidized food distribution in India, and the enduring issues of corruption that plagued the distribution of food grains (see Planning Commission 2005). The TPDS involves the participation of a myriad of actors. Farmers sell their wheat and rice to the agency that manages the TPDS, the Food Corporation of India (FCI). This food grain is channelled through an extensive train network across the country and then stored behind locked gates in various conditions in local depots, called *godowns*. Each state government administers the distribution of subsidized food to its subject population. In Delhi,¹⁵ the Department of Food, Supplies, & Consumers Affairs (DFSCA) buys the wheat and rice from the FCI to sell it back to licensed Fair Price Shops (FPSs) that are privately operated, but the responsibility lies with the Department of Delhi State Civil Supplies Corporation Limited (DSCSC) to transport the grain from seven *godowns* located in the National Capital Territory (NCT) to FPS locations, which are points of distribution to the population. To do so, the DSCSC

15 Delhi is an administratively layered place. It is a union territory called the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi. Typically, union territories fall under the administration of the central government, but the Parliament of India has amended the constitution to grant the NCT a legislature. The NCT is divided into three different municipalities—the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the New Delhi Municipal Council, and the Delhi Cantonment Board—that have different jurisdictions. Delhi also comprises seven cities, among them Old Delhi and New Delhi, the latter of which was planned and constructed when the British Crown moved the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi (Legg 2007). Unless I specify otherwise, I use Delhi to refer to the NCT.

subcontracts the task to private truck owners, who hire daily-wage workers, to dispatch bags of wheat and rice from the *godowns* to the FPSs. Food grains are carried in bags of jute or plastic. The bags are stored in enclosed, poorly ventilated FPSs until stocks are liquidated. As bags of food grains move from one governmental site to the next, leakages occur constantly, and for a variety of reasons. Building on Mitchell and Anand, I see the TPDS as a large techno-political alloy, tentatively modernized in the aftermath of the NFSA to plug leakages. I contend that the government's attempts to digitize the TPDS reflect the imperatives of good governance that inhere in elements of governmental accountability and transparency. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Food Security Portal is used to publicly display in minute detail the journey of food grains within the NCT of Delhi. These new technologies of information were set up with the hopes of instilling greater practices of transparency in the administration of entitlements. The TPDS has a history that predates Indian independence, but it has also a life of its own, with informal rules, conventions, and practices modulating its operation. As such, an exploration of the techno-politics of the modernization of rationing practices leads me to investigate the design and implementation of experts and planners' welfare blueprints to render the TPDS infrastructure corruption-free and the unintended effects of these interventions on the targeted population.

Central to the overhaul of the TPDS infrastructure in the aftermath of the NFSA is the re-materialized ration card. Here, I frame the ration card as a document, a "rationing document" (Sriraman 2013, 335), that embodies rights-based discourses found in the NFSA. Building on a growing anthropological literature of bureaucratic documents, and informed by the work of Çalışkan and Callon (2009, 2010) and other materialist anthropologists (Anand 2009, 2011; Von

Schnitzler 2008, 2013, 2014; Larkin 2013), I conceptualize the ration card as an instrument of governmental rationality that embodies knowledge, rules, and practices and mediates—rather than represents—the signs and meanings it bears.

According to Hull (2012b), as documents circulate, they re-arrange humans and things in ways that are impossible to predict, let alone command. As they move, these documents help to constitute what they have been calibrated for, and as they do so, they help assert bureaucratic control over the population. Yet, these documents are more than mere things. They carry complex meanings, or denotations, of bureaucratic power and other referents about people and things. When they circulate, they “translate and displace social relations within government” (Hull 2012b, 19); in mediating associations of people and things, they draw humans and nonhumans within the purview of bureaucratic power. Ration cards, I believe, also mediate relations of governmentality. They are conceived and fabricated as instruments of government-facilitated welfare functions, but they also embody normative semiotics of human rights discourses on good governance. In their manipulation, ration cards exert bureaucratic power on rationing practices; yet that bureaucratic power is unevenly distributed in the TPDS infrastructure and, as this dissertation aims to show, imposes the burden of transparency on ration card holders rather than on government officials.

Since 2005, activists, experts, academics, and laypeople have directly helped to shape the enactment of three human rights laws set to empower Indians: the right to information in 2005, the right to work in 2005, and finally the right to food entitlement in 2013. These three laws are often reported as success stories in which civil society has handily acted on the legislative apparatus to promote ideals found in human rights discourses: transparency,

accountability, and citizen empowerment, which once amalgamated, lead to the constitution of legitimate and authoritative democratic institutions and efficient management of welfare and of human and natural resources (Smith 2007). But this is only a part of the narrative. Investigating the translocal nature of neoliberal good governance, Sharma (2013) argues that the right to information in India, and its objectives to instil elements of state transparency in bureaucratic mechanisms, is cast in technocratic procedures that do not sit well with activists' aspirations for the democratization of social and economic opportunities. As it appears, the meanders of bureaucratic practices impede the manipulation of the right to information. Similarly, Nayanika Mathur (2012) suggests that paper documents, in the context of the implementation of right to work legislation, render the Indian state transparent. Governing paper appears to be central to governing welfare.¹⁶ However, Mathur's ethnography led her to conclude that the economy of paper documents required to make the Indian state transparent is so vast and complex that the legislation in question becomes almost impossible to implement. Making the state transparent through the production, circulation, and exhibition of a colossal amount of paper documents, it turns out, hinders rather than expedites the provision of welfare.

Like Mathur (2012) and Sharma (2013), I suggest that if transparency is made by documents, then an ethnographic analysis of documents is in order. Taking the overhaul of the TPDS and digitization of the ration card as an entry point, as I did with Alka, I contrast old ration card objects with new digital ones and explore how rightful holders of the ration card navigate bureaucratic spaces. My contribution is to show that the use of new technologies of authentication deployed by the Indian state to make bureaucratic practices transparent have

16 I borrow the sentence from *Government of Paper*—“[g]overning paper is central to governing the city” (Hull 2012b, 1)— where Hull meticulously shows how paper documents draw a wide range of people and things under bureaucratic rule.

dramatically re-arranged the association of humans and things that have historically structured the bureaucratic distribution of rations in Delhi. In the process, I argue, digital ration cards acted on the TPDS in Delhi to rearrange human agency in the infrastructure of entitlement distributions to eliminate mundane prospects for corruption. Like every other development project (cf. Ferguson 1990; cf. Li 2007b; cf. Mosse 2013), the digitization of documents has had unanticipated effects on the intended objectives of the NFSA, including the systematic exclusion of empowered bodies from the NFSA (see also Abraham and Rajadhyaksha 2015; Masiero 2017). As the ethnography presented in this dissertation illustrates, my efforts to track the digital ration card as a socio-technical *agencement* acting on welfare socialities, imbued with meanings of accountability and transparency, show that the obsession with preventing practices of corruption has been pursued at the risk of systematically excluding people from their rightful entitlements.

1.3 Methodology

Daniel Miller (2017) argues that the primary contribution of anthropology *is* ethnography. In fact, Miller asserts that thick ethnographic material brought back from the field, in the Geertzian tradition, should be completely detached from theoretical groundings—such as, for instance, the concept of neoliberal governmentality—that tend to fetishize a set of conceptual abstractions rather than focusing on ethnographic engagement with people and their lives. For Miller, the engagement of ethnography with theories turns anthropology back to its armchair days. I disagree.

Instead, I contend that ethnography is not the end but rather the means of anthropology. I follow Tim Ingold (2017), who highlights the necessity of differentiating anthropology and ethnography in order to ensure that the anthropologist's voice does not remain hidden behind

interlocutors. Anthropology and ethnography, Ingold suggests, should not be conflated into one another, let alone congealed into a single, perhaps even confusing, project. Clarifications are in order. “Anthropology,” for Ingold, “is a generous, open-minded, comparative, and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the one world we all inhabit” (2017, 22). Anthropology is sensible to the ways in which lives are lived and could be lived; it is sensible, in other words, to possibilities. Perhaps even more importantly, anthropology also plays a crucial role in making these possibilities intelligible, and perhaps even realizable.

This is not to say that ethnography is a mere tool, a case study, instrumentalized to reflect theoretical underpinnings. For Ingold, “ethnography has its methods—its rules of thumb, its ways of working—but it *is not* a method” (2017, 23). Participant observation, on the other hand, *is* a method. The method of participant observation does not just involve the collection of data on people and their mundane practices. It is about learning. It is a transformative research method in which the anthropologist’s way of thinking develops and changes as she shares experiences with a group of people and learns about their perspectives on the world we all share. Ingold writes:

But to practice anthropology, as I understand it, means to study with people, not to make studies of them—just as we might study with our teachers at the university. We do so in order that we may grow in wisdom and maturity, in our powers of observation, reason, and critical thinking, in the hope and expectation that we can bring these powers to bear on whatever problems we may tackle in the future. That’s why participant observation should be understood, in the first place, not as ethnographic but as educational. (2017, 23)

Ethnography, thus, serves a crucial purpose; it assists anthropologists in developing sensibilities and empathies, but it is the anthropologist’s responsibility to make these intelligible, not only for the benefit of other anthropologists, but also for scholarly and popular knowledge more generally.

Ethnographic knowledge, I am convinced, should not be confined to our discipline. Contrary to what Miller (2017) asserts, the use of theory opens a bridge across disciplines and thus encourages dialogue. It is a path of engagement with other discourses that are perhaps not as entwined with ethnographic knowledge and practice. To be clear, I do not suggest that ethnographic knowledge should be framed by theory. Rather, I believe that theory may provide a conversational entry point from which ethnographic insights depart. This is especially true for recent prominent accounts on the anthropology of the state, which has emerged thanks the philosophical development of the concept of governmentality.

My research methods took shape as I tried to locate the ephemeral phenomenon of the right to food entitlement in urban settings. Initially, I tried one approach, to no avail. I first volunteered with the Right to Food Campaign (RTFC) as a way to critically document the mechanisms through which right-to-food activism in India shapes the state and poor urban subjects. But this approach took me on a path further away from the people and the objects at the core of the NFSA: the population targeted by the NFSA, the ration card, the FPSs, and more generally, the TPDS. I thus turned to exploring the various urban locations in which people may need a right to food entitlement. Once there, I also tried to ask direct questions about poverty and chronic hunger. Rapidly, I realized that questions such as “Do you go to bed hungry at night?” led to an embarrassing deadlock, where both the interlocutor and I felt understandably awkward and hesitant to push discussions further. Ultimately, I focused on the techno-politics of the right to food entitlement and concentrated on its infrastructures and devices.

I chose this approach because my fieldwork took place in Delhi, between February 2014 and October 2015, just a few months after the ratification of the NFSA, in September 2013.

At that time in Delhi, the modernization of the TPDS was in full swing, unlike in many other Indian states. My intention was to find people who would share life stories about the state, the TPDS, the ration card, and their FPS, as a way to question the ethico-political domain that is embodied and deployed by the NFSA. My guiding conceptual question was: “How does the right to food shape everyday lives and encounters with the state?” Although this question is pertinent to debates about the analytics of governmentality, I realized quickly that it had little to no traction with the interlocutors I encountered. When I turned to the topic of the ration card, however, interlocutors were much more voluble (see Jacob 2008). The rationing document became an ethnographic object of interest to me.

My research took place in several urban areas of New Delhi. Over the course of my fieldwork, I had the chance to share stories and food with a number of women and families from various urban locales. I lined up with homeless men and women living in urban shelters and waited to get a warm meal in religious points of distribution, including the *Nizammuddin Dargah* and the *Gurudwara Bangla Sahib*. I also visited migrant workers, farmers from Andhra Pradesh, who resided in tents provided by local contractors in need of cheap labour. I shared some of the most delicious meals I have ever had: a few *rotis* (round flat bread) cooked on an open flame in a *chulha* (a cooking stove made out of bricks and mud), with *sabzi* (vegetables cooked in gravy, or curry) prepared with a special mix of *masala* (spices) brought to the capital from the workers’ home village. But the contractors, unhappy with my presence, quickly manifested their discontent. I had to leave the premises to avoid putting the interlocutors I encountered in danger. On other occasions, I spent evenings watching TV with rickshaw pullers, munching on hot and oily *gobhi pakoda* (cauliflower pakora or fritter) and *pyiaz pakoda* (onion pakora or fritter), lying

on the ground under a blue tarpaulin, while men beside us, huddled under a wool blanket, slept in their rickshaws.

After a long day in the fields, which would often stretch late into the evening, I would always leave the interlocutors' *basti* to head back home. I chose to reside in an apartment, in a central and cosmopolitan neighbourhood, from which I could use the metro to navigate the city more efficiently. Although I do understand why it has become a rite of passage for human rights activists and academics to live with interlocutors, to experience their way of life, I also think that most of the *basti*'s residents would find it rather curious, if not off-putting. For many of them, I was, and still am, a wealthy American, even though I identified myself as Québécois. Thus, living in a *basti* when I had the means to live somewhere else made little sense to them. Of course, this methodological tactic was also more convenient and comfortable for me, since I had, in my small studio, access to latrines, electricity, water, shower, and food that I would otherwise not be able to use or consume in the *basti*. But it also meant that when I visited the *basti*, I was always in the residents' home, on their territory, and would abide by their cultural codes and their modes of being, which I tried to learn.

In Delhi, close to two million new ration cards were to be distributed across the NCT, based on a range of geographical, economic, and socio-economic criteria. To meet people, I identified two *basti* based on these bureaucratic indicators.¹⁷ The first was located at the outskirts of a posh neighbourhood of South Delhi. It was constructed in the 1980s, soon after a few

17 To be precise, to meet potential rightful beneficiaries of the right to food entitlement, I endeavoured to meet with *basti*-dwellers in dispersed settlements in New Delhi. But I did not set out to conduct my fieldwork in these two specific *basti*, where I eventually focused on. It happened rather organically, and as a result, this dissertation is informed by a range of interactions with interlocutors that reflect the rather diverse composition of Delhi's *basti*-dweller population. Most of the interlocutors I encountered in these two *basti* are Dalits and migrant workers that have been living in Delhi for decades, but their states of origin are diverse, as are their occupations, financial situations, and overall positions in the city.

migrants from Tamil Nadu were forced to move away from an informal settlement where the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium would be erected. At first, the migrants built only a few *kachcha jhuggi* (temporary housing units) in a bright alley, next to a governmental school, minutes away from the local open sewer. However, the *basti* had substantially grown since its inception. By the time I first visited in November 2014, three generations of Tamil migrants occupied the *basti*, spread across 42 *pakka jhuggi* (housing made out of bricks). Latrines and water utilities remained nonexistent, which was a primary concern for women, who have to be strategic whenever they urinate or defecate in order to avoid the potential dangers that lurk in the wasteland between the *basti* and the sewers. Most of the women worked as maids for their wealthier neighbours, sometimes for as many as twelve hours per day, seven days a week. Most men, on the other hand, were daily-wage workers, rickshaw pullers, or *noker* (servants).

I spent four months visiting this *basti*, during which time I accompanied women to the local FPS and engaged with FPS owners. Most interlocutors had in their possession their new ration cards, but many were unable to access their full entitlements. When possible, I assisted them in the cleaning and cooking of rations, but more often than not, given the gender, class, and caste modalities entrenched in local cultural practices, these women preferred that I not interfere. On a more practical level, they worked more rapidly and efficiently without me; showing me the rudiments of their culinary routine was generous enough, but having to oversee me cooking would have slowed them down.

The second *basti* was located in the heart of Chandni Chowk, within the walls of Shahjahanabad, commonly referred as Old Delhi. In 2009, while the entire city was preparing for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, the authorities had destroyed the interlocutors' former homes

(see Baviskar 2010), located in an informal settlement under a gloomy underpass, centimetres away from the railroad that leads to the touristic destinations of Agra and the Taj Mahal. Most interlocutors, male and female, were at the time, and still are today, intricately embedded in the spice trade in the nearby market. When their *kachcha jhuggi* was bulldozed in 2009, sixty households moved with all their belongings into a vacant lot next to the market, making it their own. Once again, latrines and water utilities were nonexistent, as electricity would also have been, had the residents not connected their *jhuggi* to the electrical network of the Railway Corporation. The *basti* residents used nearby abandoned buildings as an isolated place to defecate and urinate. The conditions of the *basti* first surprised me, and it took a while to get accustomed to the environment.

I was first introduced to the *pradhan* (chief) of the second *basti* early in my fieldwork, but I engaged with the local residents only a year later, in February 2015. From then until the end of my fieldwork, in October 2015, I spent countless hours in the *basti*, where I was active in helping the residents to apply for ration cards. When I left, six applicants had obtained their cards, more than two years after the ratification of the NFSA. Only one of them had successfully retrieved her entitlements from the FPS—and she had managed to do so on only a single occasion.

To complement my field trips in various localities of Delhi, I also collected archival data from the National Archives of India and the Department of Delhi Archives, along with second-hand research compiled from the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and interviews. I have been using this material to further my understanding of the cultural constitution of India's subsidized food infrastructure. I interviewed members of the RTFC, intellectuals, and

bureaucrats, as well as one politician who participated in the formulation of the NFSA. These included development economists Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera; Commissioner of the Supreme Court Naresh Chandra Saxena; Special Commissioner Harsh Mander; Principal Advisor to the Commissioner Biraj Patnaik; activists Kavitha Srivastava, Dipa Sinha, and Sejal Dand; Senior Advocate at the Supreme Court Colin Gonsalves; former Minister of Rural Development Jairam Ramesh; and former members of the RTFC Secretariat, Eklavya Vasudev, Dheeraj Kumar, and Swati Narayan. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I was also welcomed to the Delhi RTFC meetings and had the opportunity to meet with three brilliant activists Shakeel Abdul, Anjali Bhardwaj, and Amrita Johri, without whom I would not have been able to understand the realities of the politics of hunger in India and the disciplining of the everyday state in the national capital (see Webb 2012).

In the months preceding and during my fieldwork in India, I took Hindi classes, first at York University, then at the South Asian Summer Language Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and finally in a private school of South Delhi, between September 2013 and July 2015. My level of competency in Hindi was never fully sufficient to converse comfortably with interlocutors. Yet, while I do acknowledge, like every anthropologist, that being fully fluent in the language of the interlocutors I encountered would have been undoubtedly advantageous, I also believe that out of respect for them and what they had to say, seeking the involvement of research assistants was the appropriate thing to do. Over 17 months of fieldwork, I employed twelve research assistants who accompanied me to field sites and assisted me in transcribing recordings.

1.4 Outline of Chapters

In Chapter Two, I trace the historical trajectory of the Public Distribution System (PDS), which became the TPDS in 1997. Using the concept of “food regime” as an analytical roadmap, I examine how a series of governmental rationalities have shaped postcolonial food policies in India in three successive periods: the making of modern India under Jawaharlal Nehru, the making of the welfare state spearheaded by Indira Gandhi, and the making of economic liberalization. I conclude by demonstrating how the infrastructure of rationing is caught up in a productive tension between the biopolitics of the (T)PDS (maintaining the welfare of poor individuals) and its dysfunctions (leakages), which human rights discourses attempt to relieve.

In Chapter Three, I reflect on the discursive formation of a right to food entitlement in India. I situate it as a technology of “good governance” that seeks to end the relations of patronage that have over the years crippled the infrastructure of the (T)PDS. In this sense, I contend that the right to food entitlement is an equivocal technology of government that aims to tackle two issues at once: chronic hunger and corruption. Using the analytics of governmentality, I demonstrate how the formulation of the NFSA was animated by a politics of need interpretation that has shaped the nature, the form, and the scope of the Indian right to food entitlement.

In Chapter Four, I analyze how one of the key instruments of the TPDS—the re-materialized ration card— that mediates the normative principles of the NFSA in bureaucratic practices. To do so, I follow the circulation of this rationing document. Building on the work of Hull (2012b), I situate the new ration card as a bureaucratic site of techno-politics. In the process of modernizing the infrastructure of the TPDS, the ration card was radically reconfigured to embody new techniques of government deployed to eradicate practices of corruption from the

TPDS. Using ethnographic material, I emphasize the varied uses of old and new ration cards in the Indian capital and document how the ration card draws associations among people and things. I show that the circulation of the ration card has been designed to exert bureaucratic control, notably in FPSs, but has also had two unexpected consequences: that of generating systematic exclusions from the infrastructure of rationing and that of weakening the *basti*-dweller's ability to secure her position in the city.

An individual's ability to access and use a ration card depends on her ability to navigate both the bureaucratic worlds and the frustrating production of arbitrary outcomes that populate the distribution of entitlements. Chapter Five brings attention to these processes. I draw from Chatterjee (2004; 2012), Gupta (2012), and Sharma (2006; 2013) to illustrate the effects of neoliberal rationality on the production of arbitrariness, and to document the efforts deployed by ration card holders to overcome these hindrances. Bridging the analytics of governmentality and STS, I document the formation of associations of humans and things in the exercise of government. While documenting shortcomings in the design and implementation of the right to food entitlement, I describe the tactics employed by empowered bodies to overcome their lack of literacy and manipulate various devices in order to finally access their lawfully secured food entitlements.

Chapter 2: The History of the Infrastructure of Rationing in India

This chapter contextualizes food politics in postcolonial India. Tracing the history of food policies, I examine how the infrastructure of food rationing has been instituted historically and framed by three consecutive governmental rationalities. Building on food regime analysis, I argue that the Indian infrastructure of rationing has been responsive to a corpus of knowledge, techniques, and scientific and political discourses that have shaped the welfare state and actively helped to construct a modern Indian nation. I show that Indian rationing practices have been rather fluid in India between the 1940s and 2000s because they depended on different interpretations of the population's needs in successive regimes.

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, to contextualize the formulation of the right to food entitlement in India in the early 2000s, I present a history of the infrastructure of rationing that has emerged in India since the Second World War. The Public Distribution System (PDS), later restructured as the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), is a vast rationing program, designed to stimulate food production at the national level and food security at the household level (Mooij 1998, 77). Building on the work of Akhil Gupta (1998) and other scholars (Chopra 1981; Mooij 1998), I argue that the national construction of the (T)PDS has been responsive to the formation of a corpus of knowledge, techniques, and scientific discourses. In *Postcolonial Development*, Gupta (1998) analyzes how global discourses on development and food regimes shape localized agricultural practices. I take a similar approach. I examine how food policies have evolved in relation with food regimes, by illustrating the polymorphous forms and usages of rationing practices in successive economic and political contexts. In this chapter, then, I explore the

development of the (T)PDS in relation with successive food regimes that have shaped the material operations and processes of governmental interventions from the 1940s to the 2000s.

“Food regime” is a concept that “links international relations of food production and consumption to forms of accumulation, broadly distinguishing periods of capitalist transformation since 1870” (Friedmann and McMichael 1989, 95). This conceptualization subverts linear tropes of modernization to focus instead on an analysis of “global power arrangements” of food economy (McMichael 2009, 140), often referred to interchangeably as “food politics” (Guthman 2008a; McMichael 1998), which explores “the opposing movements of the state system and international division of labour” (Friedmann and McMichael 1989, 95). There have been three food regimes. The first food regime corresponded to the settler states economy between 1870 and 1930. The second food regime centred on the complex interrelation between the formation of modern states in the Global South and the hegemonic role of the United States in the construction of a world economy. The third food regime, still debated and contested (see Friedmann 2005), emerged in the 1970s-1980s, “incorporating postcolonial states into an imperial field of power to legitimize and expand capitalist markets as the vehicle of ‘national’ economic growth and modernity” (McMichael 2009, 141). For Gupta, food regimes have been instrumental in the formation of development discourse, a narrative according to which teleological beliefs of “progress” shape political and economic organization to bring them in line with Western ideals of modernity (see also Moore 2005; Rist 2007). In this chapter, I focus mainly on the second and third food regimes, which are the basis for the formation of rationalities deployed in the context of, respectively, the formation of postcolonial modern India and the liberalization of the Indian national economy that corresponded to the alignment of governments

with capitalist interests (Friedmann 1982; Friedmann and McMichael 1989; McMichael 2009). I use the logic of accumulation in the second and third food regimes as a guide to contextualize the logic of development that informs Indian food policies and politics and, more precisely, the infrastructure of rationing in India and related interventions in the agricultural sector.

Policies are always articulated with a purpose; they are designed and implemented to address particular perceived needs to regulate the biorhythm of the population. Policies are also a construct; they reflect the discursive modalities of their respective food regimes. By tracing the history of food policies in India, this chapter explores how the postcolonial government has responded to the social problem of chronic hunger. In India, the issue of chronic hunger has traversed the country's postcolonial history (Dandekar and Rath 1971a, 1971b; Drèze and Sen 2013; Sen 2013; Shah 1949), and has, as a result, been intricately linked to the construction of the modern nation (Gupta 2012). The need for food, and the government's responsibility to provide for such a need, has been rather uncontroversial and widely acknowledged across modern epochs. This is, after all, the biopolitical *raison d'être* of modern governments: to secure the well-being of the population (Foucault 1991). What has been controversial, however, is the scope of governmental interventions deemed sufficient and necessary to satisfy the population's nutritional needs.

As Nancy Fraser argues, needs are interpretative, and this quality is inherently political; needs have a "relational structure . . . they have the form 'A needs x in order of y'" (1989, 163). It is precisely this relational structure that begs questions such as: Who gets to interpret who is needy? What type of needs should be satisfied? Who gets excluded from the articulation of public discourse? How do cultural and political processes give an authoritative voice to some

interpreters over others? These interrogations all focus not necessarily on the satisfactions of needs, per se, but on *discourses about needs*—and specifically, how such discourses frame governmental interventions. In this chapter, thus, I situate food policies in relation to discourses about needs and their corresponding food regime.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first, I discuss the establishment of the PDS, India's infrastructure of rationing, during the Second World War and its deployment through key biopolitical interventions shortly before and well after Indian independence in 1947. I demonstrate how the socialist regime implemented by Nehruvian politicians and experts was developed to devalue the price of food grains in order to stabilize the infrastructure of rationing in urban areas and promote India's industrialization. Under this regime, as I show, the nutritional need for food was interpreted in Malthusian terms, where the production of national wealth and the import of cheap food were positioned as key strategies to alleviate poverty and chronic hunger.

In the second section, I examine the relation between scientific techniques of food production known as the "Green Revolution," Indira Gandhi's populism, and the expansion of the PDS across the country. I critically document how socialist food policies were articulated in a populist recasting of the state's responsibilities, designed under Gandhi's rule to raise the poorest segments of the population above an arbitrary level. For more than two decades, the infrastructure of rationing expanded to increasingly reach the poorest members of the population, who typically reside in rural areas.

The formulation of Indian postcolonial food policies have espoused successive governmental rationalities between the Second World War and 2000. These rationalities echoed

prevalent global food regimes and debates leading up to the formulation of perceived needs of a population, which instituted, over the years, national food economies. Under Gandhi, such a process led to the multiplication of points of distribution, called Fair Price Shops (hereafter, FPSs or ration shops).

In the third section, I build on Çalışkan and Callon's (2009, 2010) insights about economization—which explore how the science of economics shapes behaviour, activities, and fields as economic—to question how FPSs emulate market processes in the distribution of rations. I explore how in the 1990s, the economic liberalization of the socialist regime in India shaped the infrastructure of rationing according to the neoliberal rationality of government. The neoliberal rhetoric of welfare efficiency and civic responsibility took a prominent place in the interpretation of people's needs, and as a result, the distribution of rations in FPSs reflected new economic modalities. In the third section, therefore, I examine how the neoliberalization of the TPDS engineered a series of economic processes that changed the practice of ration distribution. Finally, I conclude by demonstrating how the infrastructure of rationing, in the early 2000s, was caught in a productive tension between the welfare functions of the (T)PDS (maintaining the welfare of poor citizens) and its dysfunctions (leakages).

2.2 The Politics of Hunger Under Nehru

After the country gained independence in 1947, and until the late 1970s, only one party, the Indian National Congress (hereafter, the Congress), ruled India.¹⁸ Inspired by the economic

18 In 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru occupied the position of Vice President of the Viceroy's Executive Council to assist with the transition of power between the British Raj and the newly independent countries of the Indian subcontinent, India and Pakistan. The Congress elected Nehru to become the first prime minister of India, a position that he occupied until his death in 1964. Following his death, Gulzarilal Nanda acted as the second prime minister of India for three weeks until the Nehruvian socialist Lal Bahadur Shastri was chosen by the Congress to succeed Nehru. He remained in office for 19 months, until his demise in January 1966.

planning of other socialist regimes, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's central government¹⁹ instituted the Planning Commission in 1950 to develop and execute five-year plans, blueprints that provided the building blocks on which India would be developed. Under Nehru's leadership, interventions in the economy, the planning and guiding of economic growth, and the promotion of welfare were heavily centralized between the commanding height of the Government of India (GoI) and its ruling party, the Congress. According to Partha Chatterjee, "[t]his was perhaps the principal governmental function that legitimized the position of the Congress leadership within the new post-colonial state" (1997, 12). The objectives of the first three five-year plans were to transition India from an agrarian society to a modern and industrialized one. Nehruvian developmentalism stemmed from the belief that modernization and economic prosperity would mechanically translate into welfare provision for the people. For K. T. Shah, a member of the National Planning Committee set up by Nehru in 1938, the aim of economic planning was to "produce a balanced economic structure," in which India would be "at least self-sufficient" enough to feed its population on a diet of 2,400 to 2,800 kcal per person (1949, 48–49). In this section, I explore how the infrastructure of rationing, under Nehru's leadership, was developed to sustain the central government's economic objectives.

"Before 1939," notes the former Indian Civil Servant Henry F. Knight, "the [colonial] Government of India [or British Raj] had made no plans for the food supply for the civilian population" (1954, 269). The colonial presumption at that time was that the domestic production of food grains through "traditional" agricultural methods and the importation of rice from Burma, a British colony until 1937, would be largely sufficient for feeding the entire Indian population.

19 India has been a federal state since its independence in 1947. Its central government, the Government of India (GoI), now oversees 29 states and seven union territories, including the National Capital Territory (NCT), which is commonly called Delhi, all of which have local jurisdictions.

Later, following the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe and on the frontier of the Indian colony, the British Raj implemented two key interventions: a campaign to subsidize food production, called the Grow More Food Campaign, and rationing practices. These were initially deployed to minimally protect Indians against the economic and political ravages of war. They were later maintained to sustain Indians during poor harvest conditions and civil unrest that resulted from the partition of the subcontinent into two countries, India and Pakistan (Knight 1954; Srimanjari 2009).

The Grow More Food Campaign was originally deployed by the British Raj to encourage the expansion of the surface area of food production and the intensification of harvests to sustain the country's war efforts. However, the initial design of the campaign seemed to have been improvised, and by the end of the war, colonial authorities were incapable of measuring whether or not irrigation works and other programs had actually increased food production or if higher yields during that period had resulted from favourable monsoon rains (Sherman 2013, 7). In 1947, when the colony was divided into two independent countries, two fertile regions, Punjab and Bengal, were partially cut off from India's domestic markets, which reduced the aggregate quantity of food available to feed the newly independent India's citizens. In this post-independence context, the Grow More Food Campaign was initially maintained as a nationalistic effort to produce more food. National food self-sufficiency was critical, Nehru insisted in a radio address: "If we do not produce enough food for our country, we become dependent upon other countries, and in a matter like food we cannot afford to be dependent" (Sherman 2013, 8–9).²⁰

20 Although the Grow More Food Campaign was initially established in 1943, it is only after independence that the campaign became an integral component of plans to develop and expand India's agrarian sector (Sharma 1980). Through governmental subsidies and loans to farmers, the government planned to buy more domestically produced grains—at a price that was cheaper than what they could find on the international market at the time—to distribute in areas of food deficit. By 1947-1949, the country's food situation had become less precarious, but food supply remained low. Fearing the detrimental effects of drought or flood, the Advisory Planning Board

The Grow More Food Campaign served as a call for every Indian citizen to participate in the national project of food self-sufficiency.²¹

However, in the first few years following independence, weather conditions worsened, food availability declined, and popular criticism of the Grow More Food Campaign arose.²² “Imagining a nation,” it turns out, “was not the same as feeding one” (Sherman 2013, 11). By December 1950, during the Conference of Food Ministers in Bombay, governmental officials concluded that the Grow More Food Campaign had largely failed—that the funding allocated through its subsidies had had no “incremental effect” on aggregate food production (National Archives of India file No. BP 301[1]/52). Furthermore, as stated in the Grow More Food Campaign Report of 1952, farmers had been given little incentive to produce cheap food to promote the industrialization of urban areas (in Chopra 1981, 62).²³ The campaign was thus abandoned in 1951-1952. It was not mentioned in any of the 39 chapters of the First Plan (1951-56); however, the modernization of India’s agrarian sector and the development of food self-sufficiency were stressed as prime concerns in this document.

pursued the Grow More Food Campaign to promote food self-sufficiency in every state. In the words of Nehru, this was a fight against the “ignorance” of peasants who still relied on traditional modes of production that conflicted with his development ideals of modernization (in Sherman 2013, 9; see also Chopra 1981).

- 21 Surely, Nehru assumed, food could be an instrument of economic nationalism in a “war in which every citizen can be a soldier and can serve his or her country” (Sherman 2013, 10).
- 22 In 1951, some 50,000 people marched down the streets of Delhi, chanting, “hungry and naked India demands bread, clothing, and houses” and “a government that cannot end blackmarketing [sic] and corruption has no right to exist” (Sherman 2013, 18). With elections just around the corner, the need to clothe and feed Indians garnered growing attention in political circles.
- 23 Despite the criticisms that it faced, the Grow More Food Campaign did constitute a critical building block in the construction of a modern architecture of governance in India and the institution of localized development blocks and community development centres (Sahi 1967). The campaign also succeeded in drawing the attention of policy makers and promoting the capitalization of the agricultural industry—a state responsibility—in order to: (a) expand the area of cultivable lands; (b) expand crop density yields; and (c) construct nationalist ideals of independence from the global market by implementing new agricultural technologies and political mechanisms. It established the idea that the central government would need to finance the country’s agricultural production by subsidizing modernized modes of agriculture through incentives administered by the collection of local political bodies: *panchayat* and officials from development blocks and districts.

A second colonial intervention that was maintained after independence was rationing, which was characterized in 1946 by B. R. Sen, the Food Secretary to the Government of India, as “the most effective means of enforcing equality of sacrifice and equitable distribution.”²⁴ Equality and equity are, of course, commensurable to the larger contexts in which they are measured. Take Great Britain, for instance. Political scientist Tarangini Srirnam (2014) reminds us that, during the Second World War, rationing practices in Great Britain were designed to control scarce and valuable commodities, such as eggs, meat, or butter, for the vast majority of the population, while less valuable commodities, such as bread and potatoes, were available in unlimited quantities. Rationing practices in India took a different form. First, rationing was only statutory in urban areas of India.²⁵ Second, rationing practices covered essential staple food items, such as wheat and rice, as well as other commodities that were deemed necessary for the army, including cloth, fuels (e.g., coal, mineral fuels, petroleum), and medicines. As Historian Indivar Kamtekar strikingly illustrates, rationing practices in the colony were diametrically opposed to those in Great Britain:

In Britain, the ration merely determined what a person ate; in India, it might determine whether a person ate at all. British rationing carried, for the majority of people, connotations of equality; Indian rationing offered, to a minority of Indians, a promise of subsistence. (in Sriraman 2014, 46)

Unsurprisingly, then, food rations were prized in the subcontinent.

To enable access to rationed goods, rations cards were mainly issued to families living

24 Sen uttered these words during the Standing Committee of the Chamber of the Prince, on March 13, 1946 (National Archives of India, BP 201 [1946], p. 7).

25 Statutory rationing only took place in urban areas of India, where ration card holders only had access to a certain quantity of food grains and commodities, fixed by the state, at a prescribed rate. The food economy was under government control. Any violations of the statutory orders—from ration card holders, shop owners, or anyone else—was punishable by law. Non-statutory rationing took place mainly in rural areas, where rationing practices were implemented to supplement the open market (see Chopra 1981).

in urban areas, in all sections of society, irrespective of classes or castes.²⁶ Sriraman (2014) describes two challenges that informed the distribution of these ration cards: hoarding and jurisdiction (see also National Archives of India, R-1014[10] [1943]). In areas of statutory rationing (in cities), ration cards and licenses to trade food were distributed in an attempt to instill confidence, among consumers, producers, and traders, in the ability of the state to secure food for all. Hoarding was deemed to be a major hindrance to the circulation of food grains and, ultimately, to the proper functioning of the infrastructure of rationing. Colonial drain, poor harvests resulting from poor weather conditions or pest damage, and price volatility certainly contributed to the institution of rationing (Sen 2013; Srimanjari 2009).²⁷ However, long queues outside of food supply stores, strikes by grain merchants, and the occurrence of hoarding more generally also enticed colonial authorities to enforce control over the food economy, in order to pace the distribution of food to the population and prevent any kind of insurgence, civil disobedience, or revolt—an effort that ended up being rather unsuccessful (Bhattacharya 2001; Srimanjari 2009).

Ration cards were also critical instruments for monitoring the identities of deserving

26 The contours of the ration card are rather messy. Not all ration cards granted the same rations. Rationing documents were typically issued to households because that approach was thought to be cheaper and easier to administer, but individual ration cards were also distributed to industrial workers and government employees (Sriraman 2014).

27 Bombay (Mumbai) was the first city to introduce rationing, which it implemented as early as 1939. By 1943, twelve other cities, including New Delhi, had implemented rationing schemes; however, rationing was still seen as largely unjustified across the British Raj and the princely estates. After the Burmese invasion by Japan (1942-45) and the Bengal Famines (1942-44), hunger began to spread dangerously throughout the subcontinent. The imposition of a coordinated food plan quickly came to be seen as critical for contending with the rapid decrease in food supply for the colony's civil population. By 1944, 103 cities were rationed. In 1945, the number increased to 516. More than 150 million people were covered by a rationing scheme, representing about an eighth of the entire population of the British Raj. Rationing in rural areas was deemed unnecessary, based on the belief that farmers could grow and eat their own produce and pay their landless labourers in kind. After the Second World War, rationing measures were abandoned for several months, until the collapse of crop production in South India galvanized the movement towards rationing again. By 1946, 771 towns and rural areas were under a rationing scheme. That number grew to 878 in 1947, reaching around 45% of the registered population (Chopra 1981).

beneficiaries. Historically, notes Srirnam (2014), the deployment of welfare programs is always accompanied by a governmental obsession with filtering and adjudicating the populations that are deemed deserving of welfare support from those that are deemed alien to it, most notably migrants and homeless people. Although federal in its design, the infrastructure of rationing in India has been (and still is) provincial or regional in its implementation. During the British Raj, each provincial government was responsible for the deployment of rationing in cities within its own jurisdiction. Similarly, after independence, state governments were responsible for properly implementing the central government's food rationing plans. Censuses and surveys were conducted across statutory areas to carefully monitor the subjects deemed deserving of rations, as well as those that were deemed less or not deserving. Residence became (and still is) a clear bureaucratic marker of belonging and the central category for the dissemination of ration cards, which eventually made the ration card the key identification document (ID) that testified residence in the city. In contrast, lack of residence proved to be a critical factor for exclusion from welfare programs. That is not to say that migrant workers and homeless people did not obtain ration cards in statutory areas. They did, especially shortly before and after Partition, when massive flows of migrants reached urban centres, such as Delhi and Calcutta. However, the ration cards that were distributed to migrant workers and homeless people were always labelled as such, and the rations allocated to these cardholders were temporary and smaller in volume than those granted to other residents. Over time, the use of temporary ration cards opened up arbitrary spaces for bureaucratic officials to determine whether or not applicants could extend their use of ration cards or access other welfare programs, such as housing schemes under the jurisdiction of state governments (Sriraman 2014, 62).

By 1947, the infrastructure of rationing in India had been compromised by the price volatility of food in the global market. In a nutshell, India could not afford the infrastructure of rationing. In the aftermath of independence, in December 1947, the Foodgrains Policy Committee of 1947 proposed a gradual rollback of rationing commitments and a policy of decontrol. But this shift in food policy did not last long. As early as September 1948, floods and droughts forced the government to reintroduce measures to increase domestic food production and reinstate rationing. The Government of India restored its control over the food economy. In an effort to manage the price volatility of food grains and prevent hoarding, food zones were drawn to restrain the movement of grains within the Indian territory, from “surplus” to “deficit” zones.²⁸

In the first decade after independence, the government switched back and forth between exercising total control and relaxing control over its food economy. “The basic weakness seemed to be the absence of a well-defined co-ordinated food policy,” R. N. Chopra, the former chairman of the Food Corporation of India (FCI), has argued (1981, 8). On the one hand, when the food economy was under total state control, the government’s commitments to rationing were higher than its corresponding procurements. Not enough food was available to hand out rations to every ration card holder. On the other hand, total decontrol was not desirable either. It left the newly independent India at the mercy of uncertainties linked to “traditional” methods of food production (e.g., flood, drought). For instance, in 1953, wheat and coarse grains were freed from restrictions of movement across food zones. However, buffer stocks of food grains²⁹ remained

28 Food zones are cordoned-off areas, from which the movement of food is restricted. Since food grains cannot be moved beyond the frontiers of these zones by non-government agencies or individuals, market prices are devaluated to reach procurement prices. Surplus can thus be bought by agencies at procurement prices and moved to deficit areas. In the 1940s and 1950s, food zones corresponded to areas of food production in India; for example, Punjab and the Delhi territory formed one food zone. Since the mid-1960s, food zones tend to be conflated with states’ geopolitical territories.

29 A “buffer stock” is a supply of food grains that is used to prevent the collapse of market value in good crop

low. In the following years, the poor harvests of 1954-1955, coupled with low buffer stocks, created a critical shortage of food supplies. India responded by configuring food zones once again to control soaring food grains prices and reinstating rationing practices.

In 1957, the Foodgrains Enquiry Committee proposed a long-term plan that aimed to strike a balance between total control and decontrol of the food economy. Rationing practices were extended³⁰ and zonal policies were instituted to create cordoned regions in which the prices of food grains would stabilize (Mooij 1998, 82–83). Calling for “the mobilization of popular energies on a national scale,” as much as “understanding and co-operation from the people,” the Foodgrains Enquiry Committee (1957, 133) recommended flexible regulatory control of the trade of food grains that allowed for the sale and purchase of those grains in the open market when conditions permitted, the distribution of licences to traders, and the construction of a food grains buffer stock (Chopra 1981, 8, 96–98). Already in 1955, the Essential Commodity Act was designed to grant powers to the central government to regulate the production, supply, and distribution of foods to gradually increase its buffer stock for “securing their equitable distribution and availability at fair prices, or for . . . the efficient conduct of military operations” (GoI 1955, sec. 3). The infrastructure of rationing expanded; more licenses to operate ration shops, called FPSs, “where food is sold to consumers at a ‘fair price,’” were opened; and more ration cards were delivered, especially in rural areas (Chopra 1981, 94).³¹

production years and ensure the availability and stability of food grains in bad years.

30 Ration shops, called fair price shops (FPSs), were privately or collectively run shops, operated under licences distributed by each state’s food department, which buys subsidized grains from agencies at issued prices and sells it back to ration card holders at fixed prices. Profits are predetermined at a particular rate basis.

31 In the First Plan (1951-56), the Public Distribution System (PDS) was operated to channel food from rural to urban regions and other deficit areas. The Second Plan (1956–1961) and Third Plan (1961–1966) aimed to expand the items sold in FPSs, including raw materials and a few other consumer goods, and to encourage the formation of cooperative rather than private traders to run the FPSs.

The Foodgrains Enquiry Committee sought to modify rationing practices from the provision of temporary relief in times of food crisis to a more perennial and centralized welfare program, which would later be called the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the Fifth Plan (1974-79).³² Yet, and it is important to stress, the committee planned for measures of rationing to serve as a supplementary mode of food provision. At the time, as Chopra argues, it was thought that, “[a]s the production of food increases, controlled and rationed distribution of food grains through the [PDS] decreases” (1981, 210). Administrators believed that the food situation would significantly improve, leading people who lived in urban areas to increasingly get their food grains or other commodities from somewhere other than a ration shop. In practice, however, the PDS grew in cities into a universal system of distribution of subsidized commodities “irrespective of income” (Chopra 1981, 206). Under Nehru's rule, the infrastructure of rationing was gradually implemented in cities as a way to feed urban areas, which were considered to be the engine of modernization.

However, it soon became clear that without increased food imports, the implementation of a perennial rationing infrastructure was not feasible. By 1954-1955, the food situation in India had become dire. Buffer stocks in the country were too low, and poor weather conditions impaired the domestic food production required to sustain the PDS. The First Plan was coming to an end, and despite investment in farming and irrigation, it was widely recognized in the Second Plan (1956-1961) that “[a]griculture may fall short of the mark” (Planning Commission 1956, para. 32). The Second Plan (1956-1961), which promoted heavy industrialization in urban India, shied away from national food self-sufficiency as a goal and promoted a greater acceptance of food imports. Rather than drawing from domestic food production, the newly independent state

32 To facilitate the articulation of the argument, I refer to the architecture of rationing as the PDS.

had little choice but to turn to global markets in order to pursue the industrialization process. The authors of the Second Plan stated:

It would, of course, be desirable on psychological as well as administrative grounds to avoid as far as possible control and rationing of the necessities of life like, for instance, food grains. On the other hand, high or rising prices of primary necessities are apt to create serious difficulties. The basic remedy for a situation of scarcity or shortage is, of course, an increase in supplies, and, to an extent when domestic supplies are deficient, imports may be inescapable. (Planning Commission 1956, para. 33)

In March 1954 and May 1956, India imported 0.9 and 2 million tons of rice respectively from Burma (Knight 1954, 78, 84). In August 1956, India came to an accord with the United States to import 3.1 million tons of wheat and 0.19 million tons of rice (Chopra 1981, 87). For the rest of Nehru's tenure, these imports quickly became the tapping source for the infrastructure of rationing (Chopra 1981, 210), to the point where the central government attempted to introduce wheat in rice-eating areas to change the food habits of rice-eaters. Importing food to sustain the PDS was a cornerstone strategy for ensuring the channelling of food to cities in which the industrialization of the country was taking place.

In 1954, the US created its food aid program by adopting the US Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act, generally referred to as Public Law 480 (PL-480), which among other aims, facilitated the dumping of surplus American grains, mostly corn and wheat, in national markets of the Global South at a fraction of its actual value. Since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the US government had heavily subsidized its agricultural sector in order to encourage farmers to increase their farms' outputs. American production continued to rise well into the post-war period, to the point where the storage of cereals became too costly and

detrimental to American farmers³³ (see Clapp 2012, 28; Friedmann 1982).

With the passing of PL-480, large surpluses that would have otherwise driven the value of food grains down in the US, and thus adversely affected the American agricultural sector, were transformed into a powerful geopolitical levy. The American food aid program was designed to form political alliances with recipient countries, which would, once sufficiently “developed,” become trading partners. When Cold War tensions intensified, PL-480 explicitly became an instrument to counter the diffusion of communism in the Global South (Clapp 2012, 30–31; Mitchell 2004).

Between 1958 and 1966, most of the 50 million tons of food grains imported into India came from the US (Chopra 1981; Mooij 1998, 83). PL-480 wheat was exclusively distributed through the PDS for rationing purposes. With good measures, PL-480 enabled the central government to extend PDS coverage and reach an increasing number of people. The off-take of grain from FPSs more than tripled from 1962-1966, reaching 280 million Indians by 1967 (Chopra 1981, 210)—an increase that would not have been possible without American wheat. The PL-480 wheat sent to India between 1956-1967 was worth 3.5 billion USD (₹ 1690 crores),³⁴ of which 1.8 billion USD (₹ 878 crores) were paid for with loans and 661 million USD (₹ 316 crores) with grants (Chopra 1981, 120). India not only became increasingly dependent on PL-480 wheat for its rationing infrastructure, but the country’s debt also proliferated.

When the Indian-American food aid agreement expired in 1965, the US agreed to maintain the flow of food aid provision, on the condition that India would begin to fully

33 The accumulation of food grains in the US had a depressive effect on the price of those grains, which in the end, began to affect its heavily subsidized production.

34 1 crore is equal to 1,00,00,000 (or 10,000,000 in Western notation). So, 1690 crores is the equivalent of 16,90,00,00,000 (or 16,900,000,000 in Western notation), or 16.9 billion.

modernize its agricultural sector (Clapp 2012, 37). PL-480 wheat supply was on a “short tether” (Clapp 2012, 37; Gupta 1998, 60). In 1966, when India faced a significant food crisis, it imported 10 million tons of wheat, but not without making several concessions to the United States:

. . . that for seven years the government should no longer have control over the pricing and distribution of fertilizers by private fertilizer firms; that the Indian government should drop its demand for fifty-one per cent ownership of joint ventures in the fertilizer field; that greater latitude be allowed to American private firms operating in India; that India should stop trading with North Vietnam. Apart from this, India's devaluation of the rupee by 36.5 per cent on 6 June 1966 was strongly influenced by American pressure. (Byres and Crow 1983, 27, note 1 in Mooij 1998, 83)

With an entire infrastructure of rationing that depended almost exclusively on PL-480 wheat, India had little choice but to comply with these conditions. According to Jos Mooij (1998), it is unlikely that India needed so much food grains, but with the heavy industrialization of urban centres that had been well under way since the Second Plan (1956-1961), feeding urban areas via the PDS remained critically important. However, importing high volumes of PL-480 wheat also had adverse effects on domestic food production. The dumping of cheap PL-480 wheat drove the value of food grains down in the country and, accordingly, adversely impacted the agricultural sector and small-scale farmers' income and means of production, contributing to the flow of migrants towards cities.

In the mid-1960s, India was caught in political turmoil. Soon after the elections of 1962, Nehru's leadership and socialist vision of the development state began to be contested. Nehru remained in office until the day he passed away, on May 27, 1964, and left behind him a divided Congress. His successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, and the new agriculture minister, Chidambaran Subramaniam, both championed a departure from urban industrialization in favour

of an increased focus on the modernization of the agricultural sector (Gupta 1998, 60; Swaminathan 2013). In fact, Subramaniam openly criticized the Nehruvian approach to development by insisting on the importance of “high production” of food (cited in Gupta 1998, 61). This marked a dramatic shift in food policy, and a reinterpretation of people’s needs. In the mid-1960s, food production fluctuated. It peaked in 1964-1965, only to plummet in 1965-1967. Buffer stocks were low, droughts were severe, food scarcity peaked, and starvation loomed over the country. Importing PL-480 wheat helped to relieve this situation, but it left the agricultural sector in despair. India was critically dependent on foreign food supplies. It is in this context that food self-sufficiency resurfaced as a nationalistic objective.

2.3 The Green Revolution and Indira Gandhi’s Populism

In 1966, in exchange for much needed PL-480 wheat, the US commanded India to modernize its agricultural sector. But by the time that President Lyndon B. Johnson pressured India to do so, the adoption of scientific techniques was already part of the country’s plans.³⁵ While the modernization of agriculture was not a foreign imposition on India’s sovereign food policies, one can concede, as Gupta (1998) does,³⁶ that the country’s dependence on PL-480 wheat precipitated efforts to implement what would be known as the “Green Revolution.” In this section, I examine how the modernization of Indian agriculture was intricately embedded in the

35 By the early 1960s, both the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation had begun to fund research institutes in India, some of which had been established in Delhi as early as 1905 during the British Raj (Unger 2014).

36 While referring to the Green Revolution as a driving force pulling the Indian postcolonial state into modernity, Gupta posits the following:

An understanding of the broader discursive field of development discourse and the role of ‘scientific’ agriculture within it, for example, qualifies the debate about whether the Green Revolution was imposed on India by external actors for geostrategic reasons and to promote the interests of capital or whether it was independently arrived at by the Indian government . . . it is important to keep in mind that both strategies are compatible with a broader vision of what constitutes development, what it means to be a ‘modern’ nation, and, very important, what the order of nation-states should look like. (1998, 105)

politics of US food aid in the 1960s and became intertwined with Indira Gandhi's perception of the population's needs, which in turn decisively shaped the infrastructure of rationing.

The term "Green Revolution" was coined in 1968 by an administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), William Gaud, who attempted to capture its geopolitical character: "It is not a violent red revolution like that of the Soviets, nor is it a white revolution like that of the Shah of Iran . . . I call it the Green Revolution" (in Clapp 2012, 34). Yet as Raj Patel argues, the Green Revolution is "a biopolitical as well as a geopolitical" project (2013, 4). The fundamental assumption underlying the Green Revolution was that the use of modern techniques of production would inevitably lead to growth in food production, which was needed to feed millions of hungry people, and thus prevent the threat of communism from spreading perhaps more easily in the Global South.³⁷

The Green Revolution³⁸ is a scientific attempt to master natural hazards by modulating the impacts of pests and weather conditions using fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation techniques: a "quick fix" in the words of Vandana Shiva (1991). This "quick fix" offered what seemed to be an ideal solution to the Indian government, which had to act promptly to withdraw the country from the conditions imposed by the US in 1966 (Gupta 1998, 61). Between 1964-1965 and 1975-

37 Although it could have been implemented anywhere, the Green Revolution was deployed exclusively in the Global South, where population growth was considered to be out of control. What came under scrutiny with the Green Revolution, however, was the belief that an exponential growth in the human population—mostly located in the Global South—would lead humanity to its downfall. When he accepted his Nobel Prize in 1970, Borlaug lauded the "temporary success in man's war against hunger." However, he did so not without warning that "unless the frightening power of human reproduction was curbed, the success of the Green Revolution would only be ephemeral" (Borlaug 2000, 490).

38 Among other developments, one thing that resulted from Green Revolution experiments in the early 1960s is a robust hybrid seed—Nobel Prize recipient Norman Borlaug's "miracle seed"—that was crafted through the breeding of dwarfed varieties of wheat plants from Japan (Clapp 2012, 34). Hybrid seeds require more water (and thus irrigation), pesticides, and fertilizer, but they are more robust. Thus, when they are grown in a given area with adequate inputs, hybrid varieties produce higher yields than traditional seeds. The robustness of these seeds is what made them "miraculous": there is no need to expand and develop more fertile lands to produce more food with them.

1976, the average annual growth rate of wheat production reached 7.9%, compared to 3.9% in the previous decades (Chopra 1981, 286).³⁹ In the beginning of the Third Plan (1961–1966), academic institutions had already been funded by the Government of India to research high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds, which were then tested in seven different districts.⁴⁰ Since HYV seeds need more water than “traditional” seeds to grow, the Green Revolution took place in farms that were already well irrigated in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana.⁴¹ In the words of B. Venkateswarlu, “[i]t appears, in our efforts to develop modern technology for problem areas, we perfected technology for non-problem areas only” (1985, 2). If the objective of the Green Revolution was to construct a national economy that was self-sufficient in terms of food production, regardless of its natural and social impacts,⁴² then it worked fairly well. From 1976–1977, 82% of the total procurement of food grains to be channelled into the infrastructure of rationing came from the HYV wheat fields of Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh (Chopra 1981, 192).

To oversee the new economy of domestic food grains, the Government of India

39 Between 1964–1965 and 1971–1972 in India, the total productivity of wheat more than doubled and the yield per hectare rose by more than 50%. In 1975–1976, the total production of food grains reached 121 million tons; procurement reached 13 million tons; and the buffer stock peaked at 18 million tons, which was more than twice as much as what was projected in the Fourth Plan (1966–1971) (Chopra 1981, 130–31, 164–65).

40 Furthermore, in 1963, Borlaug sent 150 species of dwarf wheat to the Punjab Agricultural University.

41 The sudden increase in crop yield (mostly wheat) bore fruits mostly in places where existing technical and scientific infrastructure and institutions were already in place: in the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, as well as in some areas of Southern India, in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra (Chopra 1981, 131).

42 To this day, the successes of the Green Revolution have not been experienced in areas that are badly irrigated or water depleted—where water-intensive crops do not grow easily. The Green Revolution’s effects on nature are plural and well documented. For example, they include increased prominence of superweeds, groundwater depletion, erosion and draining of farmland, and loss of biodiversity, to name a few (Moore 2012). The Green Revolution has also profoundly altered power dynamics of class and gender (Patel 2013; Shiva 1991) and the concentration of political power in rural areas of India (Gupta 1998; Mooij 1999). These effects are quickly dismissed as inconsequential by proponents of the Green Revolution, who argue that increases in cereal productivity actually saved India, if not the world, from widespread hunger (Borlaug 2000; Chopra 1981; Swaminathan 1982).

established two institutions. The first was the Agricultural Prices Commission (APC),⁴³ which was created in 1965 to recommend procurement prices to the central government for the infrastructure of rationing. The second was the Food Corporation of India (FCI), which was instructed to: (a) develop and maintain a buffer stock; (b) distribute food grains to “economically vulnerable section of society” via the PDS; and (c) buy food grains at a minimum support price (MSP) from farmers, according to APC recommendations (Kumar 2015). After 1965, the infrastructure of rationing was much more responsive to economic experts and planners of the FCI and the APC. The regime of cheap food driven by US food dumping morphed into a new regime of development, steered by institutional support for rural landowners. Institutions such as the FCI and the APC were established to stabilize the value of food grains, which provided an incentive to farmers to produce food grains for the PDS and to keep private trade in check, while addressing the needs of PDS users (Swaminathan 2000). Over the decades that ensued, the coverage of the PDS expanded to increasingly cover rural areas. The PDS had the dual objectives of distributing food to the population and at a rate intended to regulate the domestic production of food grains.

The formation of the FCI and the APC, and thus the institutionalization of the administration of subsidized prices, occurred during the tenure of the second prime minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri—an “agriculturist at heart,” in the words of the geneticist known as the father of the Green Revolution in India, Mankombu Sambasivan Swaminathan. When Shastri passed away in 1966, members of the Congress elected Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Nehru, as

43 The Agricultural Prices Commission (APC) is now known as the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). The CACP’s mandate is fairly similar to that of the ACP: it recommends the establishment of yearly “minimum support prices (MSPs) to incentivize the cultivators to adopt modern technology, and raise productivity” (quoted from Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GoI n.d.).

the leader of the party and the prime minister of India. Gandhi's tenure lasted from 1966-1984.⁴⁴ According to Yoginder K. Alagh, the head of the Perspective Planning Division of the Planning Commission in the mid-1970s, India owes to Gandhi its national food self-sufficiency (2017). In fact, for Swaminathan, Gandhi “clearly saw the link between food self sufficiency (sic) and our ability to adopt an independent foreign policy” (Swaminathan 2013, 186). In the first few months after she was elected leader of the Congress, Gandhi met with Swaminathan to strategize on issues related to the prevailing food politics of India. On this meeting, Swaminathan writes:

I met her at her residence in late 1966 . . . the first question she asked me was, ‘how soon can we build a food grain buffer stock of 10 million tonnes?’ I was a bit taken aback by this question, but on reflection, I realised that we had imported 10 million tonnes of wheat in 1966 at the cost of heavy political humiliation. I replied, ‘we should be able to build a grain reserve of 10 million tonnes by early 1970s, if farmers can be assured a remunerative price.’ (2013, 186)

What led the Green Revolution to be a celebrated success story, according to Swaminathan, is Gandhi's enthusiasm for a synergy between technology and public policy to entice farmers to modernize their agricultural practices—an enthusiasm that was not so prevalent during Nehru's rule.

Until 1966, elitist interventions in the Nehruvian style ranged far and wide, at the

44 During the elections of 1967, the Congress did poorly and became divided. Sixty-two members, along with Morarji Desai, left the Congress to form the Indian National Congress (Organization) (INC-O). For the first time since 1947, the Congress was met with a challenging opposition. Gandhi was able to restore her leadership within the rest of the Congress, which was renamed the Indian National Congress (Ruling) (INC-R), thanks to her three-pronged plan for the country and government: (a) to make the state the primary provider of welfare services; (b) to modernize agricultural development and stimulate a political relationship with landowners and well-to-do farmers; and (c) to mark a clear division with Nehruvian politics, notably by centralizing state power in Delhi and linking it to Gandhi as a strong leader (Chatterjee 1997, 18–24). A decade later, after declaring a state of emergency from 1975-1977, Gandhi reinstated the constitution and called general elections in 1977. Desai was declared the leader of the elected Janata Party and became the first non-Congress prime minister of India (1977-1979). Internal dissension within the Janata Party and allegations of corruption forced Desai to resign in 1979 and eventually led the president of India, N. Sanjiva Reddy, to dissolve parliament. In the elections of 1980, Gandhi, at the head of a newly formed political party called the Congress-I (I for Indira), won a majority in parliament. She remained in position until 1984, when she was assassinated. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, was named head of the Congress-I after her passing.

“commanding height of the economy,” but fell short of addressing rampant conditions of poverty and malnutrition in both urban and rural areas (Kothari 1972, 1546; see also Dandekar and Rath 1971a, 1971b). The urban industrialization that was central to the Second Plan (1956-1961) and Third Plan (1961-1966) had created jobs in urban areas, but not enough to keep up with the massive flow of migrants from rural areas.⁴⁵ After 20 years of Nehruvian rule, the divide between urban and rural areas—between what Rajni Kothari calls the “urban based westernized elite and the large majority of the people” (1972, 1545)—formed the political context in which Gandhi’s political career flourished. Gandhi had the political flair to position the government as an entity capable of satisfying the most elementary needs of the Indian population. Until then, citizens were expected to benevolently contribute to the making of India by missing a meal or by adopting rationing practices.⁴⁶ By the mid-1960s, the situation had reversed. It was largely expected that the state would finally deliver on its welfare obligations. The formation of the APC and the FCI were two attempts to do so. But politicians were expected to do much more: they had to demonstrate what they had achieved and what they could do for the hungry and the poor (Chatterjee 1997; Kothari 1972).⁴⁷

45 Under Nehru, the central government’s development strategy was focused on modernizing the Indian economy by adopting the industrialization model popular in Western countries, but in the process, it displaced an army of workers from rural to urban areas. After the First Plan, investment in rural areas was mostly neglected for the benefit of rapid industrialization. “The overall result,” asserts Rajni Kothari:

was the phenomenon of growing underemployment and poverty in the rural areas as a result of being drawn into a world economy and the parallel process of migration to the towns and cities for jobs which, however, grew at a snail’s pace owing to the fact that the manufacturing sector catered mainly to the consumption needs of a small ‘cosmopolitan’ (i.e., Anglicized) urban middle class. (1972, 1543)

46 For instance, early in 1951, Prime Minister Nehru made a call to the population to solve the food crisis by giving up one meal a week (Sherman 2013, 19).

47 Partha Chatterjee notes two other elements that have marked the transfer of power between Nehru and Gandhi. First, after the Green Revolution, a new class emerged, the rich farmer class. Until the 1960s, the agricultural sector received little to no attention from Nehruvian policymakers and experts who focused on the expansion of public undertakings of industries and infrastructures. But the food crisis of 1965-66 forced the government to adopt a new approach, the Green Revolution, to quickly increase the level of available food. Second, the unified Congress that had ruled the country for two decades belonged to the past. Divisions within the Congress had

Building on Ernest Laclau, Gupta describes populism as

connected not so much to a determinate stage of development as to a crisis ‘of the dominant ideological discourse which is in turn part of a more general social crisis’ [Laclau 1977, 172-175]. In such a crisis, a fraction within the dominant bloc seeks to impose its hegemony through a direct appeal to the masses. (1998, 65)

With her famous political slogan “*Garibi Hatao*” (remove poverty), Gandhi had the political sagacity to understand the social crisis in which India had been plunged in the 1960s and to turn it to her advantage (Chatterjee 1997). Gandhi captured the failures of the previous generation of Nehruvian politicians in satisfying the needs of the population and made a promise to rule for the people who had until then been left on the sidelines of the movement towards modernization. In fact, Gandhi was able to preserve the traditional electoral support of the Congress, “a somewhat paradoxical alliance of urban elites and rural landholding castes at the top with low castes and minority groups below” (Chatterjee 1997, 23). During the 1971 elections, Gandhi remarked that while establishment members of the Congress sought her removal, she herself wanted nothing else than the removal of poverty (Gupta 1998, 67). She won the election in a landslide. *Garibi Hatao* functioned as a populist rallying cry deployed to bring attention to the severe conditions of poverty that affected a large majority of Indians. In the process, this electoral strategy pitted ordinary people against the country’s political elites in a dichotomizing and antagonizing way. With her rising popularity among poor voters, Gandhi consolidated her power in the Congress and the national government. The burgeoning delivery of welfare programs came to be seen as a handout from Gandhi herself (Chatterjee 1997, 23).⁴⁸

poisoned the ambivalent relationship between the party and government. To reassert her grip on the Congress and the government, Gandhi worked to associate her own image with that of the Congress, centralized the function of government under the executive branch, and packaged welfare programs to finally attend to the welfare functions of the state (Chatterjee 1997, 21–23).

48 Just like those of the previous generation of Congress leaders, Gandhi’s vision of the development state also relied on socialist claims to redistributive justice. But Gandhi’s populist agenda led her to instate a rule that was

As a result of the Green Revolution, a new class of wealthy farmers arose in North India at the precise moment at which Gandhi extended ideals of redistributive justice for the rural poor (Gupta 1998). As Gupta remarks, “the transformation of social relations brought about by populist programs were linked to the appropriation and redeployment of development discourses by farmers group led, in turn, by well-to-do owner-cultivators” (1998, 70). In fact, the rising prominence of an agrarian class of wealthy farmers, which resulted from the Green Revolution, translated Gandhi’s populist discourse of development along the urban-versus-rural divide. From 1970-1990, the emergence of a class of well-to-do owner-cultivators grew in rural areas. While highly variegated and regionally diverse, the rise of this class of owner-cultivators led to a chasm between the rural *Bharat* (traditional India) against an elitist urban India (modern India) (Bentall and Corbridge 1996, 27; Gupta 1998; Mooij 1999). This class of owner-cultivators occupied a position of power in local and national politics (Mooij 1999). As Mooij writes:

As a result of the Green Revolution, a new class of capitalist farmers emerged who gained considerable political power in the course of time (Mitra, 1977). Not only did they become influential in almost all political parties, they also succeeded in penetrating into various policy institutions, such as, for instance, the Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices. (1998, 94)

Rather than keeping the price of food grains down to feed the poor, as it was purported to do in the Nehru era, food policy shifted under the influence of the emergent well-to-do farmers movement to maintain a price equilibrium for the benefit of well-to-do farmers’ interests (Mooij 1998, 1999).⁴⁹ The financial interests invested in the infrastructure of rationing certainly helped to

much more “centralized, statist and focused on a single leader” (Chatterjee 1997, 23).

49 Agriculturists’ interests were increasingly represented in governmental institutions. As Alain de Janvry and K. Subbara write:

While the ratio of representation of agricultural to business and industrial interests was 2:1 in favour of the agriculturalists in the first Lok Sabha [Parliament of the central government] in 1951, it increased steadily to 3:1 in the second (1957), 4:1 in 1976 as the Green Revolution was gaining momentum, 5:1 in 1971, and 9:1 in

expand the reach of the TPDS and stabilized it as the cornerstone strategy for addressing the nutritional needs of the population.

During the 1970s-1980s, the central government designed a series of welfare programs to assist small and marginal farmers, landless labourers, and artisans. Programs such as the Small Farmer Development Agency (SFDA), the Marginal Farmer and Agricultural Labourers (MFAL) development programs,⁵⁰ and later the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP) and the National Rural Employment Program (NREP) were designed to subsidize the means of production (i.e., seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, tools, training, animals) and provide supplementary employment opportunities to poor rural farmers. These programs were essentially beneficiary-oriented and depended on a functioning bureaucratic architecture to target poor households (Rath 1985). The impacts of these welfare schemes on poverty in rural areas were limited. In the Sixth Plan (1980-1985), the IRDP was projected to lift a third of poor rural households out of poverty, but according to Rath's (1985) estimates, only about 3% of poor households in rural areas were lifted above the poverty line.

A series of nutrition-related programs were also designed and implemented to complement the PDS. In 1975, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was launched to provide food, education, and basic healthcare to children aged six years old or less and their mothers (Lokshin et al. 2005). The delivery of these welfare services took place in *anganwadi*⁵¹

1977 under the Janata government. It returned to 4:1 in 1980 as the Congress boosted the representation of business and industry under the influence of the late Sanjay Gandhi . . . [T]he large farmers' interests gained control of the Agricultural Prices Commission to the exclusion of representation of consumers' interests. (1986, 96)

50 The MFAL development programs were eventually integrated into the SFDA (Rath 1985, 238).

51 *Anganwadi* are community centres originally set up by the government in 1975 to provide health, education, and food to children aged six years and younger.

(*crèches* or kindergartens), which are set up in rural villages, urban neighbourhoods, and *basti* (informal settlements) (RTFC 2014a). In 1995, the Government of India also set up a school-lunch program, initially called the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education and later referred to as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), which was designed to provide free lunches to school-goers across the country (RTFC 2014b).⁵² Like the NREP, several food-for-work programs and other employment schemes were also set up across the country, including the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), the *Jawahar Rozgar Yojana* (JRY), the *Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana* (SGRY), and the National Food For Work Programme (NFFWP).

A multiplicity of welfare programs were thus developed to raise targeted segments of the population out of poverty. In order to do so, the government constructed poverty lines, which are biopolitical instruments established to evaluate the biorhythm of the population (see Patnaik 2010). Broadly speaking, a poverty line is a calculation of the minimum expenditure necessary to attain a threshold of daily caloric consumption.⁵³ In India, attempts to statistically quantify the minimum standard of living dated back to the British Raj (Naoroji 1901; Shah 1949), but Vinayak Mahadeo Dandekar and Nilakantha Rath were the first economists to publish a poverty line methodology in 1971.⁵⁴

Poverty lines are contested tools (Deaton 2006; Deaton and Drèze 2009, 2010), but for

52 Initially, the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education was designed to provide cooked meals to primary school students, but according to the Right to Food Campaign (RTFC), most states never really gave any food beyond dry rations (RTFC 2014b, 12).

53 Over time, the basket of commodities used to calculate poverty lines has come to include items other than food, as sanitation and hygiene products, clean water, and other resources have come to be recognized as essential for the “retention of calories” (Deaton and Drèze 2009, 43).

54 In the late 1950s, Nehru appointed six experts to draw the first postcolonial poverty line, but no records have been found on the methodologies used (Rath 2011; Srinivasan 2007).

biopolitical interventions, they have been powerful instruments of government because they enable the government to authoritatively and arbitrarily measure the general well-being of the population and identify needs that could be satisfied. In turn, this exercise of governmentality categorically distinguishes poverty from wealth. According to T. N. Srinivasan: “[a] poverty lines serves two roles: a *normative* role and a *monitoring* role” (2007, 4155; italics in original). Poverty lines reflect the normative amounts of food and commodities that an individual or household supposedly needs; once drawn, these lines divide the population into poor people who cannot meet the norm and those who can—and imply, more generally, a politico-ethical obligation for the government to pull poor members of the population above the line. What is more, over time, government authorities have used poverty lines to measure the evolution of poverty in a given area. This is the *monitory* role of poverty lines. They help the government to statistically compare one region to the next and one targeted population to another in order to determine appropriate actions to be taken.

In 1971, Dandekar and Rath published in *Economic and Political Weekly* a seminal study that quantified the evolution of various scales of poverty using a single poverty line over an entire decade.⁵⁵ Dandekar and Rath’s (1971a, 1971b) findings were shocking: they demonstrated that despite a positive rate of economic growth in the 1960s, inequality in India over the same period had grown. This proved to be a virulent critique of Nehruvian developmentalism and served as a call to the Planning Commission under Gandhi to adopt policies of wealth redistribution. “In the absence of such policies,” Dandekar and Rath note:

the processes of economic development, as we have witnessed them in the past, make

⁵⁵ Based on statistics generated by the National Sample Survey (NSS) in 1960-1961, Dandekar and Rath (1971a, 29–30) concluded that 2,250 kcal/day is an appropriate minimum level of caloric value to calibrate poverty lines.

the rich far too rich before the poor can secure even the minimum, widen the gulf between the rich and the poor intolerably and inevitably undermine the democratic foundations of the economy. (1971a, 48)

Under Gandhi's rule, poverty lines quickly became a powerful instrument of government to assess the scope of biopolitical interventions and the successes they had. Poverty line methodologies were developed and improved over the years. They became much more complex, and were reformulated to provide a statistical benchmark against which the performance of welfare programs could actually be measured.⁵⁶ Increasingly, people located below the poverty line (BPL) became the target of welfare programs intended to raise them above the poverty line (APL). The governmental use of poverty lines has been subject to heavy criticism in recent years (Deaton and Drèze 2009, 2010; Ministry of Rural Development, GoI 2009), but during Gandhi's tenure, they became popular as a normative and monitoring instrument for implementing welfare programs.⁵⁷

56 Appointed by the Planning Commission, expert committees were formed to study below-the-poverty-line (BPL) households and their consumption patterns, or lack thereof. These expert committees set methodologies that would later be used by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) to identify poor populations. The first expert committee was formed in 1977 to construct a model of private consumption by different sections of the population, based on age, sex, and occupation, across India (Planning Commission 1979, 8). In 1988, a second expert committee (referred to as the Lakdawala Expert Group) was set up with the mandate to redefine the government's poverty lines, based on metrics of adequate daily caloric-value specific to different states of India.

57 The measurement of Indian nutrient requirements played a critical role in the early establishment of a poverty line. In 1944, the Nutrition Advisory Committee of the Indian Research Fund Association (IRFA) established the first recommended "desirable safe dietary intakes of nutrients for human health" levels, based on a 1937 Health Committee Report from the League of Nations (Narasinga Rao 2009, 4). All over the world, nutritionists agreed that the need for a normalized adult body was 2,400 kcal (League of Nations 1937, 86). The IRFA recommendations considered levels of required energy, protein, iron, calcium, vitamins A, thiamine, riboflavin, ascorbic acid, and vitamin D for a normalized body in India. Following two reports by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the first on calories (1950) and the second on protein (1957), the IRFA, which had been renamed in 1949 the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), revised its recommendations in 1958. Using these revised recommendations, a working group set up by the Planning Commission in 1960 drew the first postcolonial poverty line at ₹ 20 per capita per month, which excluded expenditures on health, education, and housing (Planning Commission 1993, 8; Srinivasan 2007, 4157; Planning Commission 1979, 8). This rate is based on 1960-1961 prices. To be more specific, the ICMR established poverty lines of ₹ 18.9 per capita per month in rural areas and ₹ 25 in urban areas. Over the years, these recommendations were improved and updated by the Task Force of 1979 and the Lakdawala Expert Group of 1993, both set up by the Planning Commission, in order to develop adequate daily food intake targets that took into consideration a range of bodies, food items included in normalized consumption baskets, and varied locations and eating habits across India. The daily food

Under Gandhi's rule, food became increasingly political. As Mooij put it, "[c]heap food was among the promises with which politicians or political parties tried to win the favour of the electorate" (1998, 94). In the 1970s-1980s, in addition to the implementation of other food-related welfare programs, the PDS expanded its reach to new frontiers in rural areas. Between 1965 and 1977, the total number of FPSs in operation more than doubled. By the late 1980s, more than 300,000 FPSs were formally in operation, three quarters of which were located in rural areas. Seventy percent of the total procured rice and 55% of the total procured wheat were sold in rural areas (Mooij 1998, 86). As early as 1977, almost the entire population of India could theoretically be covered by the infrastructure of rationing (Chopra 1981, 215), making the PDS the largest universal welfare scheme in the world. This was due in part to the gains achieved through the increased stocks of food grains that resulted from the Green Revolution and Gandhi's *Garibi Hatao* agenda that helped to dramatically increase the number of FPSs in operation throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

However, it should be noted that the expansion of the country's rationing infrastructure did not necessarily result in greater reach to the poor. In his book *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, a gripping account of welfare programs in rural areas of India, the famous journalist and activist Palagummi Sainath shows that the deployment of infrastructure and public funding, including the PDS, has almost inevitably attracted practices of patronage and corruption (1996, 315–70). Figures of leakages from the PDS are hard to come by, but critics of welfare schemes have qualified the populist promises and programs implemented throughout the 1970s and 1980s as ephemeral, corrupt, and underperforming (Frankel 2009). While populist food politics

intake deemed to be adequate corresponded to a total caloric value of 2,100 kcal in urban areas and 2,400 kcal in rural areas until 1988 (Narasinga Rao 2009, 10).

continued to mobilize most of the country's political attention during the 1980s, cutbacks to the rationing infrastructure and the abolition of food-for-work programs were gradually implemented to tame India's growing public debt (Kohli 1989). In fact, the legacy of Gandhi's *Garibi Hatao* agenda was reconfigured in the Fifth Plan (1974-78) and Sixth Plan (1980–1985), which shifted attention away from improving the overall well-being of the population. Instead, the Planning Commission introduced the concept of “basic minimum needs” and a focus on welfare poverty reduction mechanisms that aimed not so much to eradicate poverty, but to “[contain and ameliorate it] until it gets eradicated in the natural process of [economic] growth” (Guhan 1980, 1975–76). Once again, a shift in food politics reconfigured the government's interpretation of people's needs, and by the same token, rearranged the Indian food welfare landscape. These mechanisms paved the way to the liberalization of the Indian economy.

2.4 The Liberalization of the Indian Economy

In 1990, the Government of India approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to apply for a structural adjustments programs (SAPs) loan. According to Atul Kohli (2006a), the country's growing fiscal imbalance left no other choice for the Indian government, which was led by the Congress at that time. This fiscal burden was a precursor to the reforms leading up to the so-called “economic liberalization” of the country: investment in the modernization of agriculture was cut back; conversion of food crops to cash crops intensified; reductions in tariff barriers were adopted; currency was devalued; foreign investments were liberalized; restrictions to the flow of commodities were eased; and wheat and rice exports rose dramatically (Patnaik 1997, 2011). It should be noted that the term “economic liberalization” is an ambiguous “grab bag” for many different policy measures that are not necessarily cohesive or homogeneous (Kohli 1989, 306).

The rhetoric stemming from the economic liberalization of the 1990s in India took the form of an ideological reorientation of public policy, which had, since Nehru, been informed by ideals of distributive or social justice found in socialism. But, this is only part of the story.

In this section, I briefly explore the origins of economic liberalization in India and examine its impacts on the formulation of perceived nutritional needs for differentiated populations. I document how the alignment of the political elites with upper classes triggered a restructuring of the PDS into a targeted system, which depends upon a greater use of poverty lines as an instrument of government to categorize the Indian population into poor- and wealthy-enough households. Rather than curbing public spending and transforming the PDS into a more “efficient” welfare program, the use of poverty lines enabled government authorities to recast the PDS according to a neoliberal interpretation of needs and wants. In turn, the making of BPL and APL households changed the distribution process in FPSs.

By the early 1980s, the Indian government had already withdrawn from its populist commitments to wealth distribution to focus instead on the promotion of economic growth. The alignment of the Indian government with Indian capitalists’ interests began during the last mandate of Indira Gandhi, only to gather steam when Rajiv Gandhi, her son, took the office of prime minister in 1984-1989 (Kohli 2006a, 2006b). According to Kohli, “Indira Gandhi’s efforts at redistribution failed and the democratic socialist tilt evolved into anti-capitalist populism, hurting economic growth” (2006a, 1258). To compensate, in the 1980s, under both Indira Gandhi (1980-84) and Rajiv Gandhi (1984-89), India’s economic liberalization was carefully designed to promote economic growth and foreign investment opportunities. Although the structural

adjustment policies of the time echoed concerns of the Washington Consensus⁵⁸ on development in the Global South more generally, the modality of economic liberalization, as Kohli argues:

was considerably more statist and more explicitly growth-oriented; it was also more pro-business than pro-market. India's nationalist-capitalist model of development from 1980 on thus started to share some important traits with east Asia, where highly interventionist states commonly ally with business and against labour, and only selectively link their economies to the world, often more via trade than capital. (2006a, 1257)

This was of course problematic for the ruling Congress, which had historically relied on the electoral support of the poor. It needed to justify the cutbacks in public expenditures. Kohli (2006a) argues that the country's growing fiscal imbalance throughout the 1980s, which notably resulted from low levels of taxation, provided the much needed rationale for undertaking the IMF loans in 1991—and for adopting the radical economic reforms now referred to as “economic liberalization.” In other words, the rhetoric of *Garibi Hatao* had to be put on the “back burner,” as Kohli (2006a) puts it, in favour of policies benefiting a narrow capitalist and industrial class.

Once pitted against welfare expenditures, economic growth provided the governing rationale for cutbacks in welfare programs, including the infrastructure of rationing, which was at the time the most expensive welfare program of India.⁵⁹ Until then, the PDS had run as a system of universal entitlements that equally distributed coarse cereals, pulses, rice, wheat, sugar, edible oil, milk, kerosene, soft coke (a coal product), and clothing, washing materials, and footwear, all available from the FPSs upon the waving of a ration card. The logic of structural adjustment

58 The term “Washington Consensus” was coined in the mid-1980s by John Williamson to illustrate the “principal economic reforms that were being urged on Latin American countries by powers-that-be in Washington” (1993, 1329). These powers-that-be advocated for liberalization in international financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, as much as in American political institutions (see also Stiglitz 2003).

59 Roughly half of total spending on poverty alleviation programs in India was on the PDS (Radharkrishna and Subbarao 1997, 4).

suggested that the PDS would have to be severely reformed. According to Deepak Ahluwalia (1993), an economist at the World Bank, the financial cost of the PDS had grown exponentially over the previous decades: in 1991-1992, the annual tag price of the PDS reached 0.5% of India's gross domestic product (GDP), as opposed to 0.04% in the 1970s.⁶⁰ The PDS was criticized for being not only too costly, but also too inefficient and underperforming. The country's rationing infrastructure was thought to have an "urban bias" that prevented it from covering poorer rural areas as effectively as it did urban areas (Howes and Jha 1992). Perhaps more to the point, endemic practices of corruption and patronage were thought to be a massive waste of public funding that severely impaired the allocations of food grains to poor citizens by "diverting" or "leaking" food subsidies away from the infrastructure of rationing into the black market.⁶¹ In the early 1990s, key measures were taken to reform the PDS: prices of commodities sold in FPSs were raised, quantities of supplies were reduced, budgetary allocations stagnated, and the expansion of the PDS was restricted, despite the fact that PDS coverage remained vastly inadequate considering the spread of hunger and malnutrition across the country (Swaminathan 1996, 1668).

For the Congress politicians that headed the Government of India until 1996, downsizing the infrastructure of rationing was a rather problematic undertaking. Historically, the PDS had played a central role in populist politics, especially for the Congress, which had always had a strong base of poor and low-caste voters. Particularly given the food insecurity that affected

60 An investment of such sort, Ahluwalia adds, even "exceeds the total annual public investment on major irrigation" (1993, 34). To Ahluwalia's defence, it is true that when considering the rampant corruption and leakages from the infrastructure, the PDS may appear too costly and inefficient. Yet, such an argument totally dismisses the expansion of the PDS between 1970 and 1990 and the fact that investments in irrigation systems help wealthier farmers, rather than poorer peasant, to get richer (Patel 2013, 18-26).

61 Ahluwalia states that "firm estimates [of leakages] are hard to come by" (1993, 34).

large sections of the country's population, abolishing the infrastructure of rationing would be detrimental to the electoral politics of the time. "This," Mooij notes, "together with the fact that capitalist rice and wheat farmers are a powerful lobby group which demands high procurement prices, would mean that the PDS, as a big and costly intervention, is here to stay" (1998, 95). In effect, the PDS was simply too important, both for politicians and well-to-do farmers, to be removed from the political and welfare arenas.

To strategically transform the PDS into a more "efficient" welfare program, the Planning Commission planned to allocate most of the resources available to poorer households in order to ensure that available public funding would bear the most tangible results. This reform was considered to be more pragmatic and, for advocates of liberalization, unavoidable.⁶² In August 1995, a working group appointed by the Planning Commission designed the blueprint for a targeted infrastructure of rationing, the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) (Planning Commission 1997, para. 2.3.3).⁶³ According to the Planning Commission, transforming the universal infrastructure of rationing into a targeted program would help "[curb] subsidies to the barest minimum," while at the same time "recogni[zing] the need to provide food grains at affordable prices to the bottom rungs of the population" (Planning Commission 1997, para. 2.3.2). In 1997, then, the PDS became the TPDS. Following this restructuring of the rationing infrastructure, only wheat and rice, along with kerosene, were to be subsidized by the central

62 When prices are higher, it benefits the producers rather than the consumers, which positively impacts the agricultural sector and the well-to-do farmers of Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh—but it has marginal impacts on the poor households that depend on rations to survive (see Mooij 1998, 95).

63 The Planning Commission undertook this restructuring for three reasons: (a) the gains of the Green Revolution had not been effectively translated into increased food security; (b) the minimum support price (MSP) offered to farmers to procure food grains sold through the PDS had not increased the price of food items sold on the open market; and (c) leakages and practices of corruption within the PDS had prevented the poor from accessing subsidized food in states with high incidences of poverty.

government.⁶⁴

Reforms to PDS did not go unnoticed. Proponents of poverty alleviation programs critically voiced their concerns—even fifteen years later (Himanshu and Sen 2011)—and continued to stress the need for more significant interventions by various levels of government to tackle the everlasting issue of undernourishment in India, which would require an expansion of PDS coverage, a lowering of prices of subsidized commodities, and an increase in the number of rationed items offered at FPSs (Patnaik 2011; Swaminathan 1996, 2000). But such proposals were radically opposed to the reforms proposed by the Washington Consensus, implemented by the Indian political elite, and supported by a minority of capitalists (Kohli 2006b). For “a challenge to the dominant policy framework” to work, or to establish the basis for a “politics of need interpretation” (Fraser 1989, 145), greater pressure, notably from voters, was imperative (Drèze 2004; Khera 2009; Mooij 1998; Sen 2013). In Chapter Three, I follow this thread and examine how such politics of need interpretation led to the formulation of the NFSA and the modernization of the TPDS.

At the outset of the process, the overhaul of the PDS into a targeted system reflected a compromise to the poor in the era of neoliberal reform of welfare programs and the belief that economic growth stemming from liberalization would eventually alleviate the issue of chronic hunger. The rationale underlying this belief, explains Philip McMichael, is “that food consumption is a market act, [it] is so deeply entwined with the faith in global markets that critics of this conception of food security are cast as misguided, even immoral” (2004, 113). It is precisely this faith in market solutions that led experts of the Planning Commission to redesign

⁶⁴ It should be stressed here that the delivery of rationed commodities falls under state jurisdiction. Some states, like Kerala, offer more subsidized commodities throughout their infrastructure of rationing than others (see Sen and Drèze 2013).

the TPDS as an alternative to the open market economy, based on the idea that government interventions must be complementary to the provision of food on the free market. These biopolitical solutions to systemic issues such as chronic hunger would be more serviceable to the population as a whole, it was believed, compared to what was thought to be a too-costly and comprehensive universal system of rationed food.

Note, here, that FPSs were also markets before the making of the PDS into a targeted system. They were sites of exchange, just like other markets, with the difference that subsidized commodities were sold at statutory rates, fixed by the state. Following the enactment of the Essential Commodity Act in 1955, FPSs provided a variety of food and other commodities to ration card holders. Since ration shops were established to distribute subsidies to households irrespective of class and caste, entitlements were equally distributed across cardholders. The FPS market eliminated processes of valuation of commodities and activities of competition between ration card holders, in order to ensure that every one of them would have access to rations.

However, in the reformation of the PDS into the TPDS, FPSs integrated different processes of economic organization, and as such, embodied distinct processes of marketization (see Çalışkan and Callon 2009; 2010). First, the Planning Commission assumed that most residents would buy most of their food basket outside of the TPDS, on the open market, where food and other commodities are distributed according to the laws of supply and demand. FPSs became sites of exchange that sold only a few items that were available, oftentimes at better quality, on the open market. As a result, a majority of wealthier APL household deserted the FPSs. Second, in selling the same rations at differentiated rates to different segments of the population, FPSs became market sites where the valuation of rations was based on the class

category of the cardholder. In creating a taxonomy of different ration card holders, the Indian state generated distinct categories of population, each having a different political stake in the TPDS and the distribution of rations more generally.

Ration Cards	Wheat (₹/kg)	Rice (₹/kg)
APL	6.10	7.95
BPL	4.15	5.65
AAY	2	3

Table 1: Prices of food entitlements according to ration card category.

Between 1997 and 2000, three categories of ration card categories were created: the above poverty line (APL), the below poverty line (BPL), and the *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* (poorest of the poor, hereafter AAY). While all categories were allocated 35 kg of wheat and rice entitlements, the poorer the household classification, the cheaper the entitlements (see Table 1). In Delhi, two other types of ration cards were also issued to people who were considered to be temporary residents of the city. The Resettlement Colony (RC) and *Jhuggi Jopri* (JJ) ration cards were valid for a period of six months, after which point they could be renewed. Both RC and JJ cardholders could buy rations at FPSs at APL rates.

Here, what is at stake is the interpretation of needs that could be met by the distribution of rations. By deploying targeting mechanisms in the TPDS, experts and planners of the Planning Commission overhauled the infrastructure of rationing to better allocate scarce resources to poorer households. In the process, however, the distribution of entitlements was conceptualized as supplementary to the otherwise mundane act of buying essential foods and other commodities on open markets. Subsidies were thought to be supplemental: in the age of economic

liberalization, the Indian state interpreted nutritional needs as a market act, and therefore situated governmental interventions as a support to such acts. This is important. The Indian state interpreted the nutritional needs of its population as a “thin” need (Fraser 1989, 163), by providing only staple foods such as wheat and rice. Under the auspices of economic liberalization, experts and planners assumed that thicker nutritional needs—such as proteins, vitamins, and minerals that are essential components of a healthy diet—were superfluous, and their subsidization, unjustified. The provision of food through the TPDS could relieve some of the economic burden on poor households, but the state’s interpretation of nutritional needs also required such households to navigate the open market on a tight budget. Oftentimes, even with entitlements collected at FPSs, these households could not afford more than one meal a day, a diverse diet consisting of foods other than rolled up *roti* [flat bread] with salt or rice, or other essential commodities and more luxurious items—such as water, sanitation items, health care, education, or alcohol and tobacco.

Drawing poverty lines became a critical technique of government for categorizing different types of households according to their nutritional needs. To undertake the monumental task of identifying who would be targeted in the TPDS, the Planning Commission exhorted all state departments of food and supplies to deploy poverty lines as instruments for identifying poor households that were, in fact, poor enough to access food subsidies at cheap rates (see Corbridge et al. 2005). This use of poverty lines to measure, classify, evaluate, and target India’s poor proved to be a problematic instrument of government. In 1992 and 1997, surveys were undertaken across India to document poverty based on indicators that were inconsistent, arbitrary, and debatable.⁶⁵ One could even question if these surveys, and thus the production of BPL

65 In 1992 and 1997, surveys were conducted in various states to quantify the BPL population. Inspectors were

households, served the wide-ranging objective of alleviating poverty—or if they were not, in fact, designed to purposefully compile statistics to show that numbers of poor people in the country were in constant decline thanks to the *Garibi Hatao* initiatives (Corbridge et al. 2005, 75).⁶⁶

Three reasons explain why poverty lines are questionable instruments. First, when poor households are targeted and the population is divided into APL and BPL households, errors of inclusion and exclusion are bound to happen due to the arbitrary character of indicators used to classify households (Corbridge et al. 2005; Drèze and Khera 2010; Khera 2009, 2013; Swaminathan 2000). Second, the calibration of poverty lines based on caloric consumption remains at best an approximation, based on aggregate factors and variables of consumption capabilities and metabolism that are poorly translated into a statistical benchmark; indeed, the Indian caloric count for rural and urban areas has proven “to be highly context-specific, depending on activity levels, the epidemiological environment, the composition of the population, and other factors” (Deaton and Drèze 2009, 59, 2010).⁶⁷ Third, in the era of economic liberalization, when welfare programs are designed to be leaner, statistical benchmarks most likely deflate the count of poverty, which in turn reflects positively on the design and implementation of welfare programs—and state interventions more generally. Thus, the use of poverty lines, no matter how precise the underlying methodologies, is conducive to creating bureaucratic categories of households deserving welfare or not—but it surely leads to misleading

instructed to “use their eyes” and to “look inside household cash box” or “look out for a bicycle or other such item as proof of the non-existence of poverty or BPL status” (Corbridge et al. 2005, 75).

66 According to the Lakdawala Expert Group’s statistical demonstration (1993), the BPL population was in constant decline across the country from 1973-1974 onwards.

67 In 2009–2010, Jean Drèze and Angus Deaton (2009, 2010) and Utsa Patnaik (2010) debated the merits of this assertion. Similar to Drèze and Deaton, Patnaik suggests reviewing poverty estimates, but she does so by arguing that consumer price indices understate the actual cost of living, which deflates official poverty lines. Drèze and Deaton (2010), on the other hand, suggest that the official uses of poverty lines obfuscate rather than clarify the actual experience of poverty.

results and interventions that misfire.

In 2005, the Planning Commission published a study on the performance of the TPDS, which concluded that only 42% of subsidized food actually reached APL and BPL households, implying that the infrastructure of rationing was deeply dysfunctional. In the study, the term “leakages” appeared to be a euphemism for the underlying practices of corruption that were said to cripple the delivery of food grains.⁶⁸ Increasingly, the need to curb corruption predominated debates about the government’s biopolitical duty to eradicate chronic hunger. The Planning Commission’s study revealed that “the transition from the PDS to the TPDS has *neither led to a reduction of budgetary food subsidies, nor has it been able to benefit the large majority of the food insecure households in the desired manner*” (Planning Commission 2005, xi; italics added, bold in original). According to the Planning Commission, the TPDS failed on two fronts: it failed to secure food security for the majority of the country’s poor and failed to reduce the fiscal burden of welfare programs. Yet, these failures were not blamed on the transition from the PDS to the TPDS, which was determined to be “a move in the right direction” (Planning Commission 2005, vii). Instead, the Planning Commission stressed that in order to plug leakages from the system, it was critical to improve methods for identifying BPL households and to ensure that the infrastructure of rationing become more “effective, efficient, and transparent” (2005, xii), two objectives that were prominent in the design of the TPDS in the mid-1990s. According to the

68 The Planning Commission notes two ways in which leakages from the infrastructure of rationing occur. At the FPS level, owners may divert ration entitlements to the black market in a number of ways. For example, ration card holders might not pick up their rations at the FPS, thus leaving it to the owner to sell their subsidized food on the black market and pocket the profits. This is typical of APL ration card holders, who are usually more affluent and can afford to buy higher quality wheat and rice in the open market. However, rural BPL cardholders who seasonally migrate into cities may also leave their rations back in their home state. Some FPS owners also arbitrarily refuse to sell full rations to ration card holders. Furthermore, in every state, there exists a number of “ghost cards.” These cards are typically not in the possession of their owners, which enable usurpers to grab someone else’s rations at FPSs. Anybody working along the infrastructure of rationing, from bureaucrats to FPS owners, may own a number of ghost cards.

Planning Commission, in other words, efforts to address the failures of the infrastructure of rationing depended on a recalibration of instruments of government in order to better capture the biorhythm of the population and satisfy its needs.

After having demonstrated that the TPDS had “neither benefited the poor, nor helped reduce budgetary food subsidies in the desired manner” (2005, 90), alternatives to the TPDS could conceivably be explored. Once the powerful institution had demonstrated that the TPDS was inefficient, deeply corrupt, and a black hole for public funding, the Planning Commission could therefore arguably frame the infrastructure of rationing as a dysfunctional welfare program that ought to be revamped, cut back to an even more narrow system, and perhaps even replaced by other initiatives, such as cash transfers advocated by international institutions (J. Das, Do, and Özler 2005). In other words, the Planning Commission framed the TPDS within a neoliberal rationality, evaluated it as a failure, and opened the door to further cutbacks in government spending.

For Reetika Khera, the findings of the Planning Commission were short-sighted:

The Planning Commission study is very outdated. The study was published in 2005, but the study was conducted between 1997 and 2001. There is a lot of work on this issue [the TPDS] after that. But the fact is that the data coming out afterwards is not suiting the arguments that the PDS is the same across the country, that nothing has changed [in terms of inefficiency or leakages for instance] in the last fifteen years and neither of these things are true. (Khera, personal interview, New Delhi, August 2015)

In 2013, Drèze and Khera argued that the TPDS played a critical role in alleviating hunger in India and reducing poverty across the country. Khera showed that the performance of the TPDS was largely satisfactory in seven large states and that “signs of revival” were present in five other states (2011, 113; see also Drèze and Khera 2013). Plus, Drèze and Khera (2015) showed that

leakages from the TPDS were on the decline. More to the point, Drèze and Khera (2015) have confirmed what others had suspected for a long time (Planning Commission 2005; Ministry of Rural Development, GoI 2009): a large part of the leakages occurred *because* of the faulty targeting mechanisms of food distribution in FPSs. Since many APL households, due to a variety of reasons, did not pick up their allocated rations, these entitlements typically remained in the FPSs. For FPS owners, the leftover food grain became an important source of additional income, once diverted to the black market. Over time, these practices of leakage became customary and widely known. Under such light, one could reasonably argue, as have Himanshu and Abhijit Sen (2011) and others (Jhabvala and Standing 2010; Svedberg 2012; Swaminathan 2000), that perhaps the best path towards plugging leakages rests in the reverting of the TPDS into a universal system of rationing. Yet, this proposition has been out of question since the mid-1990s because it goes against the logic of the neoliberal food regime and the dominant interpretation of people's needs.

This is not to say that leakages did not occur when the PDS was universal. They did: between 30% to 40% of food grains were diverted to the black market (Ahluwalia 1993). However, in drawing a clear line between those who had to be elevated above the poverty line and those who were already above that line, the Planning Commission shaped different kinds of households who had different types of nutritional needs. For BPL and AAY households, having access to highly subsidized food remained of crucial importance, since a larger fraction of their (perceived) diet came from staple food bought in FPSs. For APL ration card holders, who demographically were part of the rising middle class and the elite that typically inhabited urban centres, the TPDS became a vestige of past generations that had little impact on their diet. APL

households' chief concerns centred on the delivery of other government services—*bijli, sadak, aur pani* (electricity, roads, and water), rather than *roti, kapda, aur makaan* (food, clothing, and housing) (Baviskar and Ray 2011, 1)—which had been, in the 1970s, the key appeal behind the expansion of the PDS and the deployment of the *Garibi Hatao* agenda. Conceivably, members of the rising middle class had benefited from economic liberalization, and ostensibly, their stake in the TPDS lay not so much in the proper distribution of subsidized food to the poor, but rather in its ability to operate efficiently, at low cost, and without corruption. Ironically, in the age of economic liberalism, not only did the reform of the TPDS create a category of population that had a low political stake in the provision of subsidized food in general, but it also simultaneously generated mechanisms through which practices of corruption could be sustained *and* a rationale for the wealthier segment of the population to question, given the high rates of leakages, the *raison d'être* of the TPDS.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have emphasized the fluidity of the infrastructure of rationing in India over a period of national development and economic liberalization. More precisely, I have traced the history of the TPDS by situating its deployment in contexts that were key to the food politics of three contrasting rationalities of government: Nehruvian developmentalism, Indira Gandhi's populism, and economic liberalism. In each of these three periods, I have shown how biopolitical interventions were largely responsive to the rationality of government based on perceived needs of the population as a whole.

If the infrastructure of rationing was ostensibly designed to secure both food access for the country's most vulnerable populations and food availability, there is some evidence that the

(T)PDS has also been intricately embedded in other political concerns. During the Nehru era, the stabilization of the PDS served the national objective of urban industrialization, which was considered at the time to be fundamental to the movement of India into modernity (Chatterjee 1997). When India adopted Green Revolution technologies, and proceeded to become food self-sufficient, food policies morphed to sustain the country's production and, thus, increased the market value of cheap food more generally. Institutions such as the FCI and the APC gradually came under the influence of well-to-do owner-cultivators, who have directly benefited from the Green Revolution (George 1996; Mooij 1998). While the planning of food policies became increasingly centralized and institutionalized (and powerful), the PDS and welfare programs more generally expanded in rural and urban areas. Indian rulers and planners came to realize that economic growth alone could not alleviate experiences of poverty and hunger. To maintain and centralize its rule, the Government of India attempted to meet the needs of wide segments of the poor population by using poverty lines. During the era of economic liberalization that followed, the PDS was reformed into the TPDS, a system that directly targets the country's poor as part of efforts by the political elite and some capitalists to restructure the government's biopolitical interventions. Nutritional needs were reassessed and reformulated. To shrink welfare expenditures, the Indian state deployed poverty lines to categorize households according to their perceived nutritional needs. Largely relying on the open market, the Indian state kept the TPDS infrastructure, but items sold in FPSs were reduced to address the most basic nutritional needs of poor households. Meanwhile, most of the wealthiest households abandoned FPSs and their rations, leaving them to be leaked from the infrastructure.

The overhaul of the PDS into the TPDS system has revealed some of the shortcomings

of the infrastructure of rationing. First, errors of inclusion and exclusion are bound to happen, and they either help to divert subsidized food to the black market or, worse, lead poor households to spend more money on food than what they should (Swaminathan 2000). Second, poverty lines as benchmarks of poverty are a poor indicator of food security (Deaton and Drèze 2009, 2010; see also Patnaik 2010). In fact, methodologies for drawing poverty lines poorly capture the contexts and experiences of chronic hunger (Deaton 2006; Deaton and Drèze 2009) and, thus, serve more as a bureaucratic category rather than an effective tool for eradicating undernourishment.⁶⁹ Third, the production of APL and BPL households has considerably helped to sustain practices of leakages in the country.

At the turn of the 20th century, a famine spread in Northern India, touching millions of households, and patently revealed the systemic failures of the Indian state to protect the most vulnerable against hunger. It is in this context that activists have begun to voice concerns on the ability of the TPDS and the commitment of the government to actually tackle the endemic issue of chronic hunger in India. This is the topic of my next chapter. Here, I explored how successive food regimes and their discursive rationalities have shaped the interpretation of different populations' nutritional needs used in the design of governmental interventions. In the next chapter, I explore the politics of need interpretation in India, as human rights discourses have framed debates and struggles on the question of food security in the 21st century.

69 Other criteria have been designed to count the poor (Ministry of Rural Development, GoI 2009), but the manipulation of these indicators by government officials has proven to be inadequate to take a realist account of poverty (Saxena 2015).

Chapter 3: The Politics of Need Interpretation of the Right to Food Entitlement in India

In the previous chapter, I detailed the history of the infrastructure of food rationing from the 1940s to the early 2000s. I described how successive food regimes have shaped Indian food policies and, with them, governmental interventions in the food economy and welfare. I contextualized the construction of the infrastructure of rationing in India, which was first called the Public Distribution System (PDS) and later overhauled into the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). In this chapter, I explore how human rights discourses shaped Indian food politics, and ultimately techniques of government, after the implementation of the TPDS. I examine the formation of democratic spaces in which state and non-state actors have formulated claims about needs that should be satisfied by the government. I engage with the analytical grid of “politics of need interpretation” to chart how diverse claims about needs either challenge or reproduce the “dominant policy framework” (Fraser 1989, 145). This investigation leads me to interrogate how the rhetoric of “good governance” is articulated by state and non-state actors—and how this discourse has framed debates about the nature and scope of the Indian right to food entitlement. In this chapter, I question how certain perceived needs of food security are addressed by the right to food entitlement, while others are not. In doing so, I shed light on food politics that emphasize notions of accountability and transparency as key provisions of national food security legislation.

3.1 Introduction

At the turn of the millennium, almost half of Indian children under the age of six years old were undernourished (Deaton and Drèze 2009; RTFC 2006).⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the Food

⁷⁰ More precisely: “About half of all Indian children are undernourished, more than half suffer from anaemia, and a

Corporation of India (FCI), which oversees the operation of the TPDS across India, was storing more food grains than necessary, often beyond their shelf-life (Chaturvedi and Raj 2015; Drèze 2001). This practice of storing food, Jean Drèze (2001) explains, drives the value of food grains up, which has an inflationary impact on the cost of food more generally in the open market. By 2001-2002, the FCI had built a buffer stock of food grains nearing 50 to 60 million tons. In an op-ed entitled “Starving the poor,” Drèze⁷¹ argues that:

The Indian public is so used to large numbers that it is easy to lose sight of the staggering scale of this hoard. It may help to think of it as the equivalent of one tonne of food for each household under the poverty line. If all the sacks of grain lying in FCI godowns [storage facilities] were lined up in a row, the line would stretch for a million kilometres—more than twice the distance from the Earth to the moon. When millions of people are undernourished if not starving, hoarding food on this scale—at enormous cost—is nothing short of implicit mass murder. (2001)

Releasing food grains and thereby decreasing their market value would be beneficial for all, with the exception of cultivator-owners who sell their produce at a higher minimum support price, Drèze argues. It would have an impact on food markets, making food items more affordable for the population as a whole. This deflationary pressure on food markets would be particularly beneficial for poor people, whose diets are typically less balanced than those of wealthier households (Deaton and Drèze 2009, 47). When the PDS was overhauled into the TPDS in 1997, the commodities available in fair price shops (FPSs) were limited to wheat and rice.⁷² These food

similar proportion escapes full immunization” (RTFC 2006, 1).

71 When Drèze wrote this op-ed for *The Hindu*, the country had witnessed a series of poor harvests due to droughts between 1995-2002. After a small respite in 2001, the drought of 2002 was particularly severe. The state of Rajasthan was notably touched by this natural disaster, which affected not only food production and consumption, but all aspects of everyday life for rural people, who live at the mercy of state relief in times of drought. According to the Relief Department of the Government of Rajasthan, in 2002, 44.8 million people were reportedly affected by drought in 96.98% of the state’s districts (in Rathore 2005, 8, 11). Food became too scarce. When a natural disaster of this scale hits, people cope as well as they can, including through urban migration, taking up credit to feed those close to them, or braving the storm by living with hunger (Khera 2004).

72 While the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) is a welfare program put in place across the country, it is the prerogative of each state government to complement entitlements of wheat and rice with other commodities,

commodities were made available to ration card holders at differentiated prices: below-the-poverty-line (BPL) cardholders had access to food grains at cheaper rates than their above-the-poverty-line (APL) counterparts, whose entitlement rates were fixed at near-market prices. Once reformed, the infrastructure of rationing sought to address the most basic nutritional needs of different categories of the population by subsidizing staple foods and leaving them to acquire other essential nutrients on their own. As such, nutritional food security, including the consumption of protein, vitamins, and other essential nutrients, came to depend on the ability of different households to access nutritious food on the open market. Obviously, this was more difficult to achieve for BPL ration card holders than their APL counterparts, and even more so for other groups, such as migrant workers, agricultural labourers, and other daily-wage workers, who for various reasons, do not all have access to ration cards and subsidized food.

Perhaps even more troubling is the fact that vast quantities of food were rotting in *godowns*. Food grains, as opposed to non-food items, cannot be stored for an extended period of time without declining in quality. Commenting on “the low quality of PDS food grains,” Drèze writes:

In some areas, it is reported that even BPL (below poverty line) households see little advantage in purchasing food from ration shops rather than from the market, because the price differential is too small to compensate for the quality differential. These households, in other words, effectively gain nothing from subsidised PDS sales; on the other hand, they bear the burden of high food prices on the market as a result of the FCI's hoarding operations. (2001)

When stored for a prolonged period of time, food grains get eaten by rats and weevils, which in

such as sugar. For instance, during my fieldwork in Delhi, onions were sporadically sold in FPSs, and other household items such as toothbrushes and toothpaste were allowed to be sold in there, but not at subsidized prices. In other states, like West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, a large variety of food items were subsidized in FPSs, along with wheat, rice, and sugar. Kerosene is also made available through the PDS.

times of severe droughts, end up better fed than neighbouring humans.

This situation is all the more concerning when one considers the condition of the TPDS more generally. By the turn of the millennium, most APL households had deserted FPSs, due to the low quality of food grains sold there compared to what they could buy elsewhere.

Entitlements distributed through the FPSs for APL households were set at prices similar to food grains sold on the open market, and for many, the slightly lower price tag was not worth the difference in quality. Moreover, it was not unusual for fraudulent actors in close contact with the TPDS to systematically redirect APL rations for their own benefit (see Drèze 2001). With the value of food grains already high, diverting them to the black market was all the more profitable.

In 2001, during a meeting organized by the People's Union for Civic Liberties (PUCL) in Rajasthan, Drèze took human rights senior advocate Colin Gonsalves for a visit to a village located close to Jaipur to witness the extent to which repeated droughts had afflicted the local agrarian population. Villagers were eating "in rotation," which is to say there was not enough food to feed everybody every day. On any given day, only a fraction of each family would eat. The following day, the rest would eat. Meanwhile, to their dismay, Drèze and Gonsalves were told by local residents that there was a nearby *godown* replete with food grains. Locked behind closed gates, the food grains in the storage facility had fermented in the rain—"some of it rotting and a feast for rats," Gonsalves (2002) writes, describing this scene as "the spectre of starving India."⁷³

In response to the patent inaction of local and national governments in securing the

73 In December 2000, months after the low monsoon, the grain stored in Rajasthan's *godowns* was planned to be dumped in the sea to make room for upcoming crops. This was known by the Government of Rajasthan, the union minister for Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution in New Delhi, and the senior regional manager of the FCI (Gonsalves 2002).

well-being of its population, and given the plentiful stock of food grains available in the FCI's *godowns*, on April 16, 2001, the PUCL submitted a writ petition to the Supreme Court of India to demand that the right to food be recognized. Led by Gonsalves, a team of human rights petitioners endeavoured to convince the Supreme Court magistrates of the FCI and national and local governments' failures to abide by their biopolitical duties and secure access to food for the country's (starving) population. Meanwhile, activists for a right to food started the Right to Food Campaign (RTFC) and began to mobilize popular support.

The RTFC is an informal network of organizations and individuals committed to a human rights approach to issues of hunger and undernourishment in India. According to the RTFC's Foundation Statement that was written later in 2007:

Realising this right [to be free of hunger] requires not only equitable and sustainable food systems, but also entitlements relating to livelihood security such as the right to work, land reform and social security. We consider that the primary responsibility for guaranteeing these entitlements rests with the state. Lack of financial resources cannot be accepted as an excuse for abdicating this responsibility. (RTFC n.d.)

The authors position the provision of entitlements related to livelihood security as a fundamental biopolitical duty of the state.

The RTFC has used what political scientist Shareen Hertel calls a "three-pronged strategy" to popularize human rights discourses as a response to the government's inaction in fulfilling its duties (2016, 611). The strategy focuses on: (a) judiciary activism; (b) popular mobilization, which has notably built on other human rights campaigns for the right to information and the right to work; and (c) advocacy with parliamentarians, via collaboration through a special para-public institution, the National Advisory Council (NAC). This led, in 2013, to the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), a piece of legislation that

guarantees four types of entitlement: (a) subsidized food grains to 67% of India's population; (b) universal delivery of lunch to school-goers; (c) universal provision of warm meals to children aged 0 to 6 years; and (d) maternity entitlements of ₹ 6,000 per month (about 90 USD).

In this chapter, I examine each prong of Hertel's three-pronged strategy and come to three distinct conclusions. The first is that if the state is far from a unitary and homogenous entity (Gupta 1995; Mitchell 2006), so is the social movement for a right to food. Put in simpler terms, the categories of "state" and "civil society" often encompass a range of actors that make competing normative claims about the needs of the population and the strategies that should be deployed to satisfy them. The assumption underlying Hertel's analysis is that actors from both the social movement and the government have negotiated the nature and scope of an Indian right to food in three different milieus: within the judiciary system, in para-public forums like the NAC, and through the legislative process. Building on the work of Deepta Chopra (2011a, 2011b, 2014) and Hertel (2016), which focuses on the formulation of the Indian right to work in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA),⁷⁴ this chapter maps the "politics of need interpretation" (Fraser 1989: 163) in such a way as to show that the right-to-food movement, just like the state, is composed of a myriad of heterogeneous and diverse (even conflicting) voices. I demonstrate that welfare policy-making is complex and messy, but it is always articulated to (re)produce the appearance of a centralized state power in the materials, practices, and techniques through which welfare is delivered—what Timothy Mitchell calls the "state effect" (Mitchell 2002, 2006; see also Chopra 2011b; Ferguson and Gupta 2002).

My second conclusion is linked to the first. Throughout the decade-long struggle

74 In 2010, NREGA was renamed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Since I refer to the formulation of NREGA in this dissertation, which took place in 2004-05, I use the acronym NREGA instead of MGNREGA.

leading up to formulation of the NFSA, human rights discourses have informed the construction of an implementable food security bill. Co-occurring debates conducted first within the judiciary system, then in para-public forums, and finally through the legislative process, established a relation between the interpretation of nutritional needs of a (rather diverse) population and how these needs could be satisfied in the form of implementable policies and programs. This process brought to fruition what Nancy Fraser has termed the “politics of need interpretation,” defined as “the processes by which welfare practices construct . . . needs according to certain specific—and, in principles, contestable—interpretations, even as they lend those interpretations an aura of facticity that discourages contestation” (1989: 146). Here, Fraser considers politics not necessarily as an ideological struggle between different political groups, but rather as norms and assumptions that lend credence to welfare techniques, programs, policies, and laws. In tracing the formulation of an Indian right to food entitlement in this chapter, I explore competing interpretation of needs in the above-mentioned milieus to probe how normative claims have come to be woven into the NFSA.

Third, I take under consideration how corruption and leakages have taken a prominent place in Indian politics (Giri 2011; Gupta 2005; Parry 2000; Shapiro Anjaria 2011). In the debates leading up to the formulation of the NFSA, state and non-state actors pegged their claims about food security, or food sovereignty, within the rhetoric of good governance. In this chapter, I explore how narratives of accountability and transparency have been central to the articulation of the right to food entitlement, positioned as techniques of government to make bureaucratic practices incorruptible. I examine how claims about accountability and transparency have been translated into techniques of government with the purpose of shaping the role, functions, and

expectations of government in satisfying the need for food security for the population.

Drawing on the work of Nikolas Rose (1999, 57), I ask: which need(s) was the right to food entitlement designed to satisfy?⁷⁵ The right to food entitlement is generally, and perhaps too simplistically, conceptualized as freedom from hunger. I argue that the right to food entitlement has served competing meanings, objectives, and rationales, some of which have been intended and others unintended. In the next section, I closely examine the tactics and narratives employed and voiced by activists, economists, politicians, and human rights lawyers to use and translate normative claims of governance about food security into a technical and implementable law and program. First, I trace the origin of the right to food on the international scene. I examine how the rights-based approach framed debates about the formulation of the NFSA. The language of good governance provided a vocabulary to establish moral claims about the state's responsibility to alleviate the social problem of hunger. I use this discussion of human rights discourses to delineate the dominant framework of public policy in the first decade of the 21st century. Then, I delve into this dominant framework to explore how it has shaped the history of the NFSA. I trace the formation of the Indian right to food entitlement in three milieus: judiciary activism, para-public forums, and the legislative process. I show how competing claims about the nature and the scope of an Indian right to food entitlement were debated over a decade to result in implementable legislation deployed with the aim of establishing principles of good governance. I conclude the chapter by examining how the language of good governance, and notably the governing rationale for state accountability and transparency, has been so closely aligned with the

75 Building on Rose, who has argued that “[a]nalytics of government are diagnostic,” or in other words, an exercise of symptomology deployed in such a way as to establish a relation of “singularity of particular strategies within a field of relations of truth, power, and subjectivity” (1999, 57), one could legitimately ponder the strategic rationales behind the push for a right to food.

issue of food insecurity that it became a primary catalyst in the design of instruments to deploy the NFSA and more specifically modernize the TPDS.

3.2 Human Rights Discourses and Good Governance

In India, a vernacular of “human rights” has emerged in the context of economic [neo]liberalization (Robinson 2009). “This is not a historical coincidence,” Shannon Speed argues, “[y]et the relationship of human rights and neoliberalism is unclear, at best” (2005, 31). For Speed, neoliberalism is a political project, much like David Harvey’s “construction of consent,” through which the “role of the government was to create a good business climate rather than look to the needs and well-being of the population at large” (Harvey 2005, 48). As a rationality of government, neoliberalism reorganizes the techniques of government and function of the state and (civil) society along the lines of privatization, consumerism, individual freedom, free trade, and greater expectations for non-state organizations to undertake some of the welfare functions of the government. In the neoliberal context, some authors have argued that human rights either fill the void left by the retrenchments of the welfare state (Donnelly 2013) or provide a line of defence against the alignment of government and capitalist interests in order to promote ideals of equity and social justice (Ignatieff 2003). Human rights, as forms of protestation or protection against neoliberal processes, are confined to the modalities of the rule of law and mechanisms of good governance. They are articulated to shape states into institutions void of undemocratic, inefficient, and unlawful practices. These mechanisms turn political issues into solvable problems with implementable solutions according to neoliberal precepts (Bornstein and Sharma 2016; Merry 2006), thus running the risk of reproducing the logics of power against which human rights advocates struggle (Brown 1995; Speed 2005). This is precisely why the

notion of human rights has been treated as panacea for addressing structural issues such as chronic hunger and undernourishment in the neoliberal age: it points to implementable solutions informed by narratives of good governance that reproduce the rule of law, discursively constructing and making the state according to democratic norms of accountability and transparency, while foreclosing any debates on structures of economic and political domination and exclusion that populate bureaucratic practices and processes (see Gupta 2012).

In this section, I chart the history of the right to adequate food, and at the same time, I explore how the language of good governance is intricately intertwined with human rights discourses. I emphasize that while the right to food entitlement has been discursively constructed against the sentiment that government institutions must protect the population from chronic hunger, it has been designed according to principles of accountability and transparency to address welfare failures of the state rather than structural inequalities (see Merry 2006, 40).

In 1974, after a global food crisis hit populations in the early 1970s, the World Food Conference set up goals to eradicate hunger and malnutrition, while framing the proposed solutions to chronic hunger and famines in Malthusian terms. Increasing food production and stabilizing food supplies were the two main measures proposed to end chronic hunger by the mid-1980s, an objective that was never met. Over the ensuing two decades, the rhetoric of food security gradually shifted from questions of food availability to include concerns about household and individual livelihoods. The concept of food security incrementally incorporated an emphasis on poverty (as opposed to food availability) as the driving explanation for chronic hunger. The works of Amartya Sen (2013) on food entitlement and the publication of Drèze and Sen's *Hunger and Public Action* (2013) critically contributed to this reconceptualization of food security (Shaw

2007: 385).⁷⁶

In 1996, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) convened government representatives and other key actors at the World Food Summit (WFS) in Rome, in order to debate the development of a new global plan for eradicating hunger. It is during this summit that a definition of food security was coined:⁷⁷ “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, [social]⁷⁸ and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 1996). Widely accepted by most scholars, this definition highlights the responsibilities of national governments and institutions to not only take necessary measures to ensure that available food be adequately distributed to the population, but to also address the integral dimension of cultural nutritional preferences in the distribution of food (Pinstrup-Anderson 2009: 5). The WFS definition is based on four pillars that schematically frame the practice of food security at the national level:

76 John D. Shaw delineates five successive phases or turning points in the evolution of food security after the World Food Conference of 1974: (1) the arrangement of the global food security system; (2) Sen’s approach to food entitlement as a critique of food availability and the structural adjustments programs (SAPs); (3) the publication of UNICEF’s *Adjustment with a Human Face* (2007), which further criticizes the impacts of SAPs in Africa; (4) the publication of *Hunger and Public Action* (Sen and Drèze 2013); and (5) a series of international conferences on the deterministic relationship between poverty and chronic hunger (Shaw 2007, 385).

77 In 1993, Marisol Smith, Judy Pointing, and Simon Maxwell compiled as many as 194 different definitions of food security, drawn from academic publications, reports from national and international organizations, and unpublished manuscripts. They note that earlier conceptions of food security first emerged in the second half of the 1970s, but the bulk of definitions were developed in the 1980s, first in relation to food production and then in relation to other manifestations of power, such as relations of class or gender. All definitions are based on the notion that food insecurity is occasioned by failures of economic mechanisms to either produce or distribute sufficient food items to those in need, thus conveying a form of economic determinism (Smith, Pointing, and Maxwell 1993).

78 The adjective “social” was added to the definition in 2002 (FAO 2002; Simon 2012, 4).

availability,⁷⁹ access,⁸⁰ utilization,⁸¹ and stability.⁸²

One of the key objectives of the 1996 WFS⁸³ was to clarify what the right to food entails. Historically, the right to food had already been protected as part of the right to an adequate standard of living established in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly 1948) and the fundamental right to be free from hunger in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (UN General Assembly 1966). However, members of the WFS urged the international community to come up with provisions that would make the right to food, and the WFS's commitment more generally, legally implementable. The Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR), a United Nations (UN) body of experts charged with overseeing the implementation of the ICESCR, was tasked with drafting a legal interpretation of the right to adequate food (UN General Assembly 1966, sec. 11). Published in May 1999 in a document entitled *General Comment 12* (UN CESCR 1999), the committee defines the right to food in terms of access and distribution: "The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or

79 "Food Security exists when all people . . . have . . . access to *sufficient* food . . ." (emphasis added). This refers to the production of sufficient and adequate food for a given population. The WFS estimates that to feed the world, the total agricultural output will have to increase by 70% before 2050 (Simon 2012, 5).

80 "Food Security exists when all people . . . *have physical, social, and economic access to . . . food*" (emphasis added). Food commodities need to be made accessible to consumers who would otherwise not have access to food, but also to those who are either economically excluded from entitlements or prevented from accessing them due to their religious beliefs, gender identity, health issues, or other types of vulnerabilities (Simon 2012, 6–7).

81 "Food Security exists when all people . . . have . . . access to . . . *safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences*" (emphasis added). Clean water, sanitation, and access to health care facilities are crucial for ensuring the proper utilization, processing, preparation, consumption, conservation, and elimination of food items (Simon 2012, 7).

82 "Food Security exists when all people, *at all times*, have . . . access to . . . food" (emphasis added). Food security implies a continuous supply of food to prevent episodic catastrophes (Simon 2012, 8).

83 Objective 7.4 of the WFS seeks "to better define the rights related to food in Article 11 of the Covenant [on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights]" (FAO 1996).

in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement” (UN CESCR 1999, sec. 6). The right to adequate food shall therefore not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense that equates it to a minimum package of calories. Rather, the right to adequate food is indivisibly linked to understandings of human dignity and ideas of social justice, oriented towards the total eradication of poverty (UN CESCR 1999, sec. 6). “Fundamentally,” the committee notes, “the roots of the problem of hunger and malnutrition are not lack of food but lack of *access to* available food, *inter alia* [among other things] because of poverty, by large segment of the world’s population” (UN CESCR 1999, sec. 5; italics and underlining in original document).

Emphasizing the duty of governments to enable access to available food, the authors of *General Comment 12* insist on the responsibility of states to adopt social and economic policies to ensure that: (a) dietary needs are satisfied at all ages (1999, sec. 9); (b) available food is culturally appropriate, with respect to occupation (or class), gender, age or location (1999, secs. 9–11); (c) available food is free from toxins (1999, sec. 10); and (d) special attention is paid to economically vulnerable populations or those living in disaster-prone areas (1999, secs. 12–13).⁸⁴ Thus conceptualized, the right to adequate food consolidates a governmental approach to food security, “in all its conceptual lucidity, simplicity, and universalism . . . as a normative ordering principle around which social practices are increasingly organized and invested with meanings” (Goodale 2006b, 26). In other words, the right to adequate food discursively constructs the state as an entity embodying normative principles of good governance to respect, protect, and fulfil

⁸⁴ Based on the recommendations of the *General Comment 12*, in 2005, the FAO adopted the *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*, which in the words of the then recently appointed director-general of the FAO, Senegalese Jacques Diouf, provides “practical guidance to States in the implementation of the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security, in order to achieve the goals of the World Food Summit Plan of Action” (2005).

individuals' right to adequate nourishment. These normative principles, here, configure the government's responsibility to act with respect to dietary norms and approaches to food security within the rule of law, under which the well-being of individuals should be promoted.

Compared to the rather instrumentalist view of human rights according to which inalienable rights are provided to empowered subjects, a discursive approach sheds light on the normative elements of human rights as a category of analysis. It gives us the tools to explore how regimes of knowledge are normatively constituted in practices, policies, and governmental interventions (see Chapter Two). As Mark Goodale stipulates:

This does not mean that human rights is simply studied or analyzed as norms rather, normativity is understood as the means through which the idea of human rights becomes discursive, the process that render human rights into social knowledge that shape social action. (2011: 8)

As key constitutive elements of the analytics of governmentality, human rights as discursive operations constitute a particular kind of politico-normative project—one that “help[s] people to help themselves” (Ignatieff 2000, 57 in Brown 2004, 454)—one that works to mitigate suffering and social ills, but only within the parameters of social justice protected by the legal institutions and political authorities that deploy them. The right to food, then, constitutes a field of knowledge that renders food insecurity issues intelligible and translatable into particular types of bureaucratic practices, in which, as the FAO puts it, “people hold their governments accountable and are participants in the process of human development, rather than being passive recipients” (FAO 2005, 7; see also Mechlem 2004).⁸⁵ In other words, a discursive approach to the right to food delineates an arena in which issues of food security are discussed and debated. Here, of

⁸⁵ This notion of “passive recipients” is particularly interesting since it suggests that struggles to implement the right to adequate food can, and perhaps even should, be implemented from “below,” from the (civil) society onto the state.

course, the nature of claims may vary. But to be seriously considered in the legislative process, claims must conform to a particular field of knowledge that is congruent with a rights-based approach. As the FAO (2005) stipulates, this field of knowledge is built upon principles of good governance: accountability, transparency, citizen empowerment, and participation in democratic processes. It precludes other solutions to the endemic issue of chronic hunger that challenge the stability of property rights, capitalist food economies, liberal regimes of trade, or class-based access to land, forest, or water.

To understand human rights as discourse is to posit that human rights are constituted in practices: it implies that human rights are not solely conceptual, analytical, universal, or formal—but that they shape, and are shaped by, people’s everyday lives. It stipulates that human rights exist in universal declarations, texts, analyses, court of laws, and bills, but also in the regimes of knowledge through which they operate and act on cultural practices (see Foucault 1991). Since human rights emerge locally within a cultural matrix of conventions, meanings, and rules, “the *discursive* approach to human rights is itself internally diverse,” Goodale states (2007, 8). As such, competing norms and assumptions inform the variegated forms that discursive human rights may take in practice. Fraser refers to these norms and assumptions as “thick needs” (1989, 163), which are positioned at the centre of a series of nested interrogations about possible forms of governmental provisions (see Chapter Two). The interpretation of what comprises thick needs is an object of acute public debate, unraveling in a series of struggles to affirm what should and should not be framed as implementable interventions. This is what Fraser refers as the politics of need interpretation.

For instance, by the mid-2000s, against the state's perennial inertia on issues of chronic

hunger and undernourishment, human rights discourses came to take a prominent position in public debate in India. On the issue of food security, it was widely acknowledged that levels of government should intervene to distribute resources to the poorest segments of the population—what Fraser refers as “thin needs” (Fraser 1989, 163). But questions remained, as to what extent and how the government should intervene. How could needs be articulated and addressed in a thicker form to better address the issue of chronic hunger in India? For instance, could cash replace food distributed through the TPDS? Were there interventions that should be better implemented? Were there new initiatives that should be deployed? Should India prioritize the protection of its most marginalized populations, especially children and young mothers, rather than distributing entitlements to all? Did everybody need to be food secure? Should the government impart rations equally among poor and wealthy households? And if not, how much food should be distributed to different groups? What methodologies could be use to demarcate the wealthy from the poor? Was it the duty of the state to meet more than the population’s basic nutritional needs? Were wheat and rice nutritious enough? Is it the duty of the state to provide more than the basic nutritional needs? What does nutritional food entail? Was the current infrastructure of rationing too corrupt to adequately ensure food security? What kinds of mechanisms could be deployed to ensure that governmental interventions conformed to principles of good governance? These questions were just some of those raised in the many debates that animated the formulation of the NFSA.

In the following section, I trace the history of these debates. Using the politics of need interpretation as an analytical grid, I undertake the task of probing the discursive politics of the right to food entitlement in the spheres of judiciary activism, para-public forums, and legislation

processes. I emphasize how the language of good governance is central to the right to food entitlement and, thus, attempt to chart its trajectory in the formulation of the NFSA.

3.2.1 Judiciary Activism: Leveraging the Supreme Court

In 2001, shortly after Drèze and Gonsalves' visit to Rajasthan, in light of the waves of starvation-related deaths affecting the country, the PUCL submitted a writ petition to the Supreme Court of India (PUCL 2001). The PUCL argued that starvation-related deaths that had occurred in six different states⁸⁶ could have been avoided, if only the Government of India and the FCI had released some of the 50 to 60 million tons of food grains stored in their *godowns*. Its petition raised three questions:

- Starvation deaths have become a national phenomenon while there is a surplus stock of food grains in government godowns. Does the right to life mean that people who are starving and who are too poor to buy food grains free of cost by the State from the surplus stock lying with the State, particularly when it is lying unused and rotting?
- Does not the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution of India include the right to food?
- Does not the right to food, which has been upheld by the apex Court, imply that the State has a duty to provide food, especially in situations of drought, to people who are drought affected and are not in a position to purchase food?⁸⁷

Article 21 of the Constitution of India ensures that “no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law” (see Kent 2002). The PUCL petitioners, led by Gonsalves and a team of human rights lawyers from his non-governmental organization (NGO), Human Rights and Law Network (HRLN), argued that the constitutional obligations of the Government of India had been neglected (Chhibbar 2001). They sought support from the Supreme Court to compel government authorities to finally abide by their biopolitical

86 The states included Chattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa, and Rajasthan.

87 The petitioner's questions were retrieved from the PUCL Bulletin, November 2001 (<http://bit.ly/2v6Nt6N>) on October 29, 2017.

duties. I show how the writ petition constituted a field of knowledge, from which non-state actors could make normative claims on possible governmental interventions on the issue of food security.

The writ petition was filed as a public interest litigation (PIL). In India, a PIL is a legal proceeding conducted in the public interest of the population, protected by Article 32 of the constitution. Soon after the Emergency, a period in India when democratic rights and duties were suspended from 1975-1977, Justices P. N. Bhagwati, V. R. Krishna Iyer, and others created a path to social justice in the Indian legal system for those who would otherwise be incapable of accessing the courts. By doing so, these justices championed human rights, especially social and economic rights, for the poor and the oppressed (Mate 2015, 175). According to Dan Banik, in India, “the Constitution empowers the judiciary branch to protect the fundamental rights of citizens and to intervene when legislative and executive actions are found to be unconstitutional” (2010, 264). In 1982, Chief Justice Bhagwati abolished the “standing requirements,” a legal term connoting the ability of a party to show the connection between the petitioner and the harm incurred from the law. This opened the door for representative bodies to bring to the courts any cause with compelling evidence on behalf of anyone who, “by reason of poverty, helplessness or disability or socially or economically disadvantaged position, [is] unable to approach the court for relief” (Chief Justice Bhagwati in Birchfield and Corsi 2010, 716). Since the 1980s, hundreds of PILs have been filed at the Supreme Court (Banik 2010), to the extent that an entire NGO sector in India has been founded on the sole exercise of PIL. It is this constitutional provision that enabled the PUCL to file its writ petition in the name of people starving to death and allowed HRLN to litigate what would become the right-to-food case.

As Hertel (2016) writes, claims for the right to adequate food were made against the domestic rule of law. While India has been a signatory of a number of international documents pertaining to the right to food, including the UDHR and ICESCR, the entire right-to-food case rests on domestic legislation, “as a *national* fundamental right, founded on unique principles of Indian constitutional law” (Birchfield and Corsi 2010, 703; italics in original). In fact, in India, the Supreme Court seldom relies on international law, but it must “as far as possible give effect to the principles contained in those international instruments” (Anand 1999), especially when there is some degree of inconsistency between international and domestic law or when there is a certain gap or void in domestic law (see Rana 2009 in Birchfield and Corsi 2010, 704).⁸⁸ In the context of the right-to-food case, judiciary activism consisted of building a domestic legal framework in order to leverage the power of the law onto the legislative and executive branches for the promotion and protection of human rights—“as a court of good governance over the rest of government” (Banik 2010; Robinson 2009, 3). As Nick Robinson clarifies, “the Supreme Court has expanded its role . . . in an attempt to combat the perceived governance shortcomings of India's representative institutions” (2009, 3–4). The Supreme Court has become an arena in which normative claims of accountability about what these shortcomings are and how to address them are formulated. The work of translation from the Constitution of India to interim orders—judgements passed by the court that are applicable for the duration of a case—has come to be an

88 In the case Apparel Export Promotion Council vs A. K. Chopra, Supreme Court Justice V. N. Khare declares that:

This Court has in numerous cases emphasised that while discussing constitutional requirements, court and counsel must never forget the core principle embodied in the International Conventions and Instruments and as far as possible give effect to the principles contained in those international instruments. The Courts are under an obligation to give due regard to International Conventions and Norms for construing domestic laws more so when there is no inconsistency between them and there is a void in domestic law. (Anand 1999)

operative element in the formulation of these claims.⁸⁹ This is especially patent in the right-to-food case, where the Supreme Court directly intervened in other domains of the state. In 2001 alone, the Supreme Court issued five interim orders to compel levels of government to take immediate action to deliver relief to people suffering from undernourishment due to repeated droughts.

Perhaps no interim order had a broader scope than the one issued on November 28, 2001. In July, August, and September 2001, the court urged levels of government to quickly implement and properly deploy already-existing food welfare schemes, including the TPDS.⁹⁰ Since governments were slow to comply, on November 28, 2001, the Supreme Court issued another interim order that marked the emergence of the RTFC. The court engaged in “something strikingly close to lawmaking” (Birchfield and Corsi 2010, 700) by identifying nine nutrition-related programs and outlining, in detail and with deadlines, the required courses of action for various levels of government. These interim orders stretched the original object of contention in the case, which was food relief for alleviating starvation-related death, to include welfare benefit provisions in already-existing programs. The PIL redirected the Supreme Court’s attention from the delivery of food relief to a normative understanding of good governance on the terrain of chronic hunger. It opened up a space of negotiation between the petitioners and the state, in which the Supreme Court Justices, in the name of the Constitution of India, played a critical role in transforming normative state obligations related to food security into concrete and implementable interventions that ought to be taken. It compelled the government to act on

89 Since the Emergency in 1975, to act as a court of good governance, the Supreme Court has had to be responsive and capable of projecting the voice of marginalized groups in the public arena (Gloppen 2005).

90 In addition to the TPDS, these welfare schemes also included the *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* (AAY), the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), the National Old Age Pension Scheme, the *Annapurna* Scheme (food security for seniors), the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and the National Family Benefit Scheme.

already-existing welfare programs: the interim order of November 2001 granted, among others, legal rights to children to receive a nutritious meal in school via the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS); it granted legal provisions to ration card holders to receive their rations from the TPDS; it compelled state governments to pay minimum wage on public work; and it forced state governments to fund *anganwadi* (*crèches* or kindergartens) across India and to provide meals for every child between 0 and six years old via the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). These programs, according to the interim order, had been either partly or poorly implemented and were dysfunctional.

The RTFC saw, in these legal entitlements, a powerful lever to force governments to respect, protect, and fulfill the population's right to adequate food. As an extended network of organizations across the country, the RTFC sought to reach people of all castes and classes, students, workers, politicians, and administrators, including *gram panchayat* (local institutions ruling over villages),⁹¹ to evaluate the deployment of welfare schemes under the court's interim orders via informal discussions or formal surveys. As the RTFC noted: "Without public pressure, the orders typically remain on paper. The orders are just a helpful 'stick' to keep the government on its toes. But hands are needed to lift the stick and use it" (2008, 50). This statement is strikingly similar to the FAO's characterization of the right to adequate food, which stipulates that rights-bearing individuals should be active rather than "passive recipients" in holding their government accountable to issues of food insecurity (FAO 2005, 7).

91 The RTFC leaders notes that *gram panchayat* should not be classist or casteist instruments of oppression:

it is important to ensure that they are fair and 'inclusive.' If, say, a Gram Panchayat is dominated by upper-caste landlords, it is unlikely to do much for the poorer households. Similarly, if Dalits are excluded from the local Mahila Mandal [organizations for women's empowerment], something must be done about it before the Mandal can be actively involved in the implementation of midday meals. (RTFC 2008, 53)

In May 2002, the Supreme Court took an additional step to address poor compliance with its interim orders by instituting a commission for the right-to-food case. The court entrusted two commissioners with the responsibility of verifying that state authorities were respecting the interim orders, mandating them to investigate violations and demand restitution. Narendra C. Saxena⁹² and S. R. Shankaran⁹³ were first appointed, but when Shankaran retired two years after his appointment, Harsh Mander⁹⁴ was authorized to assist Saxena as special commissioner. The commissioners have been prominent figures in the movement for a right to food, due to their particular positions as representatives of the judiciary branch. Part of their mandate was to develop a network of consultants, or state advisors, across the country to help investigate and monitor the extent to which the interim orders were being implemented. Over subsequent years, the commissioners drafted nine reports to the Supreme Court, each of which was more comprehensive than the last, to comment on levels of accountability and transparency in efforts to secure a nutritious diet for the population as a whole.

Constraints to judiciary activism exist, however. The power of the judiciary branch to compel state governments to provide food security benefits to the population was, at best, limited. In every report, the commissioners note various degrees of non-compliance and reticence from some state authorities to fully cooperate with the Supreme Court's orders.⁹⁵ With close to no

92 Dr. N. C. Saxena is a former Indian civil servant in the Planning Commission, Government of India.

93 Dr. S. R. Shankaran is a former secretary in the Rural Development Department, Government of India.

94 Harsh Mander is also a former civil servant, who abandoned his work to join social movements on various causes, including the right to information, tribal and Dalit rights, bonded labour, and homelessness, and he has become one of the public faces of the RTFC.

95 In the fifth and perhaps most virulent report, Saxena and Mander preface their conclusions by critiquing the state government's first line of defence, the lack of public funding, as spurious. In fact, Saxena and Mander write:

Direct the states to earmark fully to meet the cost of the nine food based and welfare schemes, and then only divert the rest for salaries and other expenditure. This is in light of recent reports of diversion of funds and discussions with non-complying states whom often try to take shelter behind the excuse that they have no

resources and little authority over elected representatives, the commissioners had minimal clout to ensure that the right to food was realized (Hassan 2011). What is more, very few sanctions, if any, were levied against officials or individuals that did not comply with the orders (Banik 2010, 277). The interim orders may have been potent instruments, as the RTFC (2008) suggests, but these tools were hard to leverage for a large section of the population, either due to gaps in the dissemination of information or structural barriers to people having their grievances heard. As legal scholar Unpendra Baxi states, courts are “never an instrument of total social revolution: they are at best . . . instruments of piecemeal social engineering . . . never a substitute for direct political action” (2000, 164 in Banik 2010, 277).

It should be noted that judicial activism efforts were not totally unproductive either. Over the course of the right-to-food case, close to 500 affidavits were presented to the Supreme Court, which resulted in the issuance of 49 interim orders (RTFC 2008, 7). In the four years that followed, 20 more interim orders were added to the lot.⁹⁶ These interim orders delineated the arena in which debates about the thick needs of the population were associated with implementable solutions, if only government authorities abode by principles of good governance. The RTFC used these interim orders to bring legitimacy to the right-to-food movement and its claims, especially those claims that pointed to the inertia of central and state governments in

funds. This is factually not correct as they [state governments] have received a total of Rs 1,66,749 crore [approximately \$3.6 billion USD] as central transfers from the GoI [Government of India] according to recent estimates. (2004, 99)

Rather than low public funding, Saxena and Shankran point to the debilitating effects of corruption and gaps in information dissemination as prominent obstacles to compliance with the interim orders (Supreme Court Commission 2003, 2002). In the sixth report made to the Supreme Court, Saxena also condemns the normalization of apathy through practices of patronage and corruption that are, at once, widely acknowledged yet ignored (2005, 5).

96 This information was retrieved from the RTFC’s website available at <http://bit.ly/2quGxvm>, last consulted on March 14, 2017.

delivering on welfare obligations that were already in place. Programs to alleviate food insecurity already existed when these orders were promulgated, and the primary purpose of these orders was to make the state accountable and transparent in its delivery of welfare services, which would, it was thought, obliquely help to alleviate chronic hunger in the country.

The commission and the right-to-food case contributed to produce a rhetoric of good governance in terms of food-based welfare delivery. They both consolidated a narrative and an approach to the right to food in the country and, to various degrees, have helped to inform other means of direct political action. Members of the RTFC have also written several accounts about the failures of the state to address chronic hunger, based on the narrative of state accountability and transparency found in the interim orders issued by the Supreme Court (Drèze 2004; Khera 2013; RTFC 2008). In the next sections, I examine how the Indian right to food entitlement emerged from a politics of need interpretation.

3.2.2 Towards a Legislative Path: the National Advisory Council

In what follows, I explore how the RTFC established strong alliances with other rights-based campaigns, such as the right-to-information and the right-to-work campaigns, and here I show that without the existence of a para-public institution such as the National Advisory Council (hereafter the NAC I), these rights-based campaigns would perhaps not have been as successful as they were in bringing human rights into law. In this section, I trace how the NAC I constituted a space of debate for the politics of need interpretation.

In the first few years of the right-to-food case, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led a coalition inclined to pursue processes of economic liberalization, which had been well under way since the late 1980s. When elections were declared in January 2004, bidding on impressive rates

of economic growth and the rising popularity of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee of the BJP, a coalition led by the BJP, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), used the slogan “India Shining” (*Bharat Uday*) to conjure up symbols of consumerism that were only possible because of economic growth. “India Shining” was coined as a marketing strategy—a rebranding of India on the global scene. It became the catchphrase of the outgoing government to represent the promise of a shiny future (Jha 2004).

Of course, life stories about death by starvation or chronic hunger in the previous drought years, popularized by the right-to-food case and RTFC activism, did not resonate well with the BJP election campaign. Shortly after the beginning of the 2004 elections, Sonia Gandhi, widow of late Rajiv Gandhi and president of the Congress,⁹⁷ asked in a *basti* (informal settlement) of North Delhi, “Where is India Shining?” (The Hindu 2004). Polarized along a left-right axis, the BJP bid on the fruits reaped from more than a decade of economic liberalization, while the Congress argued for the merits of economic inclusion, social justice, and anti-poverty measures. The Congress formed a coalition with left-leaning political parties and created a political alliance, called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), chaired by Sonia Gandhi. The UPA secured the support of low-caste and poor voters, who have historically constituted a significant portion of the electoral base of the Congress.

In May 2004, at the culmination of a tight race, Vajpayee conceded victory to the UPA. However, the mandate of the coalition remained ambiguous. In describing its mandate, Yogendra Yadav, a political commentator, perhaps puts it best: “[UPA’s mandate] was not and could not be a mandate against economic reforms, but there was an element of protest against exclusion from

97 Due to Gandhi’s Italian origins, a faction of the Congress seceded and formed the Nationalist Congress Party. The rest of the Congress is known as the Indian National Congress (Chatterjee 1997).

benefits and opportunities in the realm of the economy” (2004, 5398).

Difficult to stabilize, the UPA coalition attempted to reconcile diverse positions on the orientations of economic policy and reservations about the Italian origins of Sonia Gandhi (Sridharan 2004, 5425).⁹⁸ Days after the elections, to avoid further turmoil, Gandhi declined the position of prime minister and recommended that Manmohan Singh, former finance minister and key architect of the economic liberalization turn of 1991, take the role. In turn, a few weeks later, Singh formed the NAC I, a para-public institution comprised of a range of experts in various social and economic domains, to advise the prime minister. Still president of the Congress and chairperson of the UPA, Gandhi was then appointed as chairperson of the NAC I.

At its inception, the UPA drafted its Common Minimum Programme, outlining the political agenda of the government. In itself, the programme was meant as a conciliatory document, a kind of middle ground, upon which the cohesion of the UPA’s fifteen member parties, including the Congress, was established. In addition to a pledge of accountability, transparency, and responsibility, the programme lists a series of principles and norms that echo concerns for social justice, good governance, and the maintenance of economic growth and liberalization (Government of UPA 2004, 2005).⁹⁹ As an advisory body, the NAC I provided a space for deliberation among appointed experts to realize the objectives of this programme, from

98 Sonia Gandhi is the widow of Rajiv Gandhi, son of Indira Gandhi and grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru. When Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984, Rajiv Gandhi succeeded his mother, serving until 1989. He remained president of the Congress until 1991, when he was assassinated during elections. Sonia Gandhi became president of the Congress from 1998 until 2017. Her son Rahul Gandhi has since replaced his mother as president.

99 The principles of governance comprise: the maintenance of social harmony under the rule of law; an economic growth at a rate of 7-8%; the protection of welfare and well-being of farmers, farm labours, and workers; the empowerment of women; the protection of equality of opportunities for members of all castes; and the promotion of a productive and creative economic environment. The domains of governance are fairly large and comprehend as many sectors as possible. Among them are employment and the enactment of a National Employment Guarantee Act, agriculture, education and health, women and children, food and nutrition security, good governance at local levels (*Panchayati Raj*), welfare of minorities, infrastructure, water resources, and inter-relations of governance between the centre and state authorities.

which policy formulation was given credence, accountability, credibility, and authority (Chopra 2011a, 160–61). The importance of Gandhi's presence as the head of the NAC I was not negligible (Drèze, personal interview, Ranchi, May 2014; Ramesh, personal interview, New Delhi, August 2015). "The NAC was powerful because Mrs. Gandhi was its Chairperson," Jairam Ramesh, minister of rural development between 2011 and 2014, said in a personal interview. He stated:

The National Advisory Council was conceived of in 2004 as an institution to give a role to Sonia Gandhi. She was not going to be the prime minister, she was not going to be the president, she was not going to be a minister, but you needed her involvement in policy-making. In reality, [the NAC I] was an instrument created to give her some meaningful role in policy formulation. So the thinking was: 'let us get people from outside the government because, from within the government, you will be getting ideas through ministries and different governmental institutions. So let's create NAC,' which would give a position to Sonia Gandhi, and it would institutionalize her position. And the NAC took upon itself the responsibility for focusing on those aspects of the program that were pro-poor. So this is the background to the NAC. (Ramesh, personal interview, New Delhi, August 2015)

The NAC I, in other words, provided an institutional arena in which debates over people's need and how to satisfy them took place. Armed with her "immense political power both within the Congress and the UPA" (Chopra 2011a, 161), Gandhi was able to give the NAC I a crucial role in translating normative claims rooted in human rights discourses into technical policies, programs, and legal protections for the poor. In what follows, I examine the trajectory within the NAC I of the Right to Information Act (RTI) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), enacted during the first mandate of the UPA. Both pieces of legislation paved the way to the formulation of India's right-to-food legislation. RTI and NREGA were the first pieces of legislation that emphasized the recasting of bureaucratic practices according to principles of good governance (Mathur 2012; Sharma 2013). In exploring their history, I highlight how normative

claims about accountability and transparency in the delivery of welfare were rooted in social movements but intricately embedded in a politics of need interpretation by state and non-state actors. I shed light on how actors popularized human rights discourses in India, and how institutions such as the NAC I provided a space for policy-making.

The Right to Information. In 1987, the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS)¹⁰⁰ was founded in a hut in rural Rajasthan by Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, and Shekhar Singh. Initially, MKSS fought for a minimum wage for peasants and rural workers in Rajasthan. Quickly, however, the activists realized that rampant patronage and corruption thwarted welfare programs and the payment of a minimum wage, guaranteed in Rajasthan under the Minimum Wage Act. This became apparent in the implementation of governmental relief work schemes during droughts, in which peasants were registered to work but unable to find employment. MKSS activists began to ask questions: “How do the poor know what happened to the minimum wage that would have made them survive one more day? By demanding information contained in the official documents!” (Mishra 2003, 1). MKSS demanded access to governmental muster rolls—the registry in which the names of work relief program participants were kept. State authorities refused, despite two hunger strikes by members of MKSS (Baviskar 2007; Das 2013; Mishra 2003; Aruna Roy and Dey n.d.).¹⁰¹

In the first half of the 1990s, as the social movement against corruption gained momentum across the country, MKSS sought the opening of consultative spaces in which citizens

100 *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* means “Workers and Farmer Power Union.”

101 It should be noted that social movements in the 1980s and 1990s had to rely on leaked information from the state. Without being able to access sound and reliable information, social movements struggled against the imposition of development projects and were thus framed as “not ‘constructive’ and that they did not want India to develop” (Baviskar 2007, 6).

could voice their concerns about practices of corruption. These spaces took the form of village-based public hearings, called *jan sunwai* (Aruna Roy and Dey n.d.), in which MKSS explored development spending by local political leaders (*gram panchayats*). The *jan sunwai* were forums conducted in a horizontal deliberative mode, in which people could express themselves in front of a panel of independent observers that was convened to listen to their grievances. The *jan sunwai* embodied processes similar to courts of law locally, providing a place for people who were otherwise excluded from the judiciary system to speak fearlessly against the political elite. Speaking in front of the gathering not only empowered villagers and provided democratic legitimacy to the *jan sunwai*, but it also illuminated the gap between official records and actual practices of government (Baviskar 2007, 6–7), as much as it highlighted development projects failures and electoral scams (Aruna Roy and Dey n.d.).¹⁰² Evidently, it also shed light on the critical relation between the RTI and entitlements to welfare programs, including the TPDS (Das 2013, 39). Through the *jan sunwai*, MKSS was able to establish a relation between Article 21 of the Constitution of India, the right to life, and the RTI—a strategy that was replicated in the right-to-food case. MKSS compiled, challenged, and cross-checked reports of patronage and evidence of corruption (Baviskar 2007). In this relation, the RTI functions as a democratic tool that enables people, through organizations like MKSS, to scrutinize governmental practices in order to ensure access to welfare programs that are, in times of drought for instance, crucially important for their survival (Das 2013, 39; Sharma 2013).

In 1996, the National Campaign for People’s Right to Information (NCPRI) was launched. The campaign still exists today. Its stated objectives are “transparency in public life,

102 “Development scams” describes the discrepancies between development expenditures and on-the-ground realities. As for “electoral scams,” it relates to how *panchayat* leaders, *sarpanches*, are, in a nutshell, administrators of vote banks “who can organise and deliver votes” during elections (Aruna Roy and Dey n.d., 8).

empowerment of people, deepening democracy, and fighting corruption and malgovernance” (Baviskar 2007, 3). Based in Delhi, the main mandate of the NCPRI is to keep state authorities in check. Between 1996 and 2005, the organization set up *dharna* (marches), *jan sunwai* (popular tribunals), and *sammelan* (conventions) asking for greater accountability at various levels of government, and it sought to institutionalize a people’s audit of state machinery (Aruna Roy and Dey n.d.). Over this period of time, nine states (out of 28) enacted a form of the RTI (Baviskar 2007, 3).

The social movement for the RTI was so effective that in 2004, as India headed towards general elections, Gandhi contacted members of the NCPRI to develop a short statement about the RTI to include in the electoral program of the Congress. At that time, no one expected the Congress to win, but the opportunity was too good to let go. According to Amita Baviskar, “[t]he NCPRI did not expect much to come out of this: election Manifestos are notorious for being quickly forgotten after coming to power, and in any case, no one expected the Congress to win” (2007, 19). But once the elections were over, the NCPRI’s statement made its way into the Common Minimum Programme and into the working groups of the NAC I. In 2004, members of the NAC I—including a former civil servant and founder of MKSS, Aruna Roy; a development economist and founder of the RTFC, Jean Drèze; and a Supreme Court commissioner for the right to food, Naresh C. Saxena—were important supporters of the democratic principle of access to information (Baviskar 2007, 19). Based on a previous right-to-information bill drafted by MKSS, the NAC I wrote a bill that was quickly sent to the *Lok Sabha*. Within a year, in May 2005, the RTI was passed by the *Lok Sabha*, and in October 2005, it was implemented across India.

The Right to Work. While the NAC I was set up to develop legislation to protect and empower the poor, certain prominent members of the Congress, including Prime Minister Singh, were more inclined towards economic liberalization and limits on budgetary spending for welfare programs. Even though, soon after the 2004 elections, the NAC I benefited from a considerable influence in the *Lok Sabha* and in the Congress, its efficacy remained fragile as it relied on a large coalition and the authority of Gandhi (Baviskar 2007, 19–20). For human rights activists and members of the NAC I, such as Drèze, Roy, and Saxena, there was little time to waste before working on another element of the Congress’s manifesto: the enactment of a national Employment Guarantee Act, which, in the words of Drèze, entered national debates “like a wet dog at a glamorous party” (2011, 6).

The right to equal access to government-sponsored work relief had been an initial demand formulated by MKSS and later by the RTFC and played a central role during the right-to-food case. During the drought in Northern India in 1999-2003, activists who would later participate in the RTFC highlighted the need for employment relief programmes in times of natural calamity (Drèze 2011, 6). In the right-to-food case, two early interim orders were issued on employment guarantee schemes. The first, dated from May 2002, urges each level of government to take responsibility and adequately fund work relief across the country. The second, issued a year later, condemns the poor coverage of existing food-for-work schemes and suggests that allocations of both food grains and cash should be at least doubled. These two Supreme Court orders were used by members of the RTFC to draft a national rural employment guarantee bill (Drèze 2011, 7). Called the “citizen draft,” this bill was rather path breaking: it guaranteed work in every rural district, within a radius of 5 kilometres of every household, to

both men and women, who were entitled to work 15 days after request at a minimum statutory wage. The citizen's draft includes provisions for state transparency and accountability, which are to be achieved through social audits, monitoring, and grievances mechanisms. Funded by the Government of India and state authorities, the right to work was designed to be decentralized in its implementation in *gram panchayats* and local rural districts. As early as August 2004, two months after the formation of the NAC I, Gandhi forwarded an almost identical copy of the citizen's draft to the prime minister, with an additional clause that limited the right to work to 100 days per year and to only one adult per household, which corresponded to the engagements of the Common Minimum Programme.

After recommendations were provided by the NAC I through the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) changed some minor provisions and tabled a draft right-to-work bill in December 2004 (Chopra 2011b, 96–97; Drèze 2011, 8). Following the conventional legislative process, the MoRD's bill was then referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development, where several safeguards were watered down, including commitments for guaranteed work and other provisions for transparency, accountability, and universality. According to Deepta Chopra, “[i]t was from this point onwards that the [diluted] bill entered into a phase of intense contentions” (2011b, 98). It did so because human rights activists formed an organization called People's Action for Employment Guarantee (PAEG), which much like MKSS, campaigned for the enactment of a right to work. For Chopra (2011b), members of the PAEG¹⁰³ have redrawn the blurred boundary between the state and society and actively

103 Chopra writes that the social movement that supported the enactment of a more substantial right-to-work bill was the PAEG, a “loose conglomerate of various individuals and organizations . . . to lobby for the passing of an improved act” (2011b, 98). The contours of this loose conglomerate overlapped with the RTFC, with some actors playing decisive roles in both networks.

moulded the Indian right to work (see Gupta 1995). The PAEG lobbied the Standing Committee in an effort to amend the bill. To sensitize the population and garner public support, the PAEG organized protests and marches, including the *Rozgar Adhikar Yatra* (Journey for Employment Rights), which consisted of 50 days of protest across 10 states. At the end of the *Yatra*, parliamentarians and the media were convened in a public forum, much like MKSS's *jan sunwai*, in which grievances could be voiced and heard. Additionally, members of the PAEG also lobbied parliamentarians, the Planning Commission, and the MoRD through informal networks, while the NAC I continued to put pressure on the Prime Minister's Office.

The PAEG was in the end largely successful. Following recommendations from the Standing Committee, the MoRD re-drafted a right-to-work bill that including most of the civil society members' demands. In July and August 2005, notable concessions were made by the Government of India to pass the NREGA, which contains provisions that were initially present in the citizen's draft (Drèze 2011, 7–8). A year after the initial intervention of the NAC I, right-to-work legislation was passed at the *Lok Sabha* in August 2005 (Chopra 2011a, 2011b; Drèze 2011).

Interestingly, if the burden of legitimacy and transparency usually lies with the government, it is through the NAC I that these obligations were realized during the first term of the UPA, even though the advisory body had no “legal mandate or legitimacy” to construct policy (Chopra 2011b, 97). Substantiated by its political weight, its wide support and interrelationship with civil society and left-leaning political parties, and its adamant pursuit of good governance objectives through the realization of human rights as ideals of social justice, the NAC I formed a crucial political platform that was significant for what was characterized as “progressive

legislation” (Chopra 2011a; Khera 2013, 12). The NAC I provided a space to develop a rights-based approach to the interpretation of need and the integration of good governance principles in bureaucratic practices. When the 2009 elections loomed on the horizon, the Congress was quick to put together another manifesto that included a reminder of the successes of the RTI and NREGA: an electoral promise to enact the right to food as an additional progressive measure (Congress 2009). On the front page of its manifesto, both Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi appear as a symbolic pledge of continuity from the first to the second UPA term.¹⁰⁴

3.2.3 On to the National Food Security Act

In 2002, the RTFC emerged on India’s political stage organically, months after the first hearings of the right-to-food case at the Supreme Court. Following the publication of the Supreme Court’s November 2001 interim order, India’s central and state governments had until February 28, 2002 to effectively implement already-existing nutrition welfare programs—an ultimatum that was never met.¹⁰⁵ On April 9, 2002, across nine states, in 100 different districts, people took to the streets to voice demands regarding the implementation of the Supreme Court’s orders. Lunches were symbolically distributed to children in order to shame the government for its inability to turn already-existing programs into governmental action (Khera 2006). It is this Action Day that marked the beginnings of the RTFC. In the years that have followed, the RTFC has grown from a few members located in Delhi, brought together in support of the right-to-food case, to a large network across the country. The RTFC comprises a decentralized horizontal network of national organizations and individuals, each bringing to the table a different set of

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting that members sitting at the NAC I, and in umbrella-organizations such as the PAEG and other NGOs such as MKSS, typically have worn more than one hat (Hertel 2016) and easily moved from one group to the next.

¹⁰⁵ Later on, the deadline was extended to 2005 (Khera 2006).

topical and regional concerns in relation to the realization of the right to food in India. A steering group is responsible for formulating the strategic direction of the RTFC. An advisory group, formed out of the steering group, oversees the activities of the RTFC's secretariat. Coordinated by one remunerated worker and a team of volunteers, the secretariat carries out the daily operations of the RTFC. The RTFC is solely funded through donations, with no strings attached, from individuals and organizations of India, in addition to proceeds from the sale of promotional materials. The Supreme Court Commission of the right-to-food case is formally independent from the RTFC, but members of the commission are closely associated with it and take a prominent and indistinguishable role in its activities.

After the World Social Forum (WSF) that took place in Mumbai in January 2004, the RTFC convened members of civil society and other stakeholders to the First National Convention on the Right to Food and Work in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, in June 2004. The convention followed a format similar to the WSF: workshops, panels, discussion groups, and cultural activities were organized to promote reflexive thinking and debates on ideas, experiences, and proposals on issues related to food security. The RTFC provides a rallying point for stakeholders to strategize on the best course of action for the state to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food in India. Rather than formulating focused demands and grievances articulated around a unitary project, the needs identified by the RTFC have always been writ large, including for instance, the decriminalization of seeds and grain markets and a minimum income for farmers. A series of concerns have been considered to be central to the realization of the right to food: the full implementation of the Supreme Court's interim orders; the abolition of gender, caste, class, indigenous, and religious discrimination; the promotion of small-scale farming; the

firm engagement of government in the complete eradication of chronic hunger, especially for children; the condemnation of coercive displacement; the universalization of welfare services; and critical compliance with good governance fundamentals, including measures to ensure accountability and transparency.¹⁰⁶

During the 2009 election, given the support of the Supreme Court and the recent successes of the RTI and NREGA, there was a solid case for optimism. Just like it did for the RTI and the right to work, the Congress included in its manifesto a commitment to enact a right to food. Behind the scenes, there were negotiations between members of the Congress and prominent figures of the RTFC to include in the Congress's manifesto an electoral commitment to free health care (Drèze, personal interview, Ranchi, May 2014; Khera, personal interview, New Delhi, August 2015). Instead, members of the Congress chose to promise a right to food, since it was considered to be easier and cheaper to implement. However, in its manifesto, the nature and scope of the Congress's electoral commitment about the right to food remained fairly vague.

After the elections, the RTFC's optimism quickly deflated. The right to food imagined by the Congress was narrower than that envisaged by the RTFC. With the electoral commitments made by the Congress, the window of opportunity to enact a right to food was wide open (Khera 2009), but the interpretation of the right to food widely differed between the Congress and the RTFC. Partly attributable to its positive image among voters, with respect to "good governance records and welfare measures" (Yadav and Palshikar 2009, 33), the Congress won 61 additional seats, which destabilized and weakened the clout of the leftist parties of the UPA. Soon after the

106 Members of the RTFC were united in their commitment to: (a) the unionization of NREGA workers; (b) the full implementation of the Supreme Court's orders, especially for child nutrition programs; (c) the universalization of the PDS and, thus, elimination of the targeted system; (d) the need to develop a strategy to counter the agrarian crisis; (e) the granting of greater attention to disadvantaged and marginalized groups; (f) accountability, transparency, and good governance; (g) the extension of NREGA in urban areas.

elections, in her presidential address to parliament on June 4, 2009, Shrimati Pratibha Patil framed the right to food in terms of entitlements allocated via the TPDS in unambitious terms:

My Government proposes to enact a new law—the National Food Security Act—that will provide a statutory basis for a framework which assures food security for all. Every family below the poverty line in rural as well as urban areas will be entitled, by law, to 25 kilograms of rice or wheat per month at Rs. 3 per kilogram. This legislation will also be used to bring about broader systemic reform in the public distribution system. (Patil 2009, 24)

The president of India also announced, as part of broader systemic reforms to the TPDS, the creation of a new ration card under the National Food Security Act (NFSA): a bureaucratic instrument—a rationing document—that would become central in the deployment of accountable and transparent measures of entitlement exchange.

Needless to say, the government's commitment to food security was much less ambitious than the goals of the RTFC. Days later, on June 9, 2009, the Department of Food and Public Distribution issued a “concept note” that expanded on the commitment of the president. It limited the scope of the right to food to mere entitlements from the TPDS—rather than entitlements to nine different food-related programs as ordered by the Supreme Court in November 2001—and it focused on the attribution of grains only to an identified population—BPL households—at lower prices than those established under the TPDS between 1997 and 2009.

In terms of food security, the government's promise called for, in a nutshell, the modernization of the TDPS, or the computerization of the entire infrastructure of rationing—which to say the least, fell significantly short of the RTFC's core goals. However, the RTFC was not ready to propose an alternative to the Congress's proposal. Unlike the organizers of the right to information and the right to work, members of the RTFC did not have a consensual draft ready

to submit for debate. “NREGA was successful because we have done a lot of work before it became a party political issue,” Reetika Khera maintained, during a personal interview. This was not the case with the NFSA:

There had been lots of discussions. Before NAC was formed, there was already a [NREGA] draft ready on which there was consensus in the civil society. So the minute the NAC I was formed, this draft was submitted. . . . With the right to food, that had not happened. The Right to Food Campaign didn't start with the belief that someday it would result in an act. Then, suddenly, these political parties said that we are going to enact a right to food. So when that window opened up, we had to get our act together outside government. (Khera, personal interview, New Delhi, August 2015)

Members of the RTFC met in New Delhi in June, July, and September 2009 to formulate the RTFC's essential demands.

In the movement for the right to food, interpretations of people's needs were variegated. The politics of need interpretation pivoted around the role of the government in securing two aspects of food security: food availability and access. Instead of playing out different needs against one another, the RTFC integrated them all in their claims for food security. These thick needs included: the strengthening of sustainable agricultural practices, especially for small-scale farmers; the protection of employment, livelihood, and equitable rights over land, water, and forest, with special attention paid to structural exclusion from access to food; and finally, the delivery of welfare entitlements. A list of 17 essential demands was drafted. Among others, these demands included:

- an entitlement bill that holds the government accountable to food security and the development of mechanisms for monitoring, social audits, compensation, and grievances redressal to promote accountability and transparency;
- the recognition of every interim order issued by the Supreme Court in an entitlement bill;
- the adoption of a “life cycle approach,” in which various food security programs would

address the needs of different population groups, especially children; and

- a universal PDS that distributes entitlements of at least 35 kg of food grains per household (or 7 kg per person) at a rate of ₹ 2/kg of wheat and ₹ 3/kg of rice.

Building on these 17 essential demands, the RTFC drafted its own food security act, which it called the Food Entitlement Act because members of the RTFC believed that the concepts of food security and right to food were much broader than the distribution of mere entitlements through a modernized TPDS (Sinha 2014).

Using these 17 essential demands, the steering committee of the RTFC mandated Drèze, Gonsalves, Mander, and Anuradha Talwar¹⁰⁷ to draft the Food Entitlement Act that comprised the RTFC's most fundamental demands: the decentralization of procurement mechanisms by the FCI; a universal PDS expanded to include cereals, but also pulses, millets, and oil; special provisions for vulnerable groups; pensions; protection of small and marginal farmers; and a moratorium on genetically-modified crops (Sinha 2014, 21). Drèze recalls:

By then, we were trying to push a particular act through, but that's not the kind of work for [which] the campaign was built. The RTFC was well built for decentralized actions, but not to draft an act. Now, the campaign did come up with a kind of consensus draft act through a very long process of consultation, but I have never been convinced . . . I feel that it would have been better to formulate certain clear and strong demands, and then push for these demands. The draft act was circulated to some members of parliament who . . . may have used handouts and petitions and letters of the campaign. I think that was useful . . . but for that, they don't need a 30-page act.

The RTFC's act was trying to take everybody on board and ended up being not very realistic. You know, one act cannot serve every purpose. Because the priority for different people was different, and when you try to accommodate everybody in one [single] act, actually you produce something that is not practical. This is my personal view. (Drèze, personal interview, Ranchi, May 2014)

107 At that time, Talwar was strongly involved in the RTFC. In addition to representing the New Trade Union Initiative in the campaign's steering committee, she also occupied the role of state advisor to the Supreme Court commissioner in West Bengal.

The RTFC's act may have been too consensual for policy-making, but it generated enough enthusiasm among activists to challenge the dominant framework, and to push for needs that were not being seriously considered in political circles. Members of the RTFC worked to grant legitimacy and political status to their list of thick needs. On November 26, 2009, 5,800 people from 58 different organizations and networks gathered in the streets of New Delhi to raise awareness of food security issues and to hear concerns and recommendations from the public on the RTFC's essential demands (Sinha 2014). Days later, a delegation led by Annie Raja from the National Federation of Indian Women, Kavita Srivastava from the PUCL, and Drèze met with UPA Law Minister M. Veerappa Moily to convey the grievances voiced during the rally and share the RTFC's essential demands.

Frictions between the RTFC and the Government of India remained. Within the RTFC (and in the civil society in general), not all activists agreed on the interpretation of needs that must be satisfied in order to secure the nutritional well-being of the population. Yet the RTFC's essential demands served to challenge the government's rather minimalist view of need interpretation. This politics of need interpretation continued within the legislative instances. More than a year after his re-election, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reinstated the NAC (hereafter NAC II) as a forum for both civil society and the government to shape food security legislation. Still acting as chairperson of the UPA and president of the Congress, Gandhi was once again named chairperson of the advisory body. The NAC II became the key institution where the politics of need interpretation played out. Members included, among others, M. S. Swaminathan,¹⁰⁸ Drèze (who resigned shortly thereafter), Roy, Saxena, and Mander, the convenor of the NAC II Working Group on the National Food Security Bill. Unlike the NAC I, the NAC II

¹⁰⁸ M. S. Swaminathan is a geneticist who is widely recognized as the father of the "Green Revolution" in India.

was formed without a clear mandate.¹⁰⁹ Instead of a Common Minimum Programme, the NAC II was given the responsibility of “[giving] attention to the priorities stated in the address of the President of India to Parliament [shortly after the election] on 4 June 2009” (Gupta 2011), which vaguely stated that the TPDS would be overhauled to be accountable and transparent, reflecting concerns about rampant practices of patronage and corruption rather than the systemic nature of chronic hunger.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, in contrast to the NAC I, the NAC II included key members of the Congress to ensure that the recommendations proposed by the NAC II would be much more conciliatory to the Congress’s agenda. Referring to the right to food, Drèze even characterized the NAC II’s “recommendations [as] very mild, coming as they did at the end of a long process of consultation with various ministries, when the government went out of its way to ensure that the NAC did not hatch any ‘unreasonable’ proposal” (in Gupta 2011). Despite sharing the same advisory functions, the NAC II had a different mandate than the NAC I. While the NAC I was designed as an advisory body to the Prime Minister’s Office to provide a forum for non-state actors to voice claims and write laws to enforce norms of social justice and good governance over ruling institutions, as well as legally protected entitlements, the NAC II provided a space of negotiation in which the ruling government was able to contain the normative claims of human rights activists (Gupta 2011).

It is within the confines of the NAC II that the National Food Security Act (NFSA) was first negotiated. The NAC II Working Group on the National Food Security Bill (NFSB) held

¹⁰⁹ During its second tenure, the UPA coalition of left-leaning political party members was much less influential in setting the NAC II’s agenda.

¹¹⁰ Ruchi Gupta quotes Prime Minister Manmohan Singh:

the National Food Security Act — that will provide a statutory basis for a framework which assures food security for all. Every family below the poverty line in rural as well as urban areas will be entitled, by law, to 25 kilograms of rice or wheat per month at Rs 3 per kilogram. This legislation will also be used to bring about broader systemic reform in the public distribution system. (Gupta 2011)

consultations with government officials¹¹¹ and members of the RTFC to work on the scope of proposed food security legislation. Negotiations occurred on three fronts: (a) the question of whether an overhauled (T)PDS should be universal or not; (b) the inclusion of food welfare programs other than rationing through the (T)PDS; and (c) the constitution of mechanisms conducive to good governance practices. The following year, building on the Supreme Court's orders, the NAC II's NFSB adopted a "life cycle approach," in which different already-existing nutrition-related programs were integrated in the bill to respond to the nutritional needs of various populations at different stages in the life cycle.¹¹² Additionally, the working group quickly abandoned the RTFC's demand for a universal PDS, in order to develop, instead, a targeting mechanism based on the Saxena Report.¹¹³ In fact, the universalization of the PDS was never on the table: "The government imposed certain boundaries and the act needed to be within certain parameters," Drèze affirmed during a personal interview. He added:

It didn't give space, for example, for a universal PDS or even a universal PDS in the 200 poorest districts, which, I think, was a really good idea. . . . At one point, there were discussions around proposals of this sort [within the NAC II], but then it became very clear that universal coverage was something that Mrs. Gandhi didn't support. So that was that because she was the chairperson. (Drèze, personal interview, Ranchi, May 2014)

In fact, the issue of universalization of the PDS was fiercely debated outside of the NAC II, but within the government, the idea to revert to a universal infrastructure of rationing "did not fly." In

111 Senior officials were drawn from the Department of Food and Public Distribution, the Department of School Education, and the Planning Commission.

112 Key food welfare programs protected by the interim orders were abandoned in the redaction of the NFSB, such as the elimination of the National Old Age Pension Scheme.

113 *The Report of the Expert Group to advise the Ministry of Rural Development on the methodology for conducting the Below Poverty Line (BPL) Census for 11th Five Year Plan (2009)*—written by a group chaired by Saxena, with members such as Mander and Roy—assesses the strengths and weaknesses of poverty lines as technologies of government for identifying poor and marginalized households and better targeting welfare program to people in socio-economic need.

a personal interview, former Minister of Rural Development Jairam Ramesh explains that for the government, a universal PDS made little sense economically and politically:

Frankly, from day one, I was telling him [Jean Drèze] that a universal PDS will not fly. It's not wise politically and not desirable from an economic point of view as well. The cost associated with the universal system plus the amount of food you will have to procure for a universal system were too high. . . . But [more importantly] the [main] argument against the universalization was that it is morally wrong. It was economically burdensome. Also, administratively, it was a heavy cost because the amount of food you will have to procure. But ultimately, there was a universal consensus [in the parliament] that it should not be universal. Only the communist parties wanted universal food distribution system, and no one else wanted it. Even the Congress party did not want the universal system. Only the communist party wanted it. (Ramesh, personal interview, New Delhi, August 2015)

The NAC II Working Group came up with a targeting system to overcome the errors of inclusion and exclusion associated with the poverty line methodologies used in the TPDS since 1997. It granted responsibility to the state for developing visible indicators, such as the presence of an electric fan or latrines, rather than arbitrary lines, to better allocate entitlements to those who (allegedly) really need them. Additionally, the NAC II had to design a rather complex architecture of ration distribution, due to the maximum allocations of food rations made available. According to Drèze:

The NAC was quietly but firmly told that the government would never agree to go beyond a food grain allocation of 60 million tonnes for the national food security act. This undermined its endeavour to extend the coverage of the PDS while retaining the norm of 35 kg per month per household. The tension was resolved by proposing a very complicated framework, with multiple categories of cardholders and differentiated entitlements. (Drèze, personal interview, Ranchi, May 2014)

The working group proposed a rather convoluted TPDS that would cover 90% of rural and 50% of urban populations, which were divided into general and priority populations, each of which would be allocated different maximum entitlements (7 kg/person and 4 kg/person, respectively)

at the same per-kilogram price.

Other critical demands from the RTFC, such as land reforms and a focus on small-scale food producers, were abandoned. According to Mander, the convener of the working group:

in the context of the food security law, the principal disagreements are not about whether such measures are critical to ensure food security; few would disagree that sustainable food systems need to be revived and developed, and that the crisis in agriculture needs to be addressed. Rather, the debates are about whether these measures should be part of a single omnibus food security law. (Mander 2012a, 2015, 16)

For Mander, development projects such as a right to food should not be ideological but rather implementable, or to use Erica Bornstein and Aradhana Sharma's (2016) wordings, “technical” (see also Mitchell 2002; Rose 1999). To achieve this goal, the provisions of the NAC II's draft bill focused on nutrition-related programs and mechanisms of government accountability and transparency, such as proactive disclosure, social audits, the creation of local vigilance committees, and inspections of activities, documents, and records, as per the Right to Information Act, as well as the creation of a National Food Commission, which would be mandated to oversee the implementation of the right to food. In other words, the NAC II's bill included nutrition-related welfare programs, with strong provisions for civil society to monitor bureaucratic activities in order to ensure that practices deemed immoral—such as leakages—would be alleviated.

Once submitted to the government, the NAC II's draft bill went through the parliamentary process. It was first examined by an expert committee led by chairman of the prime minister's Economic Advisory Council, Chakravarthi Rangarajan. Composed of economists, this expert committee watered down the NAC II's recommendations, notably in

terms of TPDS coverage and provisions for good governance. Based on the expert committee's recommendations, the government created a draft NFSB that was tabled in December 2011 and submitted to the Standing Committee in January 2012.

Meanwhile, members of the RTFC multiplied interventions in the public space to criticize the minimalist framework—the thin-need approach—of the government's bill. As Chopra mentions, “[e]motions for and against NFSB run high, and are intertwined with debates around the PDS” (2011b, 94). Members of the RTFC condemned the minimalist framework of the government's bill, notably because it fell short of addressing the much larger objective of food security as defended by the RTFC, the Supreme Courts, the CESC (1999), and the FAO (2005). They critiqued the absence of provisions related to agriculture, the lack of attention paid to nutrition, and the highly centralized character of the NFSB (RTFC 2012). However, what really captured the attention of the public was the debate on the universalization of the PDS and the lack of effective mechanisms for grievances redressal. Debates on the universalization of the PDS raged on two fronts. The first set of debates, often argued among economists, addressed the burden that a universal PDS would place on government expenditures and, ultimately, the (middle-class) taxpayer (Basu 2011; Himanshu and Sen 2011). The second set of debates focused on the benefits and limits of targeting mechanisms for properly distributing resources to the poor and the impacts of errors of inclusion and exclusion on people likely to suffer from chronic hunger (Drèze 2011; Khera 2009; Mander 2012a; Ministry of Rural Development, GoI 2009; Saxena 2015).

The RTFC also denounced the lack of decentralized mechanisms available for people to ensure that they receive their entitlements. The NFSB did include provisions for social audits,

vigilance committees, and mechanisms of grievance redressal, such as helplines and the appointment of district grievance redressal officers, as a way to empower citizens to access entitlements; however, these worked sporadically.¹¹⁴ To curb practices of patronage within the TPDS, the NFSB also included provisions to expand governmental surveillance of the movement of grains, including the “end-to-end computerization” reforms of the TPDS and the leveraging of unique identification instruments used to confirm the authenticity of ration card holders and plug leakages from the TPDS. Members of the RTFC insisted that end-to-end computerization measures could not replace wider provisions for accountability and transparency, which in their current form were not sufficient, since “[t]oo much of discretion has been left to the Government to decide the modalities of inspection” (2011a, 4).

During most of 2012, the Standing Committee on Food, Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution invited input from the public on various provisions included in the NFSB. Drèze and Khera were particularly involved and influential in the consultative process; their contributions were notable in shaping the entitlements covered by the TPDS. While admitting that they were in favour of a universal system, Drèze and Khera insisted that people excluded from the TPDS should not include more than 25% of the country’s rural population and 50% of its urban population, since higher rates of exclusion may create an untenably large population with no stake in the TPDS or too vulnerable to chronic hunger. Drèze and Khera suggested that if rationing should be capped at 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population, then entitlements should be distributed among this population without any distinctions—with the exception of the poorest of the poor, the *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* (AAY) category. With these

114 To note, after over two years of fieldwork in New Delhi, we discovered that mechanisms for social audits and the formation of vigilance committees were either never set up or not functional. Help lines were functioning episodically and poorly.

measures, the coverage of the TPDS would not be universal, but it would be simpler and more uniform and thus help to limit errors of inclusion and exclusion in the infrastructure of rationing. While Drèze and Khera supported the provision of 7 kg of rations per person, the Standing Committee recommended that 5 kg of wheat and rice be distributed per person per household at a uniform rate of ₹ 2/kg of wheat and ₹ 3/kg of rice. For the poorest of the poor households, otherwise referred as AAY, the Standing Committee's allocation of wheat and rice reached 35 kg per household per month, at the same price. The NAC II's "life cycle approach" was preserved, with the provision of cooked meals in *anganwadi* once a day for children aged six years or less (ICDS), school lunch programs (MDMS), and maternity entitlements of ₹ 6,000.

These provisions marked a clear retreat from the needs defined by the Supreme Court's interim orders and, more generally, from the initial demands of the RTFC, since pensions, additional rations for senior citizens, and social assistance in the case of death or injury of the bread winner were not included in the final version of the NFSB. As for mechanisms for grievance redressal, the Standing Committee discarded the NAC II Working Group's suggestion to form a national commission on food security, but it supported the establishment of local vigilance committees to oversee the implementation of the food security legislation and social audits. Largely built out of the recommendations of the Standing Committee, the NFSB was passed at the *Lok Sabha* in August 2013, thus becoming the National Food Security Act (NFSA), just in time for the general elections that took place in Spring 2014.

The formation of the NFSA was complex and, to large extent, controversial. For members of the RTFC, who had varied and contested perspectives on what the right to food should look like, the NFSA fell short on several front. In the process of its formation, the RTFC

lost its momentum, falling prey to a certain fatigue among members of the media, in public discourse, and within its own membership. Colin Gonsalves questions whether the NFSA was really worth the effort:

See, a law [like the NFSA] is much more stable than policies. . . . But this act took away the 35 kg of rations per household. It leaves it open to replace in-kind entitlement by cash. It's not the same. Suppose you take all the Supreme Court orders into an act, then I'd be happy. I'm not saying that I'm unhappy with an act. I'm saying, should you spend five years of a movement's time with that obsession? Suppose today you take the judgement and make it the act, I have no problem with that. But [in the process of legislating on a food security act], we've lost the social movement in the meanwhile . . . we've lost it completely. . . . What is your end results? Is malnutrition any better? It's the same. (personal interview, May 2014, New Delhi)

According to Gonsalves, efforts to secure right-to-food legislation undermined the larger social movement and some of the claims that the RTFC could make on nutrition-related issues.

Many of the “thicker” claims over people’s needs made by the RTFC ranged too widely or were too ideologically driven to be included in the right-to-food legislation, which served the primary purpose of providing an implementable framework for legally protecting welfare entitlements. Transforming normative claims into technical policies, programs, or laws is the first operationalization of the politics of need interpretation. It frames the ways in which claims are first considered, before they are even negotiated and debated within the political process. In the case of the NFSA, the NAC II as a para-public forum took the shape of a legislative space in which state and non-state actors could negotiate and submit an implementable bill to the legislative process, based on at least some of the thick-need claims made by members of civil society and Supreme Court interim orders. In exploring the politics of need interpretation of the Indian right to food, I have shed some light on the processes through which normative claims make their ways into technical governmental interventions.

3.3 Conclusion

If the right to food entitlement was enacted as an answer to a social problem, which normative claims was it designed to resolve? It appears to be a response to perceived issues of accountability and transparency in the deployment of food security programs. In this chapter, I have made three primary arguments. The first builds on the existing anthropology of the state literature: Gupta (1995) and later Chopra (2011a, 2011b) and Hertel (2016) have theorized on the extent to which, in the exercise of government, the state is a heterogeneous and translocal entity, constituted by actors that produce the bureaucratic state in their everyday life. In this chapter, I have paid particular attention to these processes to show that the conception of an Indian right to food has indeed involved a myriad of actors and state institutions—including the Supreme Court, the NAC I and II, and the legislative and executive branches of government—that have competing interpretations of the needs that the government should satisfy. One consideration that has perhaps been underexplored in the anthropology of the state literature is that if the state is a heterogeneous and fragmented entity, then so too is civil society. As an umbrella-organization, the RTFC encompasses a range of individuals and organizations with variegated visions of what a right to food signifies and how to transform these ideas into welfare goods and services protected by laws.

The second argument relates to the first. Within both the state and civil society, actors, organizations, institutions, and other entities have entered into debate over competing claims to circumscribe the nature and scope of a right to food. The processes through which these negotiations have taken place are strikingly antipodal. When forged out of the WSF model, in the confines of the RTFC, the discursive construction of the right to food has been inclusive,

multidimensional, and expanded to include variegated interpretations of needs, without which the most vulnerable populations may suffer from chronic hunger and undernourishment. On the other hand, the Supreme Court, the NAC II, and other members of the legislative branch have framed the right to food in the language of good governance. This framework has restricted both state and non-state actors in their ability to creatively construct the right to food outside of the discursive field in which these debates have been pitted (see Merry 2006).

Third, within state institutions, the language of good governance has charted the debates leading up to the enactment of the Indian right to food. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that even though the discourse of food security has taken shape against the backdrop of chronic hunger and undernourishment, the long and convoluted process through which the right to food has been formulated is not necessarily an answer to chronic hunger. Instead, the right to food entitlement is a purported technocratic panacea negotiated by state and non-state actors in an attempt to shape implementable bureaucratic techniques deployed to meet the nutritional needs of a segment of the Indian population. These techniques have been formulated with the goal of shaping the role, functions, and expectations of government, in order to render bureaucratic practices accountable and transparent in a way that is congruent with human rights discourses. Building on campaigns for the right to information and the right to work, the social movement for the right to adequate food in India was planned as a struggle in which members of civil society were able to leverage normative claims to compel the government to adopt legislative measures to eradicate chronic hunger, while also ensuring accountability and transparency in the delivery of these services.

What ensued from the politics of need interpretation of the right to food is a set of

instruments designed specifically to secure the state's accountability and transparency. It is in this context that the iconic ration card was re-materialized to bear normative principles of governmental transparency. In compounding digital technologies of authentication with the rationing document, the bureaucratic state has deployed a new technical instrument, engineered to eradicate practices of corruption that have crippled the infrastructure of rationing for decades. In the next chapter, then, I examine this rationing document in relation to the socialities that it mediates.

Chapter 4: Re-Materialization of Ration Cards: The Agency of Objects to Curb Corruption

In the previous chapter, I described the Indian right to food entitlement as a technological intervention anchored in bureaucratic practices of accountability and transparency. I recalled how the country's food security legislation, the National Food Security Act (NFSA), resulted from what Nancy Fraser (1989, 145) calls "politics of need interpretation" that have framed the scope and meanings of the right to food entitlement in India. In the process, I examined how some normative elements of the discourse of food security were evacuated from the formulation of the NFSA in order to shift the focus of the law to technical aspects of the delivery of entitlements. In fact, claims and concerns about transparency and accountability led the state to redesign a 70-year-old document—the ration card—by digitizing some of its elements to enable closer monitoring of the exchange of food entitlements in ration shops, called Fair Price Shops (FPSs).

In this chapter, I ask: what does the ration card do? Building on recent literature on documents and bureaucracy in anthropology and cognate disciplines (Hull 2012a, 2012b; Mathur 2012; Sharma 2013), I frame the ration card as a "rationing document" (see Sriraman 2014). Instead of treating the rationing document as a text bearing representations that are readily legible, I examine it as a mediator "that shape[s] the significance of signs inscribed on them and their relations with the objects they refer to" (Hull 2012a, 253). I argue that the production and circulation of the new ration card have been designed to establish bureaucratic control through the use of new technologies of information and knowledge to remove human agency from the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). This has resulted in unexpected consequences,

including the systematic exclusion of some members of the population from the infrastructure of rationing and other culturally constituted practices.

4.1 Introduction

On a sunny afternoon in November 2014, my research assistant and I were waiting in a deserted alley for a FPS to open. To fight boredom, we spied on a rat going back and forth under the large metal sliding door of the FPS, scavenging for wheat grains lying around the front of the store. The ration card holders would arrive much later, closer to the store's opening hours. We waited for two hours in front of the FPS, scrutinizing every passer-by in the hope that we would meet a ration card holder. Finally, a rickshaw puller stopped his rickshaw right in front of the FPS. An old lady climbed down from it, glanced at us for a second, and sat down on a nearby dusty scooter. We approached her and asked when the FPS would open its door. "At 5," she replied promptly, before turning her head away. She did not seem to be interested in pursuing the conversation any further. We stepped back and, like her, waited in silence for the FPS owner to reach his shop around 5:00 pm.

While FPSs are supposed to stay open six days a week, very few do.¹¹⁵ Ration card holders later told us that some owners do not open their FPSs at all, or only do so on rare sporadic occasions. Since there are only a few FPSs in every neighbourhood, ration card holders are typically aware of the informal schedules of their respective FPSs. Most get that information from their neighbours or from the shops located around the FPS. This particular owner opened his shop regularly on the 20th of every month for a few days, from 5:00 pm to 8:00 pm, because

115 According to a few of the FPS owners that I interviewed, FPSs should be opened six days a week, from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm and from 4:00 pm to 7:00 pm. I have not been able to find the official regulations on this subject. In practice, these rules are never observed, and nobody tries to enforce them.

it is more efficient to sell most of the rations that his shop received all at once¹¹⁶ rather than keeping an empty shop open for an entire month. While we waited for the FPS owner to arrive, ration card holders—a woman and her teen daughter, a daily-wage worker, a group of two or three female relatives—began to show up just before 5:00 pm and waited around the FPS until the owner's helper unlocked the sliding door only minutes later. By then, the rat had disappeared from view, and the ration card holders began to form a line across the alley.

I knew the helper, Dheeraj, from the grocery store next to my apartment building, where he also worked. I did not know it at the time, but the FPS owner, Ashok, also owned a grocery store—a practice that does not conform to the regulations in place in Delhi, since it facilitates the diversion of food grains from FPSs to the black market. After Dheeraj opened the door, he began to dust the desk at the front of the FPS. He brought up the store's electronic balance to prepare for the distribution of rations. He swept the shop, collected the wheat from the floor, and sieved it to remove dust, rat droppings, *bidi* (eucalyptus cigarette) butts, pieces of jute and string, and other impurities. Once sieved, Dheeraj poured the wheat grains back into a jute bag, from which the first few rations would be drawn. Meanwhile, the FPS owner walked down the alley. He recognized me and waved. I asked him if we could watch the distribution of food grains. He acquiesced awkwardly, before silently sitting down behind his desk as the queue lengthened. As if there was no one else there, he took his time to get ready, barely glancing at the cardholders waiting patiently in front of him. His decades of experience in delivering rations had transformed the exchange of entitlements into a series of weary gestures.

Manush and his wife, Pramila, were waiting in line. Pramila was a mother of two, in

116 Every month, the Department of Food, Supplies, and Consumer Affairs (DFSCA) of Delhi subcontracts the delivery of rations to FPSs.

her late 40s. She grew up in a small village on the outskirts of Delhi, but she had moved to the city in her late teens when she married Manush. He was a tall thin man in his 50s, wrapped in a blue coat with a broken zipper, with shaggy hair and an unshaven beard. For the last 35 years or so, Pramila and Manush had lived with their three children in a small *jhuggi* (habitation in informal settlements), a house located in a nearby *basti* (informal settlement) at walking distance from the FPS. Manush ran a small electric shop. While his business was far from flourishing, it provided sufficient income to feed his family twice a day, which was not the case less than ten years ago. His two younger daughters, who were quickly approaching marriageable age, were a source of stress for him, as he wondered how he would manage to amass a large enough dowry for each to attract a suitable husband. Over the next few months that I would spend with him, Manush did not smile much. He was becoming a grumpy old man. That evening was no different. Holding his winter jacket closed with one hand, he clung to a white envelope sent from the DFSCA with the other. Inside was their freshly delivered ration card. Pramila and Manush were about to use it for the first time.

That evening, about 75 ration card holders came to the FPS to draw their rations. Manush was one of a few men that queued up to receive monthly entitlements. The other cardholders were women of all ages—grandmothers, mothers, wives, and sisters—who lived in a neighbouring *basti* and visited the FPS in groups of two, three, or four. When his turn arrived, Manush opened the envelope, slid the plastic credit card-like ration card free of its new green cover, and handed it to the FPS owner. On the card, Ashok wrote down the number 277¹¹⁷ to identify the cardholder. He then pulled a small registry from one of the drawers in his desk and

117 The number 277 is not the actual number used by Ashok. I randomly chose this number to preserve the anonymity of Manush and Pramila.

recorded on line 277 the cardholder's name, address, ration card number, and the number of household members registered to the card. In an even larger red registry, Ashok entered the details of that day's transaction, as he does for every cardholder. For this transaction, for instance, Ashok wrote the number 277 and the quantity of grain that Manush and Pramila bought from him. In theory, both of these registries may be audited by an inspector from the Department of Food, Supplies, and Consumer Affairs (DFSCA) to monitor the operations of the FPS and ensure that diversion of subsidized food does not occur; if some of the rations delivered to the FPS are not distributed to card holders, those remaining rations are supposed to be deducted from the next month's delivery. In reality, at the end of every month, most FPS owners doctor their registries to various extents; this allows them to divert any remaining stock of rations to the black market. To maximize the profitability of their ration shops, FPS owners ensure that in their registries, the quantity of entitlements sold to cardholders corresponds to the total amount of food grains delivered by the DFSCA.¹¹⁸ In doing so, they ensure that unsold entitlements are not carried over to the next month, and they pocket the excess profits.¹¹⁹ This, I was told by more than two FPS owners and several other interlocutors, is a widespread practice across the capital. In fact, this is perhaps the most mundane and ubiquitous way that leakages take place from the TPDS in Delhi—a technical problem that could be solved by closely monitoring the exchange of entitlements at FPSs.

As he inputted the information in his registries, Ashok glanced at Pramila for a second and turned towards Manush. He told him that with their new ration card, they could buy 16 kg of

118 According to one FPS owner that we later interviewed, this is a widespread practice that has historically been conducted at every FPS since the development of the TPDS in 1997 because above-the-poverty-line (APL) households do not, generally speaking, pick up all of their rations from their FPSs.

119 Ration card holders were also quick to point out that some FPS owners refuse to sell rations altogether, in order to divert even more food to the black market.

wheat and 4 kg of rice. “And what about sugar?” asked Manush, who either ignored the fact that his entitlements did not cover sugar or assumed that he could barter with the FPS owner.¹²⁰ With me around, however, there was little chance that the FPS owner would bend the rules. “When the government allows it, I’ll give it,” Ashok responded. “If you don’t trust us, go to the government and ask. And if you get it, I’ll give you double [your ration]. It is not available on this card. Would we keep anyone’s right? This is your entitlement.” Resigned, Manush bought 16 kg of wheat. He threw his money on the old beaten desk that separated them. Ashok wrote a receipt and quickly noted down the quantities of grain and money exchanged. He tore up the bottom of the receipt, a gesture that signifies that an exchange is completed, and put it back on the desk, along with a few rupees of change. As he did so, Dheeraj fetched a half-empty jute bag of wheat from the back of the almost empty FPS and poured grains from it into the worn plastic bag brought by Pramila until the digital scale read exactly 16.0 kg. Since his household did not eat rice, Manush did not buy it. With this transaction completed, Manush picked up the plastic bag and put his left hand in it to feel the quality of grain. When he removed it, his hand was covered in dust, a sign that the wheat had been infested by wheat weevils. The quality of food grains varies from one FPS to another and from one 50 kg jute bag of rations to the next. To avoid leakages, wheat and rice grains are routinely repackaged, both in governmental *godowns* and FPSs, and sold to ration card holders. This minimizes the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and FPS owners’ losses. But in a warm climate such as Delhi, repackaging food grains like this increases the likelihood of

120 While wheat and rice are considered to be staples, sugar is not. However, it is a crucial ingredient for the preparation of *chai*. Every day, Pramila used sugar with milk, black tea, and spices to brew a few cups of *chai*, which she served to her husband, mother-in-law, two daughters, and herself. Tea is drunk all year around in India, twice or thrice a day, but the sweet treat is especially appreciated in the cold months of winter, especially among *basti* inhabitants who resort to wool blankets, large scarves, and the occasional fire lit on the side of the street to warm up. In the months that followed, I would share my fair share of *chai* with Manush right in front of his home. Cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom are very expensive and usually not used by poor households or at roadside tea stalls.

infestation by pests. In Delhi storage facilities owned by the FCI, the food grains are regularly tested and treated with pesticides. At FPSs, however, outlets are typically located in inexpensive, poorly maintained, and badly ventilated places, which are more conducive to infestations. When FPSs have low-quality food grains in stock, they typically mix it with freshly delivered wheat or rice to keep the proportion of rotten grains in each cardholder's allocation down. Doing so also helps to preserve the stock of good-quality food grains available for diversion to the black market.

The rations sold in FPSs are, as a general rule, of better quality than what Manush bought that day. He was unlucky. For the ration card holders that followed him, Dheeraj distributed food grains from a different jute bag, which contained better quality wheat.

Frustrated, Manush showed his hand to the FPS owner and asked for better grains. But the owner was not moved and refused. "This is not dirt, it's dust" [*Dhool hoti hai, mitti nahi hoti*], Manush said. He tried to make the case that the wheat was not fit for consumption, but Ashok let him know that he had other cardholders to serve and no time for Manush's grievances. "Ye tumera entitlement hai" [This is your entitlement], Ashok repeated, using an amalgam of Hindi and English, "Chaalo!" [Now, go!]

Followed by Pramila, Manush stepped away from the queue, not without mumbling quite loudly about his dissatisfaction with their entitlements. The term "entitlement," voiced in English, was a rather charged term in this context. Activists and human rights lawyers working under the banner of the Right to Food Campaign (RTFC) have endeavoured for more than a decade to transpose the concept of entitlement into a discursive instrument set up to describe the rightful prerogative of the poor over welfare goods and services. The notion of entitlement has

been central to the normative right-to-food project, which was formed in part around issues of government accountability and transparency in the domains of food security. However, in the everyday transaction of rations, the term entitlement has been depoliticized, only to be discursively re-packaged as an ostensibly apolitical exchange of commodities. Manush was entitled to 20 kg of food grains every month, and as long as the electronic balance read 20.0 kg of food grains, his own agency to negotiate or contest his household's entitlements was limited. In the infrastructure of rationing, Pramila and Manush's right to food entitlement was realized through their access to the TPDS, not necessarily through the quality of the entitlements that they received. Here, the new ration card played a critical role, since it embodied in its materiality Pramila and Manush's access to the TPDS—but only in ways that had been designed in the blueprint of the NFSA.

In this chapter, I explore the role of the new ration card in the mundane practices of entitlement exchanges at FPSs in the aftermath of the NFSA. Since the infrastructure of rationing was first established in India, the ration card and other identification documents have had their own “lives that escape rationales of bureaucratic authorities and discussions of power” (Sriraman 2014, 3–4). Over subsequent decades, the rationing document has become at once a mundane object present in millions of households across India and a potent thing embodying, to various degrees, the capacity of the state to identify, catalogue, and govern a population. Once distributed in Delhi, this object—charged with bureaucratic power (see Das 2004)—has enabled access to welfare services and predisposed its holder to formal identity and belonging to the city, but it has also brokered other kinds of everyday socialities, “affective energies and . . . emotional responses” (Sriraman 2014, 4). Following the enactment of the NFSA, the re-calibration of this

powerful bureaucratic document into a new technology of identification has been deployed, I argue, to tame alternatives uses of the ration card in Delhi—or to control what political scientist Tarangini Srirnam (2014), drawing on Arjun Appadurai (1986), calls the social life of the rationing document in India.

In this introductory section, I have described an exchange of entitlements that took place at an FPS in the first few months after the integration of the new ration card into the infrastructure of rationing. While both FPS owners and ration card holders have been getting accustomed to the manipulation of this new bureaucratic document, the new ration card has embodied bureaucratic power aimed to achieve new formal welfare objectives—namely, the elimination of corruption in the distribution of allocated food grains to ration card holders. In subsequent sections in this chapter, I will concentrate on the material qualities of the new re-materialized ration card. Paying attention to the materiality and embodied meanings of the new rationing document, I believe, will shed light on how the instrument rearranges associations of humans and things in respect to the biopolitical objectives of the government.

4.2 The Ration Card: A Bureaucratic Document

The ration card is iconic in India. Throughout my fieldwork in New Delhi, I encountered different generations of ration cards in different places: Manush had two ration cards, one in his wallet and another at home; another interlocutor protected her ration card from theft by storing it between the pages of a colouring book; in the National Archives of India, I found one of the first ration cards issued, yellowed by time and misplaced among other archival folders; many new ration cards were piled up in sealed white envelopes in post offices because mail carriers could not (or would not) find the addresses inscribed on them; we found a

surprisingly large number of ration cards in transparent garbage bags withheld at a DFSCA field office, months after applicants had submitted their claims for them; several pictures of ration cards are stored online; one of my friends kept a digital photocopy of his parents' ration card on his computer; another interlocutor kept her ration card sealed in a worn, plastic, water-resistant bag during the monsoon, hung from a ceiling of a *jhuggi*; and others locked their cards away in chests among other valuables. Many of these ration cards had long passed their expiration dates. Others were new, but had never been used. After more than a year of fieldwork on issues pertaining to the deployment of the NFSA in New Delhi, I got the sense that most interlocutors treasured their ration cards. Accordingly, these documents became important to me as well (Jacob 2008, 250).

As I cover more fully in the next chapter, ration cards are coveted objects. In the rather rich literature of “urban citizenship” (or belonging) and everyday exclusions in New Delhi (Baviskar 2010; Cowan 2015; Ghertner 2010; Kumar Routray 2014; Rao 2010a), the ration card is almost always referred to as an identification document (ID) that secures formal access to the city (Das 2011; Sriraman 2011, 2013). In fact, in urban contexts, as Veena Das puts it, ration cards have “become material embodiments of the right to dwelling” (2011, 327). These documents authenticate identity. This is especially true for members of populations that reside in *basti* and other informal settlements, who typically have little to no access to other formal proofs of identity and residence, such as passports, driver's licenses, or Permanent Account Number (PAN) cards, a type of ID issued by the Indian Income Tax Department.¹²¹

¹²¹ This is not to say that no other types of ID could be used as identification or proof of residence. Bureaucratic identification documents such as passports, driver's licenses, and PAN cards are all available to Indian citizens, but they are hard to access for most members of the urban population who would not travel overseas, cannot buy a car, and do not pay income taxes.

Bureaucratic documents have attracted attention from ethnographers interested in the dynamics of biopolitics and the means through which modern states design and deploy instruments to document, constitute, classify, and assess the welfare of populations (see for instance Corbridge et al. 2005).¹²² Evidently, the ration card is no different (Sriraman 2011), especially since 1997, when the introduction of targeting mechanisms to the public distribution system (PDS) led the Indian government to distribute a range of different ration cards formally designed to meet the different nutritional needs of various socioeconomic strata of the population. As instruments of government, ration cards have contributed to the construction of social groups. These cards are objects that render social, cultural, and economic phenomena legible and intelligible; they arrange the population into discrete groups according to (interpreted) consumption habits and, thus, frame and organize specific social issues (such as food insecurity) according to metrics that bureaucratic instruments can perceive and schematize (see Barry 2002; Rose 1999).¹²³ In this sense, the manipulation of ration cards produces a form of technocratic knowledge that shares similar features with a Foucauldian reading of bureaucratic documents: ration cards embody a function of representation, as much as they generate a work of social

122 While the ration card is used as an ID, it should be noted that most people apply for or use their ration cards to draw entitlements from FPSs. Research in anthropology tends to emphasize elements that are unfamiliar, informal, uncanny, or illegal (Hull 2012b, 234). While it is important to uncover the multidimensional aspects of the ration card, I believe that we should be wary about framing this rationing document as something that is radically and unmitigatedly different from, or more than, the object it was designed to be: a document that grants access to food entitlements.

123 This was particularly patent when the Planning Commission (2005) commissioned a study on the TPDS. The study suggests that the introduction of targeting mechanisms, and APL and BPL ration cards, has not helped to significantly mitigate leakages and diversion of food grains from the TPDS. However, rather than admitting that targeting mechanisms have failed to improve the TPDS, or that reverting to a simpler universal system of rationing may in the end be more beneficial, the study recommends the further refinement of poverty line methodologies in order to better target APL and BPL households. While the Planning Commission's study has been criticized for its own methodology (Khera, personal interview, New Delhi, May 2015), it is interesting to note the extent to which the ration card, an instrument that classifies the population into discrete social groups according to the perceived welfare support that they need, has been so closely enmeshed with the rationality of government that the state itself cannot envisage a return to a universal system of distribution.

construction (Riles 2006). According to such a framework, documents are texts bearing denotations and representations ready to be interpreted. In other words, documents are *intermediaries* to the signs they bear. Due in part to how well researchers operating within a Foucauldian framework have studied representations and the construction of objects (see Cabot 2012; Corbridge et al. 2005; Riles 2006; Sriraman 2011), recent work on documents, according to Matthew S. Hull (2012b), tends to move beyond the textual qualities of objects to focus instead on the materiality of documents, “to look *at* rather than *through* them” (2012a, 13). Informed by science and technology studies (STS), recent literature on bureaucratic documentation emphasizes the agency of objects and the role of *mediation* that they perform (Hull 2012a; Larkin 2013). For Bruno Latour, there is a fundamental difference between the notions of intermediaries and mediators: “An *intermediary* . . . transports meanings or force without transformations . . . *Mediators*, on the other hand, . . . transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour 2005, 39; see also Hull 2012b, 13). In treating documents as mediators rather than textual representations, anthropologists have attempted to explore the gap between the indexical role of documents and how they may act on social relations (Hultin 2008; Jacob 2008).

Seminal to this research project is Hull's *Government of Paper* (2012b). Hull uses the term “graphic artifacts” to encompass “the material form of documentation and communication” to argue that in Islamabad, “governing paper is central to governing the city” (2012b, 1). In this ethnography, Hull builds on the work of Latour (1987, 1993, 2005) to demonstrate that graphic artifacts constitute, and are constituted by, associations between people and things in two interrelated ways. First, as they circulate, graphic artifacts generate relations between people and

things, forming a terrain in which bureaucratic power exerts control over the population. Second, while they circulate, graphic artifacts carry with them signs and reference to places, objects, or people, thus bringing these objects into the association of people and things under the rule of the government (see Das 2004). In framing documents as a fluid object always in movement, Hull captures how certain graphic artifacts carry with them idiosyncratic bureaucratic power and how their circulation renders each constitution of associations unique. Paper, bureaucratic files, archives, writing notes, and ration cards are as much recipients of information or knowledge as they are key objects that bring together a number of people and things (Hull 2012a, 2012b; Sriraman 2014).

James Ferguson (1990) and Tania Murray Li (2007b) demonstrate that development experts and knowledge always fail to adequately capture and thus improve the lives of targeted populations, which leads to unanticipated ramifications for both the rulers and the governed; similarly, I argue, the circulation of documents has effects that are impossible to foresee and anticipate. Once in movement, documents rearrange people and things in such a way that is impossible to predict, let alone control (Hull 2012b, 134). Historically, for instance, Indian ration cards have been designed to curb the proliferation of corrupt practices through the inclusion of security measures that mark the documents in such a way, as Sriraman explains, “to render its misuse difficult and make any offence related to it traceable” (2011, 57). Thumbprints, serial numbers, and coloured backgrounds have, for instance, been inscribed on the ration card to ward off abuse and misappropriation. This is precisely why these security measures have made the ration card such a widely used identification document. Concerns for practices of corruption have led bureaucratic authorities to implement measures of authentication on rationing documents, in

order to prevent theft of these documents, embezzlement of rations, and extortion (Sriraman 2011, 56–57). However, in practice, these inscribed security measures have enabled the document to mediate other practices that would otherwise not have been possible, including for instance, the mortgaging of rations in exchange for loans (Sriraman 2011) or the construction of socialities where ration cards can be procured outside of state institutions or formal bureaucratic channels (Srivastava 2012).

For the circulation of documents to happen, for the bureaucratic object to mediate performance or enactment, materiality matters. In compounding the ration card with the unique identification (UID) technology—the *aadhaar* card—the state has fabricated a rationing document with novel security measures, designed with the sole purpose of finally transforming the TPDS into an accountable and transparent welfare program. Security measures that used to be central features of the old ration card have been digitized, withdrawn from the materiality of the card itself to operate through an online database. This has significantly altered the ways in which the ration card can circulate to create associations of people and things, which is precisely the aim of the “end-to-end computerization” process that has been undertaken to digitize the TPDS infrastructure.¹²⁴ In this chapter, I explore how the digitization of ration cards has, just like graphic artifacts, drawn things and people under bureaucratic control. Building on Sriraman (2011, 2014), I trace the circulation of the new ration card and highlight the associations of people and things that this rationing document constitutes and is constituted by. Historically, the introduction of new forms of bureaucratic instruments has helped to exert (colonial) government

124 The National Informatics Centre (NIC), a science and technology organization of the Government of India, points toward the manipulation of transactions at FPSs as the main site of diversion and leakages of food grains from the infrastructure of rationing. Therefore, the NIC proposes, in bold, that: “The solution lies in distributing the essential commodities using biometric authentication of any member of beneficiary in order to restraint (sic) the diversion at the FPS level” (2015, 8).

power in the everyday lives of its subjects (Raman 2012). It is not unreasonable to be wary of similar consequences from the re-materialization of the rationing document.

In India, recent ethnographic research on the implementation of human rights legislation has critically examined how documents mediate normative principles that are constitutive of rights-based discourses. In her research on the right to information, for instance, Aradhana Sharma states that “documents are the primary sites of state transparency” (2013, 309). For Sharma, transparency in the age of neoliberal governmentality is technocratic and instrumentalist; it is reduced to a procedural administration that depoliticizes an otherwise political rhetoric of citizen empowerment, democratic participation, or claims about good governance (see Hetherington 2011). The Right to Information Act, in Sharma’s words, “governmentalizes social life and fosters bureaucratized activism and procedural citizenship” (2013, 319), and the knowledge required to manipulate or manufacture documents certainly contributes to this effect. Similarly, Nayanika Mathur has explored how, in the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), “transparency is made by documents” (2012, 167). But her ethnographic work in bureaucratic worlds led her to conclude that the generation, circulation, and uses of document to render practices transparent is so vast and complex that it hinders rather than facilitates the right to work.

In this chapter, I build on insights from Mathur (2012) and Sharma (2013) to explore how the re-materialization of the ration card—that is, the transition from a paper to a digitized rationing document—has rearranged bureaucratic practices and other socialities. I explore, through ethnographic vignettes, revealing glimpses of how the re-materialized ration card has rendered the exchange of rations in FPSs more transparent and, in the process, constituted new

associations of humans and things that have historically helped ration card holders to assert their place in the city. I argue that the re-materialization of this rationing document has exerted bureaucratic control in practices of entitlement distribution that were otherwise difficult to police or discipline.

In the next section, then, I begin by exploring the materiality of the new ration card as it compares to the old ration card, in order to “self-contextualize” the digitization of the rationing document (Das 2011; Latour 1999, 91 in Hull 2012a, 255). Then, I show how the ration card is deployed in relation with other objects to eliminate human agency from the TPDS, with the goal of ensuring accountability and transparency in the delivery of entitlements. Finally, I explore the systematic exclusions from entitlements that this document fosters—and the impacts it has as an instrument used by *basti*-dwellers to secure their position in the city.

4.3 A Plastic Ration Card

In this section, I describe the materiality of ration cards. I do so in order to describe the new ration card introduced in New Delhi in the aftermath of the NFSA (2013), but also to compare the discrepancies between the new rationing document with previous ones used since the public distribution system (PDS) was transformed into a targeted program (TPDS) in 1997.

Following the implementation of the NFSA, the population targeted by the TPDS in New Delhi was capped to 7.3 million people—which is in the vicinity of half of the population. In total, 1.9 million ration cards were distributed on a household basis across the National Capital Territory (NCT). Before the NFSA was enacted, every household could apply for a ration card. These rationing documents—the above-the-poverty-line (APL), below-the-poverty-line (BPL), and *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* (AAY) ration cards introduced in Chapter Two—consisted of colour-

coded booklets used to communicate the category of household they represented.¹²⁵ In Delhi, red ration cards were given to AAY households, which are the poorest of poor households; yellow cards were granted to BPL households; and white cards were issued to above APL households.¹²⁶ The colour coding of these cards was designed to allow FPS owners and ration card holders to easily identify the rates at which their entitlements should be exchanged. Entitlements were exchanged at cheaper rates to AAY households than to BPL households. In turn, BPL households could access entitlements at cheaper rates than APL households. To APL households, entitlements were sold at near-market prices.

These different categories of ration cards served the same functions: they allowed cardholders to access food at FPSs, as described above, and they formally situated the holder and their family in the city. All colour-coded ration cards authenticated holders' identities and, accordingly, granted them access to governmental services, empowering them to not only collect food from the TPDS but also engage in a range of other practices, such as registering children in schools, applying for voter IDs, or opening bank accounts. For APL households, the identification function of the ration card was not as critical as it was for BPL or AAY households. APL households could still use their ration cards as a form of ID, but most of them also had access to other kinds of ID—including passports and PAN cards distributed for income tax purposes.¹²⁷ In contrast, BPL and AAY householders generally resided in *basti* and other informal settlements.

¹²⁵ In the post-war period, ration cards were distributed to household units rather than individuals because it was considered to be easier to administer and cheaper to issue them on a household basis (Sriraman 2011, 56). Since then, ration cards have been issued to households rather than to individuals.

¹²⁶ Two other types of ration cards, the *Jhuggi Jhopdi* Clusters Ration Card and Resettlement Colony Ration Card, were granted with APL rates to residents of *Jhuggi Jhopdi* clusters and resettlement colonies. These cards were typically temporary and could be renewed after a period of six months.

¹²⁷ It is also interesting to note that if the ratio of entitlement collection at the FPS was lower among people holding white cards than other colour-coded rationing documents, some more affluent households still did draw their monthly rations from FPSs (see Planning Commission 2005).

For them, the ration card was one of the only bureaucratic documents at their disposal to use as proof of residence. With the exception of voter ID cards that were distributed just before elections, very few other forms of ID were readily available to them before the issuance of the *aadhaar* card—a card on which a unique identification number (UID) is written.

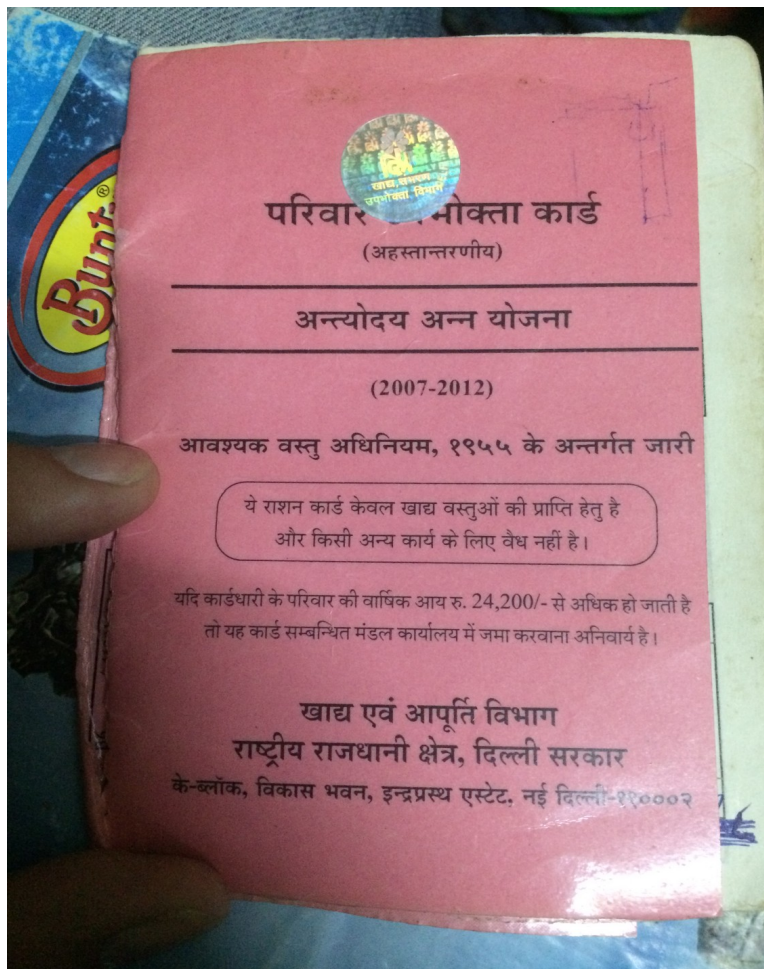


Illustration 3: Manush's AAY ration card.

While it is true that the state created both old and new ration cards to enable eligible citizens to draw rations from FPSs, the two documents are in many ways fundamentally different. Old ration cards were booklets printed on paper and designed to be malleable. Inscriptions were made on each booklet to record transactions and other bureaucratic information, such as the

period of validity, dates of renewal, signatures of bureaucrats, and official stamps. Each month, when cardholders drew rations from an FPS, the owner would write in the booklet the date and quantity of rations drawn. In contrast, the new ration card is made of plastic and has been designed to make it almost impossible to inscribe additional information on it.¹²⁸ It is shaped like a credit card.¹²⁹ On the front, the cardholder's photograph, name, and address are printed. The cardholder's circle number, designated FPS number, and the name of the FPS owner also appear on the front of the card, indicating where the cardholder can draw rations. At the very bottom of the card, a seal of approval indicates the time and location at which the cardholder's application was processed at one of the DFSCA field offices, located in one of the 70 circles (or circumscriptions) of Delhi. This seal sanctions the cardholder's use of the card. The old ration card reproduced patriarchal understandings of power by attributing it to the male head of each household. In a move to empower women, the NFSA has christened older women as heads of the household and delivered the new ration card to them. Policy-makers believe that designating women as heads of the household will promote the regular retrieval of rations from FPSs, since mothers or grandmothers are more likely to provide for their family than men are.

On the front of the new card, beside the cardholder's name, the initials PR, PR-S, or AAY appear. These initials represent the new categories of households designed following the enactment of the NFSA: priority, priority-sugar, or *Antyodaya Anna Yojana*. Previously, every cardholder in the TPDS in Delhi could buy sugar from a FPS. After the enactment of the NFSA, the distribution of sugar was discontinued for cardholders who had not been previously issued

128 While it is true that the FPS owner wrote a number on each ration card to associate it with an entry in his registry, the new ration cards were designed to limit inscriptions.

129 The DFSCA has at times dubbed the new cards "Household Consumer Cards," but they are also commonly referred to as either "*MasterCards*," "fresh ration cards," or "new ration cards."

AAY or BPL ration cards. Under the new system, these households would be categorized as PR households and allocated wheat and rice at a fixed rate of ₹ 2/kg and ₹ 3/kg respectively.¹³⁰ Although Pramila and Manush had once owned an AAY ration card, it had subsequently been deemed invalid; as a result, they were classified under the PR category in the new system, which explains why their FPS owner refused to sell sugar to them. In contrast, households that held a valid BPL or AAY ration card under the old system could obtain a PR-S or AAY ration card under the new system. PR-S and AAY ration card holders are entitled to the same wheat and rice rations as PR householders, but they are also theoretically entitled to subsidized sugar; however, in practice, sugar is often not available at FPSs.¹³¹ To note here, the NFSA legally secures four types of entitlements. Three of them target children and mothers. These entitlements should in theory deliver meals to *all* children of six years or less in *anganwadis* (*crèches* or kindergartens), mid-day school meals to *all* school-goers, and cash entitlements to *all* mothers. To access these entitlements, no ID is necessary. The ration card only enables access to the collection of rations in FPSs.

130 These rates make the rations quite inexpensive. To compare, at the time of my fieldwork, a bottle of 350 ml of soft drink would go for about ₹ 10 to ₹ 12.

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Illustration 4: Sample of the new ration card available on the DFSCA's website. In reality, the new ration cards distributed in Delhi frame the cardholder's portrait in the middle of the card, in between the pictures of rice and wheat. Note here that, on the back of the card, the third column is entitled Aadhaar number. Source: bit.ly/2GVY5La, last consulted on April 13, 2018.

On the back side of the new card, a table of two columns by eight rows contains the names of every household member that has been approved for entitlements by the DFSCA. A similar table appeared on the last page of the old ration card, in which every member of the family was listed for identification purposes. However, on the new ration card, the list of family members determines the total quantity of monthly entitlement that each cardholder can withdraw: the longer the list, the greater the household's entitlement will be. Since the very beginning of the infrastructure of rationing, rations have been distributed on a household basis (see Sriraman 2011). For instance, Manush used to be able to collect 35 kg of rations every month with his old AAY ration card. However, with the passing of the NFSA, only AAY ration card holders were entitled to a bundle of rations totalling 35 kg of food. PR and PR-S household are entitled to monthly rations of 5 kg of wheat and rice per each family member that holds a UID—an *aadhaar* card. To be entitled to 5 kg of rations, to be enrolled in the TPDS, or to be inscribed on a ration card, one must submit a UID. For example, on Pramila and Manush's card, four family members were registered with a UID, entitling the household to 16 kg of wheat and 4 kg of rice, for a total of 20 kg of subsidized food. The table on the old ration cards served no other function than providing proof of identity and residence for each household member. In contrast, the list of

family members on the new card determines the quantity of rations that the cardholder can draw at the FPS. This is not to say that the new ration card cannot be used as an ID. However, to apply for the ration card, one must submit an ID that authenticates one's identity—the *aadhaar* card. Therefore, the utility of the ration card for securing identification in the eyes of the state has become, in the aftermath of the NFSA, much more negligible, since the *aadhaar* card already serves this function.

At the heart of the “end-to-end computerization” strategy to curb leakages and diversion of food grains is the idea that the transformation of the paper ration card into a plastic document makes it much less “susceptible to forgery or mimicry,” to use Hull's words (2012a, 260). In this process, however, the circulation of the new ration card has engendered a set of novel bureaucratic practices that have not only limited possible alternative uses of the ration card, but have also enabled the state to control information and knowledge in new ways. The digitization of information has replaced older writing practices. In the following sections, I provide ethnographic evidence of how the transition to the new ration card has resulted in greater bureaucratic command and unexpected socialities.

4.4 The Making of (Dis)Empowered Bodies

In 2015, the DFSCA deployed a pilot project to digitally monitor the exchange of rations in FPSs. Hand-held machines, called point of sale (PoS) machines, were distributed to 42 ration shop owners across the NCT of Delhi to track the circulation of food along the infrastructure of rationing. Equipped with a print reader and touchscreen and connected to the cellular network, the PoS machine could be used with either the ration card number or the UID number of a ration card holder. Since the name of every household member who has a UID

number is listed on the back of the new ration card, any of these members are eligible to draw rations from a FPS, using either the ration card or their UID number. Once presented with this information, the FPS worker can input the last four digits of the cardholder's number into the PoS device and then ask them to press one of their fingers firmly on to the print reader. Once the device recognizes the cardholder's fingerprint, the screen displays the total quantity of rations that they can buy from the FPS.

As it has been designed, this machine is the latest instrument in a series of identification technologies to be used with the UID number as a replacement for the manual registries that are easily doctored by FPS owners. Used in combination with the new ration card, the overt purpose of this device is to plug leakages from the TPDS. By cross-checking the body's fingerprint with a database secure in the Food Security Portal (see Illustration 5), the device is meant to not only ensure that rations are allocated to empower population members targeted by the TPDS, but to also monitor every single transaction that takes place at FPSs. In theory, the DFSCA validates the exchange of entitlements at FPSs by authenticating ration card holders' body markers or "biometrics." This technology of government enables the DFSCA to control the distribution of rations and adjust the allocation of food grains for the following month according to the stocks remaining in each ration shop.

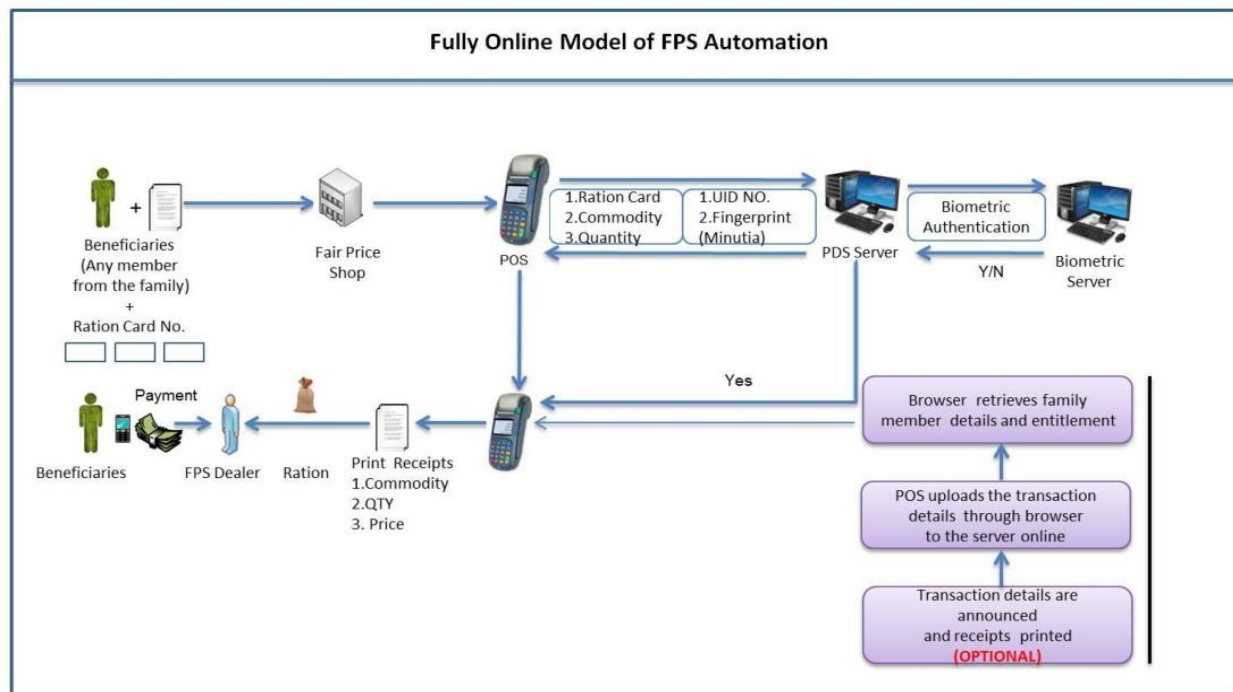


Illustration 5: Source NIC (2015: 14).

The locations of the 42 FPSs that were equipped with the PoS machine had been kept secret by the DFSCA, but they were quite randomly shared with me towards the end of my fieldwork.¹³² I undertook the task of visiting one of these FPSs in Old Delhi, which was rather close to one of my field sites (see Chapter Five). Lost in the maze of small streets and alleys, hidden from sightseeing destinations and culinary treats that attract tourists from all over the world, my research assistant Ritesh and I found the FPS in a dark alley between three- to four-story-high buildings. Above the maroon sliding door, which was locked down, the number of the FPS and the name of the owner were clumsily painted in worn-out white paint. We waited

¹³² I received the list of these FPSs during an impromptu visit to the DFSCA. While working in the Department of Archives of the Delhi government, I met with the director of the department, who also occupied, it turns out, the position of assistant commissioner at the DFSCA. Usually, researchers working in the archives have to submit an application to be approved by the director in order to be able to undertake archival research. These procedures tend to be solely administrative and do not require formal meetings. In my case, however, thinking that my research centred on the postcolonial history of wheat consumption in urban areas, the director sought to meet with me. During our short meeting, in a moment of surprising candour, the director-cum-assistant-commissioner gave me the list of the 42 FPSs. He took good care to mention that the list should not be shared with any activists, fearing that they would disrupt the pilot project.

awkwardly in front of the FPS for a few minutes, until a young teenage boy appeared in a window, two floors above. After a short exchange, in which we informed him of who we were and the reasons for our presence in front of the FPS—which turned out to be his father’s shop—he asked us to come back tomorrow, early in the morning, when we could see the PoS machine in action. The ration shop was closed for the remainder of the day.

Early the next morning, we reached the FPS just as cardholders were beginning to collect their rations. The FPS owner’s son, Ansar, stood at the entrance of the FPS, carefully processing transactions with the newly installed PoS machine in his hand. Before the end-to-end computerization of the infrastructure of rationing had begun, the distribution of rations was conditional on the presentation of a colour-coded ration card, without which entitlements would not be delivered. Typically, a cardholder drew the entitlements allocated to their entire household, but it was also not unusual for people to stand in line and pick up rations for a relative or a neighbour using their card, since over time, FPS owners and cardholders grew familiar with one another. However, the digitization of the new ration cards has made such exchanges impossible. With the PoS machine, the delivery of entitlements is contingent on the authorization of the transaction by the Food Security Portal database, which requires each empowered body to press a finger on the device.

With the purpose of preventing leakages through the manipulation of bogus ration cards (Planning Commission 2005), the PoS machine works in conjunction with the re-materialized ration card to remove the arbitrary decision-making power of FPS owners from transactions and make exchanges more legible to the state and anyone that accesses the database online. This is, in fact, the core rationale for the introduction of the PoS machine to the FPSs. The use of these

devices carefully calibrates the delivery of entitlements according to biometric information displayed by the PoS machine. Since all transactions are computed via the PoS machine, the DFSCA can monitor the stocks available in FPSs and adjust subsequent deliveries of rations accordingly. The PoS machine limits the agential power of FPS owners to conduct or refuse a transaction for a plethora of reasons, in order to serve the purpose, it is believed, of plugging leakages from the infrastructure of rationing and delivering rations to rightful cardholders.

In implementing the end-to-end computerization of the TPDS, the government has heavily relied on the digitization of identification information to plug leakages. In the process, it has re-materialized the ration card in such a way as to ensure that exchange of entitlements are conducted with accountability and transparency. The government's blind faith in this technology opens a window for us to explore how new bureaucratic practices of accountability and transparency are conjured in documents of identity and authentication. As Ritesh and I quickly realized, the re-materialization of the new ration card, in combination with the PoS machine, has changed practices of entitlement exchanges at the FPSs. Out of habit, most likely, each ration card holder handed their ration card to Ansar. However, since the entire infrastructure of rationing now relies on the digitization of information and the use of the UID technology, the material ration card is no longer required for the collection of rations at FPSs. One could, in fact, simply present one's ration card number or UID number to the FPS worker.

Initially, Nandan Nilekani, co-founder of the multinational corporation Infosys and later chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), introduced the *aadhaar* card (and the UID) as a bureaucratic document that could provide formal, and portable, ID to poor members of the population across state boundaries. But to be empowered by the *aadhaar*

program, to get access to rightful entitlements and governmental services, one had to hand over one's biometrics. As Nilekani stated in November 2012: "If you do not have the Aadhaar card, you will not get the right to rights" (Ramakumar 2014). However, as Usha Ramanathan puts it, the function of the UID crept into welfare delivery: "it became a precondition for underserved and socio-economically vulnerable people to get any manner of state assistance" (2017). In compounding the UID with the ration card, the new rationing document became a conduit for the state to control the ways in which the exchange of entitlements were conducted. The new ration card has been designed in such a way as to keep its manipulation to a minimum, while the UID technology seems to have been granted a more important place than the card itself, giving far greater agency to things than FPS owners in the state dispensation of welfare services. Under this regime, only empowered bodies get to benefit from governmental interventions.

After Ansar computed the last four digits of each customer's ration card or UID number, the PoS machine crosschecked the identity of the cardholder with their fingerprint stored in the database on the UIDAI's portal. It was only after the ration card holder had been verified by the system that the PoS machine allowed the delivery of entitlements granted to their household, at the rate of 5 kg of food grains per registered household member. Once the ration card holder had been verified, Ansar selected the amount of rations that would be exchanged, since not all ration card holders chose to buy, at the FPS, the total amount of rations allocated to them. To complete the transaction, each cardholder finally purchased their rations at the prevailing rate and left the FPS with their entitlements and a receipt printed from the PoS machine itself.

If the use of the UID technology helps the government to closely track the circulation

of food grains, it does not guarantee that rations are actually distributed to cardholders. To receive one's entitlement, one must present a readable fingerprint, and as anthropologist Ursula Rao reminds us in her ethnographic account of homeless people's enrolment into the UID technology, this is not always possible:

Lost fingers, damaged fingertips, and rubbed-off skin contours made fingerprints unrecognizable to a system that posits healthy, young bodies as the norm. Age, exposure to nature, and hard manual labour had worn off those marks that were perceived as infallible signs of physical individuality. (2013, 74)

If "unhealthy" bodies face difficulties in acquiring an UID number, they also face challenges in collecting entitlements. It turns out that empowered bodies need to be intelligible and readable by the state's technologies of authentication in order to access entitlements. By design, via its targeting mechanisms, the NFSA has attempted to allocate available entitlements to populations that are more vulnerable to having their fingers ravaged by labour or age. In addition to ill or aged beneficiaries, the targeted populations also encompass a large proportion of men and women who work on a daily basis with dangerous materials and tools. The very occupations that allow these workers to survive in the city may hinder their rightful access to entitlements. In implementing a system in which the material ration card has lost its most basic formal function—enabling access to food subsidies—to readable biometrics, the DFSCA has systematically failed to secure entitlements to members of arguably the most vulnerable populations who cannot provide intelligible identifiable biometrics such as fingerprints. These cardholders can be understood as "disempowered bodies."

Over the course of my short presence at the FPS, I met with two disempowered bodies: one ration card holder was returned home empty-handed and another nearly was. On my first

morning with Ansar, a man in his late 30s came to pick up his rations. The cardholder was a daily-wage worker who most likely had not found anyone to hire him that day. After glancing at his hands, Ansar threw the man a small rag to clean the tips of his fingers before he apposed them to the device's reader. Just when Ansar was about to give up at the fifth attempt, the PoS machine was finally able to read the man's fingerprints. The following day, battling what appeared to be Parkinson's disease, an elderly cardholder made her way to the FPS. She did not wait for long before Ansar brought the hand device to her in the middle of the alley. The PoS machine did register the card number that Ansar computed onto the screen, but it could not read the woman's fingerprints. A quick look at the ration card was all it would take for a person to recognize that the cardholder was in fact entitled to rations, since the picture on the ration card clearly portrayed her. However, Ansar had to wait for the PoS machine to verify her fingerprints before he could hand over her entitlements. Ansar wiped the woman's fingers repeatedly with his rag and asked her to firmly press her thumb on the print reader. The machine failed to read her thumbprint. At the third shot, Ansar actually clamped the woman's shaking right index finger onto the device, to no avail. The young FPS worker tried two other fingerprints before giving up, despite her repeated laments that she and her husband were both enrolled. She left frustrated, not without mentioning that for two consecutive months, she had not been able to collect her rations. She disappeared from the alley with her useless ration card in hand.

Of course, by definition, abnormal and unhealthy bodies are much less numerous than normal and healthy bodies. Statistically speaking, the compounded ration card/UID is likely to function with more people than it does not. But here, I am not making an argument based on statistics. As I have described above, it took very little time in the presence of the PoS machine

for me to see that the new rationing document does not function for some rightful cardholders. For some, the modernization of the TPDS has disempowered rather than empowered them. It is critically important to point out that while, under the promise of empowering bodies, the UID has been designed to eradicate the diversion of food grains from the infrastructure of rationing, it has in practice become a major hindrance to the delivery of entitlements to at least some abnormal bodies *because* of its very design.

Such exclusions are often mundane and go unreported. Yet sometimes, when they are dramatic or spectacular enough, they do make their way into public discourse. For instance, in 2017, in Jharkhand, a young girl died of hunger after her mother's ration card was cancelled because she failed to link it with her UID (Mander 2017). In July 2017, in Karnataka, three members of a *Dalit* family died of starvation. According to the report, they used to have a BPL ration card, but they could not draw rations because they did not have a UID number (The New Indian Express 2017). Similarly, during my fieldwork, I met with an elderly widow, introduced in Chapter One, named Alka, the head of a household of eight members, who had received a photocopy of her ration card 14 months after she had submitted her application.¹³³ She had not received her new plastic ration card, but she had a photocopy approved by clerks from the DFSCA and was able to draw rations from the TPDS. However, after her first successful trip to the FPS, Alka realized that she was only entitled to 5 kg of food grains per month, rather than 40 kg, because none of her children or grand-children had UID numbers. Likewise, where Manush lived, several other mothers were unable to enrol their children on their ration cards because they were too young to have been granted UID numbers. The retina and print scanners used at the time to record biometrics were unable to read the small retina and fingerprints of children aged three

¹³³ Alka was able to draw rations from her FPS 8 months after her application had been approved.

years or less. UID numbers were therefore not granted to children younger than three years old, which substantially reduced the total quantity of entitlements that could be collected by young families. In the next chapter, I explore much further how bureaucratic practices are excluding almost entire families from drawing entitlements at the FPS due to the introduction of the UID technology to the rationing document.

If the PoS device fails to accommodate every empowered cardholder, especially those with abnormal bodies, it also fails to exclude some of those who should by design be omitted from the infrastructure of rationing. Exclusion criteria clearly list a number of situations in which ration card applicants should be automatically denied entitlements delivered through the TPDS. The exclusion criteria for the TPDS are: possession of a four-wheel vehicle; receipt of subsidized food under a different food-related welfare program; employment in the formal sector (paying taxes), including any governmental body; an electric connection that consumes more than 2 KW per month; and ownership of land of categories A to E.¹³⁴ However, if an applicant who should be excluded from the distribution of entitlements successfully obtains a ration card, either through relations of patronage or errors of exclusion, the PoS machine is unable to detect what are, in theory, leakages from the TPDS.

For example, on the same morning that I had seen that elderly woman turned away, another woman arrived at the FPS in a car. Ownership of a car is one of the exclusion criteria of the TPDS. She presented her ration card to Ansar, who inputted her number and pressed her right thumb on the reader to identify her. The PoS device noted that the ration card holder was entitled to 35 kg of food grains, which means that her household comprised seven people covered by the

¹³⁴ In Delhi, the NCT is divided into eight different categories (A to G) that are scaled according to the market value of land and property.

TPDS. Once the transaction was completed and the ration card holder was far enough away that she could no longer hear us, Ansar muttered that she worked as a personal assistant for a member of the legislative assembly (MLA) and was not, therefore, supposed to draw rations. Since bureaucrats are, in theory, automatically excluded from the TPDS, the cardholder would have had to circumscribe the rules of ration card allocation twice to receive one.

Ansar's allegations were difficult to substantiate, but according to his father, Aftab, ration card holders who should be excluded from the TPDS are easy to recognize and more numerous than one may think:

Aftab: In this circle, there are 20,000 cards, and 16,000 of them have some links in the government. How come you are poor when you are coming in a vehicle of one lakh rupees [₹ 100,000] to take rations? How is that person poor? They took the rights of real poor people. This is the reality. You have seen it [referring to the MLA personal assistant]. Government [officials] gives them ration cards. Poor are not getting it, but wealthy people have it.

Guillaume: But how can you know that a person is too rich to be entitled to a ration card or work for the government?

Aftab: Face! Look at their face. Face can tell you reality. Face is one thing that can tell you the truth. I have 40 years of experience. Trust me. People do not know their MLA [member of the legislative assembly] as much as they know me.

Strangely enough, this is how the PoS machine functions. Just like Aftab used to observe people to judge whether or not they should be entitled to rations before the pilot-project, the PoS machine scans people's bodies to authenticate their rights to entitlements. Unlike Aftab, however, the PoS machine cannot decipher, or nor can it register, situations that exclude rightful cardholders from their entitlements or grant access to rations to fraudulent cardholders.

According to Aftab, the end-to-end computerization process has not stopped the distribution of ration cards to people who are not, in theory, targeted by the NFSA. These sorts of

leakages do and will continue to occur once the end-to-end computerization process has been fully implemented (Drèze and Khera 2018; Kotwal and Ramaswami 2018; Mehtal 2018).

Expanding nonhuman agency to curb practices of leakages has been central to the rearrangement of the infrastructure of rationing in New Delhi. However, in the process, the use of the UID technology has hindered, rather than facilitated, access to rationed food for at least some members of vulnerable populations.

4.4.1 Nonhuman Agency to Eradicate Corruption

The following day, we arrived early at the FPS, only to realize that it was closed once again. Ansar saw us from his window and came downstairs to welcome us. The PoS machine had stopped functioning for a reason that Ansar had ignored, so his father had decided to close shop. At that time, the daily maintenance of the PoS machine was the sole responsibility of FPS owners. The SIM card, used to connect the machine to the Internet and thus to the Food Security Portal, had to be paid for by each shop owner. Other costs, such as the electricity needed to charge the device or the rolls of paper needed to print transaction receipts, which had never been employed by Ansar, were also the responsibility of the shop owner to cover. However, when the PoS device did not function, the FPS owner was expected to contact the DFSCA and wait for further instructions. In the meantime, since the device's use was mandatory for FPS owners that were participating in the pilot project, the owner could not distribute rations to cardholders. This was a cause for concern among cardholders who had not yet collected their rations for the month.

Ansar introduced us to his father, Aftab, who ran his FPS from his electronic store, which was located on a busy street of Old Delhi. The FPS was located behind the electronic store in the same building, which was owned and occupied by Aftab's family. Aftab's father acquired

his first license to run a FPS from the DFSCA in 1967. At the time, the license cost ₹ 500. Now, every three years, Aftab renews his license for ₹ 10,000. Over the same period of time, FPSs have become much more profitable.

Since the FPS was closed, many ration card holders walked into his electronic store to ask questions about their rations. Many others called Aftab directly on one of his phones. They were worried that they would not be able to collect their rations that month, since the PoS machine had stopped functioning. For example, I observed the following exchange between Aftab and one ration card holder:

Cardholder: It is the last day of the month and we will not get ration. Last time, the same happened . . .

Aftab: You will get the ration. The machine is not working right now. My son has gone to get it fixed. But it's coming, it's coming. Please don't worry, I would not let you stand in line. Please come after 2:00 pm.

The ration card holder looked angry. At her side, her daughter, holding a new ration card and an old plastic bag, kept her eyes on Aftab.

Cardholder: My mother-in-law cannot walk and my daughter lives with her grandmother, but when she comes, she never gets rations. So tell me, what should I do now?

Aftab: See, your mother-in-law needs to leave her home and to get the rations herself because now, it is biometric. First listen to me and don't get angry. Go and tell the commissioner or minister to kill us [to terminate our FPS]. My son and I are running here and there to give ration to you, people. I suggested them [the government] to give ration directly, but they asked me to not give without the machine and my son has gone to get that. I am fighting for you and asking them to give you ration for the previous month. This is what I am doing for you. Now tell me what else do you have to say? People, please come after 2:00 pm.

She grumbled a few words of frustration and, followed by her daughter, awkwardly exited the narrow electronic store, manoeuvring between empty chairs, the glass counter protecting the items for sale, and the door. Once the door closed behind them, Aftab turned to me and said: "I

told the same thing to the assistant commissioner [of the DFSCA] yesterday. We are tired of this. We are ready to resign. We can't hear abuses anymore.” Up until the end of that month, he was unable to distribute entitlements to his cardholders.

There are many FPS owners who fear the introduction of the new ration card and the PoS machine. When I first attempted to meet with FPS owners, many of them showed me a medical declaration, signed by a doctor, that exempted them from selling rations. None of these FPS owners did in fact suffer from medical conditions, but several FPS owners kept their medical note handy as a way to counter the government's plan to introduce the PoS machines. FPS owners were hoping at the time to compel the Delhi government to bring the pilot project to an end if enough FPS owner would stop selling rations all at once. “If [after the pilot project] that machine comes, then all the shops will close,” said Aftab. He looked at a text he had just received from one of his cardholders and then told me:

These owners are applying for medical, but none of them are actually sick. Let the machines come, and you will see that all these shops will shut. They do not want it to work. See, the new card is similar to an ATM card. In most FPS, you just need to put the number [in the registry]. You use the card, but you don't use thumbprint [scanner]. There is no verification. You can use anybody's thumbprint. Any person. No verification.

While it is true that the DFSCA may send inspectors to verify any FPS's registry, in reality, according to Aftab, many of these inspections are feeble, if not futile. Without a PoS machine, then, an FPS owner can more easily pocket some of the rations.

Aftab: Inspectors from the DFSCA come for verification, but FPS owners give them money, and then they go. Whatever the inspectors do, the FPS owners pay them. If they ask for like one lakh [₹ 100,000], owners give them ₹ 10,000. If you want to stop corruption, the only solution is the introduction of machines. No improvement without that.

Guillaume: You can't improve the PDS without using these machines?

Aftab: See, you received rations for 1,000 people, but you distributed only to 600. In your books you wrote that you distributed to all, but how can you distribute to all when 400 didn't receive anything? Suppose that I am poor and can't come to get the ration. [With the PoS machine,] the owner can only use my name when my card is with him. How can the machine run without my card? What is happening now? You come or not . . . the FPS owner makes an entry in the registry, and it is done. Your ration is gone.

At the heart of the end-to-end computerization of the TPDS, the removal of human agency in the exchange of entitlements constitutes the nodal element that underpins the overhaul of the rationing document. One could argue, as I did when we spoke with Aftab, that if the government operated FPSs, rather than licensing them to private entrepreneurs, latent practices of corruption could perhaps be better curtailed without having to introduce these PoS machines. Aftab disagreed. About a decade before our discussion, Aftab recalled, a few FPSs in the city were under the administration of the Delhi Department of State Civil Supplies Corporation Limited (DSCSC). These government-owned FPSs were eventually all shut down because they were deemed to be too expensive to be operated.¹³⁵ Yet according to Aftab, these FPSs were actually very lucrative for the operators: in addition to securing a governmental salary, these officials pocketed profits from selling a portion of delivered food rations on the black market.

During the course of our discussion, Aftab remained surprisingly loquacious about the informal practices that underpinned the operations at his FPS. Like other FPS owners, Aftab used to draw an income from his FPS in two distinct ways. The formal business model of each FPS entails the collection of commissions on all rations sold on a pro-rata basis, called margin money. FPS owners buy and sell entitlements at the fixed rate set by law, and they draw income from the

¹³⁵ A senior official working for the DSCSC later confirmed that these government-owned FPSs were shut down because they were too costly to be maintained.

margin money they collect. Since 1997, when the PDS was overhauled into a targeted system, FPS owners located in Delhi received ₹ 35 for every quintal (100 kg) of rations sold each month to ration card holders. In the wake of the NFSA, the Delhi government doubled the margin money paid to FPS licensees to ₹ 70/quintal. Since the profitability of an FPS depends directly on the quantity of ration cards attached to it, owners typically try to maximize the number of ration cards linked with their shops. By negotiating with bureaucrats from the DFSCA to have as many cards as possible linked to their FPSs, some ration shop owners see the profitability of their FPSs increase. According to Aftab, it is not unusual for FPS owners to bribe government officials in order to receive a larger share of ration cards and raise more profits. The second way to draw income from FPSs is to divert food grains to the black market, notably by drawing from APL rations that have not been collected by cardholders, a practice that used to be exercised, to various degrees, by every FPS owner in New Delhi.¹³⁶ Typically then, FPS owners profit from their FPSs by collecting margin money on rations sold, as recorded in their registries, and by diverting a fraction of entitlements to the black market.

By the time of our interview, Aftab had not received his margin money from the DFSCA for the past three or four months. Aftab's businesses, including his FPS, had been very profitable over the past decades, and by his own admission, he had easily been able to absorb the day-to-day expenditures of the FPS. This is not necessarily the case for all FPS owners *if* they do not engage in practices of patronage. "Even you, me, or anyone else . . . you incur expenses to run a shop, right? So how can you run it properly? No one will do it for free. The government is

¹³⁶ During the course of my fieldwork, two different FPS owners told me that they used to sell the remainder of their APL rations on the black market at the end of the month. The most corrupt owners sell the entirety of their food rations on the black market, leaving cardholders without entitlements at the end of the month. I also witnessed FPS owners delivering jute bags full of wheat and rice to surrounding shops in plain sight.

making us do this.”¹³⁷ This was, according to Aftab, one of the reasons why practices of corruption were so widespread at the time of our interview.

However, financial survival is certainly not the main rationale for pocketing rations from the TPDS. Greed, obviously, drives FPS owners to redirect food rations to the black market. In the capital, Aftab maintained that several FPS owners rent their licenses to third parties that operate their shops. According to Aftab, this is rather advantageous for FPS licensees, since they benefit from the FPS without having any involvement in its day-to-day operations. Aftab told me:

In most cases, the owners give the shop to the third party and pay them ₹ 20,000 every month. It is up to the third party to show a profit. And if some verification happens, then there will be corruption. They give money to inspectors.

In addition to all the fees associated with the management of a FPS, this additional rental charge compels, according to Aftab, the third party operators to maximize the profitability of their ration shops. “There is no other way,” Aftab concluded, “than to make bogus slips and to doctor the registry.” This is why, according to Aftab, the introduction of the PoS machine and the new ration card may well be the only way to force FPSs to adopt transparent practices by limiting the agency of their operators to divert rations to increase their profit margins.

In the ensuing months, Aftab stopped partaking in the pilot project and reverted back to the use of manual registries to record entitlement transactions. In the year after my fieldwork, in October 2016, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal confirmed that every FPS across the NCT would be equipped with a PoS machine as early as March 31, 2017. However, since different departments of the Delhi administration could not agree on the terms of implementation of the

¹³⁷ This does not necessarily mean that running a FPS has become unprofitable. It was, in fact, quite the opposite for Aftab, who had, over the years, bought a few properties in South Delhi thanks to his FPS. However, the implementation of the new ration card may well make it much less lucrative for FPS owners.

pilot project, the distribution of PoS machines to every FPS was postponed (Goswami 2017).

Compounding the UID technology with the ration card was the cornerstone of the end-to-end computerization strategy set to curb leakages and ensure the delivery of entitlements to cardholders at FPSs. In re-materializing and compounding the rationing document with the UID technology, the government has sought to alter the exchange of entitlements in such a way as to minimize human agency and emphasize nonhuman agencies to ensure transparency and accountability in the provision of welfare services and goods. This was indeed Aftab's opinion: the PoS machine, used with the new ration card, is perhaps the association of things that can prevent FPS owners from finding loopholes in the system and from benefiting from them. However, for the pilot project to work, ration card holders must navigate bureaucratic worlds, avoid the pitfalls associated with the exchange of entitlements, and give their biometric information to the state to access their rightful entitlements. While it is true that the PoS machines force FPS owners to adopt practices that are deemed both morally and legally respectable, in no way does the state impose on them the same burden of accountability and transparency that it does on cardholders. As covered in the previous section, the circulation of the new ration card generates systematic exclusions from rightful entitlements that are not alleviated by the use of the PoS machine. In the last section of this chapter, I will discuss how the re-materialization of the rationing document has had unexpected effects on the lives of some *basti*-dwellers that rely on the ration card's "material embodiment of the right to dwelling" (Das 2011, 327). To pursue this argument, I will turn back to Manush and his own understanding of the value of the new ration card.

4.5 Manush's Old AAY Card

When the new ration cards were put into circulation, the old colour-coded ration cards were discontinued. In effect, the deployment of the new rationing document in the population destabilized a relatively static and stable network of things and people that was widely understood to secure permanent residence in the city. To illustrate this, I return to Manush. I will describe how his old AAY rationing document used to secure his position in the city. I will examine how he has navigated and understood the realities of the Indian bureaucracy and how he has manipulated the things he owns in order to secure his footing in the city. In so doing, I wish to illustrate how the circulation of the new ration card has re-arranged the scope of action of objects that have historically secured a space in the city for Manush.

After Manush bought his 16 kg of wheat from Ashok's FPS, he made sure to slide his new ration card back into its protective green sleeve and put it securely in his old leather wallet. As Pramila stepped away from the queue to head back home, Manush, still frustrated by the quality of their rations, began to voice his grievances louder:

My [old ration] card has been cancelled for two years. [To receive this ration card,] they [the government officials] asked for ID proof three to four times. They said they keep losing it. [And now, with this new card], we got [only] 16 kg of wheat for four people!

Manush had waited in line for two days to submit his application for a new card in the middle of the winter. At the end of the first day, the officials, according to Manush, had "pushed them out of the office and closed the door on them." Manush came back the following day, waited for a few hours, and paid ₹ 1,000 when he submitted his application. He received his new ration card by mail 11 months later. On the card, unlike those of most of his neighbours, his family's two youngest daughters were registered.

To Manush's dismay, the FPS owner was decidedly unmoved by his grievances and dismissed the nature of his complaints: “But you got it in the end, didn't you [*ant tum mil to gaya na*]?” Ashok had other rations to distribute and, quite frankly, did not seem to care much about Manush's pleas. He quickly dismissed him: “There is no use telling me this [*mujhe bolne ka koi fayda nahi hai*].” Still, Manush persisted. To me, seemingly, he added: “Nobody ever helps you. You stand four to six hours in the cold in a line.” As Manush gently pushed me, he added:

Then, they say, ‘Go away, come tomorrow, come in a week.’ Should we work, or should we stand in a line? They think we are poor people and tell us they don't have time for us. They don't care for us. They closed the door on us. It was so cold, we couldn't even eat, and we'd have to spend hours just going to the office and waiting.

Pramila and Manush finally left the FPS with their 16 kg of food rations. A few days later, Pramila brought the wheat to a mill located not so far away from her home. But the mill owner refused to wash and grind the wheat into flour (*atta*) because he considered the food grains to be not even good enough for dogs. Given the hordes of stray dogs inhabiting the streets of Delhi, ready to eat anything handed to them, such characterization spoke volumes about the quality of the food.

A few days later, near Nizamuddin Dargah in South Delhi, I ran across Manush talking with a couple of men around a small fire in the middle of a little *basti*, located at a walking distance from Ashok's FPS, close to the open sewers. Around a cup of *chai* prepared by Pramila, we began to chat about Manush's experience at the FPS and his ration card. As Pramila put it bluntly, “Without the card, we won't have a *jhuggi*, and we won't get food as well.” For Manush, Pramila, and other *basti*-dwellers, the ration card is an object that can mediate not only access to welfare, but also their right of belonging in the city (see Das 2011).

Manush is vocally impaired, which makes him slightly difficult to understand at times. Years before, Manush claims, he had set up a bicycle shop next to a post office. Borrowing money from friends and relatives, he bought a pump, a cart, and some tools to fix bicycles on the side of the road. It did not take long before local business owners complained about his activities. According to Manush, during the night, police officers and local business owners smashed his cart. Frustrated, Manush found the police officers in the morning and allegedly “negotiated” with them, which ended up in a one-way fight. Manush got his jaw broken. Without any income to pay medical bills, he never went to the hospital, resulting in impaired speech. Hot tempered, he never allowed his vocal impairment to stop him from letting anybody know what he thought.

In 1988, Manush's father commanded his son to marry Pramila, who grew up in a small village near Faridabad. The newly wed couple moved to the *basti* where I first found him, right across the street from Manush's parents' home. Caught in between the school's 10-foot-tall wall and an open sewer, built around a *dhalao* (garbage disposal), the *jhuggi* multiplied over the decades. Once he saw people settling across from his parents' home, Manush quickly leapt at the occasion. He found himself a spot and moved with his wife to the *basti*. He built the *jhuggi* himself, initially using scraps of woods, tarpaulins, and bamboo that he had collected from around the neighbourhood. Then over the years, like his neighbours, he transformed his *kachcha* (temporary) house into a *pukka* (solid) one. He erected brick walls, poured cement on the floor, and levelled it up. At first, like everybody else in the *basti*, he stole power from the electrical network. Once he got caught, however, the company installed a meter right next to his front door. Monthly bills never fail to be delivered.

In his *jhuggi*, Manush became a father of two daughters and one son. Life in the *basti*

was not easy on the family. In the early years, they regularly ate no more than once a day. Rolled up *roti*, served with salt, was a recurrent meal. A few years before I met them, their son passed away. Manush and Pramila did not share many details about his premature death, besides the fact that they had not been able to afford healthcare. These days, their socioeconomic situation had improved somewhat, but Manush's debts continued to run high. With two daughters getting older, and with little with which to construct enviable dowries, Manush's debts are likely to escalate.

In the past, Manush had spent his days waiting for someone from the middle-class neighbourhoods around the *basti* to hire him to clean latrines, the drain, or the sewer, a line of work typically reserved for the *Dalit*. Once in a while, he had been contracted to do some other manual labour. By the time I met him, he considered himself too old to clean latrines and sewers. Instead, he was making a living by peddling small electric materials to local residents—selling light bulbs, wires, and fuses from the area in front of his parents' home, just outside of the *basti*.

When his father passed away, Manush moved his entire family—Pramila and his two daughters—into his parents' house to take care of his mother. Together, they shared two beds in a one-bedroom and one-kitchen house. On a typical day, Manush would step out the house around 10:00 am, draw a small chair behind him, and open up the panel of a large white cupboard that he had affixed to the space where a window used to be. He would sit there all day in the little alley, waiting for customers and chain smoking *bidi*. In the winter, he would make a fire in the alley to warm up. In the summer, he would seek shade to cope with the dreadful heat. To fight boredom, he would come and go into the *basti* to chat with his neighbours, which is where I found him.

Manush did not always answer every question that I asked him candidly. Fully aware of my position as a researcher and my access to the Indian civil society or even some government

officials, he tended to present himself in a rather positive light. But he was very generous with his time. During one of our chats conducted around the fire in the cold afternoon of Delhi's winter, Manush mentioned that he stored his electric material in his old *jhuggi*. This came as a surprise to me, since I assumed that when he moved into his parents' house, he had either sold or put the *jhuggi* to rent. We left Manush's shop in front of his parents' home so that Manush could show me his *jhuggi*, which was visibly barren and uninhabited. The *jhuggi* was in poor shape, but Manush said he continued to pay his electric bill every month and refused to rent it to other tenants.

Without the *jhuggi*, Manush would not have been able to receive a ration card. After the NFSA was enacted, his mother's old ration card was cancelled because she owned property in an area—Manush's current residence—that automatically excluded her from the TPDS. Even though Manush's *jhuggi* was located a stone's throw away from his parents' house, just down the street in the informal settlement, Pramila and Manush were eligible for a new ration card because their little *pukka* house made them *basti*-dwellers. Thanks to their unused little *jhuggi*, Pramila and Manush were able to receive a new ration card.

If a *jhuggi* can procure a ration card, a ration card can also secure a home. As it stood for Manush, the family's old ration card and *jhuggi* remained important because both objects situated them within the informal settlement as far back as the early 1990s. If the *basti* is ever demolished by the Delhi Development Agency (DDA), their barren *jhuggi* may help them relocate to a government-sponsored resettlement lot. Since the 1990s, the Delhi government has tasked the DDA with making Delhi into what D. Asher Ghertner calls a “more beautiful urban future . . . [a] world-class city” (2015, 9). The presence of informal settlements, and their

residents, was cast as an unfortunate nuisance and obstacle to the realization of this project. The DDA was charged with surveying the residents of informal settlements, developing resettlement colonies for them, determining the eligibility of *basti*-dwellers for resettlement lots, and destroying informal settlements. Documents were (and still are) key instruments for accomplishing this mandate. Ration cards issued since the late 1980s can link the holder to a physical address in the city; these rationing documents thus enable the DDA to produce knowledge on registered *basti* residents and, incidentally, to enact a biopolitical duty of care for registered *basti*-dwellers. As Ghertner reports, holding an old ration card “confirmed continuous occupation of land, giving settlers greater protection against uncompensated eviction” (2015, 53). In the event that a *basti* gets bulldozed, therefore, an old ration card holds the power to protect the life of the holder and her livelihood. As Pramila told us, “If we don’t have the card, we won’t get a place to live here. A card guarantees a *jhuggi*.” This is precisely why IDs were so important to Manush's family. They acted as proof of residence, but also as a safeguard against the destruction of almost everything they owned.¹³⁸

Once back in his parents’ home, Manush led us to his mother’s bedroom, where she was napping on one of the beds, wrapped under a fading yellow blanket. Manush picked up a white plastic bag from the closet, pulled out a mass of papers, and laid them down on the other bed. He handed me a small metallic object, a V. P. Singh token, carefully wrapped in a small handkerchief. V. P. Singh was the 7th prime minister of India, who won the general elections of 1989 at the head of an anti-Congress coalition, called the Nationalist Front, which unified the

¹³⁸ Not all of Manush’s neighbours agreed with him. Many feared the destruction of the *basti*. When entire livelihoods are destroyed by the state’s bulldozers, schemes of resettlement fail to successfully relocate entire communities. What’s more, many of the *basti* inhabitants had for decades constructed a life that was, relatively speaking, much more comfortable than those in busier and more confined illegal settlements. In addition to living in a somewhat quiet space, many women in the *basti* worked as housemaids and earned decent pay. Yet for Manush, the destruction of the *basti* would be seen as an opportunity.

forces of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and left-leaning political parties. Singh's government developed a strategy to assemble knowledge of *basti*-dwelling residents in the country (Ghertner 2010). While prior surveys had centralized information about land occupation, surveyors under Singh were deployed with the task of diagnosing issues of urban encroachment, in order to design strategies to open a path to urban relocation and self-improvement (Ghertner 2010, 190). In exchange for participation in the survey, each household was allocated what came to be called the "V. P. Singh token." Initially nailed to the doorframe of a *jhuggi*, this round metallic object granted residents of urban *basti* a government-issued proof of residence.

Since that time, Manush had carefully removed his token from the door frame of his old *jhuggi* and treasured it with the rest of his documents. However, without a *jhuggi* in the *basti* and an adequate ID placing him and his family in the *basti* as far back as possible, Manush's V. P. Singh token would have little worth. The token served as a formal proof of residence, but not as a form of ID like ration cards. This was precisely why Manush still held onto his old AAY pink ration card, along with photocopies of older ration cards dating as far back as 1990. In the winter of 2013, a few months before the enactment of the NFSA, Manush's FPS owner told him that his AAY ration card had been cancelled without giving him many more details. Frustrated, he headed to the local DFSCA field office to enquire about the issue further. He left without much explanation. But on the second page of his old AAY ration card, a bureaucrat had written in English: "As per computer data bank, this is not a valid ration card." Following this note are the unreadable initials of the officer who wrote it. Manush did not know how to read or write, but he understood what the note meant. In addition to preventing him from collecting entitlements at the FPS, the cancellation of his old AAY ration card put in jeopardy his chances of government-

sponsored relocation if his *jhuggi* was ever to be destroyed.

Given that resettlement lots are limited, according to Manush, holding an old valid ration card would grant him a better chance of being resettled. However, since his old AAY ration card had been inscribed with a message of invalidation by the state, Manush was afraid that it did not hold the power it once had. He was afraid that his family would thus be excluded from future resettlement schemes. As it stood, his old pink ration card appeared to be a bogus document and, accordingly, might not carry the same power in the eyes of the state (Das 2004). Here, the inscription of the state mattered, since it was the government's marks on Manush's ration card that enabled the document—or not—to draw other objects within the realm of welfare assistance (Sriraman 2013).

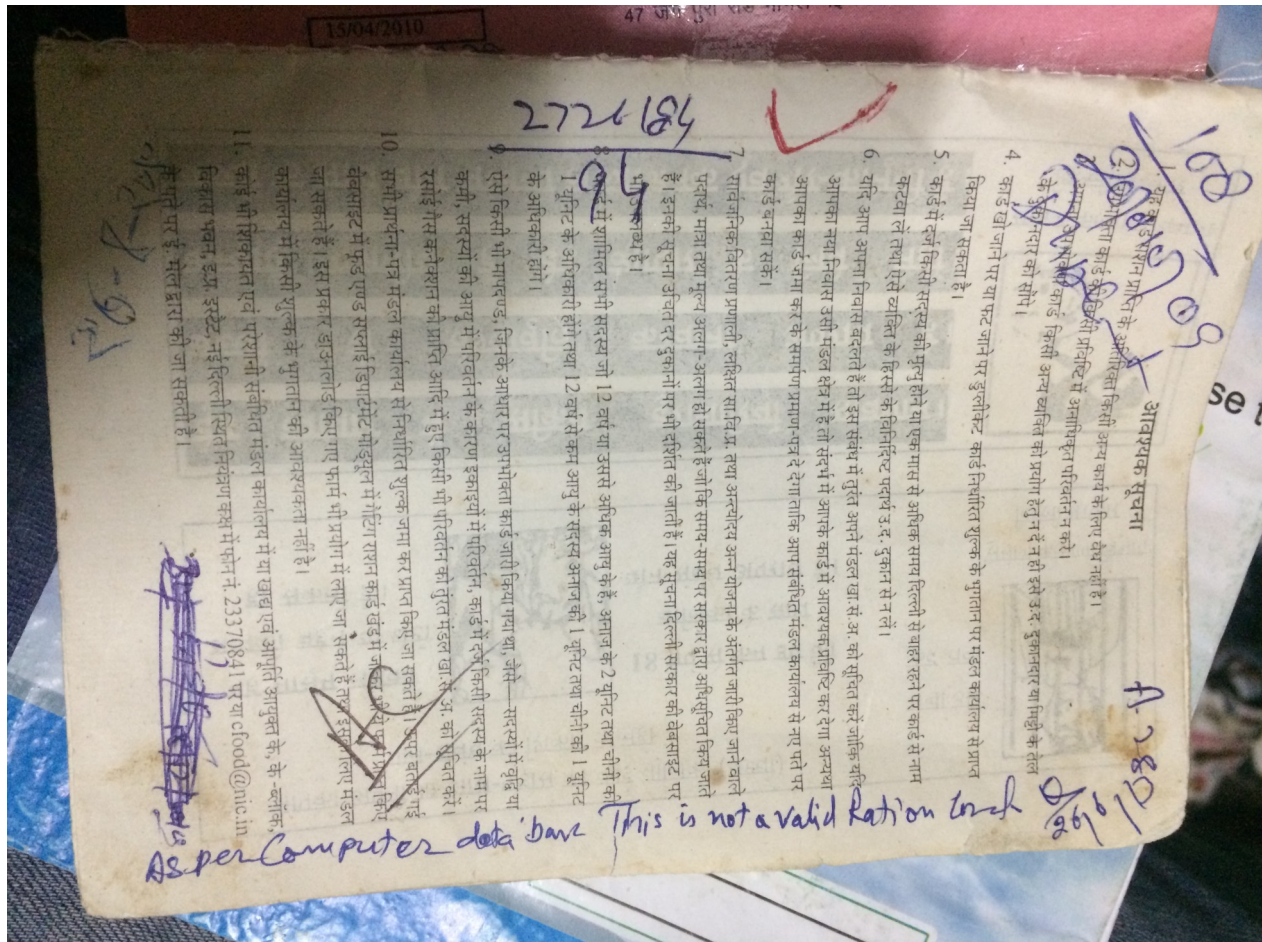


Illustration 6: Manush's old AAY ration card. It reads: "As per computer database, this is not a valid ration card."

As a last recourse, Manush decided to address his grievances to the DFSCA in writing. Trying to obtain a bogus ration card was out of the question, since only a genuine ration card would allow him to partake in future resettlement schemes if his *jhuggi* got bulldozed. However, in his words, "everybody works together to make things really difficult." First, Manush knocked on his MLA's door to share his concerns, to no avail. Then, since he could not write, he paid a friend to type a letter addressed to the DFSCA. In the letter, Manush communicated his level of poverty, which should have confirmed, according to him, his absolute need for an AAY ration card, despite his propensity to provide for his family by working very hard: "Saahab mein ek

gareeb aadmi houn. Mein mehanat mazdouree karake apna tatha apne parivaar paalan pochen kar rahaa houn.” In the end, however, he recognized the power dynamics between the bureaucratic state and himself and plead for mercy to receive what should have been his in the first place: “*aapse haath jodkar prarthna hei ki mere raashan kaard par jo bhi kamiyaa hei ouse pouri karabaaee jaae aapkee ati krapaa hogee. Dhanyevaada.*”

The letter was sent in March 2013, a month after Manush realized that his card had been discontinued. However, he told me he had never heard back from the DFSCA:

- Manush: It’s been more than a year and half. When they demolish the *jhuggi*, it’ll be a huge problem!
- Guillaume: But you don’t know when. It can take 5 years or 11 years or 30 years.
- Manush: It can break at any time. I have submitted all my papers.
- Guillaume: I am not sure I understand. Maybe they’re just going to destroy the *jhuggi* and then nothing will happen.
- Manush: No, this won’t happen. The card acts like an ID proof. Those who have lived in *jhuggi* for 5-10 years will get a new place. The value is in the card. When the *jhuggi* breaks down, we’ll get a place with the help of the card. The *jhuggi* in itself is of no value, but it could help us to get a bigger place.
- Guillaume: So what about the new ration card? Does it replace the old one?
- Manush: This [pointing to the new ration card he just received] doesn’t have any value. I’ll just get a small place. Plus, you don’t get a lot of rations on that, like sugar or oil.

This rather cryptic response was clarified later by the *pradhan* (leader, chef) of the *basti*. In the event of re-location to a government-owned settlement, the *basti*-dwellers believed that the oldest cardholders of the *basti* would be granted priority over newer cardholders. This is why Manush's old AAY ration card was so valuable to him: it located him in the *basti* as far back as 1990, amongst the oldest residents of the *basti*. To him, the old AAY ration card that he had renewed every five years acted as a safeguard against the destruction of his home and held the possibility of his family’s relocation to an even larger place that would host his mother more comfortably.

But since his AAY card had been declared bogus in 2013, it was uncertain whether his old rationing document still bore the same power.

Manush was certain of one thing: his new ration card did not hold the same “material embodiments of the right to dwelling” (Das 2011, 327) as his old card had. His new ration card authenticated his identity, but so did his *aadhaar* card, which was, in 2014, much more valued as an ID and consequently more widely used by bureaucratic authorities. The new ration cards have been designed, allocated, and distributed with the latent purpose of abating alternative uses of ration cards. In the aftermath of the TPDS in 1997, the Government of India issued a Control Order (2001) with directives regarding the responsibilities of state governments in the economy of ration cards of different categories (AAY, APL, BPL; Sriraman 2014). In the Annexure, the Control Order states that “ration cards shall not be used as documents of identity” (Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, GoI 2001, 21), thus indicating that ration cards “cannot be used for anything other than the withdrawal of rations” (Sriraman 2014, 227).

In practice, however, the widespread use of ration cards as IDs persisted well into the 2010s, since no alternative had been made available to large segments of the population, particularly people who inhabited spaces in the margins of the city, in *basti*. With the introduction of the *aadhaar* card and the UID technology, among other forms of IDs, alternative uses of ration cards could finally be abrogated. In making the UID technology mandatory for accessing welfare entitlements and services, the government ostensibly helped to restrict the use of the new ration card to the collection of entitlements alone. In doing so, as Manush argued, the state stripped the new ration card of some of the value that the old ration card had. This is especially the case when entitlements collected in FPSs are not even good enough for stray dogs.

4.6 Concluding Remarks: Tying It Up Together

According to Hull's conceptualization of documentation, ration cards are documents, rather than interpretative objects ready to be read by anthropologists, inasmuch as they act as “mediators that shape the significance of signs inscribed on them and their relations with the objects they refer to” (2012a, 253). Building on Hull in this chapter, I have explored what the ration card does in different contexts, examining the kinds of relations and socialities that are constituted through the circulation of this rationing document. For Hull (2012b), attending to the arrangement of such socialities—or “reassembling [of] the social” as Latour (2005) puts it—is a methodological endeavour that allows us to explore the relations between rule, technology, and materiality. “Documents,” Hull argues, “are not simply instruments of bureaucratic organizations, but rather are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, and even the organizations themselves” (2012a, 253).

For Hull, paper becomes documents or graphic artifacts once information inscribed on it generates a certain agency to draw a range of persons and things within bureaucratic control and coordination, which in turn, constitute the scope of action of the bureaucracy. Hull explores the question of materiality and bureaucratic power because documents are writable and recordable objects that circulate along networks of human and nonhuman actors. Similarly, Mathur (2012) and Sharma (2013) examine how documents, and their paper quality, are constitutive actors in the making of transparent bureaucratic worlds. However, once in circulation, these paper documents are governmentalized, and their scope of action on practices is confined to bureaucratic proceduralism. The deployment of rights-based legislation depends on the ability of the government to generate, to circulate, and to manipulate a vast quantity of paper

documents, which in practice as Mathur shows, hinders rather than facilitates the implementation of such laws. In this chapter, I built on Hull's methods and Mathur's and Sharma's insights to investigate how the re-materialization of paper documents into a plastic form may have a distinct impact on bureaucratic practices and other socialities historically situated outside of bureaucratic rule. More concisely, I examined how the re-materialized ration card shapes, and is shaped by, an association of humans and things.

The new ration cards, as I hope to have shown, have helped to rearrange practices of ration delivery at the FPS. With the introduction of these cards, government officials have affirmed their faith in the idea that human agency is responsible for practices of corruption and patronage, a problem that can only be solved with the intervention of nonhuman actors to replace human ones. The new ration card was designed to transport the ideals of transparency and accountability into the FPSs, but in effect, it has not only distorted these intended effects, it has also put the onus of these ideals on cardholders' shoulders. It is a technology of government that enacts realities, makes knowledge, and seeks to create novel yet mundane practices of entitlement distribution—which in practice, fall short of the purported goals of the NFSA: to secure food entitlements and, more generally, improve lives. While it is true that the use of the new ration card and PoS machine may well discipline FPS owners to curb practices of patronage during the exchange of entitlements, it does not prevent all errors of inclusion or exclusion from access to rightful entitlements. In fact, the end-to-end computerization of the TPDS has generated systematic exclusions from the system that were nonexistent before the NFSA.

In the economy of the new ration card, the onus of accountability and transparency lies primarily with cardholders, rather than with FPS owners or government officials. It is true that in

the context of the pilot project, FPS owners are compelled to use the PoS machine. However, they do not have to wait in line for days and pay (illegal) fees to submit applications for new cards, nor do they have to hand their biometrics over to the state in exchange for welfare services and goods.

One could arguably maintain that the new ration cards can be used as IDs, like the old ration cards were. However, as Manush's experiences show, the re-materialized ration cards do not simply replace old ones; rather, they alter the ways in which the rationing document can be used. While the old ration cards used to embody the “right to dwelling” (Das 2011, 327) and had serious implications for *basti*-dwellers such as Manush, the new ration cards do not mediate the same kind of relation, even though they carry the same inscriptions. In its increasing reliance on the UID technology, the government seems to have succeeded in taming the ID function of the new ration cards, while emphasizing instead the use of *aadhaar* cards.

That being said, the new ration cards have remained coveted objects in the Indian capital. After all, they enable access to the infrastructure of rationing, and many have attempted, rightly so, to fully take advantage of their right to food entitlement. The next chapter attempts to capture how the bureaucratic procedures deployed to grant access to the re-materialized ration cards are fraught with challenges for the empowered bodies the NFSA is seeking to shape.

Chapter 5: Instruments of Government as Techno-Political Sites: Towards the Construction of an Association of Humans and Things

In the previous chapter, I framed the ration card as a rationing document that brings under the confines of governmental power an association of humans and things. I examined how the overhaul of the ration card has reconfigured practices of entitlement collection, as well as governmental identification. But to partake in these practices, to collect one's rations guaranteed by the right to food entitlement, one has first to get a hold of one of these mundane, yet coveted, rationing documents. This is not a simple task. In this chapter, I ethnographically explore the tactics deployed by interlocutors I encountered to successfully navigate the bureaucratic world and get what is rightfully theirs—the ration cards and rations guaranteed to them by the right to food entitlement.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, in the era of neoliberal governmentality, the bureaucratic government increasingly relies on nonhuman actors to distribute entitlements to the targeted population. To plug leakages and to curb relations of patronage, unique identification (UID) technologies have been deployed to discipline human actors to adopt practices of good governance. This situation hinders, I showed, rather than facilitates, the collection of entitlements at fair price shops (FPSs). In this chapter, I push this analysis further. I examine how individuals targeted by the National Food Security Act (NFSA) develop strategies to overcome the difficulties they face in accessing and manipulating devices to get a hold of a re-materialized rationing document. Building on Akhil Gupta's "production of arbitrariness" (2012, 24), which he uses to describe bureaucratic practices of welfare that arbitrarily produce detrimental outcomes for a segment of the population, I turn my attention to the selection of devices that one must

utilize to get a hold of a rationing document. I show that in the era of neoliberal governmentality, these devices are sites of techno-politics in a which technocratic rationality of government is enacted.

5.1 Introduction

Early in my fieldwork, I was fortunate enough to meet Govind, the *pradhan* (leader, chief) of a small *basti* (informal settlement) located in Chandni Chowk, an area of Old Delhi known for its tumultuous *bazaar* (markets). Our mutual friend Kareem, who was affiliated with a few non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including Human Rights and Law Network (HRLN), and working on issues of urban homelessness, introduced me to Govind. Like most people living in the *basti*, Govind was from Bihar. He migrated to the city to find work in the mid-1990s. Comfortably seated in front of a water cooler and a muted television in his *jhuggi*, Govind pulled two cold bottles of soda from his fridge and poured it into three plastic cups. Govind was one of the few residents of the *basti* who owned a fridge. As we chatted, the *pradhan* showed me his white ration card, which entitled him to rations at APL rates. However, unlike many other APL ration cards, Govind's ration card was categorized as a temporary *Jhuggi Jhopdi* Cluster card, i.e., a ration card distributed to *basti* residents that must be renewed every six months (see Chapter Two, Table 1, for a taxonomy of ration cards). Govind had used it only once. He had paid an auto-rickshaw driver to take him to a FPS—at a cost of ₹ 100 for the round trip—only to discover that the shop owner had decided to close that day. From that point onwards, he had never gone back.

When new ration cards were made available by the Department of Food, Supplies, and Consumer Affairs (DFSCA) of Delhi after the enactment of the NFSA in 2013, Govind and

Kareem had worked with residents of the *basti* to fill out ration card applications. However, by the time I returned to the *basti* in early 2015, almost nobody had received their new ration cards. I saw here an opportunity to help *basti* residents to assemble their ration card applications and gain an understanding of bureaucratic procedures in action, while witnessing the challenges that residents faced in accessing ration cards or not. Moreover, by supporting their efforts to get cards, I hoped to build stronger ties with the *basti*-dwellers.

I printed a few forms from the DFSCA website and made my way into the *basti*. The first day, on a hot afternoon, I filled out all 20 forms I had brought with me. Among the people I met was Prithvi, a tall mother of four who sold enough moonshine to support her family in Delhi and her relatives in Bihar. She told us that she planned to go to the DFSCA field office “in a group of five” on the following day. Generally speaking, for their forms to be processed by the DFSCA, applicants must submit them with proof of their residence and identities. However, according to provisions of the NFSA, the DFSCA can grant some of Delhi's most marginalized residents—homeless people—the opportunity to apply for ration cards without proof of address. The government of Delhi does not recognize *jhuggi* as formal housing and thus considers those who reside in *basti* to be homeless.¹³⁹ Identity documents are, however, mandatory. The application form for ration cards delineates the required supporting documentation: (a) a “copy of Aadhar Card of each member;” (b) a “proof of permanent address if different from address on Aadhar cards (proof of permanent address is not required for homeless people);” and (c) an income certificate (not required for homeless people).¹⁴⁰

139 Given the ambiguous nature of residence in informal settlements (see Ghertner 2015), “homeless” is a problematic category. This chapter constitutes an attempt to document how some interlocutors navigate that bureaucratic category.

140 The categories of applicants that do not need to provide an income certificate comprise: (i) slum dweller; (ii) residents of F, G, and H resettlement colonies; (iii) people living in rural areas; (iv) homeless people; (v)

Before we filled out any ration card applications in the *basti*, my assistant, Ritesh, and I visited the DFSCA field office on our own to gather more information about the submission process. I entered into the large white building and passed beside the metal detector gate, without walking through it. The security guard saw me but let me go anyway. We took the stairs up to the third floor. I used my smartphone flashlight to illuminate our path down a dark and gloomy corridor, passing electrical wires hanging from the ceiling and a series of grimy and abandoned workplaces until we reached the DFSCA field office, which was located at the very end of the corridor.

Answers to our questions were given sparingly. We were met by apprehensive food and supplies officers (FSOs), who answered our questions sparingly. They repeatedly referred us to the DFSCA's main offices in ITO—an area of Delhi named after the Income Tax Office buildings, where some government departments are located—for more information. In the end, they told us that “homeless” women could apply for ration cards without having to present proof of residence or income certificates.

After bringing this news to Prithvi, she invited us to join her and a few other women on their trip to the DFSCA field office. While waiting for them to get ready, we filled out a few more application forms. After about an hour, Neelam, another young mother of three, waved at us. She had already tried to submit two applications at the DFSCA office, the “ration office,” she said, but to no avail. It was time to try again.

Neelam knew where the office was located, so she took the lead. Prithvi, who was

transgender people; (vi) people holding certificates under the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995; (vii) single women; (viii) orphans; (ix) low-income daily-wage workers; and (x) other families whose annual income is lower than 1 lakh rupee—about 2,000 CAD. These categories of applicants are relieved from providing an income certificate, since they do not typically work in the formal economy and thus do not pay taxes.

carrying her six-month-old son, sat in a cycle rickshaw with four other women. Neelam shared another rickshaw with three other women and two toddlers. Ritesh and I took a third one. Our rickshaw *wallah* (driver) negotiated his way through the congested streets and boulevards of Chandni Chowk, and after nearly 40 minutes, we finally reached the ration office. I was thankful to Neelam and Prithvi for letting us accompany them, but I insisted that we should not interact on their behalf with the DFSCA bureaucrats. While I had gladly helped them to fill out their application forms, I felt uneasy about submitting their applications for them. Ritesh and I were eager to assist them, but we did not seek to take over and cloud over the bureaucratic process.

When we arrived at the building, a few of the women in our group went to a nearby shop to get their *aadhaar* cards photocopied and acquire mandatory passport-sized photos. We waited for a few minutes, under a tree, right next to the parking lot of the multi-storied white building. Minutes later, when the women returned, Neelam stood up, fixed her bright green and blue synthetic sari on her black shiny hair, and led the group into the ration office. All of the women were wearing well-kept sari, which is not always the case in the *basti*. Ritesh and I followed them at a short distance. The women began to climb the few steps up to the public entrance of the building, but they were stopped by a middle-aged man who aggressively started to yell at them. The man, who appeared to be a security guard, refused to let the women pass. From where I stood, I could not hear the exchange between him and Neelam, but Prithvi later told me what the man said: “*Tum logon ki yahan se entry nehin hei.* (You people do not enter from this entry.)”¹⁴¹ Sweating in his white shirt, the paunchy man urged them to walk around the building

141 The security guard used the familiar “you” pronoun, *tum*, rather than the more formal, *aap*. This could be read as a sign of disrespect, but in Delhi, it is not unusual to use familiar language with strangers, as opposed to other areas of Northern India. However, in this context, my assumption was that the security guard looked on the women with contempt.

to find the side entrance.

The security guard was not the same man who had let me enter *without passing through the metal detector* just a couple days before. As shocking as this experience was for me at the time, I had by then learned that this differentiated treatment is not particularly uncommon. Being a white male foreigner in New Delhi granted me access to people and places that are mundanely inaccessible for most Indians, especially those categorized by the government as “homeless women.”

Obediently, the group of women, again led by Neelam, walked back down the white marble steps and began to walk along the side of the building, looking for a second entrance. When we reached the edge of the building without finding an open door, Neelam turned around, frustrated and determined this time to get through the main entrance. Prithvi, still holding her six-month-old boy, and the rest of the group followed. This time, the middle-aged security guard was nowhere to be seen. Nobody stopped us at the entrance. We all went through the main entrance and the metal detector and took the stairs. Some forty steps later, we arrived on the third floor. We walked down the same murky corridor that I had passed through before and reached the opened door of the DFSCA office, on which a white sheet of paper indicated in Hindi that we had arrived at the “Food and Supplies Department Office.” Still leading the group, Neelam walked towards the door but stopped before entering the room, as if invisible red tape prevented her from penetrating the bureaucratic space. A few women looked at Ritesh and me. We made a silent gesture to encourage them to go in without us. We stayed in the corridor, close to the door, trying to record as much information as possible.

The DFSCA field office consisted of a single room of concrete, in which six tables

were positioned in a U-shape. Five FSOs occupied the empty room, two of them working busily behind their computer screens. A higher-ranked FSO, the inspector, was occupied in giving directives to another FSO. The ration card applicants walked in before us, unsure of what to do or where to go. After what felt like a few minutes, Ritesh and I entered the room and sat on the long wooden bench leaning against a pile of broken chairs, right next to the door. Prithvi later told me that one of the FSOs asked them if “*aaj socha hoga ghum atei hein* [today, you thought, let’s go for an outing].”¹⁴² We remained at a distance from the group as much as possible, until we realized that the inspector would not accept any applications that day. According to an internal rule that no one else seemed to know, the window for submitting a ration card application fell between 10:00 am and 1:00 pm on any business day. After glancing at one application form, the inspector gave it back, not without adding that every single application would be processed on the condition that the women submitted a photocopy of their *aadhaar* card and an electricity bill as proof of residence. Such proof, of course, was impossible to produce, since none of these women’s *jhuggi* were legally connected to the electrical network. In other words, it seemed that even though there was no clear requirement for an electricity bill as proof of residence for *basti* residents, the FSO inserted this requirement, making it next to impossible to get a ration card for these women.

In his book *Red Tape*, Akhil Gupta (2012) has drawn attention to the ways in which knowledge about bureaucratic procedures is disseminated. In an effort to show how governmental power works, he dismantles the notion of a coherent bureaucratic state apparatus and instead urges us to pay attention to the contingencies, inherent chaos, and inconsistencies that pervade the multiscalar apparatus of bureaucracy (see Weber 1978). Along with debunking the idea that the

¹⁴² The expression does not translate well in English. The intention behind the statement was derogatory.

state is a unitary and homogeneous entity and the coherence of bureaucracy (Gupta 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Sharma and Gupta 2006), Gupta is particularly interested in the apparent contradiction found in the systematic exclusion of a large section of a population targeted by welfare benefits and entitlements in a bureaucratic world that arbitrarily dispenses welfare (see also Sunder Rajan 2003). In a poignant question, Gupta asks: “Why, among the universe of needy beneficiaries, do some people manage to receive assistance and others do not?” (2012, 24). The answer lies, he argues, in the ways in which the bureaucratic apparatus tends to systematically produce arbitrary outcomes, as opposed to consistent ones. Gupta writes:

In stressing the intimate connection between violence and caring and in rejecting narratives of the indifference or inattentiveness of the state, I am trying to articulate the ethics and politics of care that is arbitrary in its consequences. I am arguing that such arbitrariness is not itself arbitrary, rather, it is systematically produced by the very mechanisms that are meant to ameliorate social suffering. (2012, 24)

In situating arbitrariness in systematic bureaucratic mechanisms, Gupta does not blame individual bureaucrats for the failures of implementation of development projects, which according to him, tends to reproduce the colonial perception that natives are incapable of properly implementing welfare programs for a wide range of reasons (from corruption to low level of education).

Instead, Gupta points to the operation of bureaucratic procedures as generative practices of structural violence. He argues that within bureaucratic procedures, arbitrary outcomes and exclusions from welfare provisions are so widely spread that they appear to be systemic. While I agree with Gupta’s point that bureaucrats should not be framed as inherently incompetent state officials who work against the systematic inclusion of a population in welfare projects, I do however find it crucial to remember that bureaucrats’ sensibilities matter in providing welfare services. State officials are gatekeepers of knowledge about bureaucratic procedures. When the

DFSCA inspector demanded that Neelam, Prithvi, and the rest of the group come back with more documentation, she acted in a cursory manner that could, in the end, exclude these women from the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). As a gatekeeper of bureaucratic knowledge, the DFSCA inspector knew the documentation requirements for different categories of applicants and could, therefore, have entertained the possibility that these women did not possess proof of residence. Her arbitrary actions and partial dissemination of information and rules could have excluded these *basti*-dwellers from their rightful entitlements.

Prithvi, Neelam, and the rest of the women calmly turned around, prepared to leave the bureaucratic space. I, on the other hand, was appalled by the inspector's behaviour, especially since I had taken the time to get information from FSOs working in the same office just a few days before. Feeling frustrated and partially responsible, I stormed in and engaged with the inspector, perhaps not as composed as I should have been. I burst out in English, and in doing so, I mobilized all of my networks of influence, including my white, middle-class, foreign PhD candidate status. I angrily invoked the names of other high-ranking officials working in the ITO buildings (people I did not know) to conjure a political capital I did not really have. I made the case that even though these women did not have an electricity bill because they did not have an electric connection, they were entitled to food rations. I mirrored the inspector's own failures by pointing out that these women should be categorized, as per the NFSA, as homeless. In front of her own subordinates, I pointed to her arbitrary decision-making in systematically excluding all of these women. I claimed she had acted unprofessionally. The NFSA had provisions for homeless applications, I told her, and it was her responsibility to ensure that these provisions were explicitly communicated and extended to ration card applicants.

I retreated hastily, feeling first upset and then remorseful. I had not intended to be the “white saviour,” but in that moment, I just had to jump in. Behind me, the nine women remained in the DFSCA office for a few more minutes. The inspector told them that they could submit their applications as they were, without proof of residence, but only between 10:00 am and 1:00 pm, as per the internal ruling.

The following morning, then, we arrived right on time at 11:15 am. A few other women had joined us. We went through the metal detector and up to the ration office without any incident. The inspector was nowhere to be seen and the application process went smoothly.¹⁴³ The group of women sat in front of an FSO, who processed their forms, one after the other. The FSO first checked if the photocopies of their *aadhaar* cards, attached to the submitted forms, corresponded to the names of the applicants. Then, at the top of every form, he wrote “HOMELESS” in English in capital letters to indicate that the otherwise mandatory proof of residence was not required. On the back of each form, the bureaucrat nonchalantly stamped the seal of the FSO office. Finally, he mechanically presented a pen to each of the women in front of him, who, one after the other, made the thumb print gesture as a way to convey their illiteracy. Each woman pushed her thumb on a blue ink pad and apposed her print on the signature line of her form. Finally, the FSO tore off the lower part of each form and handed it over to the applicant. On this receipt, the date of the application, the thumbprint of the applicant, and another stamp from the DFSCA office appeared. Most likely, each applicant would store this receipt with other important documents in a binder, locked somewhere in her *jhuggi*.

For some of these women, this was their third or fourth trip to the DFSCA office to

143 In Ritesh's notebook, the following is written: “The clerk is less than helpful. But that is the way clerks are.”

apply for a new ration card. The process went surprisingly well. Within an hour, all women were on their way back home, their receipts in hand. According to the Delhi Food Security Portal, every single application was approved within two to three weeks. However, by the end of my fieldwork, more than six months later, only six of these women actually managed to have in their possession a new ration card—and, as I describe later in this chapter, only one of them was able to use it at her ascribed FPS.

In this chapter, I build on the analytics of governmentality used in the anthropological literature on development (Bornstein and Sharma 2016; Ferguson 1990; Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Li 2007b; Moore 2005; Sharma and Gupta 2006) and delve into encounters between my informants and the government to explore how bureaucratic procedures produce and maintain a logic of power that perpetuates systematic exclusions from welfare services (Gupta 2012). In the previous chapter, I showed how the ration card circulates in different milieus and as it does, mediates bureaucratic signs and meanings that are negotiated and contested (see Hull 2012b). As I demonstrated in chapter four, the modernization of the TPDS and the re-materialization of the ration card have not been implemented with the primary incentive of facilitating people's access to entitlements at FPSs. Instead, they have been designed and deployed with the objective of curbing practices of corruption. In this chapter, I argue that the deployment of this project has engendered a series of instruments—techno-political sites—that act as gatekeepers in the bureaucratic procedures involved in acquiring a ration card. I examine how different instruments of government—different devices—are utilized and manipulated to consolidate bureaucratic power. In turn, I describe how ration card applicants come to build networks and learn to negotiate these devices, which are rather alien to their everyday realities.

5.2 On Political Society, Negotiations, and Technology

The question I ask here is: how do urban subjects who are entitled to ration cards negotiate and navigate their way in the bureaucratic world? I ask this question because the navigation of and negotiations within bureaucratic worlds are critical components of the implementation of the NFSA. To access their rightful entitlements at FPSs, two thirds of the Indian population have to submit applications for ration cards and engage with a series of devices to get one. This rationing document is thus an important object for the realization of the right to food entitlement. Without it, the right to food entitlement for targeted beneficiaries—empowered bodies—is meaningless. The entire mechanism of entitlement provision in the TPDS relies primarily on the capacity of targeted population members to navigate bureaucratic procedures, tame alien devices, and develop tactics to use them for their own benefit.

In the previous chapter, I briefly mentioned how Manush faced a number of challenges in getting his hands on a new ration card and collecting his household's entitlements. Here, I describe these bureaucratic procedures ethnographically. The analytics of governmentality provide a framework to understand how these procedures are designed to improve well-being of populations while generating mundane practices in which inequalities are established, negotiated, and contested (Gupta 2012). In postcolonial democratic contexts, charged with the colonial legacy of exploitation, such ethnographic accounts of neoliberal governmentality are particularly insightful because they lead us to question the tensions between the normative nature of democratic political systems (imparted with the ethical significance of citizenship and the rule of law) and technologies of government that are perceived to be rather apolitical (Ferguson 1990). The right to food entitlement relies on this tension. Discursively, claims to entitlements are

informed by democratic ideals of social justice and equality (see Drèze and Sen 2013), but their material deployments depend on instruments of government that have historically systematically produced arbitrary outcomes (Gupta 2012).

In his influential analysis of modern politics, Partha Chatterjee (2004, 2008, 2011) uses this tension to theorize on the modalities of democracy in postcolonial contexts. To do so, Chatterjee distinguishes civil society from political society. In his argument, civil society personifies the modern values of liberal democracy. In the transition from colonial to postcolonial India, Chatterjee argues that civil society emerged from a section of the elite class whose objectives and activities were, under the British raj, inspired by tactics of civil disobedience. But in postcolonial India, with the establishment of the rule of law and democratic procedures, these same elites had to incarnate, along with the state institutions that they came to populate, the transformative processes of modernity. “[This] modernizing project [became] an expression of the will of the people and thus gloriously consistent with the legitimizing norms of modernity itself,” Chatterjee argues (2004, 46–47). Thus, civil society’s relations with the government came to embody principles of popular sovereignty, democratic action, and equal rights.

As for the rest of the Indian population, it engages with government agencies to secure livelihoods, housing, or access to welfare more generally. Chatterjee has famously conceptualized this segment of the population as “political society”: people who “are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state,” but as Chatterjee later adds, “. . . they have to be looked after and controlled by various governmental agencies” (2004, 38). While civil society enters into a

relation with the state apparatus on the terrain of democracy structured by the civic values of modernity (equality, freedom, and human rights), political society operates in a mode of negotiation or resistance with the Indian project of modernization on a playing field on which the legal arm of the state cannot fully regulate and administer political society members' everyday cultural practices (Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011). In the words of Chatterjee: "Civil society then, restricted to a small section of culturally equipped citizens, represents in countries like India the high ground of modernity" (2004, 41). Political society members, on the other hand, recognize that their everyday "activities are often illegal and contrary to good civic behaviour, but they make a claim to a habitation and a livelihood as a matter of right" (Chatterjee 2004, 40).

This is not to say that the government does not recognize the existence of members of political society. It does, but only on an exceptional case-by-case basis, in such a way as to avoid fully endorsing their modes of livelihood and habitation, which may transgress the legal framework imposed on them. In the era of neoliberal governmentality, according to Chatterjee (2004, 2011), members of political society strategize to mediate their relation with the government. Albeit contextual and temporary, the spaces of mediation between political society and the state are always contingent on the ability of segments of the population to establish a working network of actors to influence governmental power in their favour.

It should be noted that the concepts of "civil society" and "political society" have been criticized for what they represent—namely, a dichotomous distinction between the lives of high- and middle-class urban taxpayers (or law-abiding citizens) and low-class, low-caste, indigenous, and other marginalized segments of the population. Amita Baviskar and Nandini Sundar (2008) have been particularly critical of this binary division, especially since there is no evidence that

members of the government or civil society are actually law-abiding citizens. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary, according to Baviskar and Sundar, who suggest that:

generally, it is members of the so-called civil society who break laws with impunity and who demand that the rules be waived for them, whereas members of political society strive to become legal, to gain recognition and entitlements from the state. (2008, 88; see also Ghertner 2008; Ananya Roy 2009)

Baviskar and Sundar capture, rightly so, the aspirations of many members of so-called political society to find a space, within the formal rule of law, to also become members of what Chatterjee characterizes as civil society, as Manush's relation to the ration card illustrates (see Chapter Four). Perhaps more to the point, in postcolonial contexts such as India, a number of social groups belonging to civil *and* political society have actively participated in social movements, even though they may, at times, propose "contending visions of democracy" (Baviskar and Sundar 2008, 87; Shah 2008).¹⁴⁴ This was particularly evident in the national conventions of the Right to Food Campaign (RTFC; see Chapter Three).

Taking note of this critique, I, too, argue that Chatterjee's binary distinction of civil and political society forecloses the everyday politics of access to welfare in a rigid model. I contend that a close reading of ethnographic material, rather than an inelastic application of Chatterjee's concepts onto everyday lives, is more likely to reveal the intricacies of bureaucratic power. Like Judith Whitehead's critique of civil and political society, I believe that this binary division should be viewed as one of the "analytical, methodological divisions whose shifting boundaries can only be examined through particular historical/political contexts and constellations of power" (2015, 671). This being said, I also believe that Chatterjee has developed an intelligible framework to

¹⁴⁴ However, "contending visions of democracy" (Baviskar and Sundar 2008, 87) tend to be silenced in democratic constitutional regimes (see Rancière 2005).

think of the ways in which a bureaucratic government shapes relations with a large section of the population under its rule. Keeping in mind the spatial properties of bureaucratic power that tend to percolate all the way down into every aspect of everyday activities and practices (Das 2004; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Ferguson and Gupta 2002), I contend that detailed ethnographic accounts of the formation of this constellation of power around the techno-politics of instruments is necessary. Such an analysis of government enables us to think about the spaces of negotiation that members of Chatterjee's political society repeatedly attempt to produce in their everyday lives.

As has become abundantly clear, thanks to Foucauldian thinkers (Corbridge et al. 2005; Legg 2007) and ethnographers (Ferguson 1990; Gupta 2012; Li 2007b; Sharma 2006), modern governments draw their legitimacy to govern from improving the lives of their populations. Technologies of government design and calibrate instruments to do so—instruments that tend to render the happiness, health, longevity, needs, productivity, and wants of the population in metrological terms, intelligible to governments, planners, and experts. Building on researchers interested in the political and social qualities of these metrological instruments (Barry 2002; Callon 1998; Mitchell 2005, 2008; Rose 1999), anthropologists have increasingly been interested in the politicized role of technology in its broadest sense, both material and symbolic, and have most notably highlighted the importance of materiality and infrastructure as vectors of political issues (Anand 2009; Hull 2012b; Von Schnitzler 2008, 2013, 2014). These accounts have often helped us to reflect on the ways in which infrastructures and devices are assembled in relation to the government rationality or the ethics and politics imparted to biopolitical projects (Collier 2011; Mathur 2012; Sharma 2013; Von Schnitzler 2014, 672).

These instruments of government are deployed and manipulated in such a way as to shape subjectivities, but they also mediate the formation of association of humans and things. According to Matthew Hull, the capacity of these instruments of government to bear some forms of power:

depends on their place within a regime of authority and authentication. . . . Procedurally correct documents compel compliance not because the documents they generate supersede the realities they purport to represent, but because . . . bureaucratic procedures normatively embed documents in those realities. (2012b, 26; see also Raman 2012)

What ensues, according to Hull, is a methodological opening for ethnographers seeking to explore the gap between the power of documents to shape people, things, and places with the ways in which these documents are enacted in practice (see Çalışkan and Callon 2009, 2010). In the case that is of interest in this chapter, the gap is even wider. Instruments of government seek to shape populations based on reified models of law-abiding citizens entitled to rations of wheat and rice, but they require target populations to navigate a maze of alien bureaucratic procedures that make the enactment of such models hardly realizable. Of course, it is not impossible for individuals to navigate these procedures, but in the era of neoliberal governmentality, they must resort to their own means and resources to enact the right to food entitlement. In what follows, then, I examine how two instruments of government—the paper form and the phone as instruments of authentication—mediate the relations between interlocutors I have encountered and the bureaucracy.

5.3 Filling Out Forms: The Application Form as Bureaucratic Mediator

On that hot afternoon when I first met Prithvi, it seemed that she had already given up on her chances of receiving a ration card. She had gone twice already to the DFSCA office to no

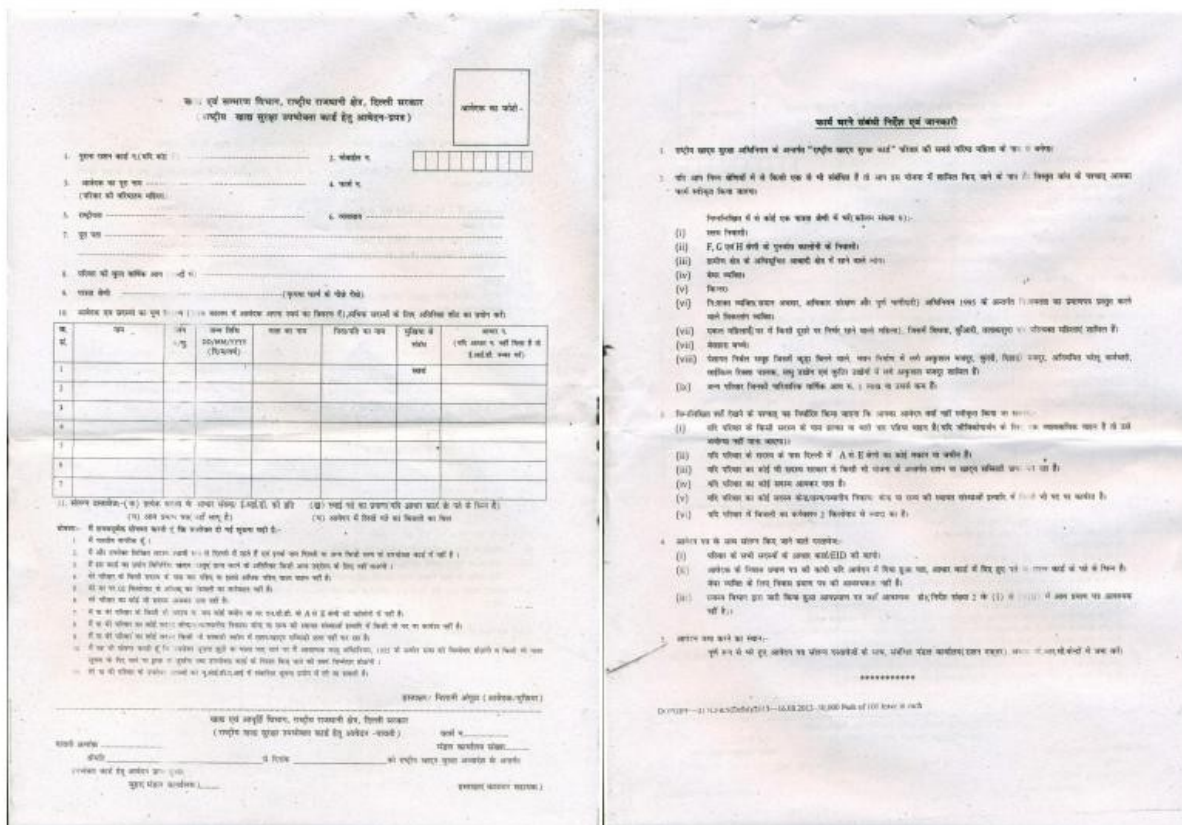


Illustration 7: A sample of the ration card application form. Source: <http://bit.ly/2JHITQL>, last consulted on April 13, 2018.

avail and did not want to waste any more of her time. When Ritesh and I sat down to chat with her in one of the narrow alleys of the *basti*, her youngest child cried loudly while his mother aired her grievances:

Prithvi: The work wasn't happening. See, the cost of going again and again was too much. We had to pay ₹ 200 per day of get there.

Guillaume: Were you treated well at the office?¹⁴⁵

Prithvi: They didn't mistreat me, but they just asked me to come back tomorrow. I was irritated because I had to spend ₹ 200 every time.

Prithvi had first gone to the DFSCA office with a blank application form that she had obtained

145 When I listen to the recording of our encounter, I can hear myself fishing for drama of structural violence.

Rapidly, I learned that the most stunning everyday encounters of structural violence are the ones that can be observed, not the ones that can be told.

from her local member of the legislative assembly (MLA), a Sikh politician working under the Congress banner who was a strong ally of the *pradhan* and particularly active in dispensing services and goods in the *basti*. The line at the DFSCA office was long, so she had waited her turn. After a couple hours, she had been sent back home. During her second visit, Prithvi had showed up once again with her blank application form. Prithvi was illiterate; she had thus assumed that the FSO would help her fill out her form. But when it was her turn to submit her application, the official had realized that the form was blank and had asked her to come back another day, after her application form had been duly filled out. In frustration, she had torn the blank form apart in front of the bureaucrat. “They said that if you don't want to make it [submit an application for a ration card], then don't do it,” she told me. She added:

See, it was too crowded. I had waited for hours in the queue. There were many people behind me, and maybe five people ahead of me. They told everybody to come back another day. That's why I tore up the form.¹⁴⁶

Unlike the DFSCA office in which she had torn up her application form, the *basti* was a place where Prithvi's wit served her well. She had been living in New Delhi her whole life. In 2009, just before the Commonwealth Games, the Delhi Development Agency had destroyed Prithvi's entire *basti*, which had been built on both sides of the train track leading up to Agra and the Taj Mahal. Prithvi and about 250 other *basti*-dwellers had relocated a stone's throw away from where she had spent most of her adult life. Now in her mid-30s, Prithvi was a tall woman with piercing eyes and a loud laugh. The “homeless” woman spent her days around her recently built *jhuggi*, feeding her toddler and handing away small bottles of moonshine made out of

¹⁴⁶ Thanks to their small business, Prithvi and Avinash made a relatively decent living and could easily survive without drawing their entitlements from the FPS. That probably explains why Prithvi was not ready to waste more than two days at the DFSCA office to submit her application. That being said, the ration card would still serve as a useful identification document for her *basti*-dwelling family. Prithvi had been rebuked by bureaucratic processes that were alien to her everyday world, but not by the idea of having entitlements per se. Plus, even if Prithvi did not want to draw rations from the TPDS, she was entitled to a ration card.

oranges, called *narangua*, to anyone seeking a taste. Her husband, Avinash, also worked full time with Prithvi to trade moonshine when he was not busy drinking with customers.

While managing her illegal business, hidden in the maze of alleys of the *basti*, Prithvi had dealt with all kinds of customers, from dawn to dusk every day. Again and again, she had frowned and shouted at drunk men twice her size, driving them away. She used to hide crates of *narangua* in her home under old blankets she had received years ago from an NGO operating in the settlement. A couple months before I met her, she had been caught by police officers, who found three crates of *narangua* in her *jhuggi*. Police officers regularly toured the *basti* and did not hesitate to enter anybody's *jhuggi*. That day, Avinash had gotten into a loud argument with a passer-by, and police officers had intervened. In retaliation, the officers raided Prithvi's home and caught her red-handed. They arrested her and sent her to prison, where she spent a few weeks with her newborn child. While she was in prison, her husband, along with other people involved in the *narangua* trade, built a *pakka jhuggi* (a solid temporary house made out of bricks) hidden under layers of black and blue tarpaulin, in which they stored behind a locked door all the crates of *narangua*. Avinash also renovated their *kachcha jhuggi* (temporary housing made out of diverse materials). Relatively spacious and built out of bright red brick, Avinash and Prithvi's new *pakka jhuggi* was much more comfortable than average, but it got smoky very quickly when Prithvi lit fires to cook meals.

Her run-in with the police had not stopped Prithvi from running her *narangua* trade. When we met, it was quite common for us to be interrupted by customers who handed Prithvi two ten-rupee bills. She would look around carefully, fish a bottle of *narangua* from an empty black water tank that was always sitting nearby, hidden away from police sight, and hand the

bottle to the customer. She was a mother of four, but in the eight months that I spent in the *basti*, I only met her youngest child, who at the time was six months old. Prithvi had been living in Delhi most of her life, but she periodically travelled to Bihar. Her three older children—who were seven, eight, and ten years old—lived with relatives and went to school in Bihar because, according to Prithvi, “once you study in Bihar, you won't face any problem elsewhere, like Delhi.” Like many other mothers living in the *basti*, Prithvi sent her children away from the Delhi settlement, which they considered to be prone to petty or more significant crime, alcohol and drug consumption, child abduction, and tuberculosis and other viral infections. Plus, for *basti*-dwellers such as Prithvi, sending children to a government school in Delhi required an assemblage of identification documents that were not readily available.

Prithvi had not known how to get a new ration card, let alone fill out her application form. The “knowledge had not reached her.” Before he was defeated in state legislative elections in February 2015, her MLA used to dispense information, material, and knowledge on bureaucratic processes to the *pradhan* and *basti* inhabitants to help them access welfare. After the enactment of the NFSA, the MLA and other actors, such as Kareem and other NGO workers, had distributed blank ration card applications, but they had not assisted her in filling one out. Like most of her neighbours, Prithvi could not read. Illiteracy is pretty much the norm in Delhi's *basti*, and oftentimes, illiterate people reach out to authority figures, such as NGO workers, the local MLA, or the *pradhan*, to get application forms filled out. However, since Prithvi's MLA had recently lost his election, if there was no NGO worker around, stumbling into the *basti* with a bunch of application forms, getting one filled out had seemed to demand a Sisyphean effort.

As Prithvi stood up to take her leave, I offered to bring her an application form and to

help her fill it out. She took my empty plastic cup of *chai* and threw it on a pile of trash around the corner of her *jhuggi*. In Hindi, I asked: “How many forms should I bring? Five or six?” She surprised me with her answer: “Many people would need the forms. Get at least 100 forms whenever you bring them from. Otherwise other people will take the forms and I won't be able to get it. Because there would be a big crowd and everybody would try to have the form.”

5.3.1 “The Myth of Voluntariness”

The ration card application form consists of a recto-verso page, divided into three sections. On the upper part of the paper form, nine fields help bureaucrats to categorize the applicant: (1) old ration card number (if available); (2) mobile number; (3) complete name of the head of the household; (4) form number; (5) nationality; (6) occupation; (7) complete address; (8) monthly income; and (9) category of population. In the upper right-hand corner of the form, a square box indicates where the applicant's passport picture must be stuck. Prominent on the form are the fields for the applicant's name and picture, which are clear markers of identity, followed by questions about previous ration card numbers, nationality, address, occupation, and household income, which evoke class status. Finally, a phone number is required for every application.

The second section of the form includes a table where the applicant is instructed to list the names of household members that will appear on the card. In this table, the applicant provides the following information for every person living under the same roof as them who is eligible for rations: (a) name; (b) sex; (c) date of birth; (d) name of mother; (e) name of father; (f) head of the household (*mukhiya se sambamdh*); and (g) unique identification number (UID).¹⁴⁷ Under the NFSA, the eldest female is automatically deemed to be the head of the household to which each

¹⁴⁷ I retrieved this information from the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) website, uidai.gov.in, last accessed January 6, 2016.

new ration card is allocated; however, each female applicant must provide the name of either her father or husband, a marker of institutional patriarchy and normalized heterosexual marriage.¹⁴⁸ It is through the tabular information provided in this table that the volume of subsidized food to be allocated to each ration card holder is determined. In addition to the eldest women of the household with a UID number, every additional member holding a UID number grants the household an additional 5 kg of rations. The third section of the form is the detachable receipt on which the applicant's signature (or thumb print) and the seal of the government legitimize and authenticate the application.

If finding the form seemed like an impossible task for Prithvi, it was a rather easy one for me. Forms were available online, on the DFSCA website, hidden behind a maze of hyperlinks. To locate the pdf document, two skills (in addition to a bit of luck) were crucial: being literate and being e-literate.¹⁴⁹ These two abilities are often taken for granted by (most) members of civil society, but for *basti*-dwellers like Prithvi, writing words, let alone decoding them, renders navigation into the bureaucratic world arduous. To get a form, Prithvi had to rely on the formation of an association of humans and things, of which I was a part.

There were two different forms available for download. The first one, as I described above, requires the applicant to submit a UID number to be granted food entitlements. The second one, much more inconspicuously located on the DFSCA website, enables the applicant to submit any other identification document other than the UID with their ration card application. I had never heard of an application for a ration card in the National Capital Territory (NCT) that

148 As Gupta concisely argues: “the requirement that any application submitted by a women to a bureaucratic office contain, for purposes of identification, the name of either her father or her husband, institutionalizes the patriarchal order and normalizes heterosexual marriage” (2012, 25; see also Das 1996).

149 E-literacy, or digital literacy, refers to the ability that one has to access and navigate the Internet.

did not require the provision of an UID number. Curious, then, I printed 20 copies of the first application form for the *basti*-dwellers and only one of the second form. The following day, I headed straight to the DFSCA office in Chandni Chowk with my 21 forms in hand to inquire further on the bureaucratic validity of a ration card application that did not require the UID number.

Since the enactment of the NFSA in 2013, the governmental use of the *aadhaar* card, the UID number, has been raised as a political issue. On the one hand, governmental officials have supported the use of a universal form of identity document that was purposefully designed to eliminate “fake” documentation, to enable the mobility of identification documents across state borders, and to create an online database of Indian residence. Created to “empower” the population, the *aadhaar* system grants a unique number to every Indian. To receive a number, one has to submit biometrics, such as retina scans and fingerprints to eliminate possible duplications of UID—and thus the production of fake *aadhaar* numbers (Ramanathan 2011). To oversee the deployment of the *aadhaar* project, the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) was founded in 2009, and the first UID was issued in September 2010. Six years later, in September 2016, 1.05 billion *aadhaar* cards had been issued (NDTV 2016).

The driving force behind the *aadhaar* card project was Nandan Nilekani, a famous technocrat-cum-businessman and co-founder of Infosys,¹⁵⁰ who was the chairman of UIDAI from 2009 until 2014.¹⁵¹ Nilekani strongly defended the *aadhaar* project because, compared to Western countries, IDs are more difficult to access in India, and those IDs that do exist do not necessarily

150 Infosys is an Indian multinational corporation that offers consulting services on information technology and outsourcing.

151 Nilekani quit his position in 2014 to run in the general election of 2014 under the banner of the Congress. He lost.

extend to a large portion of the population. At the International Federation for Information

आवेदन पत्र – ग

खाद्य एवं सम्मरण विभाग, राष्ट्रीय राजधानी क्षेत्र, दिल्ली सरकार
(राष्ट्रीय खाद्य सुरक्षा उपभोक्ता कार्ड हेतु आवेदन-प्रपत्र)
(उन अभ्यर्थियों के लिए जो आहार कार्ड नही देना चाहते)

1. आवेदक का पूरा नाम..... 2. मोबाइल नं०

3. व्यवसाय..... 4. पूरा पता.....

5. परिवार की कुल वार्षिक आय (शब्दों में)..... 6. पात्रता श्रेणी.....
(कृपया फॉर्म के पीछे देखें)

7. आवेदक एवं सदस्यों का पूर्ण विवरण (प्रथम कोलम में आवेदक अपना स्वयं का विवरण दें, अधिक सदस्यों के लिये अतिरिक्त सौट का प्रयोग करें।)

क्रमांक	नाम	लिंग म/कु	जन्मतिथि (DD/MM/YY रि/म/वर्ष)	माता का नाम	पिता/पति का नाम	मुख्या संबंध	से पहचान संख्या	पहचान पत्र प्रकार
1.								
2.								
3.								
4.								
5.								
6.								

8. संलग्न दस्तावेज
(क) प्रत्येक सदस्य के पहचान पत्र की प्रतिलिपि (ख)स्थायी पते का प्रमाण (यदि पहचान पत्र के भिन्न हैं)।
(ग) आय प्रमाण पत्र (जहाँ लागू है)। (घ) आवेदन में लिखे पते का बिजली का बिल।

घोषणा – मैं शपथपूर्वक घोषणा करती हूँ कि उपरोक्त दी गई सूचना सही है तथा –

1. मैं भारतीय नागरिक हूँ।
2. मैं और उपरोक्त विहित सदस्य स्वामी रूप से दिल्ली में रहते हैं एवं इनके नाम दिल्ली या अन्य किसी राज्य के उपभोक्ता कार्ड में नहीं है।
3. मैं इस कार्ड का प्रयोग डिजिटल खाद्य वस्तु प्राप्त करने के अतिरिक्त किसी अन्य उद्देश्य के लिये नहीं करूंगी।
4. मेरे परिवार के किसी सदस्य के पास आधार/बिधे या उससे अधिक पत्रियां वाला वाहन नहीं है।
5. मेरे घर पर 02 फिल्टरवाट से अधिक बिजली का कनेक्शन नहीं है।
6. मेरे परिवार का कोई भी सदस्य अशक्त नहीं है।
7. मैं या मेरे परिवार के किसी भी सदस्य के नाम कोई जमीन या घर एम्सीडी. के A से E श्रेणी की कोलोनी में नहीं है।
8. मैं या मेरे परिवार का कोई सदस्य केन्द्र/राज्य/स्थानीय निकाय/केन्द्र या राज्य की स्वायत्त संस्थाओं इत्यादि में किसी भी पद पर कार्यरत नहीं है।
9. मैं या मेरे परिवार का कोई सदस्य किसी भी सरकारी स्कीम में राशन/खाद्य सप्लाई प्राप्त नहीं कर रहा है।
10. मैं यह भी घोषणा करती हूँ कि उपरोक्त सूचना झूठी या गलत पायी जाने पर मैं आवश्यक वस्तु अधिनियम, 1995 की अशोभन सजा की जिम्मेदार होऊंगी व किसी भी गलत सूचना के दिशे जाने पर सजा या जुर्माना तथा उपभोक्ता कार्ड के निरस्त किये जाने की स्वयं जिम्मेदार होऊंगी।

हस्ताक्षर/निवासी अंगुठा (आवेदक/मुखिया)

खाद्य एवं सम्मरण विभाग, राष्ट्रीय राजधानी क्षेत्र, दिल्ली सरकार
(राष्ट्रीय खाद्य सुरक्षा उपभोक्ता कार्ड हेतु आवेदन-पत्र)

पारसी क्रमांक..... फार्म नं०.....
गण्डल कार्यालय सं०.....

श्रीमती..... से दिनांक..... को राष्ट्रीय खाद्य सुरक्षा अत्यादेश के अंतर्गत उपभोक्ता कार्ड हेतु आवेदन प्राप्त हुआ
।
नगर (गण्डल कार्यालय)..... हस्ताक्षर (काउंटर सहायक)

Illustration 8: The much more unusual application form which did not require an aadhaar card (and thus a unique identification number). It reads: "Oun Abhyathriyon ke liye jo aadhaar card number nehin dena chaahaten [For those who do not want to give their aadhaar card number]." Source: <http://bit.ly/2HhH1id>, last consulted on April 13, 2018.

Processing Conference (IFIP) held in Bangalore in 2013, Nilekani said:

[W]ith the increasing mobility of people, their aspiration, people moving from villages to cities, . . . lack of identities [identification documents] actually become a huge bottleneck for the future because without ID, they [people without IDs] can't really do anything: they can't get a job, they can't get admission [in schools], they can't get their entitlements, they can't open their bank accounts. . . . So fundamentally, ID creates a divide between, sort of, the people with IDs and the people without ID. And as I said, the people without IDs run into hundreds of million of people; it's not a small number. So the challenge was: how do we bring all these people who were left out from an ID perspective into a formal system? Into a formal society? . . . and give them an ID to start and then, they get on with other things in their life.¹⁵²

152 Nilekani pronounced these words in 2013, at the IFIP 8.6 Conference at the Indian Institute of Management of

For Nilekani, the *aadhaar* project—distributing *aadhaar* cards throughout the entire population so that each and every single Indian, poor or wealthy, can possess a UID number—is, in and of itself, generative of upward mobility. This line of argument is questionable. In fact, the wide acceptance of the *aadhaar* card by the population rests on the fact that holding a UID number is conditional to accessing a large ensemble of governmental and non-governmental services, such as opening a bank account, obtaining a phone number, or getting a ration card. To argue that the *aadhaar* card engineers modalities of upward mobility is to skip over the obstacles that one needs to traverse to successfully manipulate instruments of government, as my argument in this chapter demonstrates.

Critics have vehemently voiced their concerns about the *en masse* collection of biometrics (retina scans and fingerprints), from Indians and foreigners alike, that are demanded in exchange for UID numbers (Abraham and Rajadhyaksha 2015; Drèze and Khera 2015; Khera 2017; Masiero 2017).¹⁵³ Nilekani initially introduced the *aadhaar* project to the Indian population as a non-mandatory program. However, after the enactment of the NFSA, government agencies quickly made the delivery of welfare services conditional on the presentation of a photocopy of an *aadhaar* card as proof of identity, a phenomenon that legal scholar Usha Ramanathan calls “the myth of voluntariness” (2011). Ramanathan, who has over the years become a vocal critique of the *aadhaar* project, writes about the myth of voluntariness:

the compulsion will not come from the UIDAI, but other agencies may demand that a person must have a UID number to be provided a service. Banks, for instance, may make UID a prerequisite to opening, or maintaining, accounts. . . . Or to be entitled to a BPL [below poverty line] card. And so on. Voluntarism is not a norm that is

Bangalore (available at youtu.be/OH9TYU4RoVA?t=2m20s, accessed October 14, 2016).

153 In fact, what made these identification numbers unique—as in “unique identification”—was precisely their association with a single set of biometrics.

compatible with the unrelenting ambition of the UID to have universal enrolment. (2011)

On three occasions, in September 2013, March 2014, and March 2015, the Supreme Court of India has ruled on this myth of voluntariness by ordering government agencies to bring an end to their use of the UID as mandatory for the dispensation of welfare services and entitlements. More precisely, the Supreme Court has issued an interim order, in which it provided directions on the voluntary use of the UID. Ramanathan clearly lists these directions for us:

One, “it is not mandatory for a citizen to obtain an *Aadhaar* card.” Two, “the production of an *Aadhaar* card will not be a condition for obtaining any benefits otherwise due to a citizen.” Three, “the UID number or the *Aadhaar* card will not be used by the respondents (which includes the UIDAI and the various departments of the government including the Census Commissioner and the Election Commission, as also state governments) for any purpose other than the public distribution scheme and in particular for the purpose of distributing foodgrains and cooking fuel, such as kerosene.” Finally, the “*Aadhaar* card may also be used for the purpose of the LPG [liquefied petroleum gas] distribution scheme.” (2015)

As Ramanathan reports, there were two exceptions presented in the court’s interim order: the TPDS and the distribution of cooking fuel. These exceptions were premised on the court’s idea that “91% of the population had already been enrolled on the UID database and that it was useful in reducing leakages in service delivery” (2015). Yet one could legitimately argue, as Ramanathan does, that the large coverage of the *aadhaar* card has arisen due to the fact that possessing the card has been made mandatory to access welfare services and entitlements. The distribution of new ration cards, in the aftermath of the NFSA, has certainly contributed to the widespread adoption of the *aadhaar* card by a large section of the targeted population—67% of the total Indian population to be specific.

For three years, between 2013 and 2015, the Supreme Court repeatedly ordered

government agencies to refrain from making the *aadhaar* card mandatory for accessing welfare; however, in practice, the Delhi government has rolled out the end-to-end computerization of the TPDS with the UID used as the key instrument for monitoring the exchange of rations. For governmental officials, the court's interim order has given credence to the bureaucratic uses of the *aadhaar* card for the distribution of ration cards. Over the course of my fieldwork, I visited the DFSCA on several occasions to acquire a letter that would allow me to conduct research in the DFSCA field offices. I never received the authorization to do so in the field office of my choice, but I often leapt at the occasion to discuss with the Assistant Commissioner (AC) issues related to the TPDS. During one of these meetings, one AC proudly told me over green tea that the UID technology and its association with biometrics have helped to eliminate close to one million fake ration cards across Delhi (see also Pandey 2014). Needless to say, given the paranoia over counterfeit cards and free rides, it seemed that the elimination of “bogus” cards—which is to say cards that are not genuine, or fake ration cards—also extended to “bogus” people—the poor, the *basti*-dwellers, the migrant workers, which is to say urban residents without formal IDs—whom the AC and the state deemed to be less worthy of welfare.

For that reason, in the Spring of 2015, I was quite surprised to find a ration card application form that did not require a UID number on the DFSCA website. I had my doubts about the legitimacy of the form. Rather than using it right away in the *basti*, I visited the DFSCA field office in Chandni Chowk to ask an FSO if they would process such a form. The senior FSO, seated behind an empty table, received me nicely but was extremely uncomfortable about answering my questions. I explained to him that I had downloaded the form from the DFSCA website and wondered if it was valid. I slid the form across the table. After quickly glancing at it,

the officer said:

No, no, there is no such thing. The form that is [accepted] here is the same for everyone, whether the person is homeless or has a family or a flat. The conditions have been laid out. So read this and on the basis of it, if you come under the conditions, you can apply for it [a new ration card].

The form was still on the table. Casually, the FSO pointed to the lower portion of the form, where criteria of inclusion and exclusion were listed. My assistant grasped it, turned it around on the table, and read the third line of the header. In Hindi, he said: “Sir, here it is written: *Oun Abhyathriyon ke liye jo aadhaar card number nehin dena chaahaten* [For those who do not want to give their *aadhaar* card number].” Clearly, the form was intended for people who did not wish to enrol in the *aadhaar* project. For instance, for families with young children, this form could provide a useful pathway to accessing full entitlements for their household, since children three-years old or less were not given an *aadhaar* card because, as I explained in Chapter Four, their fingerprints were too small to be detected by the scanner. Adults who did not have a UID, but had other identification documents, such as the voter ID distributed widely in preparation for the general election of 2014, could also more easily enrol in the TPDS with this form. The FSO replied: “These are formalities. This is a circumstance for people who do not have *aadhaar* cards. But the [ration card] will not come.” He concluded, “we may accept this form,” without failing to add, however, that, “the computer will not upload it.”

In addition to confirming the futility of using the second form, the FSO’s response shed light on Ramanathan’s (2011) “myth of voluntariness.” The *aadhaar* project may well be non-mandatory in and of itself, but getting an *aadhaar* card, and thus a UID number, is a prerequisite to exercise one’s right to food entitlement. Interestingly, the FSO also highlighted the technocratic

function of “the computer” as a critical actor in the “production of arbitrariness” by the modern Indian bureaucracy (see Gupta 2012; see also Herzfeld 1993). In bureaucratic parlance, “the computer” often constitutes the first line of defence of bureaucrats against grievances and accusations of unfair treatment. Described by Gupta (2012) as systematic and methodological discrimination against large sections of the population, the production of arbitrariness generated by “the computer” is often exogenous to the interaction of human agents within bureaucratic worlds. It is relegated to processes that are out of an FSO’s control, by an insensitive machine meshing with a bureaucratic apparatus, which is otherwise quite fair in its treatment, since it is systematically prejudiced against a large section of the population in the exact same way.

5.3.2 Filling Out Application Forms

Soon after my meeting with the FSO, I was back in the *basti* with the 20 forms that could be processed by “the computer” in hand. I did not expect that my conversation with Prithvi, described above, around *chai* on that hot afternoon, which ended in a candid suggestion, would position me in the *basti* as a (rather unsuccessful) ration card provider. These applications did open up an unexpected space of ethnographic investigation into bureaucratic practices of inclusion and exclusion of welfare services that I would not have been able to explore otherwise.

Sita was the first woman who asked us to fill out her ration card form. She lived at the entrance of the *basti* and conducted, just like Prithvi, a profitable moonshine business. Compared to Prithvi’s home, however, the location of Sita’s *jhuggi* made it more accessible to anyone who wanted to buy her moonshine without having to wander through the narrow lanes of the informal settlement. Everybody knew, including police officers, that Sita participated in the moonshine trade. She ran the business with her husband, Ram. Both in their early 30s, they had been married

for over a decade in a love marriage, as opposed to the prevalent arranged marriage that many entered, and they had two young sons together. While Sita and Ram shared similar physical appearances—small in stature, bony cheeked, large smiles—their tempers were radically different. While Ram was quiet and composed, Sita was hot-tempered and did not let anybody step on her toes.

When we told Sita that we would need the UID numbers of her husband and two children to fill out her application form, she invited us into her home. She had submitted an application for a new ration card months before, but she had never heard back from the DFSCA. Tired of waiting, like everybody else, she was ready to go through the bureaucratic procedure once again. We sat down in the corner of her *jhuggi* on a purple carpet. She unlocked the large coffer located under a brand-new TV that was still covered in plastic wrap. She looked through what appeared to be winter blankets and other warm clothes for a while and found a transparent plastic folder. From inside the folder, Sita handed over two carefully folded receipts. She had received them when she had tried to get a UID number for her young sons.¹⁵⁴ While she had *aadhaar* cards in her possession for herself and her husband, she had never received cards for her sons.

I used my smartphone to check the online UIDAI portal, where we discovered that only one of her son's UIDs had been granted. She had never heard from the UIDAI regarding her first son's submission, nor had she ever received information regarding the denied application for her second son. I filled out the ration card application form for Sita in English, using the three UID numbers she had for herself, her husband, and one of her sons. Without her second son's UID

¹⁵⁴ The enrolment number can be used to download the *aadhaar* card from the UIDAI portal, provided that the applicant still possesses the same phone number used at the time of the submission.

number, Sita would receive only 75% of her rightful monthly entitlements. Other than that issue, filling out her application form was exceptionally easy because she and her husband had had the same phone number for years; their names had been used consistently without any spelling mistakes; their dates of birth matched across the different pieces of ID they owned (they were both officially born on January 1,¹⁵⁵ like many other residents of Delhi); and perhaps more importantly, Sita watched the news every day—the TV was always on—and she had kept herself informed and had ensured that her family members possessed various bureaucratic documents that they could or should acquire, whenever possible.

However, all of her good intentions could not prevent institutionalized errors. In Delhi, since the deployment of the *aadhaar* project began, UIDAI employees have refused to take the prints of young children under the age of three years old. Sita had lined up with her young children a few years ago, in a run-down room adjacent to the post office, where she was told that the fingerprints of her youngest were too small to be picked up by the device. She had insisted that it be done anyways. The clerk had finally agreed, according to her story, but in the end, “the computer” had not computed the data.¹⁵⁶ She had known that her son's receipt was not for a genuine UID, since the difference between that receipt and the *aadhaar* card (on which the UID is inscribed) was quite equivocal. However, she had placed hopes in the salience of the receipt, since it had been printed from what appeared to be a governmental document. Once completed, I gave Sita her application form, which she carefully slid into her plastic binder and locked back in the coffer.

155 Many *basti*-dwellers do not know their birthday. When they apply for bureaucratic documents, officers register their birthdate as January 1. As a result, from a bureaucratic perspective, an unreasonable proportion of the population is born on January 1, including Sita and Ram.

156 I insert “the computer” within quotation marks to illustrate how the state official relied on “the computer” and technology to explain the shortcomings of the welfare system.

We found Prithvi later that day. By then, we had already filled out almost all of the 20 paper forms that I had brought with me.¹⁵⁷ Like we did with other women, Ritesh and I began by listing the exclusion criteria included in NFSA provisions:

- Guillaume: I am a citizen of India. It means you are a resident of this country . . .
- Ritesh: I and the mentioned members permanently reside in Delhi . . . and these names do not have a ration card of Delhi or any other state . . . No member of my family pays income tax . . . None of your family members has a fixed job . . .
- Guillaume: Like working for a company or government?
- Prithvi: No, nothing like that.
- Ritesh: No member of my family owns land or home in MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) A to E colonies.¹⁵⁸
- Prithvi: No.¹⁵⁹
- Ritesh: No member of my family gets rations under any other government scheme.
- Prithvi: None of this is wrong.
- Ritesh: None of us is a government servant?
- Prithvi: No.

Note here how Prithvi answered “no” to each of the exclusion criteria listed. During his fieldwork with London’s homeless community, anthropologist Josh Burraway received similar answers when he helped homeless people to fill out a Job Seeker Allowance form, a two-page questionnaire of yes-or-no questions. Burraway quickly realized that homeless Londoners filling out forms, just like Prithvi in Delhi, were reduced by bureaucratic practices “to an easily docketed language of synecdoche” (2015). Bureaucracy produced what Burraway called the *no-person*: no to earning money in the formal economy; no to having a formal or governmental job; no to owning land; no to a house; no to having a ration card; no to paying income tax; no to being

157 I mundanely did so without recording my interactions with the previous applicants, who were almost all women. I simply intended to reach out to these women, to introduce myself and my research, and to ease my way into their everyday lives.

158 As previously stated, the National Capital Territory (NCT) is divided into eight different categories of residential colonies, from A to H, classified according to the real estate property rates in New Delhi.

159 To this day, I wonder if Prithvi knew what the categories of different colonies were. I doubt it.

able to read; no to having time and money to wait for days at the FSO; and no to trusting the state to hand over entitlements.¹⁶⁰ Just like Burraway's experience with interlocutors, I found asking the list of questions quite uncomfortable. It was a humiliating process that Prithvi had to endure every time she filled out these forms fashioned by the bureaucratic state, no matter what benefit she was applying for. For illiterate people, filling out these forms also requires the vocalization of every way that various structures of power have worked on them and left them with few economic opportunities, let alone a formal job or a formal housing facility. The paper forms seemed to shape Prithvi as an object of welfare, a no-person of India, a member of Chatterjee's political society.

With her *aadhaar* card in hand, we filled out most of the form in silence. Prithvi had also brought her voter ID, just in case. According to the voter ID, Prithvi was 37 years old, but according to her UID card, she was born on January 1, 1984, which at the time would make her 31 years old. Since a copy of the UID document would be appended to the paper form, we chose to stay as close as possible to the information found on her *aadhaar* card. "Prithvi, what is your occupation? Your job?" She did not hesitate: "Selling pulses, *masala* . . ." She then talked in Bihari with other women around her, before adding: "We don't put up shop daily. Only on Sundays. We sell *masala*." Prithvi was lying. She had not sold spices in years, if she had ever done so, but she could not tell us, nor the bureaucratic state, that she made a living illegally by selling moonshine. Regarding her household's income, another question on the form, she remained as evasive as possible: "My income? I can tell you my savings!" Like several other *basti*-dwellers in the Indian capital, Prithvi was an entrepreneur. Most of her profits were

160 I borrow this stylistic alliteration from Burraway's blog post: "In their case, almost every answer they gave was 'No.' No to having a partner, No to having a bank account, No to having a higher education, No to having any savings, No to having a place of residence" (2015).

reinvested to pursue her economic activities and intricately meshed with everyday expenses: she had to, of course, buy the moonshine, pay a fee to the moonshine mafia (for lack of a better term), bribe police officers, send remittances to Bihar, and buy food and other treats for her family.

Whether it is selling spices, vegetables, or moonshine, or exchanging labour in return for daily wages, these practices enable the no-person to find their place in the capital (see Sethi 2011) by bargaining with a range of services and commodities to maintain their position in the city (Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008). They make do, and as they do so, they take part in an intricate urban landscape that forges their aspirations of social mobility yet systematically entrenches them in financial paucity (Baviskar and Ray 2011). Being on the street—whether it is to sell freshly cut cucumbers sprinkled with masala, or to sort out spices under the harsh sun of May, or to hand out a bottle of booze—is costly and risky for hawkers who compete for space both among themselves and with the state (Bayat 1997; Legg 2007; Shapiro Anjaria 2011, 2016), with little to no margin for error. Prithvi's illegal business abode by the same principles as most, with the difference that her customer base had an addiction to her goods. Her household was able to survive thanks to her business, but she constantly had to adopt strategies to overcome the fact that she was, in the eyes of the state, not only a no-person, but also one that practiced frowned-upon economic activities. People who are active in the “formal economy” may enable institutional strategies to coerce and limit economic activities taking place in the “informal economy” (Bourdieu 1979; Chatterjee 2011),¹⁶¹ leaving very few opportunities for social mobility to the no-person.

After exchanging a few words in Bihari with her husband, Prithvi confirmed her

¹⁶¹ Following Keith Hart, I too argue that the concept of “informal economy” is inadequate to empirically describe the complexities that characterize economic activities framed by the rules, values, and conventions of the modern state (see Davis 2006; Hart 1973; Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010). Here, however, I am using these concepts to illustrate how they can be used to make sense of Prithvi's economic activities as part of the bureaucratic process to claim her entitlements.

household's revenue: "My husband does not work. But if we put ₹ 5,000 [in buying moonshine], we get a ₹ 1,000 profit (every week)." A thousand rupees a week is not much when one considers that a phone bill—an essential commodity to receive a ration card—costs at least ₹ 250 every month. For a family of three, a meal consisting of a portion of rice and one of curry would cost anywhere between ₹ 40 and 100, including the wood bought to cook the food. If there were leftovers, they would get eaten around 11:00 am on the following day. "OK then," I told Prithvi. "Let's write ₹ 3,000 a month then, just to be safe." In theory, a yearly income of less than ₹ 100,000 grants a ration card.

When the time came to fill out the second part of the form, the one that lists the names of household members holding a UID number and correspondingly determines the quantity of monthly entitlements to be allocated, we asked Prithvi to give us the UID numbers of the other members of her household. She did not have them. Her husband always thought that getting an *aadhaar* card was a waste of time, her toddler was too young to get one, and the rest of her children were living in Bihar; they may have had UID numbers, but Prithvi did not have a copy of their *aadhaar* cards with her. "Who is the eldest woman of your family?" Ritesh then asked. Since the NFSA christens the eldest woman in the household as the cardholder, we tried to see if we could add any other members to Prithvi's household to maximize her monthly entitlements.

Prithvi: My mother-in-law...

Guillaume: Does she have an *aadhaar* card?

Prithvi: No, she does not live in Delhi. She lives in the village.

Ritesh: No, no . . . who is the elder women living with you, here in Delhi?

Prithvi: Myself.

Prithvi looked confused, and so was I. Household compositions are fluid in the capital. Some

migrant workers tend to go back and forth between what they identify as home during the winter and fall to help their family harvest crops. Others, like Prithvi, send monthly remittances home so that their children can be fed, clothed, sent to school, and taken care of, far away from Delhi's *basti*. Many migrant workers¹⁶² rent shared rooms; others sleep on their cycle rickshaws, on their cart, or simply on the sidewalk, wrapped in blankets, a few months a year or all year round. Prithvi did have a roof over her head, and she had been living in the same *jhuggi* since 2009. However, despite the apparent household stability, the composition of her household still varied depending on the time of the year. Relatives showed up to her home from time to time to take their chances at making a living in the capital. When that happened, Prithvi fed them. She also cooked for her parents who lived just in front of her *jhuggi*.

To complete the form, I asked for Prithvi's phone number. She asked her husband to give her their old *Nokia* mobile phone, which was powered off to save the battery. She turned it on and, after a minute, she handed it to me, showing me the number on the screen. Without thinking too much about it, I wrote the number on the form and gave it back to Prithvi. We exchanged a few words and planned to go to the DFSCA office, as I described in the introduction of this chapter. Over the months that followed, I filled out a number of applications for other households. I always had a few forms on me as a way to introduce myself and my research. On these occasions, we developed a number of ways to communicate the applicant's phone number. Some would show it to me on their phone, just like Prithvi had done. Some would call me. Others would have it written down on a piece of paper by their children who attended governmental schools. It took me quite a while to realize that many of these women, unable to write a word,

¹⁶² "Migrant workers" is a rather analytical and bureaucratic category that is porous, since it encompasses both people who travel for work seasonally and those who have been living in the city for most of their lives but still feel like they belong to their home state.

could not read or write numbers either—and therefore rely on their husbands, children, relatives, or friends to use a telephone, let alone to fill out a governmental form that relies on the cellular phone number as a technology of identity.

When a mobile phone number is registered on an application form for a ration card, it is used as a security measure to ensure the identity of the applicant who seeks to access her information online. In practice, for many *basti*-dwellers, this had historically had few implications for the enrolment process, since many of them did not possess a stable phone number, let alone a computer or the ability to navigate the Internet. In fact, on several occasions, many applications submitted to the DFSCA were registered with the same phone number, since some of the women we helped did not possess one of their own. However, as I explore further in the next section, when, without warning, the DFSCA stopped issuing re-materialized new ration cards and relied instead on people accessing digital e-ration cards from the Food Security Portal, the mobile phone number, and the skills required to manipulate it, became crucial for Prithvi, Sita, Neelam, and other women in their efforts to access their entitlements.

5.4 Phones as a Technology of Identification

When Chatterjee theorizes on civil and political societies, he does so to explore how the workings of governmentality create conditions that generate claims for entitlements for populations living on the margins of the rule of law (2004, 76). Chatterjee writes:

To effectively direct those benefits toward them [members of the political society], they must succeed in applying the right pressure at the right places in the governmental machinery. This would frequently mean the bending or stretching of rules, because existing procedures have historically worked to exclude or marginalize them. They must, therefore, succeed in mobilizing population groups to produce a local political consensus that can effectively work *against* the distribution of power in society as a whole. (2004, 66)

Chatterjee's *The Politics of the Governed* (2004) constitutes a rather elegant attempt to reconcile techniques of government to improve the well-being of specific populations in postcolonial contexts with democratic ideals found in human rights. To do so, Chatterjee uses the binary distinction of civil society versus political society to explore:

a far more subtle process of the induction of ever increasing sections of the people, individually as well as in the mass, into a web of power relations in which they are being transformed into the subjects of power. As I keep saying, they are not necessarily turning into republican citizens, but they are nonetheless acquiring a stake, strategically and morally, in the processes of governmental power. (2008, 93)

The binary distinction drawn between civil society and political society is rather productive for exploring the different modalities of subject formations and encounters in bureaucratic worlds. However, this binary distinction is not as clear cut as it may appear. As Baviskar and Sundar (2008) have rightly pointed out, law-abiding members of civil society do not hesitate to curb or stretch the rules for their own interests. Conversely, most members of so-called political society seek to assert their position as law-abiding citizens (see chapter four). While I contend that the categories of civil society and political society are analytically significant, I argue that in practice, *basti*-dwellers tend to construct networks that transcend these categories for their own interests.

In providing entitlements to a collection of individual bodies that may be hungry, the NFSA is designed to generate mechanisms to improve the overall well-being of the population. But these mechanisms have little to no chance of having any impact on the population if individual bodies are incapable of getting a hold of ration cards, which facilitate—among other things—the collection of food entitlements. I argue that the formation of networks that enable access to ration cards is carefully established. In the era of neoliberal governmentality, the deployment of food welfare relies on a collection of state and non-state actors (human and

nonhuman) distributed according to the circulation of governmental power. In this section, I examine phones as a technology of identification that mediates the circulation of this power (see Hull 2012b).

Due to their ubiquity around the world, cell phones have increasingly been on the radar of anthropologists who have begun to address how these devices shape and are shaped by social, economic, and political worlds (Alexandrakis 2013; Hobbis 2017). Drawn from a rich ethnography in Jamaica, Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller explore (2006) the relationship of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and poverty alleviation in the Global South. Horst and Miller question the assumption (shared by Indian planners and bureaucrats) that the cell phone has been a “key technology for helping the world’s poor move out of poverty” (2006, 3). Horst and Miller seek to enrich that rather deterministic assumption, using thick ethnographic research to illustrate how communication and connectivity, mediated via ICTs, generate economic opportunities (or income) through social networking and connections rather than work or entrepreneurship. Connectivity, they argue, goes well beyond the cell phone as a functional object of poverty alleviation; it reconfigures social and economic lives. But what happens when ICTs, in and of themselves, hinder that social connectivity? What happens when people must use ICTs to access welfare entitlements, but are incapable of doing so? When users cannot decipher the sole technology designed to facilitate their access to the TPDS, or to their ration cards, do ICTs become a liability rather than a facilitator of poverty alleviation?

The *aadhaar* card (or UID technology) and the ration card both rely on mobile phone numbers as a technology of identity and work in a similar fashion. As a way to increase accountability and transparency, governmental authorities have rendered these identification

documents available online. When an ID application is approved by the appropriate governmental authority (either UIDAI for the UID number or DFSCA for the ration card), an account is created, through which the cardholder may log into her own dashboard to access and modify certain information (for example, to correct errors in her name or change her phone number). More importantly, the cards are deliberately made available for download to be printed later. To access the approved pieces of identification, however, the user has to input her own phone number as a security measure, following which an SMS (short message service) is sent to her, containing a numeric one-time password (OTP) that must be entered on the web portal. This is a rather well known and widespread security measure, used across the world and web interfaces to protect important information online from hacking and theft.

For Prithvi and many others, however, these series of interactions with a computer and a mobile phone require intellectual gymnastics, since they cannot decipher the OTP presented to them on their phones, let alone navigate the Internet, find the page to access their dashboards, read the instructions on the DFSCA (or UIDAI) portal, and write down the required information. Facing these barriers, Prithvi did not go to one of several Internet cafés in her neighbourhood to access and print her card electronically. Instead, like Alka in Chapter One, Sati in this chapter, and everybody else in the *basti*, she waited for the mail carrier to deliver her new ration card or her *aadhaar* card. When she did not receive either, she did not know whether her application had been denied, her card had gotten lost in the mail, or her card was simply being stored at a governmental office, waiting to be delivered.

Prithvi's ration card never came. In the weeks following our visit to the DFSCA field office, the DFSCA stopped distributing the re-materialized ration cards altogether, in order to

entice approved cardholders to download and print their ration cards from the Food Security Portal. By pushing the end-to-end computerization of the TPDS onto the everyday practices of political society, the government was clearly shedding some of the operation costs of its system and, in doing so, relegating the responsibility of accessing cards to the targeted population. It did so on its own terms, without acknowledging, or at least without attempting to alleviate, the pitfalls inherent in the process of accessing digitized ration cards—the e-ration card—for a population battling illiteracy and e-illiteracy. For instance, Prithvi, who had to seek help from the *pradhan* to use her phone because she could not read numbers, was evidently not able to retrieve her ration card from the DFSCA portal by herself. By compelling users to download the e-ration card, the DFSCA has created a political space in which it is incumbent on the individual to deploy mundane tactics to access the bureaucratic world and, ultimately, their entitlements. Here, I do not wish to argue that the DFSCA has purposefully re-materialized ration cards to exclude large sections of the targeted population from accessing the TPDS as part of a larger objective to reinforce practices of accountability and transparency. But I want to emphasize that the government has not adequately considered the conditions of illiteracy and e-illiteracy in which many ration card applicants find themselves—conditions that pose major barriers to the acquisition of ration cards. As I have tried to show, the bureaucratic state has relied on informal mechanisms and instruments of government that differentially impact members of civil society and political society and inadvertently work to create barriers for targeted no-persons.

On a hot morning of June, on which the asphalt was melting on the roads of the NCT, I received an SMS from Prithvi and Sita's *pradhan*, Govind. He was concerned that I had given a fake ration card to Sita. She had tried to draw rations with the card I had printed for her, but the

FPS owner had refused to sell her rations. Concerned, Govind texted me, politely asking if I had fabricated Sita's ration card, to which I proudly replied: “*Mein rashan card bana sakta houn!* [I can make ration cards!]”

Just a few days before, I had indeed printed Sita's e-ration card from a *computer ki dukaan* (Internet café) close to my home. A few weeks after we had visited the DFSCA office together, I had sat with Sita and logged on to the Food Security Portal on my phone, only to realize that the DFSCA had already approved Sita's application (and all the other women's applications). However, three months later, Sita's re-materialized ration card had still not reached her by mail. Once we discovered that the DFSCA had stopped delivering the plastic ration cards and that nobody in the *basti* would ever receive their cards by mail, I had suggested to Sita that we use the Food Security Portal to download and print her ration card electronically. I had brought my bulky laptop to the *basti* and downloaded Sita's card using her information. On my way back home, I had printed the card in black and white at an Internet café. The following day, I had given Sita the piece of paper on which her fresh e-ration card had been printed. She had tried to use it at her FPS. The owner had recorded Sita's card and taken her fingerprints in his registry.¹⁶³ He had then informed her that it would take two additional months for her entitlements to reach the FPS—a lie, since Sita's entitlements had been approved for three months already and were already being delivered to the ration shop. The FPS owner asked her to come back with a genuine plastic ration card.

Once back in the *basti*, Sita had complained to the *pradhan*, who had decided to take matters into his own hands. We met later that day, under a *peepal* tree (*Ficus Religiosa*), where

¹⁶³ The FPS owner did not partake in the pilot project mentioned in Chapter Four.

meetings of all sort typically took place in the *basti*, on the front step of the *mandir* (temple). I had until then maintained a fairly good relation with Govind. Yet, in printing a ration card, I came to realize that I had overstepped a boundary.

I had met the *pradhan* at the beginning of my fieldwork through our common friend Kareem, who regularly visited Govind to consult with him on a wide range of issues that affected the *basti*. The *pradhan* had been generous enough to introduce me to the *basti* residents, with whom I had spent countless hours during the months that followed. Generally speaking, the *pradhan* had affably taken time to answer the most basic questions that I had about the everyday lives of the *basti*'s people and the history of the settlement. But that afternoon, he was not pleased. Bluntly, in his distinctive soft voice, he explained that I should refrain from printing any other ration card ever again:

We shouldn't hand-feed them [the residents of the *basti*]. If we do this, they will never become mature. Now, there are so many children. But people don't send children to school. The parents send their kids to steal at dusk. They don't take care of them. Their kids will become like the parents. So, first the parents should become mature. Then the children will also become mature.

Govind never did explicitly demand that I stop printing ration cards. But he gently yet firmly insisted that procuring ration cards was part of his responsibilities as *pradhan*, along with informing his people about the different welfare programs and entitlements available to them.

Like any other government authority, part of Govind's political capital is drawn from his ability to secure welfare for his people. He was literate and had relations with members of civil society. He was well acquainted with the defeated Congress MLA of the area. He had built close relations with a number of social workers who regularly laboured in the *basti* on various issues, such as health, education, *anganwadi*, and subsidized food, including Kareem who was

himself intricately embedded in a network of different NGOs, including the RTFC. Kareem was a social activist with strong ties with *basti*-dwellers across Delhi. He organized surveys compiling data that could later be used by NGOs. He printed forms for *basti*-dwellers so that they could apply for various IDs and other entitlements, like the *aadhaar* card, the ration card, or the voter ID card. He established liaisons with human rights lawyers when someone stumbled into a legal problem. More importantly, Kareem spent time with *basti*-dwellers, attended political meetings, shared *chai*, and did not hesitate to dine with them whenever the opportunity arose. In other words, Kareem occupied a prime position of liaison between members of political society and civil society.

It would be ill advised for me to argue that the *pradhan* convinced me to stop printing ration cards in order to maintain his political clout in the community. Govind had been selected as *pradhan* eight years before I first walked into the *basti*, at a moment when nobody else had sought to take the position. In the past, he had convened the residents to let them know of his intentions to let someone else lead the *basti*. But he had faced opposition from them, to the point where they had agreed, according to him, to pay him a rent of ₹ 7,000 per month to do the job. He told me:

No one wants to take it. That is the matter. But I want to leave it. I have done several meetings so that someone else become the *pradhan*. I do not want to do it. Because now my children are of marriageable age. Now I want to work for a couple of years and then rely on them.

In addition to disseminating information regarding governmental programs and services, he had worked to improve the area. Financed by the Congress MLA, a *mandir* was constructed around the *peepal* tree. Govind had arranged for the “ground to become *pakka* (solid),” or resurfaced

with asphalt, which helped to drain excess water and trash away from the *jhuggi*, an act for which he was sent to the Tihar Jail for six months on the accusation of having usurped government land. Govind was thus happy about my presence in the *basti*, since it alleviated some of his tasks and responsibilities as *pradhan*. He let me be and do whatever I wanted, as long as it did not add to his charges. But when Sati had complained to the *pradhan* about her allegedly dysfunctional ration card, it was not just another chore the *pradhan* had to deal with; I had destabilized the network that fuelled his political capital.

Govind's position and responsibilities as *pradhan* were symptomatic of the workings of the mechanics of the welfare state in a context of neoliberal governmentality. Among the chief criticism directed at neoliberalism since the 1980s, the reconfiguration of welfare services and goods for the population and thus the redistribution of responsibilities to secure those welfare services and goods among state and non-state actors certainly figure at the top. In this process of reconfiguration, some of the welfare responsibilities forsaken by the state have been picked up by the NGO sector (Sharma 2006, 2013), thus triggering the formation of new networks exogenous to the bureaucratic world to ensure that welfare works. Locally, this has often resulted in the establishment of close connections between the NGO sector and the political leaders of the *basti* and other settlements.

A few days later, over a cup of milky *chai* shared with Govind and both of his wives, I gave him the remaining forms I had printed for the *basti*-dwellers, so that he would have some handy. But he did not want them:

Kareemji wants me to remain *pradhan*. . . . Now look here, there are staplers, pens, fevicol, I get troubled buying it all. . . . There are many staplers here that work. But the people here have become so lazy. I want to push them forward a little because I

want to leave this position of *pradhan*. But I am not able to leave it.

The *pradhan* knew how to read and write. And he assured me that he helped his people to complete their application forms. But he insisted on the importance of letting the applicants navigate the city and the bureaucratic world on their own. For Govind, the job of a *pradhan*, or of any NGO worker trying to help *basti*-dwellers, consisted in educating them about the mechanisms of the bureaucracy—that “in addition to helping, we should make them aware (*help ke sat, jaagarouk bhi kerenge*).” Making them aware also surely means not venturing into the bureaucratic world for them—hand-feeding them, in other words—so that they, themselves, can manage to overcome the maze of bureaucratic practices one has to undertake to access one’s own entitlements, a perspective that has gained a lot of traction in the development literature (see Ansell 2014).

In doing so, however, Govind sustained the informal network of social and NGO workers—active members of civil society—that mediated the interactions between the government and so-called political society. Since instruments deployed by the bureaucratic government to access entitlements were so alien to Prithvi, Sita, and the other women that I encountered throughout my fieldwork, some sort of mediation was mandatory; otherwise, a large segment of the population simply would give up on getting ration cards or *aadhaar* cards. What is more, at every step of the way, acts of mediation to help residents access welfare services or entitlements generate political capital—either for the graduate student who seeks to gain access to a field site, for the NGO worker, or for the *pradhan*. Without the intervention of the *pradhan* or Kareem, one could certainly question how a no-person may find required information on welfare services, practical knowledge to fill out forms, or the political clout to face the arbitrary power of

the bureaucratic government. In such cases, bribes then become the only remaining solution for *basti*-dwellers—and perhaps the most effective mediator for accessing welfare services swiftly (Gupta 2005; Srivastava 2012), including a re-materialized ration card.¹⁶⁴

5.5 Concluding Remarks

During my last week in Delhi, I accompanied Prithvi to the FPS. By then, her ration card had been approved for six months. During the summer, Kareem had managed to print an e-ration card for her. She had then tried to use it at the FPS, but the owner had informed her, just like he had with Sita, that she would be able to draw rations from the FPS only after a two-month delay had passed after registering her card with him. There we were, then, two months later, following Prithvi, who led us straight to the FPS, manoeuvring through the crowded streets of Chandni Chowk. Once we reached the FPS, we stayed behind, leaving Prithvi by herself with the owner. After she handed over her e-ration card, printed in colour on a A4 piece of white paper, it took only a minute for the FPS owner to refuse to give Prithvi her entitlements, pleading that he had not received her food grains yet. She waved at us, and this time, I let Ritesh take the lead. He impersonated an NGO worker; he told the owner that he had connections with bureaucrats at the DFSCA, that the FPS owner was embezzling Prithvi's rations, and that he would most certainly file a complaint with the government. Meanwhile, I took a picture of the FPS to record the name of the FPS owner and the shop's number, which all FPSs must display. We left as promptly as we had arrived, with Prithvi once again taking the lead. Two blocks further, the FPS owner caught up with us on a scooter. Alarmed, he exhorted us to come back to the FPS. He told us that he had

¹⁶⁴ About corruption in the exercise of bureaucratic practices, Govind was adamant:

All this corruption starts and ends in Delhi. Its roots are here. Whatever work we have to do, we have to pay bribe of ₹ 50 or ₹ 100 for the ration card or the voter ID card. When you go to submit form, then you also have to pay. If you pay, you get it easily. Otherwise, they give us a hard time.

made a mistake, that he had Prithvi's 5 kg of food grains in his ration shop, and he apologized for the misunderstanding. Ritesh silently acquiesced. Prithvi reassured him that if he distributed the entitlements to ration card holders, we would have no reason to denounce him to the DFSCA. In the end, Prithvi decided to head back to the FPS to collect her entitlements for the first time: 4 kg of wheat and 1 kg of rice.

Albeit anecdotal, this vignette illustrates well how members of so-called political society are subjected to random, arbitrary practices that hamper their access to entitlements. To mediate their access to welfare, to navigate the bureaucratic world, members of so-called political society are most successful when they construct an association of humans and things that enables them to reach what should otherwise be theirs in the first place. This is especially true in the era of neoliberal governmentality, in which these networks are partially shaped as a response from the increased presence of non-state actors in the delivery of entitlements and the resilience of *basti*-dwellers, who do not hesitate to build on their socialities to mediate their way in the bureaucratic world.

In describing the challenges that Prithvi, Sita, and other women face when trying to get ration cards, I have analyzed the unintended consequences that the use of new devices can have in the context of government interventions. I have shown that the digitization of many forms of identification, designed to curb practices of patronage and to plug leakages from the TPDS, has indeed reproduced patterns of endemic exclusion from welfare entitlements—what Gupta (2012) calls the production of arbitrariness. More to the point, I have described how bureaucratic instruments of welfare distribution, such as the application form, the cell phone, the computer, and the digital e-ration card, are deployed to shape interactions between segments of the

population and the state, with a blunt and desensitized disregard for the ways in which the targeted population engage with these instruments. Left to themselves to navigate these bureaucratic devices—sites of government rationality—targeted population members have little choice but to build a network of humans and things to help negotiate their access to what is otherwise discursively constructed as their rightful entitlements.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

One of the key provisions of accountability in the National Food Security Act (NFSA) is the constitution of grievance-redressal mechanisms designed to help members of the population voice claims regarding their right to food entitlement. These mechanisms include call centres, help lines, the nomination of district grievance-redressal officers, and the formation of State Food Commissions. The NFSA has mandated these techniques of government to oversee the implementation of the Act, to attend to complaints made by users of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), and to monitor the entire infrastructure of rationing. In Delhi, in addition to a sporadic help line, vigilance committees have been allegedly chaired by a member of the legislative assembly and constituted by a food and supplies officer (FSO) and ration card holders nominated by a senior bureaucrat. In February 2014, the Department of Food, Supplies, and Consumer Affairs (DFSCA) of Delhi issued an order to institute a vigilance committee in each of the 70 circles of the National Capital Territory (NCT). But to my knowledge, none of these 70 vigilance committees were functional during my fieldwork, which ended in October 2015, and they remain largely fictitious outside of the plans of the Delhi government.

Although the mechanisms of accountability set up in Delhi remained largely dysfunctional two years after the ratification of the NFSA, techniques of government deployed to render bureaucratic practices transparent were on the other hand almost fully operational. The purpose of digitization was to allow the government to closely monitor and to publicly display the circulation of food grains along the TPDS infrastructure. Experts and planners have assumed that by tracking subsidized grain along this network, the government would be in a better position to contain practices of patronage and corruption—and to finally plug leakages from the TPDS

that have been said to cripple the infrastructure of rationing since the 1980s (see Planning Commission 2005). The DFSCA of Delhi set up a Food Security Portal—accessible to all who have the literacy and ability to access the Internet—to track the movement of food grains across the NCT. Every month, the portal publishes the quantity of food grains in transit from *godowns* to more than 2,100 Fair Price Shops (FPSs)¹⁶⁵ and seven millions ration card holders across the capital. Month after month, since 2014, the portal has shown that 100% of the food grains have reached the FPSs. This is rather puzzling, since I have encountered during my fieldwork a substantial number of ration card holders who have been unable to draw their entitlements at their respective FPSs.

While different methods for tracking subsidized grains have been developed, the most contentious is certainly the use of unique identification numbers (UIDs). The UID is a technology developed by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) at the beginning of 2009 as a “fix” for practices of corruption, inefficiencies, and leakages. Printed on the *aadhaar* card, the UID is a 12-digit number issued to individual Indians. Initially, this technology was designed to empower individual bodies—who typically access IDs with difficulty and thus have no identity in the eyes of the government—to use biometrics to authenticate their identity across state borders. In and of itself, the *aadhaar* card does not have any use for its holder except to authenticate their identity. However, since its deployment, the *aadhaar* card has increasingly become a prerequisite object that an individual must have in order to access a range of government services, including entitlements distributed through the TPDS.

Enrolment in the UID program is voluntary. To access a UID number, applicants must

¹⁶⁵ As of August 2018, there are 2145 FPSs in Delhi.

submit fingerprints and retina metrics. These biometrics are stored in UIDAI servers, along with socio-economic information about applicants, which is cross-checked by other governmental agencies providing services (Ramanathan 2011). This process helps to ensure that no more than a single UID number is attributed to any given citizen, thus facilitating the governmental task of monitoring the circulation of people and the delivery of entitlements across the country.

In the context of a digitized TPDS, the UID technology has been compounded to a re-materialized ration card to exert bureaucratic control over the issuing of rations. While UID numbers are allocated to individual bodies, ration cards are distributed to household units. Under the NFSA, 5 kg of food grains are allocated to each person that has been granted a UID number. To ensure that every kilogram of food grains remains within the confines of the rationing infrastructure—which is to say that it is not leaked outside of the TPDS—every member of a household must be registered to a UID number associated with the household’s ration card. By compounding individual UID numbers with household ration cards, the government intended to better monitor the economy of rationing documents. The use of the compound ration card/UID, it was thought, would curb practices of corruption and eradicate the economy of bogus ration cards, thereby seemingly improving the overall efficiency of the TPDS (and thus obliquely raise levels of food security in the country).

This re-materialization of the ration card was envisaged for some time. In 2005, a study published by the Planning Commission suggested that the issuing of new ration cards should be used as a strategy to counter the diversion of subsidized food grains to the black market.¹⁶⁶ With

¹⁶⁶ One of the recommendations of the study commissioned by the Planning Commission is that:

New cards could be issued to eliminate the bogus cards, which were in circulation. If the cards had been issued in the recent past, instead of fresh issue, the existing ones for the identified BPL [below-the-poverty-line] families could be appropriately stamped and be affixed with the photographs of the heads of the families.

the formulation of the NFSA eight years later, the re-materialized ration card became a central instrument deployed to eliminate leakages of food grains. In the blueprint for implementing a right to food entitlement, each FPS would be equipped with a device for reading the fingerprints of UID number/ration card holders, enabling operators to compute every transaction at the FPS. This set of devices helped to exert bureaucratic command over rationing practices that had been previously out of reach of government surveillance; however, as I showed in the last chapters, it also re-arranged dynamics of exclusions from rightful entitlements. As legal researcher Usha Ramanathan reminds us:

Technology and machine can . . . seem relatively incorruptible. The potential intrusiveness of technology is shielded by the extent to which the temptations of technology have upended ideas of privacy, confidentiality, personal security and fraud. This seems to have prepared the ground for a technology fix. (2011)

In the design of the NFSA, planners and experts engineered the UID as an incorruptible technology—one that could translate normative claims of good governance into technocratic bureaucratic practices. This “technology fix” echoed a new rationality of government—one that is obsessed with eliminating corruption. Informed by human rights discourses, the ration card became the quintessential instrument for transposing the objectives of good governance into rationing practices. However, instead of instituting functioning mechanisms of accountability to ensure that the targeted beneficiaries of the TPDS would be in a position to scrutinize officials’ actions and demand compensation if needed, the UID technology added another layer of bureaucratic administration that multiplies the risk of exclusion from the TPDS.

Soon after the NFSA was enacted, several members of the RTFC unanimously expressed discontent with the UID technology. In 2015, to provide a forum to TPDS stakeholders

(Planning Commission 2005, 5)

to voice their concerns, the Delhi faction of the RTFC, *Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan* (DRRAA), organized a public hearing on the implementation of the NFSA in the NCT. Much like the *jan sunwai* set up by *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) two decades ago, the DRRAA convened bureaucratic officials to hear the grievances of activists and stakeholders of the NFSA. On a humid day in September, more than 200 people from all parts of Delhi were seated under large fans rotating from the ceiling of the Gandhi Peace Foundation in South Delhi. Lined up on a stage in front of them, a panel sat quietly under a large portrait of the Mahatma Gandhi. This panel included, among others, Special Commissioner to the Supreme Court Harsh Mander, Assistant to the Commissioners Biraj Patnaik, human rights lawyer Usha Ramanathan, petitioner for the right-to-food case Kavita Srivastava, founder of MKSS and activist for the National Campaign for People's Right to Information Nikhil Dey, and right-to-information and right-to-food activist Anjali Bhardwaj.

In the morning, at the beginning of the event, a series of assistant commissioners from the DFSCA entered the room to take their seats in front of the crowd, on the floor right next to the stage. These bureaucrats were, in fact, the much-awaited audience. The event could finally begin. Throughout the day, women took the microphone, one after the other, to share their struggles with the computerized TPDS. Forum participants raised several issues, but the one that perhaps best deserves attention here is how the bureaucratic uses of UID numbers have excluded potential users from the TPDS. Throughout the day, women described the challenges they had faced in getting a hold of ration cards. For instance, a widow living in a *basti* in South Delhi revealed that she had lost her old below-the-poverty-line (BPL) ration card in the overhaul of the TPDS because none of her family members had a UID number when someone from an NGO visited her

basti to complete her ration card application. Another woman, also residing in an informal settlement of South Delhi, made the plea that less than half of her family of nine had a UID number at the time she applied for a ration card, leaving them with 20 kg of rations every month, rather than 45 kg.

Exasperated, Dey, a leading figure of civil society, summed up the concerns raised.

Standing on the stage and turning towards the assistant commissioners, he said:

Your entire structure depends on a machine system, and it is a big problem. You are getting to know who is getting rations, but you don't know who is not getting it because of UID. You are getting to know who [should be] getting their rations, but people across India are putting their thumb on [a machine] and they are not getting rations. There is no information available for [people not getting their rations]. We are tired of these machines. These machines might be helpful for you, but we are sick of these machines, and that is why we are fighting against them. And, now the Supreme Court has also said that it is not required. So we beg you to please [stop using them], having seen how difficult the machines [make it for] the people who face problems.

Dey alluded to a recent Supreme Court judgment that had concluded that the government may use the UID system in the deployment of welfare services, *as long as its uses were not mandatory* (see Chapter Five). Since it was impossible to receive a ration card without a UID number, Dey, along with other members of the RTFC, affirmed that the current compounding of ration cards with UID numbers ran counter to the Supreme Court order. Dey continued:

please don't exclude us. That is why we say to make [the TPDS] universal. This Delhi government talks about electricity and water, but I think food and pension are equally important. Please do this. And the third point is about transparency and accountability. This government talks a lot about it, but it is just not possible by [using only] machines. It should be at every point. And action must be taken on those officers who do not take action on complains filed by us.

When Dey sat down, the audience clapped loudly. For 15 years since the early 2000s, a fair majority of the RTFC's members had repeatedly called for the abolition of the targeted system

that systematically excludes rightful beneficiaries from the infrastructure of rationing. In response, the new digital infrastructure was deployed to closely monitor the exchange of entitlements between FPS owners and ration card holders, but very little attention was paid to officials and other actors who were involved in a number of bureaucratic practices in the distribution of rations. The TPDS coverage mandated under the NFSA was perhaps more comprehensive, but it was accompanied by mechanisms designed to eliminate localized practices of corruption in TPDS without addressing other practices of patronage and corruption happening outside the confines of FPSs.

In reply to Dey, an assistant commissioner took the floor and said:

I will respond on all these points, one by one. [Firstly,] some people are not aware that [the UID] system exists. We need to share this with the people who are not aware about it so that we [the Delhi government] can perform better. Secondly, this is not an ideal situation, but the government takes decisions after looking at its finances. The third point, that you talked about UID and Supreme Court, we are not insisting on it, but the Supreme Court also acknowledged that [we can use it]. *From the last 40 years, we have also seen that this PDS system is very corrupt and the only possible solution that we could see is technology.* If you know other better system then the government can adopt that as well. . . . There might be cases that there are issues in implementation and that is why we want your cooperation. If you have better suggestions or better ideas, we are trying to adopt them.

Arguably, one could not blame the assistant commissioner for seeking help from the audience and members of the DRRAA. He laid a situation down before them that Merry has perhaps best illustrated: human rights activists are “restricted by the discursive field within which they work” (2006, 48). While activists and intellectuals have actively helped to echo discourses of good governance in making claims about the needs of the population—via campaigns for the right to information, the right to work, and the right to food in India—the political claims of need interpretation have been overcast by the technocratic nature of governmental mechanisms that,

due to their opacity and convoluted processes, reproduce systemic exclusions from welfare (see Gupta 2012). The government chose to deploy the UID technology as a panopticonic instrument to plug leakages from the TPDS and track the circulation of food grains and bogus ration cards, using technocratic strategies to enforce measures of accountability and transparency. However, in doing so, the state framed practices of corruption and patronage as falling outside of the realm of bureaucratic activities. It is perhaps for this reason that the assistant commissioner welcomed suggestions to improve the TPDS, inasmuch such suggestions helped to reaffirm the use of the UID, rather than pleas for a universalization of the TPDS, an undertaking that was considered to be unrealistic, perhaps too ideologically driven, and certainly against the grain of a rationality of government that presupposes efficient governmental spending on welfare.

Negotiations between activists and government administrators reveal frictions in the implementation of practices of good governance. The right to food as framed by members of the RTFC has been proposed as a way to ensure that the Indian government fulfills its most basic responsibilities to improve the lives of its population. Since 2001, the RTFC has struggled to enshrine provisions for food security in the legal system, using instruments at their disposal, such as the Supreme Court's interim orders and the para-public institutions of the NAC I and II, to leverage their claims into governmental action. Despite the Supreme Court's judgement on the question, the government is positioning the UID technology as a catchall technology for ensuring bureaucratic transparency. However, while it directs closer scrutiny upon the ration card holder, the *aadhaar* technology turns a blind eye to practices that lead to leakages outside of the delivery of rations to cardholders. The UID fails to monitor the activity of state officials involved in the infrastructure of rationing. Plus, it contributes to the exclusion of potential beneficiaries of the

NFSA from the distribution of rations, which the UID also fails to capture. In the aftermath of the NFSA, intrusive governmental scrutiny on ration card holders and their empowered bodies appears to have been granted greater priority over what is perhaps the most important normative claim made in the lead-up to the NFSA—that is, the government has a biopolitical duty to alleviate experiences of chronic hunger across the country.

In the introduction, when I set up the premise of my ethnography, I cited Harsh Mander, one of the engineers of the NFSA. Mander’s argument stipulates that rights-based legislation embodies a sort of transformative power that changes passive benevolent people into active agents, or what I have referred as individual empowered bodies. As I close this dissertation, I draw on another quote from his book *Ash in the Belly*, which was published just a year before the enactment of the NFSA. Mander writes:

A rights-based legislation requires robust and reliable systems of enforcement and accountability through institutions that are credible and independent. At the same time, it is important to recognize that very often less literate and impoverished groups unfamiliar with government working are at a disadvantage when it comes to the recording of complaints in any grievance-redressal system. (2012, 285)

Noting that previous human rights legislation has depended on the enforcement of accountability and transparency measures for its realization or full implementation, Mander suggests that without strong mechanisms of good governance, the right to food entitlement would have mixed results. This is, however, the nature of human rights legislation. As Mark Goodale summarizes: “the idea of human rights must be legislated, legally recognized, and codified *before it can be taken seriously* as part of the law of nations” (2006a, 6; emphasis added). Therefore, the transposition of normative codes into systematically arranged and implemented mechanisms is

critically important for the enactment of human rights legislation. However, if those mechanisms are not taken seriously by the Indian population, then there is little sense in legalizing the matter in the first place. Given the Indian experience of patronage in the delivery of governmental services and goods (Sainath 1996), the establishment of grievance-redressal mechanisms may help to give some credence to these human rights laws. As I mentioned above, however, most of these grievance-redressal mechanisms have remained poorly implemented or totally dysfunctional (at least in Delhi, where I conducted my fieldwork).

While members of civil society formulated a grievance-redressal system in the text of the law as a measure to audit bureaucratic practices, the state has emphasized another avenue to render bureaucratic practices transparent in the implementation of the law. The digitization of the TPDS has played a central role in governmental interventions on the matter, and as such, it took a prominent place in my fieldwork as well. On rights-based legislation in India, recent ethnographic research has shown that the manufacture of paperwork required to make the state accountable and transparent has ironically tended to render welfare practices and procedures rather opaque, formal, and unserviceable, instead of making these practices, and the bureaucratic worlds they engender, more accessible (cf. Mathur 2012; cf. Sharma 2013). Here, I have built on these insights. I have contended that in the aftermath of the NFSA, the overhaul of the TPDS has been couched in technocratic interventions that have not always well serviced the targeted population.

In the first half of this dissertation, I provided an account of food security interventions in India that have been implemented since the Second World War in order to contextualize the formulation and the implementation of the NFSA. In Chapter Two, I examined the cultural

constitution of the TPDS. Rationing in India was a central feature of welfare under the Nehruvian regime, which used rationing to channel food from rural to urban areas—where industries, conceived to be the engine of Indian development, were located—to feed workers. In 1966, under Indira Gandhi's rule, the Indian nation-state re-articulated its food policies as a field of interventions used to eradicate poverty. The infrastructure of rationing expanded over ensuing decades. This, however, came at a cost. In the 1990s, given the growing fiscal deficit, apologists for neoliberal reforms pleaded for a scaling down of the public distribution system, with the aim of transforming it into an efficient welfare program that would distribute resources to the most deserving. Meanwhile, practices of corruption were reported to plague the TPDS (Sainath 1996).

As the new millennium dawned, waves of drought repeatedly hit the northern states of India, leaving millions of Indian households dealing with food scarcity. The Food Corporation of India (FCI), the Government of India, and state governments failed to prevent death from starvation. For more than a decade, human rights activists used democratic means to entice the state to adopt constitutional provisions to guarantee entitlements and to empower citizens. In Chapter Three, I investigated the multifaceted struggles leading up to the formulation of the right to food entitlement in the NFSA. I paid particular attention to the politics of need interpretation of chronic hunger in the country, as well as to the sites of struggle in which meanings of good governance are contested.

In the second part of this dissertation, I focused on the techno-politics of the right to food entitlement. More specifically, I ethnographically explored how instruments of government mediate discourses of good governance to render welfare practices transparent and accountable—and how those instruments, in the process, have acted on association of humans and things. I

compared the old rationing cards to the new ones and analyzed how the UID technology compounded to those documents has radically transformed not only the materiality of the documents itself, but also their power over association. This ethnographic study led me to conclude that the UID technology exerts bureaucratic control over practices that had been otherwise difficult to rule, but as a result, it has acted on an association of humans and things in such a way as to generate or reproduce systematic exclusions from welfare services.

As I illustrated in Chapter Four, the ration card is a powerful document. In Chapter Five, I explored the strategies undertaken by ration card holders to obtain that documents. I covered a succession of instruments of government—the ration card application form, the *aadhaar* card, and the cell phone—which applicants must manipulate to access their right to food entitlement. For a variety of structural reasons, applicants who are mostly female face challenges to successfully utilizing these instruments of government as they have been designed. Thus, these women strategize, actively engaging with an association of humans and other things to overcome the challenges presented to them. It is not a small feat, but in the era of neoliberal governmentality, the construction of these networks is an integral part of governmental interventions. As I concluded in the last chapter, it became quite clear to me that the right to food entitlement in Delhi would simply not function without an informal distribution of actors able to help applicants navigate the Indian bureaucracy. To make people into active agents—to produce empowered bodies, in other words—is contingent on a myriad of actors, humans and things, and their ability to bridge the gap between what the NFSA attempts to do and what it actually accomplishes.

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