

# POPULAR ACTIONS, STATE REACTIONS: THE MORAL AND POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD IN INDIA

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New Delhi, October 2014

**FOOD RIOTS**  
&  
**FOOD RIGHTS**





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**Caption:** *Bags of grain sit at a Public Distribution System store in Himachal Pradesh (Photo: Bria Yifei Yan)*

## ABOUT THIS WORKING PAPER SERIES

The green revolution and the global integration of food markets were supposed to relegate scarcity to the annals of history. So why did thousands of people in dozens of countries take to the streets when world food prices spiked in 2008 and 2011? Are food riots the surest route to securing the right to food in the twenty-first century? We know that historically, food riots marked moments of crisis in the adjustment to more market-oriented or capitalist food and economic systems. Food riots featured as part of a politics of provisions that helped hold public authorities to account for protecting people during price spikes or shortages.

This research project interrogated this contemporary moment of historical rupture in the global food system through comparative analysis of Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique in the period 2007–12. This was a period of intensely volatile food prices as well as unusual levels of food-related popular mobilisation – unruly political events like riots but also more organised action like the Right to Food movement in India. During the global food crisis of 2007–8 alone, food riots (or subsistence protests) were reported in 30 countries. In many, including the four in our study, the food crisis triggered changes in domestic food security arrangements.

Working with multiple methods and at different levels with media content, with activists and protesters, and with policy and political elites, this research asked: What motivated people to mobilise around food? And did popular mobilisation effect or influence such changes?

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Can popular mobilisation activate accountability for hunger? In 2012, a group of researchers set out to explore this question through field research in four countries: Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique. The research was framed in ideas about a contemporary ‘moral economy’ – which when breached, would lead people to mobilise – either in the form of riots, or as movements for the right to food, thus activating state responses.

In recent years, sharp rises in world food prices resulted in price ‘spikes’ in 2008 and 2011. Yet the impacts of such spikes have not been interpreted unanimously. Higher food prices are assumed to be positive for farmers, yet richer farmers tend to benefit more than poorer ones. Policies to hold the price of basic commodities are assumed to help the urban consumers at the cost of the rural producers.

Research confirms that these price rises have been sources of social unrest. Increasingly, weak democracies are vulnerable to riots, and the links between global price spikes and social unrest is getting stronger as market integration and globalisation arguably limit the policy levers for governments. However, we cannot assume that social unrest is directly rooted in hunger – protests and popular mobilisation often feature other grievances including low wages, rising fuel prices and corruption. One might suggest that motivations for popular mobilisation lie in a contemporary ‘moral economy’; a consensus that people have a right to basic needs, and the state has a responsibility to protect such rights.

Thus the trajectory of the movement from food price rises to protest to responses are contextually tempered by existing food security structures and the role of state-led programmes, the differing impact of price rises on various groups, and the political opportunity structures that present themselves at specific periods of time. Official responses to food inflation in the form of price-related policies, social protection programmes for the poor and enforceable politics of provision are of course only partly linked to mobilisations; other factors such as international pressures and debates will also affect the forms responses take. Yet research has not yet asked fundamental questions about who engages in popular mobilisation around food, around what claims, what strategies are used and what sorts of mobilisation lead to durable responses to food insecurity. The broader research addresses these questions.

The four countries in the research project comprise a diversity of types of popular mobilisations and state responses to these. Two have witnessed food-related riots (Mozambique and Bangladesh) and two have had attempts at right to food legislation (India and Kenya). This report presents the research from India. The main aim is to understand the national politics of food security, whether and how popular mobilisation invoking arguments of social justice can elicit responses that will institutionalise accountability for hunger through state policies.

This preliminary report is organised as follows. Section 2 briefly lays out the political economy context of this time. Section 3 elaborates on the impacts and political economy of food price volatility (FPV) and inflation, drawing upon general Indian data and academic debates. Having set the stage, Section 4 elaborates on the methods used in the study and the adaptation of methods to the Indian context. In Section 5 we place popular mobilisation in India in the context of the new social movements literature, to highlight how such mobilisation has been directed at the state. In particular, the features and mobilisation strategies of the Right to Food campaign are drawn out, to set the stage for the next two empirical sections that follow; the first one on popular mobilisation in Madhya Pradesh (Section 6) and the next on ration riots in West Bengal (Section 7). In Section 8 we trace the impact that these mobilisations had at national and state levels, drawing upon interviews with policymakers and activists. Bringing these sections together in Section 9, we revisit the core themes of the research: food price inflation, moral economy, popular mobilisation and policy responses. In the final Section 10 we conclude with observations about what these findings imply for the potential of popular mobilisation to elicit accountability for hunger from the state.

## 2. POLITICAL CONTEXT

To understand the unfolding of the Indian narrative, it is essential to understand the broader political economy of the Indian context as it influenced the nature of popular mobilisation as well as state responses.

Before 2004, a coalition of parties under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had formed the government. The coalition was dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu right-wing party whose base was located among the urban and trading classes. Unlike the opposition Congress, the BJP had managed, with the help of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to create a strong network of grassroots party workers committed to the BJP agenda.

The BJP fought the 2004 elections focused on urban India, with an overall campaign slogan of ‘India Shining,’ that recounted the high levels of growth, global ascendancy and infrastructure development that India had witnessed in the early 2000s. By contrast, the opposition coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Congress party, focused on rural India, the ‘common man’, issues of inequality and a social protection agenda. To the surprise of most observers, the UPA won convincingly.

Post-election, a number of factors ensured that the UPA government delivered on the social commitments in its common minimum platform. First, they were obliged to respond to the overwhelming mandate for pro-poor change. No government in power, irrespective of its ideological leanings, could ignore the message from the ballot box – not even the Congress party, which chose for prime minister a pre-eminent neo-liberal economist (who had ushered in liberalisation and economic reforms as finance minister in 1992).<sup>1</sup>

Second, the UPA government had been formed with the outside support of the Left parties, with 60 seats in parliament. They put pressure on the government to implement welfare policies. Their presence largely ensured that the pro-poor policies stayed on track, despite many attempts in government to dilute them.

Third, the Congress party which led the coalition created a new intermediate advisory body, the National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by the Chairperson of the UPA, Mrs Sonia Gandhi who was also the President of the Congress party. Her presence meant that the NAC, though officially constituted by the prime minister’s office, acquired considerable (informal) influence.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, this period saw the consolidation of new social movements into thematic, rights-based campaigns focused around specific issues and which managed unprecedented mobilisation for the causes they represented. These campaigns included the Right to Food

<sup>1</sup> Thus, much of what was achieved in terms of social policy and rights-based legislation was against the instincts of a group of those in power (the prime minister, the finance minister and the head of the Planning Commission).

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Gandhi did not become prime minister in order to avoid causing controversy over her Italian birth.



campaign, the National Campaign on the Right to Information, the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, People's Action for Employment Guarantee, the People's Health Movement, the Safai Karmachari Andolan (to abolish manual scavenging), and the Right to Education campaign. Many leaders from these campaigns were invited to sit on the NAC, and worked very closely on the law-making processes. Much closer coordination was thus possible between people's movements and the government to ensure that the demands from the communities found prominence in the policy debate.<sup>3</sup>

It was this unique confluence of factors that led to the environment of progressive, rights-based law-making in the period 2004–14.

## **2.1 Welfare programmes related to food**

Since 2004, public welfare schemes have gained increasing importance. A slew of rights-based legislation was passed by the UPA government including the Right to Information, the National Employment Guarantee Act, the Forest Rights Act, and the Right to Education. In addition, the Supreme Court had already started converting government programmes into legal entitlements and was closely monitoring their enforcement. This period also saw an expansion in the existing welfare programmes implemented to strengthen household food security. These schemes can be broadly divided into three:

1. Direct food subsidy programmes. This includes the:
  - a. Public Distribution System (PDS) which provides rice and wheat to households at subsidised rates through a network of fair price shops. The price at which the beneficiaries get the grains (and in many states even the quantity) depends on whether the household is identified as being above (APL) or below the poverty line (BPL). In most parts of the country, it is only the BPL populations that get this subsidy. A number of states have expanded their coverage under the BPL category much beyond what is provided by central government, with some having universal or near-universal coverage. Currently, about 115 million households in the country have BPL cards. Under the recently passed National Food Security Act (NFSA), 75 per cent of rural population and 50 per cent of the urban population are entitled to food grains at highly subsidised rates.<sup>4</sup>
  - b. Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS): All children in primary and middle schools run by the government are provided with a free cooked meal on every school working day. This is largely funded by the central government with the state governments contributing to the cooking costs. About 120 million children are covered under this programme.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> We do not argue that this proximity to the government in power that civil society managed to acquire was not without its contradictions and problems. However, that issue is beyond the context of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> The Public Distribution System was introduced in India as a rationing mechanism by the British in the 1940s. It was revived and expanded in the 1960s in the wake of food shortages across the country. The PDS, although universal in principle, was largely confined to urban areas for a long time. The Targeted PDS (TPDS) with different entitlements for APL and BPL populations was introduced in 1997.

<sup>5</sup> A few states had a midday meals programme since the 1980s. Since the mid-1990s there began a programme across the

- c. Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS): provides supplementary nutrition to children in the six months to six years age group, pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls. About 70 million young children are covered under this programme. Both the central and state governments contribute to the expenditure on the food provided under this scheme in equal proportions, with many states contributing more than half.<sup>6</sup>
2. Employment programmes: Parliament passed landmark legislation on employment guarantees in 2005. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides 100 days of employment at minimum wages each year to every rural household that demands work. This is largely centrally financed.
3. Social assistance programmes: Pensions are provided to the aged, widows and disabled who are below the poverty line. The funds for this are supposed to be equally shared between the central and state governments. Further, there is a maternity benefit scheme for pregnant women that is undergoing change and will soon be universalised to cover all women in the unorganised sector.<sup>7</sup> Two states (Tamil Nadu and Orissa) already have substantial maternity benefit schemes.

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country that distributed dry rations once a month to school children. A Supreme Court order in 2001 directed that hot cooked meals must be provided in all government primary schools. By 2004, this order was implemented across the country.

<sup>6</sup> The ICDS started as a pilot programme in 33 blocks across the country in 1975. It was gradually expanded and covered about one-third of the country by 2001. Following a Supreme Court order in 2001 (and later reiterated by orders in 2006), the ICDS was universalised to cover all the villages and urban slums across the country.

<sup>7</sup> Universal maternity benefits are one of the entitlements promised under the National Food Security Act. Social security pensions began in 1995.

### 3. THE IMPACTS AND POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FPV/FOOD PRICE RISES

One of the basic assumptions of this study is that ruptures in the moral economy caused by inflationary spikes lead to popular mobilisation around food. But as we note below, the case in India is slightly different; India has not seen inflationary spikes, rather inflation has led to a steady rise in food prices. Therefore, food inflation is only one of the many factors contributing to popular mobilisation as well as state responsiveness.

Globally, the period 2007–12 has been recognised as one of high food price inflation and food price volatility. While India also experienced high food price inflation during this period, the country saw a consistent inflationary trend rather than high volatility with clearly identifiable spikes. As can be seen in Figure 1, the graph showing the index of food prices for the whole world and India separately clearly shows that while the world prices saw two identifiable peaks in 2008 and 2011, India saw a steeper rise in inflation from 2008 onwards. However, even as world prices fell towards the end of 2008, Indian prices continued to rise. We therefore see in India a steady increase in food prices, with an acceleration since 2008, rather than the food price volatility experienced globally.

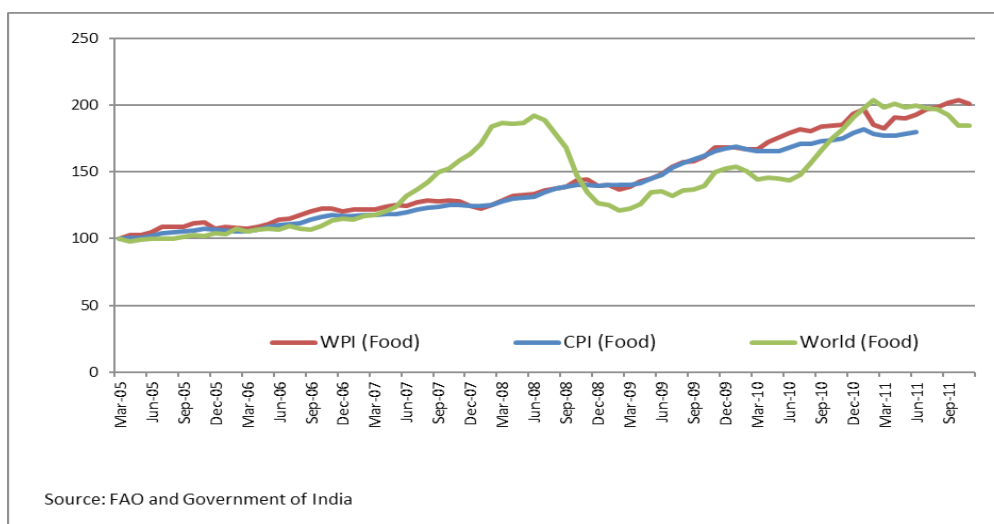


Figure 1: Trends in global and Indian food prices

Note: WPI = Wholesale Price Index; CPI = Consumer Price Index

Moreover, as seen in Figure 2, while the last decade has been a period of high inflation in India, what is striking is that a large part of this inflation was caused by food prices. Food inflation significantly outstripped the increases in the general price level.

Further, even within food prices, different components moved differently. The stubbornly

high food prices in India began with rising inflation, measured by year-on-year changes in the wholesale price index (WPI) (Base: 2004–5), of manufactured food products from January 2008, followed by primary food articles.<sup>8</sup> The inflationary pressure on food products remained high until July 2010 and on food articles it remained high for an extended period of time. On an average basis, the food products inflation rate recorded during the 31-month period from January 2008 to July 2010 was 10.20 per cent. The food articles group witnessed an average inflation rate of 12.46 per cent between March 2008 and November 2011. All the food article groups experienced high inflation between March 2008 and July 2010. Significantly, all of them were subject to a long period of upward price pressure. The peak monthly inflation rate witnessed by food grains (including cereals and pulses) was almost 20 per cent (19.49 per cent) (Nair and Eapen 2012).

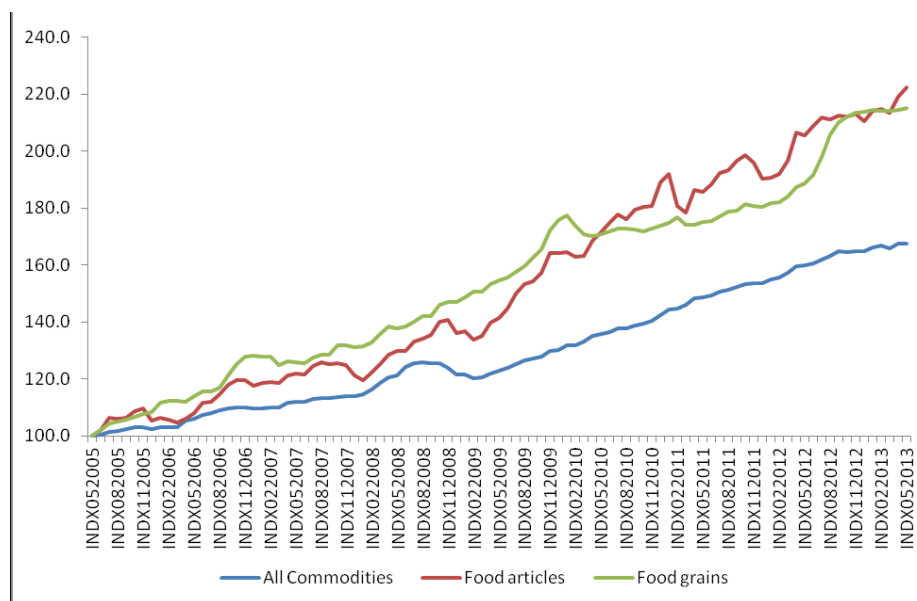


Figure 2: Wholesale price indices since May 2005

Source: Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2013)

However, although initially India witnessed high inflation in cereal prices, most of the food inflation we see has not arisen because of this. As Figure 3 shows, the worst effects of global price spikes in cereals were not reflected in the Indian economy. This is primarily largely because of the domination of domestic production in consumption, and the role played by the public procurement and distribution system for major food grains like rice and wheat.

The causes of high food inflation in India are many and global factors play only a minor role. The developments in the global economy influenced the domestic food price scenario mainly by 'passing on' world oil price increases. It was only in the case of sugar and tea that the world market prices had an influence on domestic prices via costly imports. In fact, different factors can be seen to be influencing the prices of different food commodities. Therefore, in the case of pulses, it was the poor growth in production in 2008–9 and 2009–10 that led to high inflation between August 2008 and July 2010. In the case of fruit and vegetables there were issues related to distribution, storage, market inefficiencies and the presence of trader cartels (Nair and Eapen 2012).

<sup>8</sup> The WPI of food consists of two sub-components, namely, primary food articles (cereals, pulses, fruits, vegetables etc.) and manufactured food products (butter, flour, sugar, bread etc.).

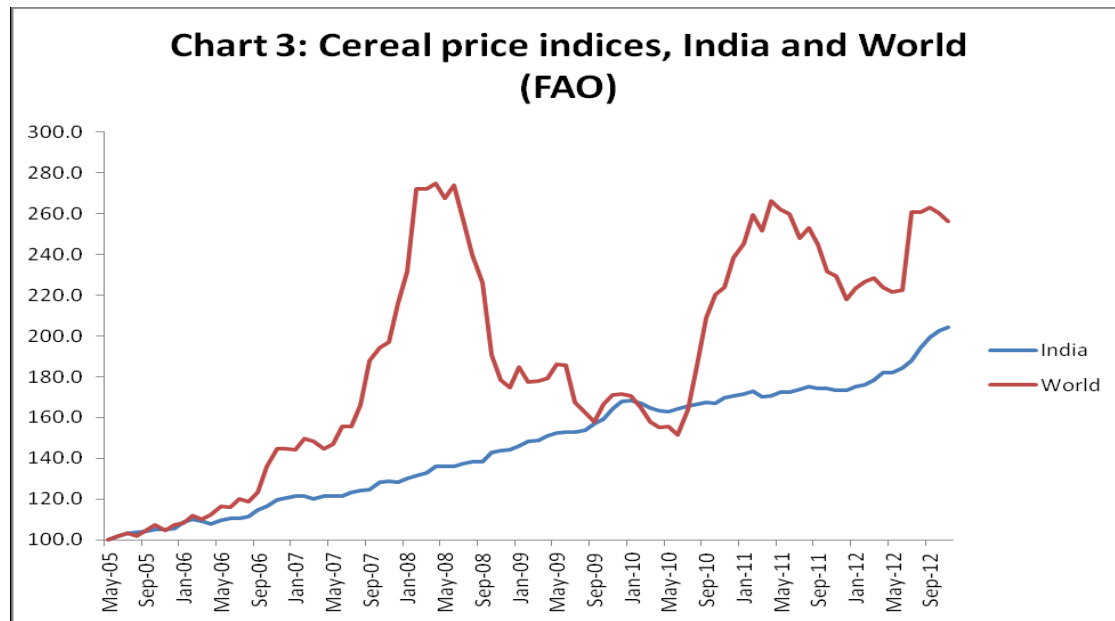


Figure 3: Cereal price indices, India and world (FAO)

Source: Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2013)

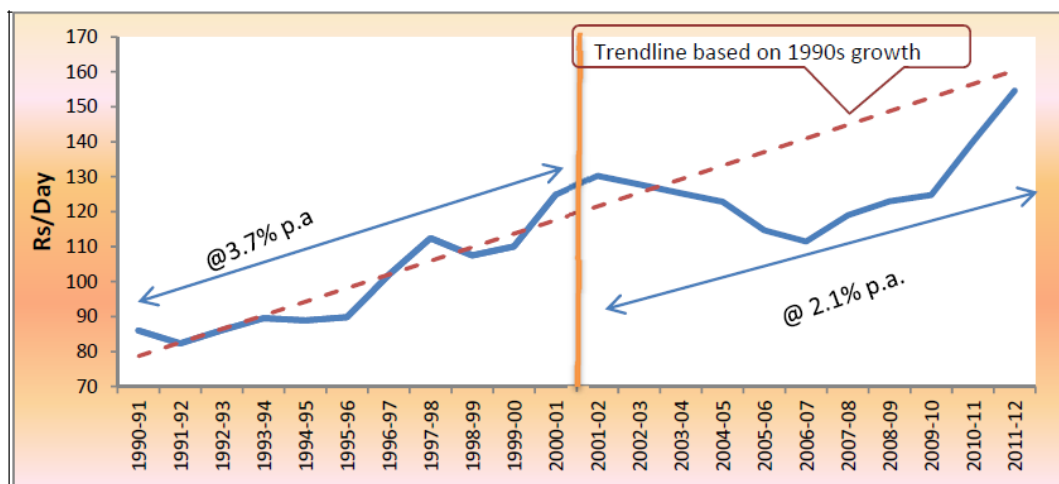
In the case of cereals it has been argued that the central government's handling of exports and imports as well as of food stocks in the central pool has been such that it may well have contributed to the domestic price rise in food grains. Data show that net exports of food grain were large and even growing during periods of particularly rapid food grain price increases. Further, the increase in central stockholding in a period of rising prices, with inadequate storage facilities that allowed the grains to rot, prevented their being transferred even to those state governments that were clearly interested in making this system more effective (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2013). The buffer requirement was of 12.2 million metric tonnes of rice and 4 million metric tonnes of wheat on 1 April 2010; the actual stocks were 26.65 million metric tonnes of rice and 18.1 million metric tonnes of wheat on 1 March. In other words, the government has been holding more than double the required buffer stock of rice and four-and-a-half times that of wheat. The government procured 25.3 million metric tonnes of the total production of 80 million metric tonnes of wheat; of which after accounting for some offtake, the government was still holding 18.1 million metric tonnes in April 2010. By not releasing the excess stocks through PDS, the government was effectively creating an artificial scarcity of 18.1 million metric tonnes, which was only a little less than one-fourth of the total wheat production in the country. The artificial scarcity, fuelling speculation as well as creating supply-demand imbalances, was one of the reasons for the high prices (Himanshu 2010b).

### 3.1 Impact of inflation

Despite rising inflation, official statistics from the period under study show a drastic reduction in poverty from 37 per cent in 2004–5 to 22 per cent in 2011–12. How are we to interpret the data?

One of the explanations for this is a simultaneous rise in wages. Most recent data on wages of casual workers, captured by the National Sample Survey's (NSS) employment surveys, show that wages of private casual workers in rural areas rose by 12.6 per cent a year between 2009–10 and 2011–12 in real terms. Even on a long-term basis, the growth rate of wages between 2004–5 and 2011–12 was at 6.6 per cent a year for rural India (Himanshu 2013). Drèze and Sen in their recent book comment that although there has been an increase in the real wages, the rate of growth of real wages in India is quite moderate (Drèze and Sen 2013).

Gulati, Jain and Satija in their paper on farm wages state that although there was a decline in the rate of growth of farm wages in the 2000s compared to the 1990s, there was still a rise in real wages. Real farm wages grew at an almost uniform rate during the 1990s, i.e., at an average annual rate of 3.7 per cent. But during the 2000s they followed a V-shaped pattern, falling by 1.8 per cent per annum from 2001–2 to 2006–7 and then growing at 6.8 per cent per annum during 2007–8 to 2011–12. Overall, during the 2000s (2001–2 to 2011–12), real wages grew at a lower rate of 2.1 per cent per annum (Gulati *et al.* 2013).



Source: Computed based on data available from Labour Bureau, Shimla

Figure 4: Average real farm wage rate at 2011–12 prices

Source: Gulati *et al.* (2013)

Overall, we find that during this period there has been an increase in real wages and that probably to some extent helped mitigate the effect of high food price inflation.

### 3.2 Food production/availability

As far as availability is concerned, India is no longer dependent on imports. However, whether food grain production is sufficient to meet the nutritional needs of all its people is questionable. For instance, while both countries have roughly the same population, China produces 500 million tonnes of food grains a year compared to 230 million tonnes by India.

Currently, the average consumption levels of food grains in India is quite low compared to the rest of the world. The average consumption of cereals (for food plus feed) in the world is 80 per cent higher than that in India (Chand 2008).

The agriculture sector, especially food grain production, has seen a slowdown in growth in recent years. The Green Revolution introduced in the 1970s helped in achieving 'self-sufficiency' in food grain production. However, the developments since 1991 threaten to destroy this 'self-sufficiency' in food production.

The annual food grains availability per head of total population has fallen from the early 1990s, to only 153kg by 2003–4. This is similar to the levels prevailing during the early 1950s, and is lower than the 157kg average during 1937–41, i.e., the years preceding the Bengal famine of 1943 (Patnaik 2007).

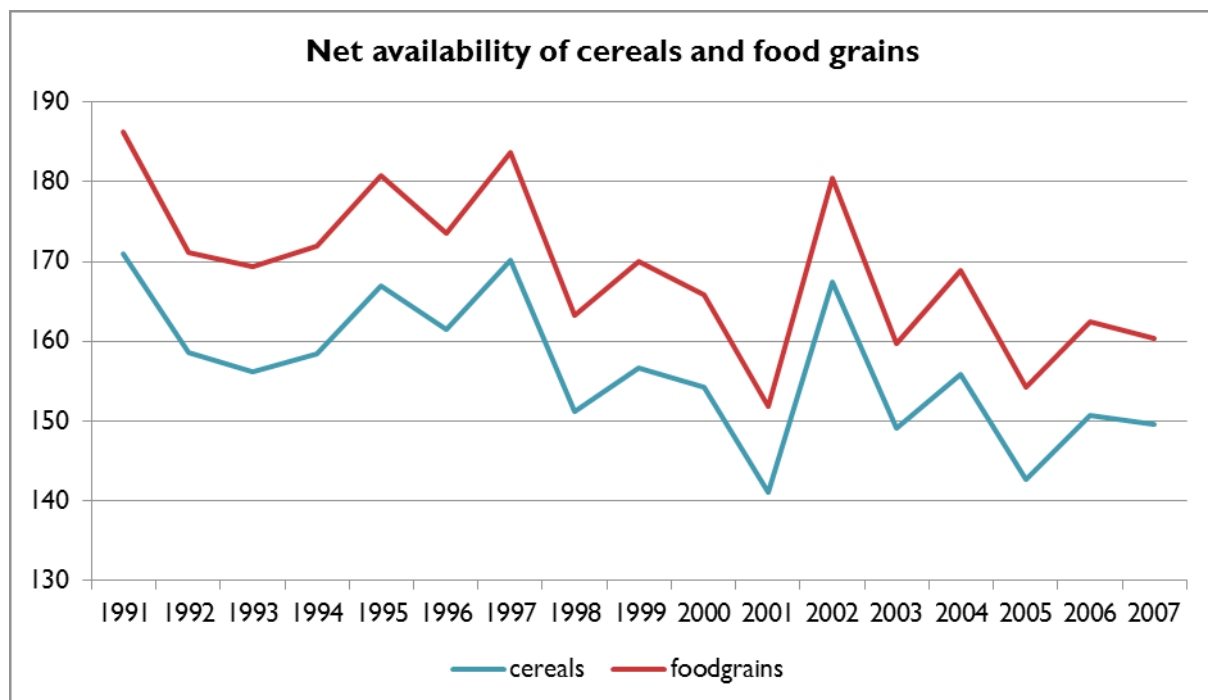


Figure 5: Net availability of cereals and food grains

Source: Compiled from Ministry of Agriculture Statistics, Government of India

Further, real public investment in agriculture has been decreasing since the beginning of the 1980s (only to revive slightly since 2004). However, the share of agriculture in total public investment currently is only half of what it was in the early 1980s. Agriculture is in crisis with

thousands of farmers in many parts of the country committing suicide as they are unable to bear the burden of debt (Mishra 2007a, 2007b; Patnaik 2007).<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3 Food security and nutrition

India has not seen a major famine since the Bengal famine of 1943, which saw close to 4 million deaths. Amartya Sen's seminal work attributes the absence of famine to India's democracy (Sen, 1983). However the problem of chronic malnutrition and hunger remains alarming. Despite being one of the fastest growing economies in the world, India has one of the highest proportions of malnourished children in the world. It also has the highest proportion of stunted and wasted children; Nigeria and India contribute nearly 50 per cent of the world's children with severe acute malnutrition. Two-thirds of Indian women are anaemic, and close to 80 per cent of the Indian population consumes fewer calories than the prescribed daily allowance. Among adult men in India, 34.2 per cent have a low BMI (which is less than 18.5), as do 35.6 per cent of adult women. India ranks 65th out of 79 countries in the Global Hunger Index (2012), worse than neighbouring Sri Lanka, Nepal and China.

**Table 1:**

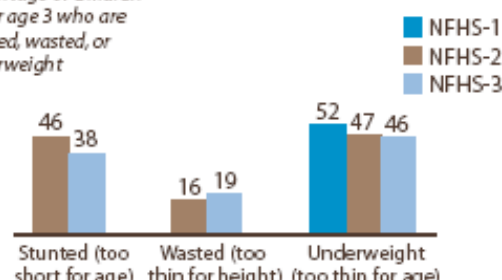
Average per capita calorie consumption (National Sample Survey)		
Year	Rural	Urban
1972-73	2266	2107
1983	2221	2089
1993-94	2153	2071
1999-00	2149	2156
2004-5	2047	2020
2009-10	1958	1922

Source: NSS Reports (various years)

**Figure 6:**

#### Trends in Children's Nutritional Status

Percentage of children under age 3 who are stunted, wasted, or underweight



Source: NFHS-3 Factsheet (2005-06)

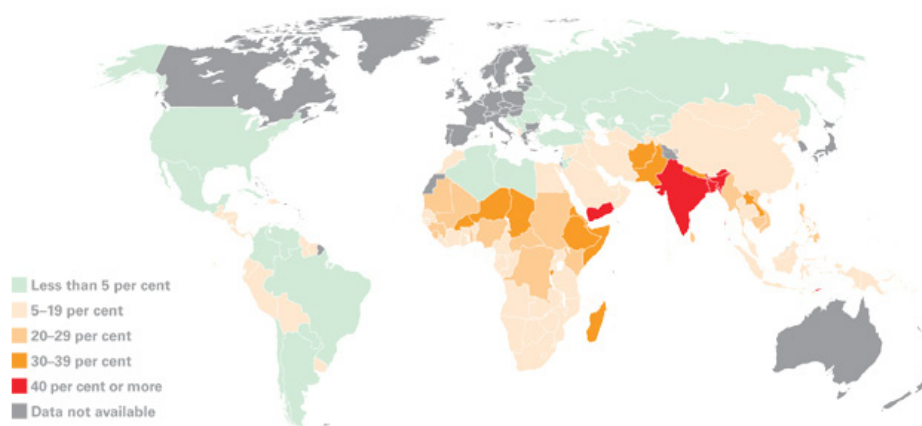


Figure 7: Percentage of under-five children who are underweight 2009

Source: UNICEF, 2009

9

Also see a number of articles by P. Sainath in *The Hindu* newspaper during the period 2007 to 2013.



First, the diets of the Indian poor are very inadequate. Second, high food inflation affects the poor more. Different consumers (rich and poor) are affected differentially by rises in food prices. Chandrasekhar (2013) uses NSS data to show that the share of total monthly per capita expenditures devoted to cereals and pulses falls quite sharply as we move from the lowest to the highest per capita expenditure deciles during 1993–94, 2004–5 and 2009–10. This shows that food expenditures (especially that on staples) constitute a much larger proportion of total expenditure in the case of the poor. Thus food price inflation substantially erodes their real spending and therefore their access to nutrition. However, both in rural and urban areas, real monthly per capita expenditure (computed by deflating nominal values by the consumer price indices for agricultural labourers and industrial workers respectively) has risen across these three years in all expenditure deciles. Yet the evidence from consumer expenditure surveys shows that consumption of cereals and pulses and of all food articles has declined in real value or stagnated across time periods in some of the poorer expenditure groups. This, Chandrasekhar (2013) argues, is partly reflective of the fact that loss of access to common property resources or the need to rely on privately delivered services (for health and education) has necessitated the diversion of a larger amount of expenditure to those items, adversely affecting the consumption of food by the poor. Food price inflation then has an additional damaging impact on the poor who are already under severe strain (Chandrasekhar 2013).

### **3.4 Living with inflation**

The overall picture described above was reflected in our focus group discussions in Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. Participants stated that while it is true that there have been rising prices which affected them, it was also true that wages rose during the period, and therefore diets did not change drastically. ‘The wages and the price of forest wood have also increased, almost in tandem with the inflation in food prices. So there is some sort of equilibrium maintained here,’ one young man in Barha Mawan said.

Despite the absence of vegetables and fruit in their diet, there was a general overview that things have improved in the recent past. As one person put it, *‘khabarabhav door hoyeche, pet’erabhav’* (food insufficiency and the hunger problem has gone).

One of the main reasons quoted was migration. Migration within the state was more common than inter-city migration. Seasonal migration to Pube in neighbouring Bardhaman district (also known as the rice bowl of the state) was the highest. Increases in agricultural wages were also given as another reason. In the last year, wages in the range of 100–120 rupees (per day) have now increased to 150 rupees. Wages also in the form of food grains, where men get 4.5kg of rice and women get 4kg, was perceived as a solution to food insecurity. Similarly, income from inter-city and inter-state migration has added an extra average income of 500 rupees per month.

However, there are two caveats to the picture painted above: the diets of the poor are very poor, and inflation has affected their purchasing power more.

First, in the areas where we conducted fieldwork, people's diets largely consisted of cereals with very few pulses, vegetables, fruits or any foods derived from animals. Households' access to food is differentiated on the lines of caste, class and gender. Landed, upper caste households do not face any major challenges in accessing food. For the lower classes, comprising of Dalit and tribal households, accessibility of food sources varies in tandem with the agricultural cycle and migration patterns. For instance, in the villages of Madhya Pradesh, the poorer households pointed out that the months of January and February bring times of food crisis.

While traditionally poorer families depended on food grants from landlords in lieu of some form of bonded labour, nowadays the situation has been alleviated to a larger extent by the availability of migration opportunities that provide remittances for accessing the food market. In turn, the dependence of the Dalit and Adivasi households on the dominant classes has also declined. In case of Chitehara, one of the villages in Madhya Pradesh where focus group discussions were conducted, it must be highlighted that the landed castes enjoy the option of personalised transactions within the landed community to supplement their food needs. Such an informal market within the village is not available to the lower classes as the landed castes prefer selling their surplus produce to the market rather than to the village poor. With monetisation of wages, landlords have also almost completely ceased to be a source of food for the working classes in the village. Therefore through monetisation of incomes, the breaking of feudal ties and remittances from migration work, the dependence of the poor has moved from traditional sources to the market.

However state support still constitutes a critical source of food security through the PDS and other nutrition-based schemes like MDM and ICDS.

Second, the coping strategies against hunger actually underline the tragic reality of food insecurity for the rural poor, particularly the tribals and the Dalits in central India. Numerous instances of malnutrition among children testified to the lack of nutrition and health facilities in these villages. Adult malnutrition and hunger, though not explicitly acknowledged in the discussions, cannot be ruled out. Besides the children, women in particular have borne the brunt of food insecurity and lack of awareness on issues of reproductive health. Since the women of the household eat last in the family, they have to most often make do with the leftovers.

Coarse cereals and particular grasses of monsoon vegetation have traditionally helped the poor cope with hunger. However, as village elders explained, there has been a cultural shift away from the coarse grains towards cheap wheat and rice varieties. There are still days in a month when the meals consist of only *roti* (bread) and salt for the poor majority.

*'I soak the rotis in water to make them more filling for my hungry children.'*  
Young Dalit woman, Chitehara

Coarse grains are still consumed by some as a matter of habit as a means of coping with persisting hunger. *Dal* (lentils) and vegetables are a luxury for many families. However since the cropping pattern has shifted away from coarse grains to wheat and rice, their availability is also an issue now.

A specific variety of grass called *chakaura* is consumed as a substitute for vegetables in the rainy season. Some women from Baraha Mawan complained that the consumption of such wild vegetation causes numerous diseases.

*I have not got a card (ration card) also. I do not get anything from the quota (PDS). I just labour out and buy my food from the market. Sometimes I go to the jungle for plucking leaves and collecting mahua. At times we go hungry for the day altogether.*

Dalit woman from Chitehara

Another, a Kol woman from the same village reported:

*The day I go to Satna, my children remain hungry in the house waiting for me to return with the food. If the collected wood is confiscated then I have to come back to borrow some grains from the local shop on credit. Such food is very carefully rationed to everyone with a lot of water to make it last longer.*

In Bengal too, people reported that their diets are poor and at times they find it difficult to get proper meals. They argued that the PDS ration is not sufficient. A weekly procurement only lasts for one to two days, depending on family size. After that, rice has to be bought from outside at 20 to 24 rupees a kilo. Sometimes, this rice has to be bought on loan.

Access to food is also difficult in certain months of the year, like September and October, when the sowing period is over and there is hardly any farm work. In these difficult months, they cook rice only once, and manage using some salt and oil for taste. In such difficult months, people take loans from the shopkeeper or landlords, and return during harvest months. Overall, food is totally dependent on the daily earnings. High density of settlements and small house sizes do not permit families to grow vegetables. People spoke about the high price of vegetables, which prevents them from eating much of these foods. Expensive cooking fuel was another grievance.

In summary, even though people had very poor diets they did not feel that the rising prices had a debilitating impact on their lives because of rising wages and no decline in the quality of food from earlier. Evidence from the field shows how inadequate many people's diets are, resulting in high levels of malnutrition, and also how the poorest suffer the most from the increased dependence on the market and accompanying rising inflation.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

The research presented here followed a multi-method strategy aimed at understanding the scale of popular mobilisation, the causes, strategies and forms of such mobilisation by social groups and the perceptions of popular action by the state which may or may not lead to action. Three key methods were involved:

- a) political event catalogue: this was intended to assess the scale and content of popular mobilisation through ‘contentious performance’ in the country. It involved the creation and quantitative analysis of a catalogue of food-related protests, petitions, demonstrations and other contentious political events in the period 2007–12 drawn from the press.
- b) focus group discussions: conducted with social groups involved in popular mobilisation in two sites in India in order to explore the everyday experiences of people facing food insecurity. The cases were not intended to be representative of the country as a whole, but were chosen for the insights they presented into issues of popular mobilisation.
- c) policymaker and activist interviews: semi-structured interviews with the main actors and key stakeholders including food and social protection policymakers from governments and aid agencies, members of the political elite, leaders from civil society and food activists were also undertaken to enrich the understanding of the political incentives shaping the response. These were supplemented with data from official reports and other documents.

While the methods used were consistent in the four countries, each country context posed particular challenges in implementing the methods. Below, we present the key methodological choices made in the Indian context.

### 4.1 Event Catalogue

The political event catalogue was to be assembled based on media reports. In India, we chose two widely read English language national dailies – *The Hindu* and *The Times of India* (both New Delhi Editions). The two represent different ends of the political spectrum – *The Hindu* is left-oriented, and *The Times* more populist. The terms used for searching their online archives are provided in Annex 1. We only used the searches to look for ‘events’ (protests, mobilisations, riots etc.) rather than general opinion pieces or reporting on the food policies in the country as these would have generated an unmanageable amount of content over the period in question.<sup>10</sup> The event catalogue was then interpreted using simple

<sup>10</sup> We also considered and rejected the idea of carrying out brief searches in regional newspapers of the two states where we carried out case study research, mainly because the newspaper archives were not in an online searchable format, and hand-searching

quantifiable measures and inputted into an info-graphic software – tiki-toki (Annex 4). The challenges posed in the interpretation of the political event catalogue as originally envisaged are presented in section 5.3.

## 4.2 Focus Groups

The project originally envisaged using the event catalogue as a basis for site selection for the focus group interviews. However, there were some concerns about using this approach in India because the political events catalogue prepared from our two English-language dailies reflected rather sparse reporting of the events, and these were largely oriented to protests organised by opposition parties. This is a general feature of the national media in India, where the coverage of what is called ‘national’ is often reflective of the limitations of the media group’s infrastructure as well as its political orientation. For instance, *The Hindu*, which otherwise has a keen eye for the politics of West Bengal, carried only a single report on the food riots in the state. Even that concerned the denial of the then ruling coalition of the Left parties of there being any ‘food riots’ in the state and not the ‘riots’ themselves.<sup>11</sup> Hence it would have been difficult to arrive at suitable choices of cases of popular mobilisation around food if we had relied on the political event catalogue. What the event catalogue showed though, is that unlike some of the other three countries in the broader project, mobilisation around food has been largely rural in nature.

The two sites for study in India were therefore chosen on the basis of discussions with grassroots organisations, ‘right to food’ activists and media reports from places where we knew popular mobilisation had taken place between 2007 and 2011. The India team had the privilege of access to numerous grassroots organisations that constitute the Right to Food campaign in India. Many of these organisations maintain a comprehensive database on food-related events in their area of activity. Moreover they often possess insights into the realpolitik of food issues in their respective regions. After consultation with the Right to Food campaign network, two sites were chosen: Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal.

The choice of the two sites was partly determined on the basis of our decision to compare the experience of ‘food riots’ with the more widespread Right to Food campaign type of activities seen in many states across the country.

West Bengal (and the districts within it) was the only state that had experienced food riots, so choosing this was obvious. We selected Bankura district in West Bengal, as it was one of the places where riots initially started, and we had contacts with members of the agricultural workers’ union in the district. This union works in the district but was not part of the food riots and did not have a direct presence in the villages that were most affected. We carried out focus group discussions and local leader interviews in two villages in Bankura: Radhamohanpur (the site of one of the first riots) and Barokumira. These were captured through detailed notes (some focus group discussions were not recorded due to the suspicious attitude of villagers caused by the presence of outsiders, soon after the local elections).

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was beyond the resources of the team.

<sup>11</sup> ‘CPI (M): No Food Riots in Bengal’, *The Hindu*, 24 October 2007, available at [www.hindu.com/2007/10/24/stories/2007102454341500.htm](http://www.hindu.com/2007/10/24/stories/2007102454341500.htm)

For the second site, we chose Madhya Pradesh. There were several reasons for this. First, it had the highest hunger and malnutrition rates in India, as measured by various indices (*India State Hunger Index* report by IFPRI and the National Family Health Survey). Second, during the period under study, the state witnessed a lot of public debate on hunger and malnutrition, e.g. in the legislative assembly. Food had clearly become a political issue. Within Madhya Pradesh we chose Satna district because it is one of the districts with the highest level of malnutrition, it has a high concentration of tribal populations, and has witnessed local grassroots action on these issues along with participation in the larger Right to Food campaign at the national level. Moreover, through the state-level Right to Food campaign, we had direct access to the work of one of the grassroots organisations in the state – the Adivasi Adhikar Manch (AAM) – which had been working in tribal villages. Again two villages were chosen for the focus group discussions: Chitehara (a tribal-dominated village) and Baraha Mawan (a mixed village with tribal and non-tribal populations). Focus group discussions in each were recorded and transcribed. Further details of the focus group composition and fieldwork are provided in Section 6.

In both West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, we transferred notes and files into the qualitative software 'Dedoose' to identify themes related to food consumption, food security, protests etc. These form the basis of the findings reported in Sections 6 and 7.

### **4.3 Policy and activist interviews**

In addition to the political event catalogue and focus group discussions, we carried out 12 policymaker and activist interviews at the national level (in addition to the policy and elite interviews related to the two selected states). Interviews generally lasted between an hour and two hours (the longest interviews were around three hours), and followed a loosely structured set of questions, which were tailored to the interviewees' position (attached in Annex 2). These were recorded (except when interviewees requested no recording) and were transcribed (or notes were written up). The findings reported in Section 8 on policy responses and national-level activism, mainly related to the Right to Food campaign, draw upon these interviews. We have anonymised the names of these interviewees in order to protect their identities.

### **4.4 Positionality**

The fieldwork (particularly in Madhya Pradesh) and policy interviews at the national level presented specific challenges due to the positions of two of the lead Indian researchers as they are key members of the Right to Food (RTF) campaign. On the one hand, getting access to senior policymakers and activists at short notice was facilitated by personal links and professional networks. On the other hand, interviewees often presumed that interviewers (as part of the RTF campaign) had particular positions on the issues in question and occasionally

responded in ways that addressed the RTF campaign rather than the interview questions. We tried to mitigate this by having Anuradha Joshi lead the interview questions and stress the academic nature of the research. However, despite our best efforts, some bias inherent in the interview context remains. We have tried to identify and reduce as far as possible the effect of the identity of the researchers on responses.

Similarly, our access to field villages and district level officials was mediated by the two AAM activists, Anand and Prateek. While this meant that villagers were unusually frank and trusting in the focus group discussions, it also meant that the discussions could have been biased by what villagers thought we wanted to hear, based on who we were accompanied by. We made attempts to independently verify in side discussions what was being reported in the main focus group as a means of additional triangulation. In addition, we found that district level officials responded in a somewhat defensive fashion, given that the AAM had been demanding state accountability for malnutrition for over a decade. In this case, the presence of the senior Indian researchers and the IDS researcher helped by somewhat neutralising what could have been a charged atmosphere. Moreover, as the research assistants were not identified as part of the RTF campaign, they conducted the focus groups independently of the senior researchers. The findings reported here should be read with these limitations in mind.

## 5. POPULAR MOBILISATION AROUND FOOD AND THE MORAL ECONOMY

### *5.1 Theoretical context of popular mobilisation in India*

Any theoretical–analytical framing of the study of the movement for the right to food and food security must be carried out around certain central categories. In the context of popular mobilisation in India, the following categories are key – ‘new social movements’, ‘civil society’, and ‘moral economy’. Here, we would like to trace the contours of these categories as they appear in the literature.

Movements classified as ‘new social movements’ have emerged across different countries and geopolitical contexts since the early 1960s from the advanced capitalist countries in the west to the countries of the Global South. Two features of these movements serve as the grounds for characterising these movements as ‘new’ – their typical organisational form was not the political party, and, second, their principal plank of mobilisation was issues rather than class. In other words, these movements were organisationally ‘fluid’, most of them emerged around a single issue, or a compact set of well-delineated issues, though the course of these movements usually either expanded or constricted the problematic that they engaged with (Beuchler 1995).

In the Indian context, new social movements assumed salience in the 1970s with the rise of several autonomous non-class movements around the issues of the environment, caste, gender and the situation of the peasantry. The developmental trajectory pursued by the post-independence Indian state had failed to achieve any significant improvement in living standards for the vast majority of Indian people by the early 1970s. At the same time, the model of large industry-based development resulted in environmental degradation on a massive scale thereby imperilling the livelihoods of large numbers of people. This range of acute problems emerged in the context of a vacuum in terms of an alternative political imagination (given the weak position of the mainstream left). The new social movements filled this space.

These new social movements provoked significant debates among observers. Omvedt (1994) points out that the fact that the rise of the new social movements took place in this specific historical context invests them with the possibility of carrying out a larger critique of the paradigm within which sociopolitical development in India has been taking place. Capitalism thus cannot be understood simply as a relationship of the exploitation of the working class by the ruling class – it also involves other forms of exploitation – of the peasantry by industry etc. It is these other forms of exploitation that make possible mobilisation of identities, groups and other issue-based collectivities as agents of transformation. Thus, the non-party movements of the Dalits, women, dam-displaced, peasants and so on were anti-systemic and egalitarian movements without being intelligible within the rubric of conventional politics. Others, such



as Kothari (1984) stressed the importance of these movements in their critique of the state and its inability to deliver on basic entitlements. Non-political party formations could thus lead the task of forcing a re-orientation of the state, and thus increasing its legitimacy. To the extent that these mobilisations attempted to circumvent the state, they were unlikely to be successful. Rather, by framing their demands in terms of citizen rights vis-a-vis the state, they had transformative potential. Indeed as Mahajan (1999) points out, the state itself was crucial in strengthening and preserving civic institutions. Drawing on empirical research in urban areas, Chandoke (2005) showed that by framing mobilisations around notions of citizenship, civil society organisations had strengthened the expectations that the poor had from the state. Chatterjee (2008) in an influential analysis suggests that mobilisations can be split between ‘civil society’ and ‘political society’ (Chatterjee 2008). He posits, therefore, a binary of sorts between a liberalisation-driven, fundamentally middle class civil society, and a derelict patronage-based political domain. The implication is that the non-party new social movements can either get co-opted into the pervasive mechanisms of neo-liberal reforms, or be eventually assimilated into patron-client relations led and dominated by political parties.

However, Chatterjee’s view is unduly cynical. As Baviskar and Sundar (2008) point out, the present post-liberalisation period has been characterised, apart from the sway of global capital, by firm grassroots resistance to the same. They cite instances of three progressive legislations – the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Forest Rights Act, and the Right to Information Act – which they argue have been the consequence of sustained non-party grassroots mobilisation and campaigning. Thus democratic pressures from the new social movements can lead to significant and emancipatory transformation. What needs to be highlighted is that these movements play a key role in expanding the frontiers of the democratic obligations of the state – and in locating a moral responsibility for the fulfilment of socioeconomic rights on the state (no matter what the traditional expectations rooted in patronage were).

It is within this rubric of continual democratic exertion by apolitical, directed-to-the-state, grassroots movements, that the movement for food security and against hunger and malnutrition must be seen. We turn to that next.

## ***5.2 Right to Food campaign***

With a vibrant civil society and a free press, there have always been spaces for diverse opinions and voices in India. The actors in civil society and their influence on national and state policies have varied over time. While the earlier resistance movements were dominated by people’s movements and social organisations, since the 1990s non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also entered this space. More recently, the country saw a wave of spontaneous protests against corruption with youth actively participating. A number of campaigns and networks of various people’s organisations, NGOs and individuals have emerged in the 1990s and 2000s that are issue-based. These include the formation of the National Campaign for the People’s Right to Information (NCPRI) that led to the enactment of the Right to Information Act. Similar alliances were also formed for demanding the passage of the Right to Education Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (both of which

have been successfully passed in parliament). The Right to Food (RTF) campaign is one such network that brings together various organisations on the issue of right to food.

The RTF campaign is an informal network of organisations and individuals committed to the realisation of the right to food in India. Its origins can be traced to the Supreme Court case on the right to food. In the year 2001, a group of activists under the banner of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), filed a case in the Supreme Court, demanding that the right to food be recognised as a legal right of every person in the country. The basic argument is that the right to food is an implication of the fundamental 'right to life' enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution.<sup>12</sup>

In this case, the Supreme Court has passed a series of significant, and at times historic, interim orders that have touched the lives of millions of people. This case is still ongoing in the Supreme Court. As part of it, the Supreme Court even appointed independent commissioners to report to it on the status of compliance and to take up on its behalf cases of violation of entitlements, hunger and starvation. After the initial orders in 2001, a number of national networks and organisations came together to contribute to the case, to the implementation of the orders from the case at grassroots level and to build a campaign on the right to food outside the Supreme Court. The RTF Campaign had its first national convention, where a steering group was formed, in 2003.

The campaign took up a wide range of issues and soon its scope expanded beyond the Supreme Court orders to all the interventions required to ensure the right to food for all. The campaign has thus taken up issues such as a national Employment Guarantee Act, universal midday meals in primary schools, universalisation of the ICDS for children under the age of six, effective implementation of all nutrition-related schemes, revival and universalisation of the Public Distribution System, social security arrangements for those unable to work, and equitable land and forest rights. Some of these demands have already been met to some extent through various Acts and government orders. For instance, the Indian Parliament unanimously enacted a National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in August 2005, cooked midday meals have been introduced in all primary schools following a Supreme Court order of April 2004, and the ICDS has been universalised following a Supreme Court order of December 2006.

Following the announcement that the government planned to introduce a right to food legislation, the campaign led an intense struggle for a comprehensive Act that addressed all aspects of the right to food. Over the last four years the campaign has led a number of protests and demonstrations opposing the narrow draft of the national food security bill and demanding a broader vision on food security. The campaign has also raised issues relating to the agrarian crisis, rising prices, strengthening the PDS etc. The National Food Security Act (NFSA) was finally passed in August 2013 with many amendments. Although the RTF campaign did not succeed in influencing the government to include all the issues that it demanded, it did manage to contribute to broadening the scope of the NFSA significantly (See Section 8.3).

However, as far as popular response to inflation is concerned, one of the senior activists

<sup>12</sup> [www.righttofoodcampaign.in](http://www.righttofoodcampaign.in)

of the RTF campaign felt that there has not really been a price rise movement of national significance since the 1960s.

*The kind of price rise movements seen in the 60s and 70s [are] not there now – then it was the middle [class] coming out on the streets. The middle class is affected by the current price in a limited way these days – in terms of choices. But [it is] not attacking their absolute consumption ... All political parties and social groups came out in protest but it was a one-time/two-time kind of mobilisation – it never became a political issue.*

Senior activist, RTF campaign

Our political event catalogue also showed that the media reported the protests and marches by the opposition parties as direct responses to inflation, much more than to that of the RTF campaign or similar movements.

The RTF activist also agreed:

*Left parties did much more. Social movements did something, but no movement as such. Although the media gave it space. Media never gave fertiliser space but they gave price rise space. Price rise was covered by the media. There was some contestation in the media. The media is very important these days. If your voice doesn't get covered by the media, nobody hears.*

Therefore, although the RTF campaign was quite active during this period, the central peg around which it was mobilising people was not inflation but hunger and malnutrition in general.

### **5.3 The political event catalogue: A media analysis**

While the initial study design proposed that the events to be studied closely would be selected on the basis of the findings from the political event catalogue, this was not the case for India because of the limitations with the English-language national newspapers in identifying 'local' events. The event catalogue was instead used to understand what the media reports on as 'events' in relation to protests or popular mobilisations around food, food prices and inflation. During the time period under study there were 59 events that the media reported, based on the search in the two national newspapers. The news stories mention little about the backdrop of the mobilisation, the nature of participation by different social groups or of people from locations away from the actual site of action. Most importantly it remains unsaid in the pieces, and in the follow-up around them, whether there was any concrete verbal or policy response by the administration or the government to the event in question. Such links are rarely drawn and we are left to study the opinion pieces to assess if there has been a response by the authorities. However the problem with the latter is that they pay little attention to specific events and talk of general public resentment.

According to the media reports, most popular mobilisations are organised almost exclusively

by the national opposition parties. Of the 59 events reported, 31 were by opposition parties (national and regional). A further 14 were by trade unions, farmers' groups or other occupational groups (often these are also linked to political parties). Only nine of the reports were related to events organised by civil society groups such as the RTF campaign.

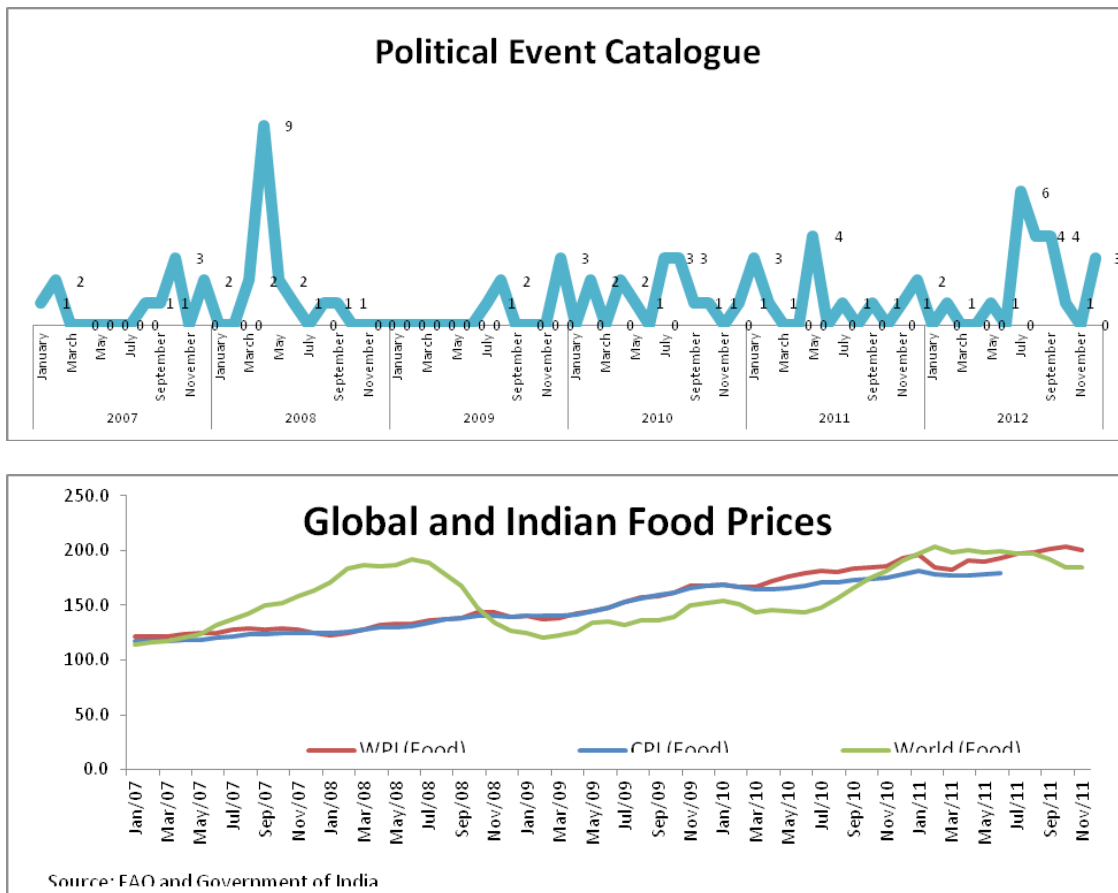


Figure 8: Timing of Price Spikes and Events as reported in the media

Source: Based on the political event catalogue compiled as part of this study

No spontaneous public outbursts on the issue of food rights are reported except for a couple of locally held demonstrations for ration cards. However the Bengal food riots remain an exception to this. Words like protest, demonstration, agitation, picketing, strike, *dharna* (sit-in), protest rally/march, public hearing and laying siege have been used to describe the events – protest, demonstration and protest march being the most commonly used terms. The term 'laid siege' has almost exclusively been used for actions by the Left parties. Almost all the events have been planned as organised actions protesting the larger policies rather than making any immediate demands – except the ones held at the local level. In these media reports, militancy in action has mostly been limited to halting the functioning of government offices and disrupting normal public services. In about five events there was reporting of some violence or threats – this included breaking windows, detention of officials and blocking roads. There is no reporting of violence or any significant state repression in any of the events. A conventional symbol of protest in India has been courting arrest. This has been deployed in some of the events – in a few the number of arrests have been as high as 2,000. However since almost all of the militant events have been organised by opposition parties, the arrested persons have mostly been party members and activists.

Grievances were largely related to high food prices and more generally to the high cost of living, lack of social protection and corruption in the food system or agriculture. The demands were about asking for more price controls, new social protection schemes and regulation of food market actors. The events recorded reflect the four core concerns on the issue of food rights in India: the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the problems in its reach and efficient functioning; the rise in prices of essential commodities including food; the national food security bill; and traders' and farmers' concerns regarding agriculture.

The demands that were highlighted all addressed governments – national, state and district. Most often they were targeting the local administration as a channel for reaching governments at the state and the centre. Besides governments and bureaucracy, the obvious seats of policymaking and implementation, it is difficult to discern other locally variable structures of authority that people might hold directly responsible for their food security. The only decentralised nodes for such accountability seem to be the PDS dealers who are the target of some local protests over alleged corruption.

It was also found that the events were reported by local bureaus of the newspapers in different parts of the country. Nationwide or state-wide incidents were reported from a local nodal point and therefore lacked the details of other connected events in geographically dispersed locations.

There was negligible mention of international food-related riots or popular mobilisations in *The Hindu*, which is otherwise known for fairly robust international coverage among Indian newspapers. However there is a chance that such events may have been referred to in the opinion pieces that escaped the online search terms. The coverage of *The Hindu* was also starkly limited to a select few states – Delhi, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Both our chosen sites of popular mobilisations around food rights are conspicuous by their absence in *The Hindu's* reportage. While Madhya Pradesh generally seems to be almost off the radar for the newspaper, there is a curious hint of a political bias in the reportage of popular mobilisations that come from the state of West Bengal. Other sources in the media reveal that the events in these sites have received considerable attention both from the local and the national media. However, *The Hindu* had only one piece that reported the event, that too reporting the state government's claim that the riots were politically motivated and were not reflecting genuine grievances.

The grievances around food at times have been articulated in connection with other issues like the rights of workers and the poor, the rise in prices of fuel and cooking gas, corruption, social discrimination, government apathy towards agriculture and related trade, the poverty line debate and most commonly with the failure of the incumbent government to check price rises and ensure food security for people. Although the connection between these grievances and food rights is clearly present, it also reflects the fact that food rights in themselves have not been able to constitute a coherent agenda at a national level that warrants exclusive attention of mass actions. The various actors raising this issue in India arrive at their demands regarding food rights from disparate political positions and social outlooks. Therefore the discourses or narratives paint no profound picture of the fundamental plight of food insecurity of the majority of Indian people.

The main opposition party, the BJP, seized on this issue to highlight the gross failures of the ruling Congress in general, whereas the Left's intent was to call into question the entire neo-liberal policy paradigm. The RTF campaign is probably the sole attempt at trying to build a consensus on the issue of food security. However, the popular mobilisation by the RTF campaign and its constituents does not find as much space in the media as that by the political parties.

## 5.4 Mobilisation strategies

Although the RTF campaign's public events did not receive as much media attention at national level, there were a number of strategies adopted by the campaign to put pressure on the government to respond to their demands. These took the form of five key categories: mass public action, lobbying policymakers, media advocacy, alliance-building and court action. We have already examined in an earlier section (section 5.2) the role of the Supreme Court case and its extraordinary reach in monitoring and enforcing its series of orders directed at government. Here we look more closely at the remaining strategies. In terms of mobilising the grassroots, there have been a variety of activities that the RTF campaign has used over the years and these are also common to other civil society movements in India, including public hearings, rallies, *dharnas*, *padyatras* (foot marches), conventions, action-oriented research and media advocacy. The political event catalogue also echoed these modes of popular mobilisation: the common types of mobilisation that are reported are: protest, *dharna*, agitation and rally. The media reports also talk about signature campaigns, public meetings, effigy-burning and strikes.

To illustrate, on 9 April 2002 activities of this kind took place across the country as part of a national 'day of action on midday meals'. This event was partly instrumental in persuading several state governments to initiate cooked midday meals in primary schools. Similarly, in May/June 2005, the campaign played a leading role in the Rozgar Adhikar Yatra, a 50-day tour of India's poorest areas to demand the immediate enactment of a national Employment Guarantee Act. During the campaign for the NFSA, similar tours were organised in different states. Sit-ins and demonstrations were held in front of the different ministries that were implementing food and nutrition-related schemes. Of the two cases we researched, in Madhya Pradesh, the AAM's strategies were similar to those of the RTF movement, while in West Bengal, the mobilisation was spontaneous, confrontational and violent.

Remarking on the repertoire of action, one senior activist of the RTF campaign said:

*We kept changing the formats (of protest) – jan sunwai, dharna, meeting MPs, protesting outside various departments and ministries that are concerned – crashed into many gates, hungry plate for the homeless – the symbols and the sites. Public hearing on the SECC – brought all the zero-score wallahs. We kept changing the method to match the members we were mobilising – not easy at all, to keep constant pressure. Also need to do it at the state level, at the district level, at the village... There was creative participation and constant effort made – when it was not possible to do street action and public action – hall meetings e.g. January this year, people*

*from pilot districts came and brought in their data – (you have to) change your mode depending on the numbers you can mobilise and the format that can communicate best.*

Along with mass public action in the form of street protests, rallies etc., the RTF campaign also conducted many specific lobbying activities with the government and members of parliament. Some of our interviewees noted that this was the actual strength of the RTF campaign. Even though the RTF's capacity for grassroots mobilisation was not greater than those working on other issues, the success of its campaign was perceived to be because it was able to reach national policymakers and the political elite. The campaign met more than 100 MPs in large delegations asking that they demand more comprehensive food security legislation. They armed MPs with suggested drafts of amendments that could be introduced in parliament. Some members of the campaign were also part of the National Advisory Council (for some time), which was drafting the first official version of the bill.

At the same time, the campaign released press briefs explaining to the media the positions being taken by different political parties and the campaign's demands. The sophistication of the media strategy of the RTF campaign cannot be understated. Senior campaign members were willing to go repeatedly on national media, and, armed with facts and analysis, confront opponents of the National Food Security Act on a point-by-point basis. A key feature was the ability to convert complex legislative clauses into language understandable by common people and to focus on the rationality of arguments. As we shall see in the details of the Madhya Pradesh case, this involved cultivating key people in the media, raising their awareness about the salient issues and consistently keeping them updated on developments.

Another strength or strategy of the RTF campaign was that it formed very broad alliances. The steering committee of the RTF campaign consists of 14 national networks, including networks of women's organisations, independent trade unions, Dalit groups, single women, disabled persons, agriculture-related organisations etc. One of the founding members of the RTF campaign states that an extremely significant turning point for the campaign was the Asia Social Forum 2003 and the World Social Forum 2004 where they learnt the strengths of these kinds of alliances.

In this section, we have briefly presented the kind of activities taken up by the RTF campaign at the national level. A deeper exploration of the national campaign for the right to food is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, we now turn to grassroots mobilisation drawing upon our two case studies – of riots and rights-based movements. We have organised our discussion of the two cases around broader themes of the substantive content of the demands, the nature of mobilisation, the profile of participants and the nature of state responses. Within these, the themes discussed emerged iteratively through qualitative analysis using the Dedoose software.

## 6. MOBILISATION IN MADHYA PRADESH, THE ADIVASI ADHIKAR MANCH

In order to understand who participates in the popular mobilisation that underpins the RTF campaign, who the target groups are, what people's experience with FPV/inflation has been and what the underlying moral economy is, we turn to one of the constituent organisations of the RTF campaign. This also gives an opportunity to see the demands related to food at the grassroots, and how the state responds at different levels. As mentioned earlier, our primary fieldwork focused on the work of the Adivasi Adhikar Manch (AAM) in Majhgawan block, Satna district, in Madhya Pradesh.

The Adivasi Adhikar Manch is an organisation of the Kol and Mawasi tribals in Satna district in Madhya Pradesh, led by two activists, CQ and CB. Both have previous experience of working with established NGOs and are supported by a fellowship they receive from a charity foundation. The rest of the members of the AAM and its activities are voluntary. The AAM was set up in the late 1990s and in the initial years, it took up different issues related to the tribals in the area. They demanded that schools be set up under the Education Guarantee Scheme, agricultural land be provided for the tribals, a fair price for forest produce and so on.

One of their early and most successful initiatives was to lead a struggle that led to the release of 87 acres of common (*panchayat*) land from the control of upper caste landlords and its transfer into small agricultural plots for cultivation by the tribal families of the village. Further, with the help of the administration and organised struggles, they have been able to retain the control of this land until now, even though they have not yet received individual titles. Earlier people had no resources of their own and were often employed as bonded labour. As a result of this action, they began growing their own food. There has been a drastic improvement in their living conditions. However, the living conditions in these areas are still extremely poor with high levels of malnutrition and disease.

Malnutrition became a big public issue in Madhya Pradesh in the mid-2000s, especially after the release of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data in December 2006. This report showed that the state of Madhya Pradesh not only had the highest level of child malnutrition in the country (60 per cent of children underweight); it also saw an increase in the prevalence of malnutrition since the previous survey conducted in 1997–98. Around the same time, the media reported some malnutrition deaths in an area neighbouring the block where the AAM was working at the time. State-level fact-finding teams were formed, and the AAM activists were included in these. This process led the AAM to get interested in the issue of child malnutrition in their area as well. The AAM activists attended a few training sessions on the issue conducted in Bhopal by different alliances including the RTF campaign and began collecting data on child malnutrition, in 2007. They found a high prevalence of malnutrition and also recorded cases of child deaths where the underlying cause was malnutrition. They



faced administrative resistance when they made this issue public and demanded better access to government food and nutrition schemes for the tribal households, especially with children. However, with the help of the state-level RTF campaign activists, they pursued these cases with the state administration.

The issue of malnutrition in Majhgawan garnered a lot of media attention during the period 2007–9, especially in the local newspapers because of the AAM's presence and its links with a media advocacy organisation, Vikas Samvad, which was also working on the issue of child malnutrition. As a result, the focus of the AAM's work increasingly shifted to child malnutrition. At the same time they were able to link their earlier work related to land rights to this as well and to see malnutrition in the larger context of access to food, livelihoods and resources. Through their work on malnutrition the AAM mobilised villagers in more than 20 villages to demand better child care centres, improved delivery in the Public Distribution System, the establishment of nutrition rehabilitation centres and so on. They were even able to bring to national attention the issue by conducting public hearings attended by the members of the National Commission of Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), getting coverage for the issue in the national media. The AAM continues to mobilise in the area on malnutrition-related issues.

The period when the AAM began focused work on malnutrition coincided with almost exactly the period under study (2007–12). During this period there were a few activities organised under the AAM's leadership, which can be considered as popular mobilisation 'events' as defined in this study (Annex 3). These included protest marches and public hearings at the block and district headquarters. Furthermore, AAM activists also participated in state- and national-level protests (*dharnas*) led by the RTF campaign. Communities' experience in relation to these events was discussed in the focus group discussions.

## **6.1 Introduction to the focus group villages**

To understand in detail the work of the Adivasi Adhikar Manch, and the response to this, we conducted a few focus group discussions. Prior to the formal discussions, we made an initial visit where we spoke to the AAM activists, local political leaders, conducted informal discussions in villages with people from different communities and met with local people in the media who covered the mobilisation events and malnutrition in the area. With the help of activists from the AAM and based on our own initial field visit, we then identified two villages in the block, Chitehara and Barha Mawan for conducting the focus group discussions.

Chitehara is a large village of about 600 households belonging to diverse social groups – Brahmins, Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the Kol tribal community. In this village, we constituted four different groups for conducting the focus group discussions. The grouping was mainly based on caste and tribal identities for they broadly corresponded to the socio-economic structure in the village. The first three groups represented the Brahmin, the Dalit and the Kol<sup>13</sup> communities respectively. While there was almost equal participation of women in two of the three categories, the fourth group consisted exclusively of women

<sup>13</sup> Brahmins are the highest caste in the caste hierarchy. In this village, they were also the landowners. Dalits are the former 'untouchables'. Kol is one of the many tribal/Adivasi communities living in this area.

from the Kol community. Besides the four group discussions, detailed individual interviews were also conducted with a septuagenarian man from the Dalit community and with a middle-aged woman from the Kol community.

In the next village of Baraha Mawan we conducted a further four focus group discussions. Unlike Chitehara, this village represented a relative homogeneity in the socio-economic features of the households. The village was mainly composed of tribal households numbering around 60 from the Mawasi community. A small minority of the households also belonged to the Kol tribal community. Here the first focus group discussion was conducted with a group of aware villagers who had actively participated in popular mobilisations under the AAM leadership. The second small group comprised four senior residents who described the general features and history of the village. The third group consisted of mainly youth and migrant workers from the village. The fourth group was mixed.

Both the villages and in general, the entire area where the AAM is active, experiences very high levels of child malnutrition. Furthermore, although the living conditions of people have improved over the last two decades, there is still widespread poverty and food insecurity. As one old man put it, '*Chaar Maheeney Chakachak, Baaki Sab Fakaafak!*' (four months of surplus and the rest a period of want).

People, especially those belonging to the Dalit and Adivasi communities, also explained that there were periods of scarcity especially the few months preceding harvest. As seen from the focus group discussions, people's diets consisted largely of cereals with very little variety or inclusion of other foods such as pulses, vegetables, milk and other foods derived from animals.

## **6.2 Grievances and demands – content of mobilisation**

Households in these villages source their food from the market, their own agriculture, neighbouring forests and the PDS, the midday meal scheme and the ICDS. The contribution of agriculture to household food security is directly proportional to the land-holding size and the investment in agriculture. In some cases, landless families still receive in-kind remuneration of grains for performing agricultural labour. For the poorer families, the PDS has emerged as a critical support system for food security over the last decade. The accessibility of the neighbouring forests have declined significantly over the last years due to increased control and prohibitions of the Forest Department, and also due to the threats of local bandits or *dacoits* who control the timber and 'tendu-leaves' mafia in the area. Not only has forest food produce declined for poorer families but it has become riskier for the women to collect firewood. Against this backdrop, the village has also seen significant transformation of labour relations with household incomes getting fully monetised with cash payments for agricultural labour and remittances from migrant family members. This has in turn resulted in an increased role of the market as a source of food for the village poor. Moreover the improvement and greater accessibility of local trains to nearby Satna city has also been instrumental in exposing the women of the village to urban markets and not only for food.

Government programmes such as the PDS therefore play an important role in ensuring minimum food availability for households, especially during times of rising food prices. Food-related grievances of the people in the two villages ranged from the malfunctioning of the PDS and other government schemes to increasing unviability of agriculture due to inflation in input prices and the lack of employment opportunities leading to poverty and hunger.

Further, the AAM's main plank of mobilisations has been the issue of child malnutrition in relation to the availability and quality of government services intended to address this. The organisation has been careful to articulate this particular issue in a way that encompasses all the other grievances mentioned above. Therefore the local demands include better access and implementation of the PDS, setting up of *anganwadi* centres<sup>14</sup>, better food through the *anganwadi* centres, setting up nutrition rehabilitation centres (NRCs) for malnourished children. Specific demands in relation to each of these schemes are then articulated depending on local conditions. For example one demand was for the *anganwadi* centre to shift to another location as the present one had dogs outside, which prevented young children from entering. Similarly, in all the villages there was a demand that the *anganwadi* workers be from the same village and the same community.

Along with these local demands, the AAM also raises demands related to policy in line with what the RTF campaign articulates nationally. Therefore universalisation of the PDS, inclusion of pulses and edible oil, enhancing the quantity of grain that is given in the PDS are all issues that are discussed with the people and support is mobilised for these demands. To further the struggle for these policy changes, the AAM also participates in the national- and state-level protest activities organised by the RTF campaign. For example in November 2009, 30 activists from the AAM participated in a national RTF rally and *dharna* in Delhi. This *dharna* was to reject the minimalistic draft on the Food Security Act that was proposed by the Union Government and to demand comprehensive food security legislation that included a universal PDS, among other things. About 5,000 people from across the country participated in this event.

### **6.3 Forms/strategies of mobilisation**

The AAM uses similar forms of mobilisation locally to raise their local demands. *Gheraos* (trappings), demonstrations, public hearings, rallies, all-party meetings and confrontations (though not violent) with the local administration were common in the latter half of the 2000s. Over time, the AAM has also been able to achieve a harmonious consensus among local political leaders from all parties who support their activities. The AAM has also considerably raised the awareness levels of local people on many issues and their rights.

One of the events held was a public hearing on the issue of malnutrition attended by the chairperson and a member of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). The NCPCR came in response to a complaint filed by the AAM along with other

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<sup>14</sup> Anganwadi centres are preschool and early child care centres set up under the Integrated Child Development Services scheme. Through these services health and nutrition services are provided to children under six years of age, pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls.

RTF campaign groups of Madhya Pradesh regarding the high levels of child malnutrition and the failure of public services to respond to the situation. In preparation for the complaint, the AAM documented cases of severe malnutrition, malnutrition deaths and how families were denied entitlements to food schemes that might have prevented such a condition arising in the first place. Parents of children were mobilised to speak up during the public hearing and people from the villages were mobilised to attend it and voice their grievances. As the leaders of the AAM explain, the local administration tried to sabotage the event by spreading misinformation (and fear) in the villages regarding the event and the visit of the NCPCR members. In spite of this, about 1,500 people from various villages attended and many spoke up confidently. In response to this hearing the nutrition rehabilitation centre in Majhgawan was opened.

One of the respondents in the focus group discussion, explained who attended the event: 'The whole village went for it. People from Delhi had also come. We went and heard. It was followed with some officials visiting to rectify the functioning of *Anganwadi* but that didn't help much and they left.'

Another major event organised by the AAM was a massive public meeting that raised multiple demands concerning the rights of the tribals in the area. Along with issues related to access to food schemes, the issue of ownership of land, access to forests and forest resources were also raised. The AAM invited a leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party from the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, a party that primarily represents the Dalits but is not very influential in Madhya Pradesh, for the public meeting in which more than 10,000 people participated. One of the messages that came out of the meeting was that people would boycott the elections and not vote if their demands were not met. This received media coverage and the AAM activists felt that this threatened the local politicians and got them to take the AAM more seriously.

One AAM activist in Chitehara described the mood of the event:

*Once when Daddu Bhaia (the BSP leader from Uttar Pradesh) had come, a lot of people had gathered and went to the meeting in tractors. It was almost like an election atmosphere where the contradictions to our interests got clearly highlighted and people were ready to oppose those who obstructed their rights. The politicians serve their own interests and never promote an Adivasi as a leader. If an Adivasi is given a chance, we could have one of us representing us in the State Assembly. Such was the feeling in that gathering.*

Some of the slogans that people could recall included:

*'Sangathan mein Shakti hai, saari duniya jhukti hai'; 'jungle ki beti kare pukar, ab na sahenge atyachar'; 'jo jameen sarkari, wo jameen hamaari hai' (In organisation there is strength, the whole world bows in the face of it; the daughter of the jungle calls out, we will not bear the exploitation; government land is our land).*

## 6.4 *Participants and leadership*

The profile of the participants in these events and active supporters of the AAM are to a large extent determined by the AAM's own focus on tribal communities. Therefore even in a mixed village such as Chitehara, the AAM has focused its work mainly among the Kol tribal community. All the activists of the AAM from this village belong to the Kol community. Understandably then, this community has been most active in the popular mobilisations of the AAM over the years on issues ranging from child malnutrition to the demand for equitable access to government welfare programmes and the PDS. The members of the Kol community expressed great faith in the potential of popular mobilisation for generating state accountability on issues of public interest including hunger and malnutrition.

The AAM has been remarkably successful in regularising and improving the functioning of the PDS, the midday meal scheme and the *anganwadi* in this village. Its success could be only implicitly corroborated by the testimonies of the members of other communities in the village for their participation in the AAM mobilisations has been almost negligible. Even the Dalits of the village, who are quite well-educated and articulate, exhibited a sense of disconnect from the AAM which they saw mainly as a tribal organisation.

The activist base of the AAM in the second village, Barha Mawan, comes from the Mawasi tribal community, which has been actively participating in mobilisations for a long time. The focus of the AAM's work here has shifted to issues of malnutrition and health. However the main concern of the tribal community here remains land and they often see the AAM programmes and actions as ultimately leading to the land question.

During the focus group discussions it was mentioned that most people participated in 'signature' campaigns (for instance, when there was a collective complaint regarding stale food being distributed in the *anganwadi*). Even such actions elicited responses from the officials. However, when it came to participating in events outside the village, either in the block or further away, only a few went. In the focus group with women in Chitehara, they mentioned that only four or five women went but they came back and shared with everyone else what they had heard and learnt. They talked about how it is difficult for everyone to leave work and go.

The two full-time activists of the AAM are clearly identified as the leaders for the mobilisation around malnutrition in this area by the general public as well as the local authorities. Although neither activist originally belongs to this area or to tribal communities, the tribals in the villages where they have been working consistently have accepted their leadership. The response to them is mainly a result of the initial successes that the mobilisation under their leadership brought – especially the land grab and later the establishment of the nutrition rehabilitation centres, attracting media attention and getting government officials to come to the villages. Each of these garnered more and more support for the AAM. In the focus group discussions, people also talk about how there is trust and how people can support the AAM because they are not party political and how they work with all political parties. However, in the discussion with the local activists, it seemed as if there were a few others from the local communities who were also beginning to be publicly identified as AAM activists/leaders.

## 6.5 Expectations from the state and state response

As mentioned above, state support still constitutes a critical source of food security through the PDS and other nutrition-based schemes. The mobilisation and demands of the AAM have to a large extent been in relation to the functioning of these schemes. The focus group discussions included how these schemes are implemented and what the recent changes have been. From these, it was noted that the activation, regularisation and improvement of the state's interventions in matters of food security in both the villages could be attributed to the AAM's successful mobilisation of the tribal population.

In Chitehara the dominant classes had previously completely cornered the benefits of state provisions. In the mid-2000s the AAM began checking corruption of the rural rich and neglect by the state on this matter. Since around 2007, the PDS has proved to be a lifeline when it comes to household food security for the Dalits and Adivasis of Chitehara. On the other hand, the village of Baraha Mawan remained outside the reach of the PDS until the late 2000s. It was around 2009 when agitations by the AAM on malnutrition and child deaths in Baraha Mawan due to waterborne diseases compelled the administration to take note of the grievances of this small tribal village. Acting on the death of seven children due to contaminated water from hand-pumps in the village, the local administration launched comprehensive efforts to start a PDS ration outlet for the village along with the *anganwadi*. Since then, with active interventions by the AAM, the Adivasis of Baraha Mawan have militantly defended their food rights and held the state accountable for their food security and health.

Describing the response to the protests following the children's deaths, an activist belonging to the Mawasi tribe states:

*After that all kinds of officials who we had never seen before descended on our village. Those who did not have the ration cards were issued the cards. All of us were given food grains and everything. There was a medical camp in the village for 15 days. All the sick children were taken care of and things became better.*

Through participation in the AAM's mobilisation activities and its constant awareness-building with the tribal communities, people in the villages are also now more aware of their rights and have learnt how they should articulate their demands with the administration. People have also learnt how to get redress from the state if they have an issue in their village. In the focus group discussions, for instance, they mentioned that if the *kotedar* (PDS dealer) refuses to work properly, the villagers now understand that they can and should go to the local administration to complain about it. This understanding of the bureaucratic authorities and the means of redress for their problems have come from the sustained interventions by the AAM, according to the villagers.

*Earlier people were not so aware. The relationship of the village issues to the collector's office was explained to us by the Manch [Forum]. Earlier the locally affluent people used to demand a lot of service and personal obligation to get any of our work done. It was completely upon their whims that we depended. Now whenever anyone comes asking about our problems we know how to present our case to the government officials and any other journalists.*

Mawasi activist, Barha Mawan

They also now have a certain amount of faith in collective action and believe that things can change if they get together and demand their entitlements. Therefore although in the discussions people kept alluding to the role of the AAM leadership, they also said success came through people's support. For example, an activist in Barha Mawan said, 'If there were no strength in numbers things would not have been like this today.'

Finally, the respondents also seemed to believe that there was space in the system for such collective action. When asked whether they were worried that the state would react in a repressive manner over their participation in a big public protest, one of the participants replied: 'How will they arrest us? It was a rally'.

Over the last three or four years the AAM's public activities, especially big mobilisations against the administration, have considerably declined. A possible reason could be that the limited demands placed by them on the exclusive issue of direct interventions to address child malnutrition have more or less been fulfilled by the government. Now their work remains mostly of monitoring the public services and working with the administration to ensure their efficacy. Their efforts have received serious recognition in that their complaints and suggestions are heeded by the local administration with utmost sincerity and urgency. This does not require contentious public action.

## ***6.6 Links with the national campaign and media mobilisation***

At this point we need to mention the role of the Right to Food campaign in the AAM's mobilisation strategies in their area of work. Firstly, at the level of ideas and understanding of entitlements, the AAM's association with the RTF network contributed to articulating specific demands with local governments. They were able to acquire the tools for monitoring, analysing the problem and linking it to existing schemes and entitlements. At the same time, they also located their specific governance and implementation-related demands within the larger policy changes and legislative measures that were being sought at state and national level. The state and national networks and campaigns built in details to their broad policy demands based on the experiences of their constituent organisations such as the AAM.

The second and very important contribution to the AAM's efforts in the area has been the links to the media that the RTF campaign helped establish. While initially the media raised the issue of malnutrition independently, over time the AAM also learnt to work directly with them when specific issues arise. There are many journalists in Satna districts who have covered malnutrition issues extensively. This constant coverage helped in putting pressure on the administration both at the district and state levels. Although the media did not give as much coverage to the AAM's mobilisation and public events, in coordination with them they kept the issue of malnutrition alive by reporting on the status of malnourished children and the failure of government response. The AAM was able to build these media links because of its association with the media advocacy organisation Vikas Samvad, one of the most active

members of the RTF campaign in the state. Vikas Samvad played a key role in advocacy with the media to ensure coverage of malnutrition.

The state of Madhya Pradesh presents the example of an activist media, which took upon itself the campaign on malnutrition, with every nuance and detail highlighted across the print, electronic and social media. The coverage of the state was extensive in the national and international media. Almost every global news agency with a desk in India, including the *New York Times* (Cecila Dugger), covered stories from Madhya Pradesh. The mobilisation of the media there on the issue of malnutrition has been documented in a report *Media and Malnutrition in Madhya Pradesh* (Vikas Samvad 2013). What marks the media intervention in that state as unique is that it was the culmination of 10 years of efforts by the local constituency of the RTF campaign, Vikas Samvad, to sensitise the media to cover social sector issues. Starting with just four journalists in 2004–5, Vikas Samvad has since trained more than 345 journalists through media fellowships, internships, workshops and retreats, during the study period in the state. Extensive support was provided to the journalists after training to cover social sector issues including malnutrition, through 29 detailed research studies, 181 information packs, 15 ‘alert notes’ and countless instances of information shared individually with journalists from 39 local and national publications that they track and inform regularly. To give an illustration (Vikas Samvad 2013) of the intensity of the media coverage on the issue of hunger in the state, in just a five-month period (June to November 2008), 1,765 news items were published in the local, national and international media concerning child deaths in three districts. For the first seven days after the story broke, it received full-page coverage, which is unprecedented for most social sector stories. It remained the lead story on the front page in the local media for 16 days and had front-page coverage for 29 days in most of the local papers. Eight editorial and 19 feature stories also covered in this media blitz rarely seen in Indian journalism.

It is this combined with the political pressure generated through raising questions in the state assembly and political mobilisation of the RTF campaign at the block, district and state level that led to malnutrition emerging as the biggest issue in the 2008 elections. The resultant policy response echoed the popular mobilisation backed by the media coverage.

## **6.7 Moral economy**

The moral economy of society in the two villages has been intricately linked to the relations of production in agriculture and the transformations therein over the years. The traditional economy in agriculture worked as a closed system of patronage within the village. However, it would be a misnomer to say that the landed elites had an obligation towards their employees from lower castes and tribes, even for their food needs. Food, like other means of livelihood, offered by the landed classes to the poor of the village was an instrument of control in feudal labour relations. For both the villages, the state was a distant, faceless entity that could not intervene in their lives for their welfare. Nutrition and food-related schemes like the PDS or ICDS reached both Chitehara and Baraha Mawan only in the 2000s. In the absence of other sources of food and livelihood, there was no alternative for vulnerable sections of society but to depend on the landlords. There were expectations on the landlords to rescue poor



agricultural workers in times of food crisis, but to say that they felt obliged to help was not the case.

However, over the last two decades these relations of dependence between the classes and castes have altered drastically owing to historic events specific to the two villages. The working class of Chitehara village was rescued from the tutelage of the landlords when the government terminated private contracts in the *tendu* leaves collection work in the forests and as agriculture's capacity to absorb labour declined. The Adivasis of Baraha Mawan revolted against the violent grip of the landed elites by occupying the *panchayat*<sup>15</sup> land for their own cultivation. It was against this backdrop that the AAM's interventions over malnutrition and land rights opened an interface that created the closest encounters of these people with the state.

In Chitehara, the prolonged struggles to activate and regularise the PDS and *anganwadi* for the benefits of the tribals and Dalits led to the hitherto subservient classes acquiring a sense of dignity and a legitimate claim to state power and welfare. This prompted the Kol community's active participation in the mobilisations of the AAM and in the long run, to developing the confidence and understanding to engage with the state over claiming their legitimate rights. It was this discourse on rights and merits of popular mobilisation propagated by the AAM that has empowered the Kol community of Chitehara to demand institutionalised accountability from the state over food rights.

However, it was also observed that other sections of the village population who could not be integrated into the AAM's campaign remained cynical of the state's intentions and capability to improve their lives. This contrast between the perceptions and approach of different social groups towards the state is crucial to underscore the positive impact of popular mobilisation on the one hand and the limitations of the strategy of mobilisation based on an identity on the other. The limitation can be understood in the cynicism towards the state politics that the Dalit community of the village ironically shared with the landed Brahmins. Both of these social groups were left out of the mobilisations of the AAM for different reasons.

In the case of Baraha Mawan, the hope of achieving land titles for the occupied *panchayat* land remains a guiding beacon for the Mawasi people as they actively respond to the AAM's calls on all the other issues. Most of the older and middle-aged population of this village claim an active allegiance to the AAM campaigns based on their faith in its leader's commitment to their welfare. They have developed a militant potential to contest any denial of their rights by the local representatives of the state and they express commitment to not let go of their rights without a struggle. As the world talks of the rolling-back of the state from the domain of public welfare, Baraha Mawan is a village that seems to have discovered the state only in the last decade or so; and they are not ready to relieve it of its responsibility towards their welfare, be it over food rights, health or education. People's expectations have only gradually increased as their regularly waged struggles have compelled the state to return every time it tries to disappear. However it must be stated that all the expectations of the state including those on food rights that the people of Baraha Mawan hold exhibit a teleological convergence into the issue of land titles. At the same time their engagement with the state to date hinges on the AAM's pivotal leadership.

<sup>15</sup> Lowest level of administration/elected body usually comprising of one main village and a few satellite villages.

## 7. RATION 'RIOTS' IN WEST BENGAL

West Bengal witnessed widespread popular unrest in 2007, akin to what we call 'food riots' or 'ration riots' as they are known popularly. Public anger was directed at the malfunctioning PDS in the state. The riots, which were violent and took a militant form in several areas, were people's mobilisations and grievances on the issues of corruption and irregularity in the PDS. Popular action included loot and arson; the houses of local PDS dealers were set on fire and looted in many instances. The threat of violence and public humiliation also led to a few PDS dealers committing suicide. The riots originated from Bankura district in the latter half of the year, soon spreading across many other districts in the state.

West Bengal is a highly politicised society. The state saw widespread mobilisation by the Communist Parties, especially on land reforms, in the 1970s. It is one of the few states in India that implemented land reforms to such a large extent. The state had an elected Left Front government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) for 34 years. The deep polarisation of its society along political lines has been widely written about. The Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM) is a cadre-based party with units in almost every village. Local governments (*panchayats*), teachers' unions, ration dealers' associations etc. were all politicised and mostly under the control of the ruling party. The state is also known for violent political clashes in rural areas.

The PDS riots happened during a time when the hegemony of the Left Front government was beginning to weaken. Massive protests broke out across the state in response to the state government's decision to acquire hundreds of acres of agricultural land for a car factory for a private company (Tata Motors). These protests gained support from not just the local farmers but from movements against land acquisition and forced displacement across the country. The main opposition party in the state assumed leadership of this movement. Although it began as a movement against one instance of land acquisition, the protests soon spread across the state to other parts where similar land acquisition was proposed. The state government responded with police action but was eventually forced to withdraw the acquisition plans and return the land to the farmers. This movement also managed to consolidate the general disenchantment among many vis-a-vis the Left Front government. While these larger political developments provided the backdrop and probably even formed the political opportunity for the PDS riots, they also contributed to the food riots being subsumed into a general loss of popular support for the ruling party.

In West Bengal, the media reported what was happening during the riots but neither malnutrition, nor the right to food or even the structural problems plaguing the PDS were central. Much of the reportage focused on the events as they unfolded and the political analysis centred around the role of the local units of the CPM, which was the leading party of the Left Front government in Bengal. The state-level activists and experts we interviewed told us that political commentary in the Bengali press placed the PDS riots in the context of the overall disenchantment with the three decade-plus rule of the coalition and of the impending change that it would precipitate. The PDS riots were seen as a continuum of the protests against acquisition of agricultural land for industrial purposes that had rocked the

state (popularly known as the *Singur-Nandigram* protests named after the locations where these protests took place). There was little reportage of the PDS riots in the national or international media.

Although the government offered immediate short-term responses in the villages where the riots took place by suspending PDS dealers and paying compensation, it cannot be said that the riots led to any structural reforms of the PDS in the state. After the riots, the ruling party did announce a decrease in prices at which PDS grain is sold but this was towards the end of their term in government. By then the anti-CPM protests were so intense that it did not elicit the kind of enthusiasm such announcements would have in other periods or in other states.

For the fieldwork, two villages were selected in Bankura district where the riots began. The researchers also had contacts with a local agricultural workers' union (PBKMS) present there. Although the PBKMS is not actively present in the villages where the riots occurred, they were useful local contacts to introduce the research team to key people and also helped with translation. The focus group discussions were conducted in the villages of two blocks of Bankura district – Gangajalghati and Sonamukhi. The latter is just an hour's drive from Nandigram where police fired on villagers protesting against the land acquisition for the car plant, causing numerous deaths in 2007. The 'food riots' in Bankura began in the aftermath of this incident. The sites of our study were Baro Kumira in Gangajalghati block and Radhamohanpur in Sonamukhi Block.

## **7.1 Spontaneous collective action**

The riots were also partly provoked by rising wheat prices prompting more and more people from the above-the-poverty-line (APL) category to demand their wheat quotas from the PDS. For a decade previously, the APL prices of wheat were not much lower than market prices and therefore people had moved away from the PDS. This resulted in the offtake of grain from the PDS under the APL quota by state governments being much less than what was allocated to them by central government (except in the case of a few states where the state governments bought the entire quota from the central government and sold to people at much lower prices by supplementing it with their own funds). The Indian government therefore decided in 2006 to limit allocations under the APL quota to a level determined by the average offtake by a state in the previous three years. Therefore, in 2007 and later when state governments faced high demand from the APL category for wheat especially, they were not able to meet the demand because their quotas had been cut. In West Bengal too, the unavailability of grain under the APL quota was the immediate provocation for the 'ration' riots. People then raised all the existing grievances over the functioning of the PDS including irregular supply, leakages, political favouritism in identifying beneficiaries and so on.

In the focus group discussions too it emerged that non-availability of wheat for APL cardholders was the main reason cited for the ration riots breaking out. It was not possible to confirm how many months or years it remained unavailable. Some villagers said two years; others just said a long time.

With the PDS grievances, people also complained that they were being over-charged, that the PDS dealers were siphoning off the grain and selling it in the open market, that no cash memos were given, that the shop was only open two days a week, there were exclusions from the below-the-poverty line (BPL) lists and so on.

*APL–BPL divide is not correct. The poorest people who should be BPL don't have BPL cards. People who should not, have BPL cards. There is a political reason.*

The APL–BPL divide continues to be highly contentious, with the government forming its own criteria and parameters and fixing a certain bracket of income below which households would fall under the poverty line. Therefore, the protests saw the participation of both APL and BPL cardholders. The anger was mainly targeted at the PDS dealers, who in both villages had the most prominent double-storeyed houses.

As one villager put it, '*dealer holo kyo daakat, kyo chor* (some dealers are *dacoits*, some are thieves)'. This was the general sentiment. Another person said, 'The dealer hasn't come to senses even after a beating. He only keeps saying your rations have not come. Dealer says how can I give ration when there is no supply.'

The people who participated in the public action were also active in the focus group discussions. Along with others, they were able to narrate the sequence of events that led to the riots in their villages. From this sequence of events, we can make some observations on the nature of the protests, the participants and leadership, the grievances and demands, the immediate response of the state and the underlying moral economy.

In Barokumira village, villagers convened a meeting after hearing about ration riots from other villages, through people who came visiting. It ran from 4pm until 2am. About 1,000 people, almost all men, attended. The dealer, Mr Bimal Kundu, was called to address the grievances of the villagers. The main objective was to confront the dealer with all his wrongdoings in relation to the PDS and make him pay. 'Dealer's meeting was about "*Shashti pujo*" (when someone is being taught a lesson)' was how they described the meeting.

Some villagers mentioned that the dealer was forcefully dragged into the meeting, because he was not coming out and it was getting late. Some described the meeting as violent and bullying towards the PDS dealer. One person in the focus group discussion described it as follows: 'It can't be called a meeting, it was forceful (*jabardasti*). There was pressure given on the dealer.' Another said: 'During the meeting there was some bit of violence (*bhang-chor*)...The dealer was caught hold and dragged to the meeting. During the meeting, *telis* (landed) supported Trinamool Congress (TMC), while *Bawris* (landless) supported CPM.'

At the end, the dealer produced a written letter describing all he had cheated from the people, and even accepted that he had been charging customers above the official price. As a compromise he was asked to contribute 200,000 rupees for village development (*unnayan*). He asked for three days' grace, went home and asked his father and brother for the money. They refused saying he should resolve it himself. At the end of the three days, he committed suicide.<sup>16</sup> Cases were filed against eight people who were jailed for 90 days then bailed. The

<sup>16</sup> After his death, a suicide note was found at his house at 11am. Villagers say it was falsified because the man died at night.

case went on for three years after which they were all declared innocent.

In Radhamohanpur, on 16 September 2007, the day of the 'riots', a Zonal Party Convention was being held in the village by the then ruling party CPM at the high school grounds. The villagers decided that they would use this opportunity to raise their grievances in relation to the PDS. This was planned in such a manner because people felt that the dealer was part of the CPM and was being protected by the party. Before the riot, the dealer was caught two or three times for selling off PDS grain outside the village. This caused agitation, as people were angry that they were not getting grain, but the dealer was selling it elsewhere.

It was also rumoured that the remaining grains were given to the CPM fund.

*Dealer gave the CPM a good sum of money which was used to hold the convention.*

*CPM party was involved, they used to get a monthly share of provisions from the dealer, so they had to give shelter to the dealer. The share system had been going for a long time.*

*Overall we wanted to prove [the] dealer's corruption (durniti) in front of the CPM leaders, that [the] village chief and local dealer were all involved in durniti. We wanted to pressurise.*

On the previous day they conducted a mike rally and appealed to everyone to go to the convention to ask for APL wheat and raise their voice against corruption in PDS. The mike announcement was organised by the villagers. A cycle rickshaw and a hand mike were arranged. TK, one of the people who was part of the planning and a participant in the focus group discussions, said that he did the announcements, as he was the most educated among them.

Slogans included: '*gam na dile, jarimana dite hobe; aamader gam dite hobe*' (Pay a fine if you are not giving us wheat; you have to give us wheat); and '*Ration keno dichho naa; APL gam'er jawab dao; ration durniti bando korte hobe; maanchi naa, maanbo naa*' (Why are you not giving us ration? Give us answers for APL wheat! We shall not tolerate corruption).

Twenty people were in and around the van rickshaw at this time, and it went around four villages where the PDS dealer supplied rations. There was a lot of discontentment as before the incident, each time the dealer was caught siphoning off grain and stealing, the CPM had negotiated in his favour. The plan was to speak to the dealer in front of other party leaders, to create pressure for decisions to be taken. The villagers wanted to confront the dealer, and when he was not sent out, they realised that he was being given shelter by the CPM. They also wanted to speak to the village chief.

Initially, around 10 or 12 people went inside to voice their grievances. On talking to some of the party members, the villagers were told, '*pore shunbo, aajge shona'r shomoy nei*' (will hear later, there is no time to listen today). On demanding that the dealer be sent out, a Zilla Parishad (District Council) member told the people, 'he is our person, do what you can.' These responses made the people agitated. There was pushing and shoving, as there was a barricade and people were not allowed to go inside. Party people took out *lathis* and wood

being used for cooking to scare away the people, and this led to more aggression. There was a huge crowd just outside; accounts of how many ranged from 1,000 to 5,000. Sensing that the crowd had become aggressive, the local police were called in. On seeing the police, people became more violent. Stone or bricks from a nearby construction site were pelted at the party convention and then at the police. To explain the scale of the event, the villagers described that about two to three cow carts full of bricks were used. The tent gate caught fire. Local villagers were pelting stones at them, and had a wall as a shield.

The Rapid Action Force (RAF) was also called in. The entire incident of violence lasted for about an hour. The RAF fired some blank rounds into the crowd. Two people were wounded by bullets, as people ran helter-skelter. The firing happened between 9.30am and 10am. Section 144 was soon imposed in the village until the next morning. The RAF remained in the village for about a month. The cases against some of those arrested for the violence are still going on in the Bishnur sub-division.

On the day of the violence, there was no sloganeering as such but villagers who were present heard voices saying, '*maar, dhor, oke dhor, saala ke dhor*' (catch him, beat him up).

## 7.2 Profile of rioters

Both in Barokumira and Radhamohanpur, only men took part in the riots. In Barokumira, the entire village had gathered for the meeting also attended only by men. In Radhamohanpur, mostly men were involved in the main scenes where rioting and stone-throwing took place. Women who were watching later formed a human chain to defend their men, so that they were not picked up by the police. Both the villages saw the participation of both APL and BPL cardholders.

As one of the rioters put it, 'Everybody had a complaint against the dealer and PDS.'

*Bawri* women who live just across the school came out with brooms in their hands and stood on the boundary road leading up to their hamlet. This incident happened just a day before their festival (*mansha pujo* – snake god), and there was a fear that if men from their house went out, they would be shot by the police or get arrested.

The people fighting were of a different caste.

*They were lower caste (mahishya and others). We are in the middle (bagdi caste). Why should we fight with them? Those men were better off, they have land. What if our men get hurt, who will pay for hospital and other expenses. Let them fight, let them only do it.*

Radhamohanpur is also a huge village where the ration dealer at present holds 6,895 cards. There were some areas where neither men nor women participated in the incident. In Muslimpada, men were in the fields and women were at home. They heard about it later

in the afternoon. However, there were no leaders from any particular political party. 'No party colour in that assembly, there was CPM as well as TMC'. 'It was a people's movement (*janagana andolan*)' was how the focus group participants described the events.

After the incident, the TMC leader Mukul Roy came to see the injured. After several weeks, the CPM and the TMC sat down to negotiate. The representatives of the ration dealer association were also present and agreed on a compensation amount for the two people who were shot. Each received 25,000 rupees (one was hit in the leg and the other in the hand). It was also decided to give arrears of wheat. This result clearly indicates where power lies: it was not so much the ration dealer association and the block authority concerned, but rather the equal stake and involvement of both the prominent political parties.

The people in these villages see the riots as an action they undertook to demand their rights. They talk about it as a reaction of common people when there is injustice. Regardless of the political party in power, there will be struggles against injustice, is how they justified the riots.

In Radhamohanpur, it was very clear from the discussions that the people saw and referred to this as a food movement (*khadyo andolan*). When they were asked whether people would organise again if they did not get rations for a month, one woman said: 'We have no choice but yes. If we don't have kerosene oil, how will we light our houses? We don't even have money to buy candles. *Aabar aandolan hobey*' (there will be a struggle again).

BG, one of those who took action, said: '*Gom chayite gachilam, gooli khelaam*' (we went to ask for wheat, and got bullets instead).

As far as perceiving the value of this incident, this is what one man said:

*My daughter asked me of what result of all this action is. I told her "we are creating history, what we have done will be history, in the future our names will appear in the list of people who did food (ration) movement in Bankura district".'*

### **7.3 Moral economy**

Asked who was responsible for inflation, respondents showed awareness of the role played by different actors.

A 15 year old girl said: 'Keeping common man aside, everyone is responsible for price-rise from shopkeepers to businessman to the top sections of the society, keeping aside only working class people.'

As most of our discussions were with farmers, mostly small and medium, there was an underlying agreement that big farmers are reaping all the benefits of the price rises. Others said that farmers are losing out to the traders. At the same time there was a strong sentiment that it was the government that had the responsibility to keep the prices under control.

*People who get the vote, they are increasing the prices. Farmers are also increasing*

*prices. Prices of fertilisers have gone up, that's why farmers are also increasing prices. Even vegetable costs are going up because of the farmers.*

Another person said, 'It's the government's responsibility, if they wish to reduce prices, they can.'

West Bengal is one of the few states in the country with a vibrant *panchayat* body, which symbolises the political party strength in the state. The 2009 *panchayat* elections in the state were an important landmark, as Trinamool Congress (a regional political party) managed to break through the left's dominance by defeating the CPM. The same party then saw a rousing success in the state assembly elections in 2011 defeating CPM after 34 years of rule in the state. People in West Bengal are extremely politically aware and participate in large numbers in the electoral process. At the same time, they were also extremely dissatisfied with the current political leadership there.

*Bawris*, who are essentially landless labourers and economically one of the weakest sections of society in the district, said: 'Some people are getting everything, house, money, land, rickshaw...all by going to the party'.

A *Bawri* woman in Radhamohanpur said: '

*When the (political) parties came to ask for vote, I said "what is that we get to vote for you?" I gave them a warning, "do not come for vote to us...what is that you give me? What is it that you help us with?" We do not even eat or wear their given stuff (ekdom vote korteeshonatomra, kidichho, kisahajjokorcho, keno bolbona, khainaporitader). We work and that is why we can eat a fistful (khaati bole, ekmuthokorekhetepayi)... In every household, they will get seven to eight votes, that is how they see us. Why shouldn't we speak up? We do not fear them. It is because of us they (the leaders) win elections. Borooderkarakore, aamrakori (Who makes them big? We do!). They have everything, while we don't.*

Another, participant observed: 'Political parties come only during election time and voting, nothing done before or after. If we have to get anything done, we have to make several trips to the *panchayat*.'

So there are some who say, 'people have a lot of courage, there is no dearth of that. Even a Class 10-11 student can go up to a leader and ask them something'.

At the same time, others say that 'If *panchayat* member tells us, only then we shall go to block office. Otherwise not'. There is an unwritten norm that the local *panchayat* body, being the first level of governance, is also the most integral power centre in a village.

This vibrant political economy is well-ingrained and reflects the dynamic rural society, where 'party' is synonymous with 'government'. So there is not just a strong awareness as far as entitlements are concerned, but people are also active participants of the political process.

In Barokumira, where villagers have been trying for the last few years to shift the ration shop to their own village, there is not just an expectation from the state in relation to how



the PDS should work, but a strong awareness and effort in approaching the concerned state machinery, whether at the block, district or state level. First the villagers submitted an application to the district food controller's office to move their ration shop. The controller's office did nothing. Then they went again, and it was referred to the food inspector, who promised an inquiry. The inspectors also came to Damra, where the shop is located, and they saw the non-existent road, but nothing was done. This was in August 2012. Since then, the *panchayat* body has also met the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), and along with him, has visited the state assembly to meet the state Food and Civil Supplies Minister Sh. Jyoti Priya Mullick.

Villagers have also offered land to build a ration shop in the village. Mass petitions were done. The options presented were: (i) build a new road, the most preferable; (ii) sell the ration in the village so that people do not have to travel; and (iii) a new licence be issued to someone from the village. This struggle of the people of Barokumira shows how they are aware of how to deal with the administration, feel empowered to do so and are able to follow it up without outside intervention.

## **7.4 Summing up the two cases**

In this study, we choose to understand popular mobilisation on food and moral economy in India through looking at two contrasting case studies of popular mobilisation during the period 2007–12. Given the diversity of the country and the different kinds of popular mobilisation taking place across different regions, it is hard to claim that studying one example is 'representative' in any manner. At the same time, the Right to Food campaign has been at the forefront of mobilising national opinion around the issue of food in the last decade. Therefore a study of this campaign and the grassroots organisation it is linked to can give meaningful insights into the moral economy that drives it and how the state responds to such mobilisation.

In the first case, the Adivasi Adhikar Manch (AAM) in Madhya Pradesh is a civil society organisation working in a rights perspective towards mobilising people to demand accountability from the state on hunger and malnutrition issues. This organisation is also a constituent of the national Right to Food campaign. The AAM is a community-based organisation working consistently on the issue of malnutrition with tribal populations in the area. It has been mobilising people to demand accountability from the state on hunger and malnutrition, through implementation of food and nutrition schemes, access to common lands, access to forest resources and so on.

The second case is one that fits more typically into the description of 'riots'. The action in Bengal was spontaneous and targeted at the local PDS ration dealers. There were no identified leaders nor was there any coordinated action. It spread from one village to another through media reports and word of mouth. Since there was no organisation or leadership, this was mostly a one-off action that saw some immediate responses, but no sustained campaign around hunger.

These two cases offer an interesting comparison. One is an area of chronic hunger and very high malnutrition that has been long neglected by the state but saw some popular mobilisation only when an external agency (the AAM) stepped in to mobilise people. In the other, the villages in West Bengal were relatively better off and had better access to government schemes; this is where spontaneous riots occurred when prices rose and the response systems did not work.

In both places however, the focus group discussions showed that there is an underlying belief that the state is ultimately responsible for ensuring that people do not go hungry. But a failure of the state to meet this responsibility did not automatically result in popular mobilisation until opportunities presented themselves. These opportunities were different in each place. In the case of Madhya Pradesh, it was two people from the outside coming in and mobilising the community around issues of hunger and livelihood. While at the same time linked to wider networks at state and national level that were working towards creating an environment of accountability on food, these people were able to sharpen their demands and include both specific short-term demands from the local governments and long-term policy changes from the state and national governments. In the case of Bengal, the opportunity came with the call for '*poriborton*' in the state and the Singur/Nandigram agitations against land acquisition. This environment for change along with inflation and a change in the APL allocation policy by the government provided the political opportunity for the riots in Bengal.

The response and follow-up were also different. In Bengal there were some immediate responses in the villages where the riots happened and a later announcement of cheaper grain for the BPL population by the state government. But there was neither sustained mobilisation on PDS nor an expansion of the discourse to include hunger and malnutrition. In Madhya Pradesh on the other hand, the AAM had immediate success in the form of control over land in a couple of villages, the setting up of a nutrition rehabilitation centre, the activation of *anganwadi* centres and so on. Through this they won more support from the villagers. They have continued to work in these villages to monitor the government schemes. However, due to constraints of funding, their local demands have been limited to some nutrition schemes of the government and they are no longer engaged in the militant struggles that they led in early days for land for the tribals. Now that their demands are more limited, they do not have to engage that kind of popular mobilisation as the government responds to them even without the need for demonstrative action.

## 8. POLICY AND POLITICAL RESPONSES

What were the perceptions of policymakers and politicians about the impacts of rising food inflation, popular mobilisation at the grassroots, and the state's ability to respond? The perception of the policymakers interviewed for this study, including two members of the Planning Commission, was that India remained largely insulated from the global food price volatility due to the role of the PDS. As indicated earlier, the outflow of stocks from public procurement to the PDS and other programmes like the MDMS is close to 58 million metric tonnes (MTs) annually. At the end of the study period, public stockholding had peaked at close to 65 million MTs in government godowns (warehouses). Three decades ago, when the public stockholding programme was still rudimentary, much of the inflation was driven by hoarding by the private sector. By contrast, there were no imports of either of the staples, wheat and rice, between 2007–12, except in 2009 (when production was low because of drought and the food reserves having been used up following mistaken policy decisions resulting in large exports).

Therefore, any analysis of the policy response to inflation has to include the policy changes in the PDS as well. One of the Planning Commission members (TB) we interviewed felt that government had not optimised usage of the public stockholding programme to rein in inflation and even went on to state that the inflation could have been managed much better if more of the stocks had been released through the PDS to stabilise prices domestically. This view was countered by a senior official (IT) from the food ministry who felt that the only option to liquidate food grains without additional subsidy burdens was the Open Market Sales Scheme (OMSS) where stocks are offloaded to the private sector (millers, biscuit manufacturers, etc.) and not to the public through the PDS. But he also acknowledged that the OMSS failed because private trade waited for government to reduce prices even further than what was initially offered. This was because they were aware that the government would be compelled to dispose of excess stocks sooner rather than later and played the waiting game to force further reduction of OMSS prices. Thus, despite the huge public stockholding, and the inflationary pressures, there was a great reluctance on the part of the government to take any short-term measures to liquidate stocks by distributing it through the PDS. However, there was a lot of criticism towards this policy of the government with opinion pieces in the media blaming the 'hoarding' by the government for the high staple price inflation in India (Gulati 2014; Basu 2011; Himanshu 2010a). The partial liquidation of the stocks happened through the PDS only after strong directives were passed by the Indian Supreme Court.

Undoubtedly the most important food-related policy intervention in the recent period has been the introduction of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), even though it was not portrayed so much as a response to inflation, rather as a food security measure. This was preceded by the expansion in PDS coverage, lower issue prices and governance reforms in the PDS in many states. In this report, we mainly look at the changes at the national level and in our two case study states – West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh.

## 8.1 Response at the national level

Inflation, especially food price inflation has been an issue of public debate and pressure for the government since 2008 onwards. The media has regularly reported inflation, there were protest marches by opposition parties, debates in parliament along with significant civil society-led popular mobilisation on food across the country. All of this contributed to creating massive pressure on the government to act. One of the responses shows the kind of pressure they were under. In 2010, the Indian government held a conference of all state chief ministers on prices of essential commodities. At this conference the prime minister not only talked about enhancing production and banning exports but also urged the states to reform their PDS to ensure that cheap grains reach the poor. As a follow-up measure, three working groups were formed: one on agricultural production, one on food and public distribution, and one on consumer affairs. The members of these working groups were various chief ministers and minister-level officials of the central government. Although there were no significant policy measures that were immediately taken as a result of the conference and the establishment of these working groups, this still shows the kind of pressure there was on the government to act on inflation, from not just civil society but state governments and political parties as well. The working groups also managed to highlight some of the successes in different states with regard to the food economy.

The main immediate response to inflation at the national level was in monetary policy. Short-term and direct food-related interventions that were made to address inflation were two-fold. One was the ban on exports of rice and the second was the ban on future trading of four commodities in 2008. The ban on exports in the view of one of the Planning Commission members (AS) added to the global price increase by decreasing the supply in the global markets. While this was widely seen as a knee-jerk reaction to the global price increase, the second (the ban on future trading in four commodities based on the recommendations of a Committee set up under the Chairpersonship of Prof. Abhijit Sen, economist and member of the Planning Commission) was the result of a more considered approach. This was based on the perception that future trade in India had the potential to impact domestic prices, much in the same way that it had been partially responsible for increases in global prices (De Schutter 2010).

One of the main long-term policy changes in relation to food initiated during the study period, but finally implemented in 2013, is the passage of the National Food Security Act (2013). The National Food Security Act (2013), that *inter alia* legislated the right to food as a legal right, guarantees subsidised grains to 820 million Indians. It also provides for a free midday meal to 130 million school children and supplementary nutrition to all (160 million) children in the country below the age of six. It also guarantees a maternity entitlement of close to \$100 to every pregnant and lactating mother in the country. With an annual budget of nearly \$25 billion, the NFSA is by far one of the largest food programmes (and the only one of its size to guarantee the right to food) in the world. In terms of coverage, it is the single largest programme of its kind anywhere in the world.

The central pillar of the NFSA is the PDS, which as mentioned above has a critical role in

controlling food inflation. Further, making available cheap food grains to people is also an important intervention in shielding people from high food inflation. The RTF campaign saw the NFSA as a crucial policy instrument to fight inflation.

*We know that price is something that is not at all in the hands of or control of poor people – that is why a PDS which could give extremely subsidised and adequate cereals, pulses and cooking oil... that is why our response was in a comprehensive way in terms of a campaign for an FSA – a kind of guarantee. This was one kind of response to this whole thing at the national level which was to ask for a law which guarantees basic rice, wheat, pulses, oil at low prices, then the poor are not affected so much, because prices are always fluctuating, so this would be a guarantee where the poor don't have to worry about the prices.*  
Senior RTF activist

The situation of constant inflation, which had built pressure on the government to show some decisive action around food, created an environment for the NFSA. But there are three other factors that contributed. These are the role of the Supreme Court case on the right to food, the pressure by civil society movements particularly the RTF campaign supported by the media coverage on inflation, and the experience of states that had reformed their PDS and where PDS had become an election issue in state assembly elections.

## **8.2 Supreme court intervention**

First, we look at the role of the Indian Supreme Court in setting the agenda on the right to food through the litigation in PUCL vs. Union of India and others, Civil Writ Petition 196/2001, popularly known as the 'Right to Food case'. Based on a petition filed by the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), a leading human rights organisation in India, in the Supreme Court, the RTF case has emerged as the longest running mandamus on the right to food in the world. The ongoing litigation has seen close to 200 orders since 2001 on a range of issues including the universalisation of school midday meals and the ICDS, interventions in RTF schemes including the PDS, pensions and maternity benefits, providing gratuitous relief to NREGA workers and tea garden workers, the creation of a network of shelters for the urban homeless and prompting the government to revisit the poverty line.

The Supreme Court through its orders in this case not only laid out path-breaking jurisprudence (De Schutter, 2013), it also ensured that for most part of the decade, right to food issues became mainstream in the public discourse. Through its orders under this case the Supreme Court converted all food and employment schemes run by the central government into legal entitlements. It universalised food entitlement programmes for children (ICDS for children under six and the Mid Day Meal Scheme for all primary school children). The court also instituted the independent mechanism of Commissioners to the Supreme Court to monitor all food and employment programmes. Further, it prevented the reduction of the 'poverty ratios' from 36 per cent to 26 per cent for the purpose of allocation of BPL quotas and ensured the removal of the linkage between the poverty line and the food schemes.

The media reporting around the Supreme Court case, and the policy response that followed, created a situation where the government was forced to act under pressure of judicial orders and the public debate that ensued. An illustration of this is the reversal of state policy linking the official poverty line to targeting of food security schemes. During 2011–12, the Supreme Court made a series of observations (for example, orders dated 31.08.2008, 14.05.2011) on the low threshold of the poverty line (24 rupees per capita per day for rural areas and 32 rupees per capita per day at 2010 prices) set by the Planning Commission for targeting in food schemes, including the PDS. The low threshold of the poverty line was picked up by the print, electronic and social media and debated extensively for close to a month. It remained in the news for nearly six months<sup>17</sup> because of the repeated observations of the Supreme Court in the RTF case. This prompted the minister of rural development and the deputy chairperson of the Planning Commission to hold a press conference and issue a press statement de-linking the poverty line from the targeting of anti-poverty schemes (Government of India 2012).

The role of the Supreme Court in driving policy change was also acknowledged by a leading activist (TL) of the RTF campaign, who observed that the power of the Supreme Court managed to bring about a wide range of policy changes, including the ‘throwing out of the contractors in the ICDS, and getting *anganwadis* “on demand” in the ICDS.’

What is notable is that the *only* short-term intervention of the Indian government to liquidate food stocks through the PDS came about only after repeated directives from the Supreme Court, to release at least 5 million MTs of food grains from the stockholding to the PDS. Some excerpts from the Supreme Court’s order dated 14.05.2011 are presented below:

*Millions of tonnes of food grains are lying in [the] open for years because of inadequate storage capacity. Admittedly, about 55,000 of tonnes of food grains rotted in Punjab and Haryana. A very large chunk of food grains were destroyed in recent Punjab fire because the food grains were lying in open.*

*In this background, the 5 million tonnes of food grains which the Union of India has already undertaken to additionally allocate must go to the most vulnerable sections of our society and the parties are in total agreement about this proposition.*

*Looking to the enormity and gravity of the problem as a one-time measure, it is absolutely imperative in the larger public interest to direct the respondent – the Union of India – to reserve another 5 million tonnes of food grains for distribution to the 150 poorest districts or the extremely poor and vulnerable sections of our society. This additional 5 million tonnes of food grains would be over and above 5 million tonnes which the Union of India has already undertaken to allocate.*

*This order is made to ensure that no starvation deaths may take place and people*

17 For a few examples see the following links: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-09-22/india/30188949\\_1\\_bpl-list-bpl-cards-affidavit](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-09-22/india/30188949_1_bpl-list-bpl-cards-affidavit); [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-09-21/india/30183991\\_1\\_poverty-line-planning-commission-ample-proof](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-09-21/india/30183991_1_poverty-line-planning-commission-ample-proof); [www.ndtv.com/article/india/supreme-court-slams-centre-planning-commission-over-criteria-for-bpl-population-100058](http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/supreme-court-slams-centre-planning-commission-over-criteria-for-bpl-population-100058); [www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/is-the-bpl-census-correctly-structured-111081700029\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/is-the-bpl-census-correctly-structured-111081700029_1.html); [www.dnaindia.com/india/report\\_rs25-a-day-is-enough-for-roti-kapda-shiksha-thinks-planning-commission\\_158965](http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_rs25-a-day-is-enough-for-roti-kapda-shiksha-thinks-planning-commission_158965)

*can be saved from malnutrition as far as possible.*

The orders were made in the context of media reports of rotting food grains in the government godowns even as inflationary pressures on food continued unabated. The court appointed a committee headed by Justice (retired) D.P. Wadhwa to work out the modalities of the quantum of grains that needed to be distributed and the price at which they should be released, in consultation with the Indian government and the state governments.

The policy interventions through the Supreme Court also arose from the setting up of the Central Vigilance Committee on the PDS headed by Justice Wadhwa in 2006. The Committee visited 19 states and submitted detailed reports to the Supreme Court on the required reforms in the PDS in each of these states. A consolidated report (2013) was presented to the Supreme Court on the basket of specific measures required to reform the PDS. Many of these reforms were agreed to by the government and found their way into the NFSA.

In conclusion, a senior official (IT) of the food ministry observed, 'if not for the interventions of the Supreme Court, a lot of things would not have happened'.

In fact, the general view within the government was that given the interventionist approach of the Supreme Court, it would be best if parliament legislated on these matters once and for all and brought them back into the purview of the executive agencies.

### **8.3 Right to Food campaign's influence**

Simultaneously, the RTF campaign, which emerged initially out of the Supreme Court case, was also one of the principal agents of policy change in the reference period, including legislating for the NFSA.

As a member (TN) of the Planning Commission observed, 'the NFSA was not on anyone's agenda. It entered the agenda because of the movement.' Crediting the RTF campaign, he further added that

*a campaign which is only in the mode of a critique and in the mode of setting up of rights has its limitations – it must get engaged in the difficult task of reform ... it has to basically "work the state" ... the anger of the people have to be mobilised into a constructive direction.*

He cited the example of the RTF campaign taking up the difficult task of reforms of the PDS in Chhattisgarh as evidence of how the state can be worked to make programmes effective for the poor. He highlighted it as an example of, 'refining the moral economy – not just showing the moral bankruptcy of the state but showing how it can be reformed.'

While the role of the RTF campaign as a critical force for driving the policy changes was echoed by a range of policymakers interviewed for the study, at least one of the respondents, a member of the Planning Commission, felt that the RTF campaign did not raise the pitch

enough on high stockholding by the government even though it was in part responsible for the price volatility.

It was important for them to do so, because ‘...the prime minister used the high inflation as an excuse to cancel the NFSA during this period,’ he said. While the campaign saw the availability of cheap grains through the PDS and NFSA as one of the measures to tackle inflation, the prime minister and others argued that the increased government expenditure (and fiscal deficit) because of these schemes would only add to inflationary tendencies in the economy.

Where the campaign focused its energies and was successful to some extent was in influencing the contents of the NFSA. Through the four-year period, between 2009 and 2013, when the intention to pass legislation was announced and the Act was actually passed in parliament, the bill went through various drafts and changes. The campaign not only prepared an alternative draft<sup>18</sup> but at each stage through public demonstrations and mobilisation of a large number of people, press statements and conferences and meeting MPs and policymakers, it managed to highlight the gaps in the drafts and increase the pressure for expanding the scope of the bill. A study of the various changes in the drafts reflects the richness of the policy discourse during the reference period.

The initial draft of the NFSA brought out by the Empowered Group of Ministers (EGOM) for instance, restricted the benefits to 25kg of rice/wheat a month at 3 rupees per kg for a very small section of the population defined by the Planning Commission as below the poverty line in March 2010. This draft had no mention of any other entitlements. The National Advisory Council (NAC) expanded it to 46 per cent coverage in rural areas and 28 per cent in urban areas by October 2011 at 3, 2 and 1 rupee(s) for rice, wheat and millets respectively. The NAC also advocated provisioning 20kg of grains per household at 50 per cent of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) paid to farmers to the ‘general’ (erstwhile APL) category. The Rangarajan Committee set up by the prime minister to review the NAC recommendations reduced the general category entitlement to 2kg per person (roughly half the entitlement put forward by the NAC).

By the time the government brought out the second draft of the NFSA, which coincided with the public debates about the poverty line, high inflation and lobbying by the RTF campaign, the entitlements had been expanded to 35kg for the poorest of poor households, and a coverage of 67 per cent of all households, with 5kg per person per month, with highly subsidised food grains. This coverage was retained by the all-party Parliamentary Standing Committee which examined the draft legislation and sent it back to the government in January 2013. Eventually, despite the many efforts made to reduce the entitlements further, the NFSA saw an expanded coverage. Further, other entitlements related to children and women which were talked about initially only by the campaign and other civil society groups also found a place in the NFSA, albeit in a diluted form.

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<sup>18</sup> The alternative draft, and a number of petitions and letters from the campaign to the government in relation to the NFSA are available on [www.righttofoodindia.org](http://www.righttofoodindia.org)



## **8.4 PDS as an electoral issue – Reforms in the PDS**

By 2009, the right to food had been firmly mainstreamed in national discourse, and both the major political parties had included detailed sections in their election manifestos. There was a deepening of the discourse around the right to food, which found articulation not just in refining demands from civil society, but also a clearer definition by the political parties and the executive. The legislating of the NFSA (2013) was evidence of how far the discourse had moved toward inclusiveness. A comparison of the manifestos of the two major political parties both for the Assembly elections in 2008 and the national elections in 2009 shows that many of the demands which were met through the NFSA had already been articulated by them as promises before the elections. Both the major political parties had promised subsidised food grains and an expanded PDS. Notably, both the manifestos mention a universal PDS (more explicitly by the BJP), and the setting up of community kitchens for the urban poor. The Indian National Congress (INC) manifesto commits to the universalisation of the ICDS and for the first time mentions the enactment of a 'Right to Food Act'.

What is interesting is that both political parties gave detailed measures they had undertaken or would undertake if they came to power. These covered the entire gamut of issues from production of food grains, distribution, agricultural interventions to child malnutrition.

This focus on the PDS in the national elections came against the background of an improvement in the PDS in many states in the period preceding the 2009 elections and within the context of high food prices. Chhattisgarh is one of the states where state assembly elections were held in 2008, and was one where pioneering reforms in the PDS had taken place. It was widely acknowledged by all that this contributed largely to the chief minister and his party's popularity. The main reforms in Chhattisgarh were to expand coverage under the PDS, decrease prices and a host of implementation measures that increased transparency and accountability and reduced leakages. By doing this Chhattisgarh became the first state outside the 'southern' states to show that it was possible to improve the PDS and that it would also result in political gains.

This period saw a host of other states also then taking similar measures to expand the coverage under the PDS using their own revenues and announcing very low issue prices under the PDS (West Bengal was also one of these). It was therefore not surprising when the national elections saw the PDS becoming one of the main campaign planks of both the major parties.

The reforms in the PDS in some states and its success also contributed to the acceptability of continuing to use the PDS as a main policy lever at a time when there were many, especially in the media, who argued that it was nothing but a drain on resources because of its market-distorting effects and the high level of leakages in the system.

## 8.5 Media debate on responses to inflation

The sustained high rate of inflation has been a hot topic in the media throughout the study period. A brief review of the various opinion pieces in the newspapers gives an idea of different sides of this debate.

India has a very large media footprint with more than 82,000 newspapers in print and 825 private television channels (in addition to a whole host of state TV channels). In recent times, millions of enthusiastic followers of social media have transformed the media space in India with a large amount of content exclusively developed for the internet. With the battle for the 1.25 billion pairs of eyeballs intensifying, no aspect of life in India escapes media scrutiny. Of the social sector legislations enacted so far, in recent years, the NFSA was one of the most intensely debated.

The debate was often barely nuanced, focused excessively on the costs of the NFSA and the impending increase in the foods subsidy, and delivery issues pertaining to the PDS. This was despite the fact that the Act had created a fresh set of maternity entitlements and had consolidated a range of entitlements for children, pregnant women and nursing mothers.

One of the key factors influencing the media debate was the fact that food inflation was at all-time high for three decades and the middle classes, the most influential stakeholders in the media, were also affected, giving considerable traction to this issue.

The debate about the relationship between public food provisioning, and its various manifestations, on the one hand, and inflation on the other, was one the key subjects on the opinion pages. This has raged from time to time, whenever a strengthening of public welfare provisioning, in general, and food provisioning, in particular, has been envisaged. The proponents of the strengthening of public food provisioning (i.e. bolstering the PDS, food security legislation, minimum food guarantees, institutionalised realisation of the right to food) argue that public provisioning of food provides a much-needed buffer against deprivations and hardships caused by spiralling inflation. Particularly in the period from 2007 to 2009, which saw exceptionally high rates of food price inflation, it was argued by many that the most effective way of blunting the impact of the surge in market food prices was to make the subsidised public availability of food more extensive. On the other hand, there have been commentators who have argued that expanding public food provisioning would significantly aggravate inflation. This argument has, of course, in most cases been part of a larger argument against strengthening welfare provisioning.

The debate occurred, in particularly sharp terms, around the question of the enactment of the National Food Security Act 2013. Some commentators launched a sustained attack on the (then) proposed legislation in terms of its implications for the national economy, which they thought would be disastrous. According to Surjit Bhalla, for instance, the implementation of the then bill would take food subsidy costs to 3 per cent of the total GDP ('Manmonia's FSB: 3% of GDP', *The Indian Express*, 6 July 2013). That quantitative claim has been challenged by many. For a powerful criticism of Bhalla's estimate see the article by Ashok Kotwal and others ('Correct Costs of the Food Security Bill', *The Financial Express*, 2 September 2013). This, apart from placing an enormous burden on other areas of government expenditure,

would have massive macroeconomic implications, the exacerbation of inflation being one of them. R. Jagannathan, echoing this assessment, dubs the legislation a 'big political hoax' ('The Math Proves that Sonia's Food Security Bill is a Big Hoax', [www.firstbiz.com](http://www.firstbiz.com), 6 July 2013). The general linkage drawn between the legislation and inflation is that the former, by substantially increasing the strain on the exchequer, would expand deficit financing, which, of course, would generate its own inflationary pressures.

The Japanese investment firm Nomura Holdings argues in a report that there are several ways in which the Food Security Act would worsen inflation ('Food Security Bill: Cannot Implement This Policy, Says Nomura', *The Financial Express*, 4 July 2013). The argument is essentially three-fold. Firstly, the food security obligations of the government, under the legislation, would compel it to import food grains in drought years. This would exert an upward pressure on world prices, which in turn would worsen the inflationary situation in India. Secondly, enhanced procurement by the government would result in a shortage in the private sector, which would end up increasing price levels. Thirdly, the expanded provisioning of subsidised food would create increased disposable incomes, expanding consumption demand for other items, which again would have inflationary implications. D. Subbarao, the then Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), had maintained that like the MGNREGA, the Food Security Act too could fuel inflation ('Rural Wages Scheme, Food Security Bill Can Stoke Inflation', *The Indian Express*, 23 November 2011). He argued that the inflationary impact of the legislation would depend upon the extent to which it would raise demand relative to increases in supply. The extent of the contribution to inflation would depend upon the difference between the increase in procurement and the increase in available marketed surplus. The only way to avert the inflationary implications of the legislation was therefore, according to Subbarao, to increase agricultural productivity at a rapid pace. Further, the additional incomes generated by the scheme were a concern for him as well ('Food Security Plan to Put Pressure on Growth, Inflation: RBI', *The Economic Times*, 30 July 2013).

Ajay Modi argues that the legislation being cereal-centric would put an upward pressure on non-cereals like pulses and dairy products ('Feeding A Billion: Implementing the Food Security Ordinance Will be a Big Challenge', *Business Today*, 4 August 2013). The legislation would lead to a supply-demand mismatch between cereals and non-cereals since an increase in the consumption of the former would increase demand for the latter. The lack of a corresponding increase in the supply of non-cereals thus would result in a price rise. The situation would be further aggravated according to RBI's Technical Advisory Committee, by a shift in supply from non-cereals to cereals ('Food Security Bill to Aggravate Food Prices, say RBI Advisors', *The Business Standard*, 22 August 2013). Yashwant Sinha posits that the legislation would necessarily trigger inflation since the increased provisioning requirement would be substantially greater than the government's total ability to procure, forcing the latter to purchase in the open market, thereby increasing prices ('Food Security Bill is a Complete Disaster, says Yashwant Sinha', *The Hindu Business Line*, 3 June 2013).

The arguments at the other end of the spectrum have not received adequate attention in the public media. They have, however, been made compellingly. Anil Padmanabhan, for instance, argues that the claim that the legislation will worsen inflation turns the objective

situation on its head ('Five Myths about the Food Security Bill', *Livemint*, 1 September 2013). He points out that the principal reason why there are persistent food price rises is because while there are gargantuan grain reserves in public godowns, there are not enough grains in circulation in the market. Thus, the release of these uncirculated grains through the public delivery mechanism can only mean a reduction in the prices of grains, and not the other way around. The Food Security Act, therefore, can be a partial solution to the problem of food inflation. Bindu Shajan Perappadan writes that despite the fact that the public provisioning of food suffers from several ills – pilferage and other kinds of leakages, problems of quality etc. – it remains the only buffer that the poor have against spiralling prices of food and growing food insecurity, and this applies even for the urban poor ('The Common Man's Buffer Against Inflation', *The Hindu*, 30 April 2008). Thus, a strengthening of public provisioning is essential if the impact of inflation is to be offset even to a limited extent. Absence of public provisioning in an inflationary situation would mean starvation. Madhavi Cherian, arguing against switching to cash transfers, writes that the successful implementation of public food provisioning can effectively stabilise food prices – she cites the examples of the PDS in Punjab and Chhattisgarh to make this point ('Cash Transfers are Bad for Food Security', *The Hindu*, 11 May 2013).

C. P. Chandrasekhar argues that the economic liberalisation programme has undermined the grain procurement process and the food distribution network ('Making Sense of Rising Inflation', *The Hindu*, 21 April 2008). Liberalisation has enabled private traders including large multinational companies to corner stocks and render ineffective procurement and distribution mechanisms. This liberalisation-induced weakening of food provisioning has contributed significantly to food inflation. Another contributor to food inflation, as Chandrasekhar and Ghosh argue, has been the large quantum of food grain exports ('Changing Pattern of Food Inflation', *Hindu Business Line*, 24 June 2013). These exports essentially imply a net diversion from the network of provisioning, and hence blunt the downward pressure on prices that the latter can exert. Further, they argue that successful instances of public provisioning, for instance Tamil Nadu and Kerala where the PDS has been operating on a nearly universal basis, or Chhattisgarh and Orissa where it has been majorly expanded, testify that effective food provision can provide some form of protective buffer against spiralling price rises.

Among political parties there has of course been a recognition, direct or indirect, limited or pervasive, of the connection between strengthening public food provisioning and controlling inflation. Parties on the left of the political spectrum have drawn this linkage quite consistently. Thus, the CPI(M), along with other Left parties like the CPI, RSP and the Forward Bloc, have repeatedly insisted that universalisation of the PDS is an absolute necessity if inflation is to be checked at all ('Include All People Under PDS', says Karat', *The Hindu*, 5 August 2012). According to these parties the shift from universal to targeted PDS has rendered a vast majority of the people vulnerable to the depredations of inflation. Other major parties, too, have drawn this connection, though most often in a grudging, inadequate and inconsistent manner. In 2008, for instance, Prakash Javadekar, the then spokesperson of the BJP, alleged that the UPA government by failing to strengthen the PDS had allowed the food price rise to continue unabated ('Strengthen PDS, says BJP', *The Hindu*, 17 May 2008). The Congress, though its professed programmatic focus has been on what it sees as inefficiencies in the

delivery mechanism of the PDS, has from time to time identified the ills plaguing the PDS as one of the reasons the poor and the vulnerable have not been adequately shielded from price rises. For instance, countering allegations of incapacity in checking food inflation in 2010, Pranab Mukherjee, the then Finance Minister in the UPA government, retorted that a major problem in the overall strategy against inflation had been the failure of the state governments to run the PDS effectively ('Our Steps Curtailed Food Inflation: Pranab', *The Hindu*, 6 August 2010).

As is evident, while both sides had adequate space to present their arguments, the amount of newsprint devoted to either side was contingent on the ideological preference of the medium. The 'pink papers' for instance, almost exclusively focused on the cost implications. Public support in the media was overwhelmingly in support of the NFSA, though there were also equally persistent doubts about the ability of the government to deliver on its implementation.

## **8.6 Response in the states under study**

In Madhya Pradesh and to a limited extent in Bengal, the opposition parties played a critical role in highlighting the issues of malnutrition and hunger. Two very prominent leaders of the opposition parties – the Communist Party of India and the BJP were interviewed for the study and had diametrically opposing views on the policy responses made by the government.

The BJP national spokesperson thought that the NFSA was an important intervention but unlikely to give the Congress Party any electoral benefit, because 'how people vote is a million-dollar question and how a billion people vote, is more than a trillion-dollar question'. He noted that while many people in India 'cast their vote, many more will vote their caste' suggesting that the elections would continue to be contested on social cleavages rather than issues. He pointed out that the problem of hunger was no longer as severe as it was being made out to be, yet he admitted that sometimes giving 'individual benefits to the people' does influence the behaviour of voters. He also felt that the negative impact of food inflation would outweigh any potential positive outcomes of the legislation of the NFSA.

While both the senior opposition figures were very critical of the government's food management policies, the leader of the Communist Party felt that the NFSA did not go far enough as a policy response to the ongoing hunger crisis and that more ought to be done.

The institutional response to the popular mobilisation around food in the two states we examined was very different. In Madhya Pradesh, the response was two-fold: the creation of a high-level structure to converge action around malnutrition in the form of an inter-departmental 'mission' for child health and nutrition set up under the leadership of the chief minister. The creation of the Atal Bal Mission was far more nuanced and comprehensive, looking at aspects of production and distribution of food grains as well as the social determinants of malnutrition, including water and sanitation, decentralisation and convergence between the services of various ministries like Women and Child Development, Health and Family Welfare, and Rural Development and Panchayati Raj. A comparison of the manifestos of

the two major political parties in Madhya Pradesh – the ruling BJP and the Congress Party – clearly shows that malnutrition and the right to food had emerged as dominant concerns.

During this period, the government of Madhya Pradesh also expanded the number of beneficiaries who would get subsidies under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) and decreased the price of wheat to 2 rupees for all BPL cardholders. Issues pertaining to the TPDS were aggressively raised in the state assembly by the opposition and simultaneously raised by the state government with the government of India. This is evident from the letters written by the chief minister of the state to both the prime minister and the central minister of the Ministry of Food, Consumers Affairs and Public Distribution.

In West Bengal, the policy response was primarily the provisioning of a state subsidy to reduce the prices of rice and wheat available to families living below the official poverty line. But this was *not* so much an immediate response to the riots as it was to the state elections, which were less than 100 days away when the scheme was announced. A senior bureaucrat (IT) of the food ministry interviewed for the study pinned the blame for the crisis in West Bengal firmly on local factors and corruption in the state machinery and not on the reduction of the APL quota for the state. He argued that the reduction in the quantity of wheat supplied could not be the sole factor precipitating the riots there. His argument was that since Bengal was not primarily a wheat-consuming state, much of the APL wheat that was allocated there was being leaked into the open market and diverted to neighbouring countries illegally. He further attributed the crisis there to the private entities in the PDS network who are more amenable to large-scale hoarding:

*In almost all other states, there is a state government entity which picks up food grains from FCI [Food Corporation of India] godowns and that entity keeps the food grains in their own godowns and then distributes it to fair price shops. In both Kerala and West Bengal the job of a wholeseller is done by private people. They are called authorised wholesale dealers. Ironically, in both the left-ruled states it is the private dealers who lift the grains from FCI. So we have tried and failed to persuade the states to set up their own corporations and do this work.'*

This was also the analysis of the Supreme Court Commissioners in their interventions with the government of West Bengal. Yet this analysis is not shared either by the bureaucracy or the political class in West Bengal who still attribute the crisis to the inflationary trends in food grains and therefore deem appropriate the intervention that was made to reduce BPL prices in the PDS. At the time of the study, the situation with the private wholesalers remained unchanged in West Bengal and little by way of structural reform had been undertaken.

Thus, the policy response in West Bengal focused on a populist price intervention that was easier to undertake rather than the more difficult route of structural change in the way the PDS is managed.

As a member (TN) of the Planning Commission put it,

*Because of a badly functioning PDS and even though we have ICDS, MDM, they have failed to provide the kind of food security that people need – right instruments in*

*place, but not reaching people, in terms of ensuring people's participation.*

The frustration with the lack of reforms was also echoed by a senior bureaucrat (IT) of the Food Ministry, who felt that

*...in North Indian States and Eastern India the maladies of PDS have continued from before and there was no real effort to reform the PDS. While allocations kept going up, there was no real reform in the correct identification of beneficiaries or delivery of food grains or better running of PDS shops.*

Needless to say, despite the reduction of BPL prices, the winds of '*poribortan*'<sup>19</sup> swept the ruling Left Front government from power.

What is notable are the differences at many levels in the policy responses in both the reference states. Unsurprisingly, the policy response was driven by the underlying nature of the problem and its popular articulation. In Bengal, the riots were essentially 'ration' riots as detailed in an earlier section and linked more directly to the PDS. The response therefore was restricted to policy changes *only* in the PDS. In Madhya Pradesh, the popular mobilisation was around broad food security issues and specifically malnutrition, so the policy response was appropriately larger and more institutional.

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<sup>19</sup> Poriborton in Bengali translates into "Change". This was the slogan used by all the groups opposing the ruling Left Front government

## 9. ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

We have now seen some of the contours of popular mobilisation and policy responses in relation to food security (including issues of price rises) in India between 2007 and 2011. How should one interpret the trajectories that we observe in the field, policy and activist interviews, and media reportage? Before a discussion of the themes that emerge, certain issues need to be highlighted.

First although our study covers the period between 2007–11 (the period of global food price volatility), the riots and (related) responses we report have to be located within a longer trajectory of state initiatives, popular mobilisations and acts of nature (e.g. drought, bumper harvests etc.). Pulling out one short period in which inflation has peaked, and attributing responses to popular mobilisation during that period would miss the complexities of the broader picture. Issues such as public debates around the setting of the poverty line, the Right to Food case that started in 2001 and the Supreme Court orders related to that case, memories of famine and hunger from earlier periods including the Bengal famine of 1943, all form part of the public imagination of both those mobilising as well as those responding to food insecurity of the poorest. Further, mobilisation and responses have happened in parallel, through engagement and incremental iteration over time culminating in the sea change signified by the passage of the NFSA in 2013. Over the period of time under consideration and beyond it, there has been an overall improvement in the implementation of food schemes across the country (Drèze and Khera 2014; Himanshu and Sen 2011; Khera 2011a, 2011b; Drèze and Khera 2010).

Second, even over the longer trajectory, while one might argue that popular mobilisation including the Right to Food campaign has evoked accountability for hunger in the form of passing the RTF Act, this is a story that is larger than the popular mobilisation in response to food price inflation. The broader environment of the decades starting in the 2000s has been one where socioeconomic entitlements of all kinds are being demanded as well as accepted as legitimate by the state (as reflected by the legislating of entitlements related to the right to education, right to work, right to information etc.). In this context, the responsiveness of the state in the form of the Right to Food Act is part of the larger shift towards a more rights-based, accountable and transparent state.

Despite these bigger trends, there are some clear patterns that can be discerned from the research. We present these below organised around the key themes of the study: food price inflation, moral economy, political opportunity structure, popular mobilisation and state response.

### 9.1 *Food price inflation*

In contrast to the other countries in this research, inflation in India has not simply followed global trends; rather the pattern is that Indian prices have increased with global prices and



maintained a steady rise even when global prices have dropped. Because of these steady increases, inflation has assumed the character of a continuous background hum, rather than provoking responses at periods of rapid rises.<sup>20</sup> Global food prices, while influencing domestic food prices, have not translated into domestic popular action quite in the same sporadic spikes as in some of our other countries.

While inflation, particularly food price inflation, is and was an issue during the 2000s, the debates around inflation and related responses have not been framed in terms of the debate around hunger and malnutrition, but around macroeconomic issues such as growth, fiscal deficits and interest rates. The Right to Food campaign for its part did not explicitly link inflation with food security. Rather, when the government decided to import Australian wheat to meet the needs of the nation, there was opposition due to the poor quality and appearance of the wheat although it was adequate nutritionally.<sup>21</sup>

As we saw earlier, observations from fieldwork also suggest that food price inflation issues were linked to a range of other rises in the cost of living and to declining access to local food sources such as farming, forests etc. In Madhya Pradesh, in particular, our focus group discussions were largely located in tribal areas where diminishing self-sufficiency was resulting in outward migration. In West Bengal, where due to inflation wheat prices in the market which were usually lower than market prices, rose rapidly resulting in a growing demand for PDS wheat. The non-availability caused by the imposition of quotas based on the previous year's uptake, (or corruption), resulted in widespread dissatisfaction that as we saw led to the protests. Thus in both cases, while general inflation was part of the story, there was no direct and immediate link between food price volatility (FPV) and popular mobilisation, at least in the case of Madhya Pradesh.

## 9.2 Moral economy

The research aimed to uncover whether popular mobilisation was a response to ruptures in the moral economy of food security. Here, following Hossain and Kalita (2014), we use moral economy as a framework for the discussion of concepts of fairness, justice and solidarity. Thus the protests in Madhya Pradesh, or the riots in West Bengal, or even the broader Right to Food campaign activities have to be seen in the light of what expectations people had of their relationships with the landed elite, the community more broadly and the state. Two threads in this respect can be discerned. The first relates to the erosion of patronage ties with landlords and other community elites. While such expectations of ensuring food security have been a key feature of rural India in the past, they are, as we found in our field sites, rapidly disappearing. With declining access to traditional products from the forests, the de-linking of employment and social security due to migration, the changing nature of employment and more recently the advent of the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), the roots of popular mobilisation can no longer be tied to the moral economy of elites and landlords.

The second is that moral economy (and related expectations) in rural India have to be seen

20 With some exceptions as was the case with the recent rise in the price of onions in 2013.

21 Personal interview, Abhijit Sen, 17 September 2013.

in a context in which the constitution has within it accepted a 'right to life' which has been drawn upon to make arguments in a variety of progressive cases, including the Supreme Court Right to Food case. Past histories of famine (including the Bengal famine), and the fact that in India hunger has always been an emotional and political issue, suggests that mobilisation against hunger and malnutrition, no matter what form it takes, is more naturally directed against the state. The recent heated debate about definitions of the poverty line illustrates the extent to which poverty, (including food security) and related relief programmes are high-stake issues. While exploitative landlords have not disappeared in rural India, what we observe is that their hold has weakened in many parts of the country, and seemingly in contradiction, it is easier to direct anger against a 'faceless' anonymous state rather than an identifiable local personage who might subject one to reprisal. In other words, for the most part, patronage ties have been replaced by electoral accountabilities. This is reinforced by the fact that civil society mobilisation, under the auspices of the RTF campaign has managed to create an environment where the state is seen as the solution to these issues. The state is the first port of call in contexts of hunger.

In this widely held view of the state's responsibility to address food insecurity, the role of the long-standing PDS looms large. The PDS, by providing subsidised basic grains and fuel (even when functioning poorly), is viewed as the institution through which food security is ensured. This is not only in the eyes of the poor, but also in the perceptions of the state, for whom interventions in food prices has been limited (e.g. open market sale of procured grain and anti-hoarding policies). The PDS has sown the seed for a growing acceptance of a 'right to food' whose duty bearer is the state.

These themes emerged both from our national-level interviews and state field studies. In Madhya Pradesh, social (and economic) cleavages in the villages we looked at lie between the landed and the landless. Although awareness of state presence appeared to be relatively recent, and partly an outcome of the mobilisation work by the AAM, there has been little expectation of patronage ties in the recent past (dependence on landlords ended at least two decades ago). Rather, prior to the AAM's interventions, tribal populations were left in a vacuum, squeezed between large-scale economic changes that removed traditional sources of security, and the absence of the (albeit limited) welfare state. The AAM was able to use moral economy arguments of state responsibility to mobilise the poorest groups and demand accountability from the state for the failure of state institutions such as ICDS and the PDS.

In West Bengal by contrast, social cleavages are more political than economic, in terms of those supporting the CPM and the rest. Shaped by the history of the Left movement and the Left Front government that remained in power from 1977 to 2011, the moral economy has been always framed by expectations of the state. The PDS, which was the focus of the riots, had worked relatively well in providing for the poorest (BPL quota) as well as providing the allocated quotas of rice, the staple food. The problems in 2007–8, as we saw, were in the provision of wheat grains for those above the poverty line (APL), leading to the spontaneous protests.

However, while uncovering the moral economy of popular mobilisation in India tells us something about expectations and motivations, it does not say much about the strategies

and substance of mobilisation. We turn to these questions next.

### ***9.3 Political opportunity structures***

Popular grievances against food insecurity have prevailed for a long time in rural India. But when do feelings of injustice, unfairness and exploitation become intolerable enough to provoke action? In political science language, what were the political opportunity structures that catalysed action? Our research offers interesting and contrasting insights into this question.

The predominant features that have enabled popular mobilisation are national. First, the opening up of the Indian economy in the early 1990s and the adoption of neo-liberal policies has consistently invoked civil society protests against the elevation of private interests before public ones (for example, protests against land appropriation for Special Economic Zones). Rising food prices have been viewed as part of the broader impacts of liberalisation. Second, as alluded to earlier, the precedent of state obligations to protect the poorest had been well-established since the early 1960s in the case of food security. Third, the 2004 elections in which the Congress-led UPA unexpectedly won, opened the door to the possibilities for several social protection policies. The National Advisory Council (formed soon after) under the chairpersonship of Sonia Gandhi had political clout, and with a membership consisting of several representatives of social movements, was able to support several pieces of progressive legislation including the NREGA, the Forest Rights Act and the Right to Information Act. The impact of these was viewed as critical to the support that the Congress-led UPA received in the subsequent 2009 elections, in which the PDS became a political issue. Several state governments reduced PDS prices and the NSFA appeared in the election manifesto of many parties. Moreover, the passing of orders by the Supreme Court in the Right to Food case, compelling the government to expand and improve food-related programmes such as the midday meal, was seen by many within government as an overstepping of the court's mandate into governance issues. A Right to Food Act was thus seen as placing policy and implementation back into the legislative sphere: its rightful place.

These larger national factors played an important part in the Madhya Pradesh story. The Supreme Court case had highlighted the need to address child nutrition issues through orders on the midday meal scheme and the ICDS (through orders in 2001, 2004 and 2006). Moreover, the then latest NFHS data (NFHS-3 released in December 2006) showed the shameful situation of child malnutrition in the country. The Right to Food campaign also started to focus more on child malnutrition (along with earlier issues of hunger and starvation) with the release of a report on children under six (FOCUS 2006). In this context, the work of the AAM became increasingly oriented to malnutrition, mobilising the poor to demand better nutrition especially through government programmes.

By contrast, we see how the West Bengal riots run against the general narrative exemplified by Madhya Pradesh. Although the Right to Food campaign was active in the state (and even was instrumental in mobilising people around the PDS), the riots themselves had responded to the opportunities opened up the Singur/Nandigram actions and the prevailing

mood of '*poribortan*.' For the first time, villagers in rural Bengal, who had been for some time dissatisfied with the stranglehold of the Left Front on all aspects of rural development, felt that the party was weakening and there was the possibility of standing up to tyranny without fearing total repression. The air was ripe for protest. At the same time, this was the year in which inflation rose significantly making the PDS price of wheat more attractive than the market price (previously the PDS price had been just slightly below or at par with the market price, making it unappealing). Simultaneously, the central government decided to restrict the state entitlements to PDS grain to the average utilisation by states in the past three years. As the state had not been using its full quota of wheat for reasons explained above, the effective PDS quota was slashed, leaving the state in a situation of very high demand and much reduced supply. The growing desperation of people in the face of high prices, and suspecting corruption, led them to spontaneously demand that ration shop owners replenish the supplies they had diverted to the open market or refund villagers.

Thus while access to food formed part of the causes of mobilisation, political opportunities (often unpredictable) opened up new spaces for action that were perceived as those with high potential for pushing through change. In the next section, we reflect on who rioted or mobilised and what strategies they used in their activism.

## 9.4 Popular mobilisation

We have already alluded to the different forms that popular mobilisation took in the two states – riots in one vs. protests and demands in the other. As we saw, the case of Madhya Pradesh is more representative of what was happening to a greater or lesser extent throughout the country and we pay more attention to it here. The strategies and tactics used there were set in the broader environment where socioeconomic rights of all kinds were being accepted as legitimate by the state (including right to education, work etc.) and strategies were commonly understood and shared across movements.

Thus, in Madhya Pradesh, where the mobilisation has been driven by the AAM, the grassroots group linked to higher levels in the Right to Food campaign, the mobilisation itself shows similarities with national strategies. Supreme Court orders were disseminated by the state-level Right to Food campaign to the AAM, which used them in their mobilisation strategies. This networked nature of the AAM gave it power well above its miniscule organisational base. The local media (linked to and feeding the national media) were heavily involved in highlighting malnutrition and making it a political issue as evidenced in the state assembly debates. Further, in Madhya Pradesh, while individual PDS shops might have been closely linked to the patronage of particular political leaders, there was no state-wide capture of the PDS system by any political party, so mobilisation for food security and malnutrition was not viewed as being against any particular political parties. The AAM campaigns addressed all political parties in an effort to highlight the demands of the people, the main ones being access to and expansion of services related to food and malnutrition. The mobilisational repertoires were common ones: of *dharnas*, petitions, *jan sunwais* (first popularised by the MKSS in Rajasthan) and rallies.

In West Bengal, as we argued, mobilisation was spontaneous, in response to a perceived injustice and corruption within the PDS system. There were no obvious leaders of the mobilisation, and the protesters consisted largely of those who were 'above the poverty line', mainly men. The protest repertoire included widely accepted actions of protest including stone-pelting, name-calling and '*gheraos*' (trapping) resulting in police action and the suicide of one ration shop owner. The news of the protests seems to have spread like wildfire, with other aggrieved villages also participating in ration riots in their locations. Most observers and interviewees agreed that there was no organisation or political party behind the riots, rather the atmosphere of political challenge which had already been created by the Nandigram/Singur incidents catalysed the villagers who were fed up of being unable to raise their voice against the CPM-controlled network of ration shop dealers. The then opposition party (TMC) only later capitalised on the opportunity to politicise the issue in order to build its own party base.

## **9.5 Policy response**

During (and slightly after) the period of the study, there was a lot of policy action around food prices and food security. However, would it be possible to attribute it all to popular mobilisation? Undoubtedly not. We have to understand policy response during this period as coinciding with the prevailing public debate on inflation and world food prices (and the related debate on the poverty line), the pressures exerted by the Right to Food campaign, the debates on the legislation of the National Food Security Act and the discussions in national media around the high levels of malnutrition in the country. In addition, 2009 was an election year during which issues of food had become quite salient, as witnessed by the presence of commitments to food security in all political party manifestos. Moreover, as we argued earlier, the whole period was characterised by the rise of a rights discourse, where socioeconomic rights were being increasingly accepted as part of real policy options.

Some features of the perceptions of policymakers around these issues are of relevance. Our interviews suggested that state officials do not view themselves as highly constrained by global markets, partly because they operate a large-scale procurement programme, and partly because India's size and food production partially insulates it from world markets. Moreover, some of the responses in the form of improvements in entitlement programmes, as we have seen, were results of an activist Supreme Court forcing a recalcitrant government to act. One has to note however, that policy responses driven by Supreme Court orders do not automatically get translated into action at the grassroots – they have to be used and activated by campaign groups on the ground to mobilise people and make accountability demands. What some policymakers seem to argue is that the RTF campaign's mobilising was perceived as more acceptable to the bureaucracy because RTF offered 'solutions' and worked on details of programmes (interviews with BN and TN, however these responses might be coloured by our interviewer's positionality).

In Madhya Pradesh, the responses were in the form of improvements in ICDS, the creation of nutrition rehabilitation centres and the better functioning of the PDS. These improvements were not seen just in the districts (and villages) where the AAM worked. But because of

the networked nature of campaigning (and the relevant media coverage) the response was institutional and state-wide. These reasons suggest that the progressive responses by the state in Madhya Pradesh are also more sustainable. By contrast in West Bengal, although there was some immediate response to the riots, in that some ration dealers paid stolen money back, or compensated villagers for the lack of availability of wheat, and some dealers were suspended, there were few institutional responses – the riots did not trigger state-wide improvements to the PDS. Again, although the state later announced the distribution of 2 rupees of rice, this was not really a response to the riots, but in preparation for the forthcoming elections that promised to be highly contested. Neither did the opposition party (TNC), which used the mobilisation for its own political ambitions, offer policy changes in the PDS or other related food security programmes.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The Indian case shows the variations in space and time, both of rising food prices and policy responses – one cannot view the Indian narrative as a single story. However, some broad contours can be drawn – to different degrees, citizens place accountability for hunger squarely at the doorstep of the state and generally state officials acknowledge this responsibility. Popular mobilisation has taken place in India against rising food prices (despite little food price volatility) in varying forms; and ultimately some institutionalisation of such accountability has occurred through the passage of the NFSA. What remains to be seen is the extent to which mobilisation now turns to implementation of the Act, and the range of state responses to such mobilisation given the inevitable unevenness in implementation.

What seems clear in the Indian story is that unlike the other countries in this study, food price inflation was not the direct cause of popular mobilisation (or indeed of ruptures in moral economy) – both because of the nature of inflation and also the cushioning effect of welfare schemes. One question that arises is whether the welfare schemes that are relatively limited in their transformative content are doing just enough to suppress protests.

Our two cases illustrate these issues, through contrasting content and responses to popular mobilisation. These case studies highlight the different political opportunity structures conducive to popular mobilisation – a general mood for change and disenchantment with the ruling party on the one hand and in the other case the intervention by an external agency that brought in ideas of rights and state responsibility. This was in turn influenced by its participation in a larger rights-based campaign. Majhgawan in Madhya Pradesh was so marginalised for so long, there was no state at all – and the expectations were so low – that there was no spontaneous mobilisation in spite of extremely poor conditions of living. On the other hand in West Bengal, because of the politicisation and high levels of awareness of rights, the local state is forced to be more accountable. State response has also been different in different cases – something that cannot be attributed to popular mobilisation alone.

The responses have to be understood in the prevailing political context of the time – the forthcoming state elections in West Bengal, and the location of the local mobilisation within the larger network of the Right to Food campaign in Madhya Pradesh. In Bengal, as we have shown, the riots were part of a larger continuum of political action that had been sparked off due to the growing disenchantment against the Left Front government which had already manifested itself in the struggles for land during that period. What is therefore surprising is that the food riots in Bengal were met with the same inaction that the land struggles had met before it. The last-minute increase in the entitlements by a reduction in prices, on the eve of the state elections, was way too little too late to make any difference whatsoever to the electoral fortunes of the incumbent government. The role of the Right to Food campaign in Bengal in the popular mobilisation on food was overshadowed by that played by the larger political forces in operation by then. On the other hand, the campaign had a more sustained role in creating awareness and sustaining a campaign over the years, both in the media and

on the ground in Madhya Pradesh.

One might argue that state responses are conditioned by state capacity: thus the differences in responses in the two states might be reflecting the differences in state capacity. However, given that state capacities themselves are politically constituted (or not, see Mathew and Moore 2011), such an interpretation would only present part of the picture. The party political context as well as ongoing mobilisations around issues of food security in each state led to the particularities of the problems and the responses we saw.

Does this mean that no generalisations can be drawn from these two cases and the national context within which they are located? This is not the argument we make. What we suggest is that these two cases represent two extremes of the spectrum of mobilisation in India – from riots to relatively successful grassroots mobilisation around the right to food – and looking at the extremes can help us understand the conditions that enable accountability for hunger to be institutionalised. Our research suggests that these conditions include the following: strong networks that link national policy interfaces with grassroots groups, thus increasing both legitimacy and strength at the national and local levels; an active strategic use of the media; close and regular interactions between national and subnational structures of governments; and a framing of demands in terms of a moral ‘right to food.’



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# ANNEX I: SEARCH TERMS FOR MEDIA CATALOGUE

- Food riots
- Vandalism
- Protest
- Demonstration
- Inflation
- Crisis
- Public meeting
- Dharna
- Rally
- Hunger
- Starvation
- Occupy
- Gherao
- RTF
- National Food Security Bill/NFSB
- PDS
- Ration
- Public hearing
- Jan Sunwai
- Petition
- Social Audit
- BPL/Poverty line

The above terms in combination with food/cost of living/inflation were searched. The catalogue included only events and no general interest or opinion pieces.

# ANNEX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDES FOR POLICYMAKERS AND ACTIVIST LEADERS

## Tool for activists' interview

People who have led protests/riots/campaigns at the local and national levels

### Section I: Background of respondent

- Name, age, sex
- Occupation
- History of association with the movement/campaign/activism
- Nature of association with above

### Section II: Food inflation and its impact

- What is the situation of hunger and malnutrition in the country?
- What is the situation of access to food for different groups? Which are the vulnerable groups?
- What has been the nature of food inflation in your country in the period 2007–11?
- Has it in any way been different/similar from other periods since the country's independence? How?
- Which are the groups that have been more affected by food inflation?
- In what way have these groups been affected?
- What have been the coping strategies of people in response to food inflation?
- Would you say there was/is a food crisis (in the recent past)? Explain.

### Section III: Public response

- Did the food inflation result in any popular mobilisation around it?
- What kind of mobilisation? What forms of action were undertaken?
- Who were the people who participated in these actions? How were they mobilised? What were the challenges faced in mobilising people? Was it spontaneous?
- Were the most-affected people part of this mobilisation? If not, why not?
- What triggered the actions?
- Who provided leadership for the actions?

## ANNEX 3: AAM'S PARTICIPATION IN EVENTS

S. No.	Date	Venue	Event	Organiser	Agenda	Speakers	Attendance count (approx.)	Sponsor/Support	Remarks
1	12/02/2007	Kolan Mohalla, Majhgawan	Zonal meeting	AAM	Corruption in govt. schemes; FRA, 2006	Bandelal Kol (Chitehara), Mohd. Shakir Hasan, Hiralal Mawasi, Prateek and Anand	32		
2	21/12/2007	Pado	Jan Sunwai	AAM	MNREGA, Pension, PDS	M.P. Ganesh Singh, C.O. Block, D. O. Aadim Janjati Dept., SDM, NavBharat Editor Sanjay Payasi	300		Public hearing on issues of 10 villages
3	02/12/2008	Majhgawan Block grounds	NAFREE JanHaq Yatra	AAM	Caste-ism, patriarchy, equity in education, land rights, tribal development	Nasreen (NAFREE)	600	CRY	60 villages' participation followed by a press conference in Satna
4	05/01/2008	Satna District Headquarter	Protest	AAM	ICDS, livelihood, land and drinking water	CRY Delhi, Rajesh Dubey (Samajvadi Party), Mohd. Shakir (BSP)	2,000		Petition submitted to Tehsildar

5	24/08/2008	Majhgawan Block grounds	Dalit Adivasi Mahasammelan	AAM	Malnutrition child deaths, MNREGA malfunctioning, ICDS issues, PDS ration cards, corruption in drought relief programme	Daddu Prasad (BSP Cabinet Minister in U.P.), Gopal Bhai (Akhil Bhartiya Samaj Seva Sansthan), Tijiya Kol (Mahila Sarpanch, Baraha Naugawan), Bandelal Kol (Chitehara), Smt. Chunki Kol (Barua), Kumari Savita Saket (Badha), Shuvkailash Mawasi (Majhgawan), Prashant Dubey (Vikas Samvad, Bhopal), Anand and Prateek	10,000	Local contribution	100 villages mobilised
6	26/08/2008	Gandhi Chowk, Satna	Sarva-Dharma Prarthana	AAM	Condolence meeting for children who died of malnutrition		100		Some families whose children died along with other political leaders and media figures present; speakers of different religions

7	16/10/2008	Gandhi Bhawan, Bhopal	World Food Day	Vikas Samvad	Food security, hunger and malnutrition		8/500	Vikas Samvad	4 mothers of child victims of malnutrition
8	12/10/2008	Kolan Mohalla, Majhgawan	Manav Adhikar Divas Goshthi	AAM	PDS, IDS, ICDS, primary health and land rights	Local people and leaders	150		Charter of demands submitted to DC and MLA Chitrakoot Prem Singh
9	01/09/2009	Majhgawan Block Headquarter	Aaamaran Anshan	Lalpur Padri Gram Panchayat	Corruption in digging of 20 wells		64	AAM supported	Lalpur Padri Panchayat people participated in a 2-day hunger strike
10	16/01/2009	Bhopal	Workshop on FRA	Vikas Samvad	FRA	FRA Committee President from 2 villages and other higher level officials	2		
11	23/01/2009	Satna	Baghelkhan Malnutrition Coordination meeting	AAM	Generating regional awareness on malnutrition and spreading the campaign to other adjoining districts		22	CRY	Baghelkhand region districts tried to form an alliance on malnutrition issues; only Satna and Rewa people participated

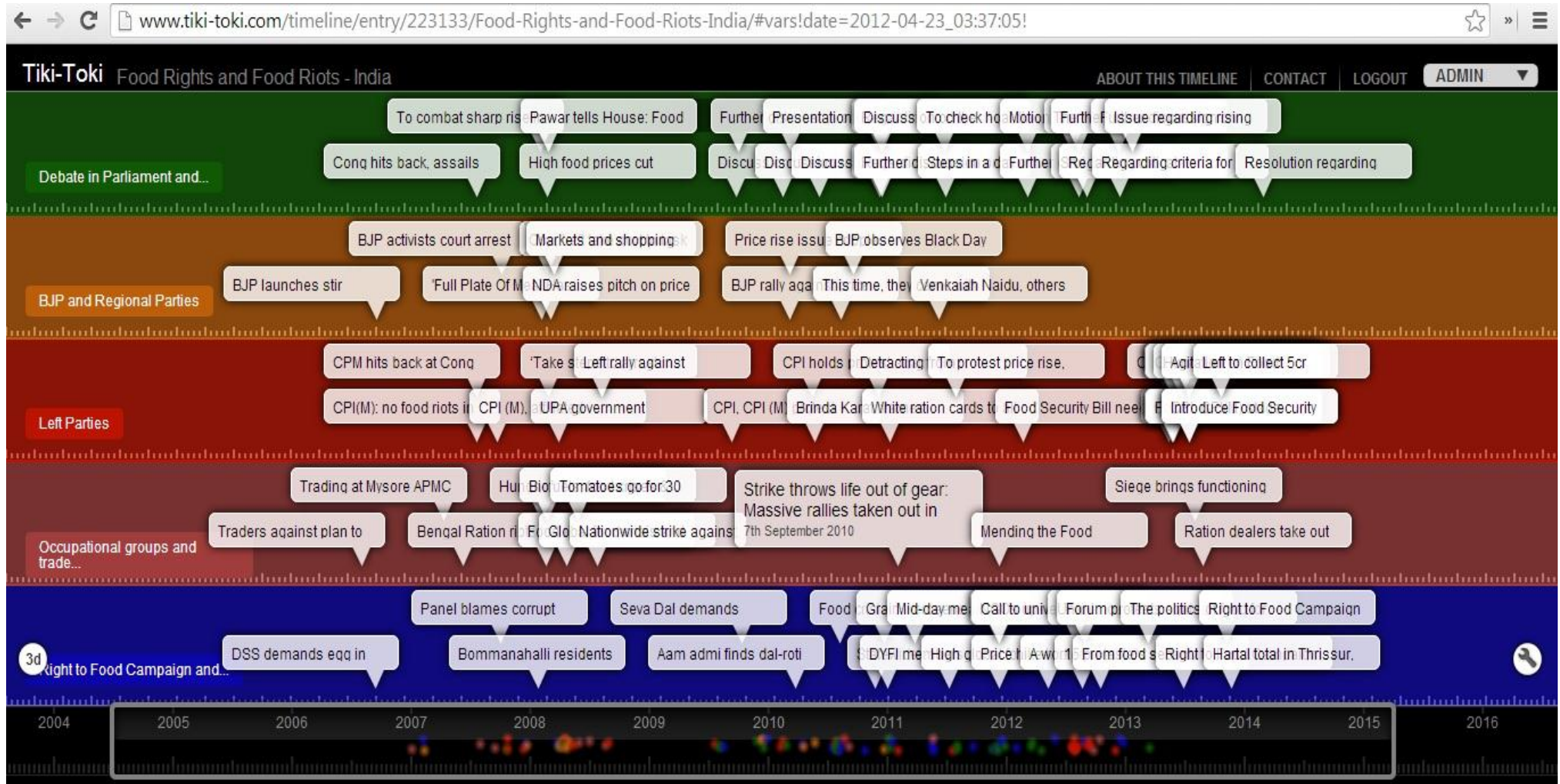


12	02/10/2009	Tehsil Headquarter, Majhgawan	Jan Sunwai	NCPCR	Malnutrition	Dr. Shanta Sinha, Dr. Vandana Prasad, Ms. Deepa Dikshit, Ms. Swathi Narayan (NCPCR); Commissioners of NREGA and ICDS also came from Bhopal; DC, SP and other district officials; Vikas Samvad members	1,500	CRY and local administration	
13	03/08/2009	AAM Office, Majhgawan	Women's Day Seminar	AAM	Women's issues: domestic violence	Local people and leaders particulalrly women; Smt. Vandana Dohar (Nayagaon), Kumari Komal (Milia), Smt. Rataniya (Duduar), Smt. Sarmaniya and Smt. Rajabai (Baraha Mawan)	100		
14	22/05/2009	Rewa	RTF Workshop (Rewa Region)	MP Lok Sanghash Sajha Manch, Bhopal	Review of the 9 schemes being monitored under the Supreme Court Commissioners on RTF	Rajesh Bhadauriya (MPLSSM), Pramod Pradhan (CRY), along with local leaders	65/200	MPLSSM	Participation from 21 villages of Majhgawan; report on 20 villages of Majhgawan presented by AAM

15	25-27/04/2009	Bhopal	Child Rights Perspective Building Workshop	MPLSSM	Awareness on child rights		4 out of 40	MPLSSM	4 people from communities participated
16	24/04/2009	AAM Office, Majhgawan	2009 LS Elections Child Rights Manifesto Consultation	MPLSSM	Discussion on the manifesto on child rights prepared by MPLSSM for the upcoming Lok Sabha Elections		42		People from 19 villages participated
17	17/08/2009	Jawa Block, Rewa	Regional Alliance Meeting	MPLSSM	Food security, education and MNREGA	Pramod Pradhan (CRY)	12 out of 50		12 people from Majhgawan
18	18/11/2009	Regional Headquarters, Rewa	Child Rights Day	CRY	Child care and education related laws were discussed	Pramod Pradhan (CRY)	60/150		
19	11/07/2009	Satna	Meeting	RTF, MP	Food Security Act (When Sachin was appointed the State Advisor in MP to the SC Commissioner)	Sachin (Vikas Samvad)	7 out of 35		
20	26/11/2009	Delhi	National Protest	RTF	Food Security Act		30/4,000		

21	05/01/2010	Tehsil Headquarter, Majhgawan	Protest	AAM	Schemes being monitored by the RTF campaign discussed for their implementation; FRA implementation and malnutrition deaths	Rajesh Bhadauriya (MPLSSM) and activists from Rewa along with local leaders including district Panchayat President Mewalal Bharti	700		25 villages participated submitting a 13-page charter of demands to the Tehsildar
22	28-29/7-2010	Chitrakoot	Orientation Meeting	MPLSSM	Malnutrition issues discussed		4 out of 30		
23	31/7/2010-01/8/2010	Bhopal	State level Jan Sunwai	NCPCR	Malnutrition victims' families		2		2 families of child victims of malnutrition deaths
24	20-22/9/2010	Bhopal	Workshop	MPLSSM	RTF and RTE		3 out of 40		
25	22-23/04/2011	Satna	Workshop	MPLSSM	Food Security Act, PDS issues and hunger	Pramod and Archana (CRY); Vibha (MPLSSM)	10 out 30		
26	16/04/2011	Tehsil Headquarter, Majhgawan	Jan Sunwai	AAM	'nutrition', food security, livelihood and drinking water	Sachin (Vikas Samvad), SDM, CEO, Project Officer- ICDS and other officials from local administration	600	CRY	From 50 villages

# ANNEX 4: RESULTS OF THE POLITICAL EVENT CATALOGUE – TIKI TOKI



2009

Debate in Parliament and...

BJP and Regional Parties

Left Parties

Occupational groups and trade...

Right to Food Campaign and...

26th November 2009  
Discussion regarding rise in prices of essential commodities.

17th December 2009  
Presentation of the Bill...

14th December 2009  
BJP rally against price rise

16th December 2009  
Price rise issue

21st April 2010  
Regarding notices of Motion for Adjournment to discuss the price increase

This time, they came with garlands of...

14th February 2010  
CPI holds protest against price rise

20th July 2010  
Detracting from entitlements: Brinda Karat

7th September 2010  
Massive rallies in out in Kollam...

17th July 2010  
Statewide protest against anti-cow slaughter Bill: Organisati...

18th April 2010  
Food crisis on the horizon: Dr. V. Rajagopal

29th December 2009  
Aam admi finds dal-roti out of reach in UPA's second innings

2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016

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