Power, Policy, and the Politics of Food in India

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Abstract— *Food, as a fundamental necessity for human survival, represents not only a basic right but also a critical responsibility of the state. This responsibility becomes even more significant in developing and poverty-stricken nations, where the state's dual obligation lies in supporting both the producers—primarily farmers—and the consumers, who often face food insecurity. Moreover, agriculture plays a pivotal role in shaping a country's overall economic health, influencing employment, income distribution, and trade balance. Agricultural policy, therefore, becomes a key instrument through which the state can drive inclusive growth and ensure food security. However, this paper seeks to analyze how private corporate interests, in collaboration with state mechanisms and influenced by global powers, are reshaping agricultural policy to serve market-oriented objectives. This reorientation often sidelines ethical and moral considerations of food justice, sustainability, and equity, ultimately compromising the broader economic and social goals of food security.*

Keywords— Agriculture, Food security, MSP, PDS, food politics.

I. INTRODUCTION

After the discoveries of fire and the wheel, agriculture stands as one of humanity's most significant breakthroughs. Yet, it took humans a long time to truly master agriculture, the science of producing food, which ultimately gave them something unique in the natural world: food security. Humans became the only species capable of deliberately controlling food production.

However, we need to be cautious when using terms such as *human*, *food production*, or *food security*. This is because agriculture is often assumed to be a universal human practice, which is not the case. By *human*, we specifically mean *Homo sapiens*—the only surviving species among nearly nine different human species identified by science. And even within Homo sapiens, agriculture has never been universal. Many nomadic tribes, pastoral communities, and indigenous groups continue to live without practicing settled farming.

The advent of agriculture also marked a fundamental rupture in the natural relationship between humans and nature. In the natural world, the link between food and hunger is direct: when food is available, it is accessible to all. A forest filled with fruit-bearing trees sustains birds, primates, and other creatures who freely share in its bounty. In contrast, human societies regulate access to food through systems of ownership and commodification. A warehouse stocked with grains, fruits, and vegetables cannot be accessed by a hungry individual without the means to pay. Food may exist in abundance, but access to it is mediated—and restricted—by purchasing power.

This introduces a critical distinction: in natural ecosystems, availability equals accessibility. Among humans, hunger intersects not only with the production (supply side) but with economic entitlement (demand side). As Amartya Sen famously argued in *Poverty and Famines* (1981), famines often occur not due to an absence of food, but due to lack of accessibility. In other words, a biological need of hunger creates demand in all the animal species except the human beings. For humans just being hungry is not enough to create demand. It's the purchasing capacity which creates the demand. For humans who practice the agriculture hunger is more of a political economic activity than a biological one. This paper is not about the human population in general but that precise section of the population which practices agriculture.

Next comes the question of purchasing capacity. For a long time, human societies relied on barter, exchanging one commodity for another. The monetization of the economy, where goods (including food) began to be exchanged for money, took centuries to evolve. Once this system was firmly established, it brought about a permanent shift: the "demand" for any good was no longer defined simply by need, but by the purchasing power of the buyer. Agriculture, too, was shaped by this transformation.

Yet, there remains a common belief that food security can be ensured merely by increasing production. This perception has kept the focus largely on the supply side, while the demand side, people's ability to access food—remains neglected. The result is a paradoxical situation: hunger persists even in the midst of abundance. In nature, such a contradiction is unthinkable, you would never find animals starving in a forest rich with fruit. But in human societies, particularly in India, this paradox of "hunger amidst plenty" has become an everyday reality.

II. INDIA HUNGER AMIDST PLENTY

India provides a compelling case of this paradox. As of May 2025, India's central food grain stock was approximately 318.73 lakh tons of paddy and 3.16 lakh tons of coarse grains. It was also reported on last July that Central rice stocks have reached 37.48 MT, the highest in 20 years, that is over three times the buffer. However, at the same time India ranked 105th out of 127 countries in Global Hunger Index 2024. On one hand Food Corporation of India (FCI) reports overflowing grain stocks and on the other hand hunger persists across vast swathes of the country. The contradiction lies in the decoupling of production from consumption. A large section of the population remains food insecure, not due to a lack of production, but due to insufficient means to access the available food.

India's historical experience illustrates both the strengths and vulnerabilities of human food systems. Geographically blessed with fertile soils and riverine networks, the Indian subcontinent had a long tradition of food self-sufficiency. Medieval Indian rulers were acutely aware of the dual dimensions of food security, i.e. they had given equal importance to the food crop production and made it sure to be affordable for their subjects. For example, Alauddin Khalji (r. 1296–1316) implemented a dual strategy—creating grain storage systems (addressing supply) and instituting strict price controls (addressing affordability), thus stabilizing both sides of the food equation. Like any other parts of the planet India faces famines and drought time to time. Estimates suggest over 120 major famines occurred between 1900 BCE and 1765 CE. These were primarily triggered by climatic irregularities—droughts, floods, locusts—or wars that disrupted both agriculture and trade. Some of the kings and dynasties addressed natural calamities efficiently while some of them failed and faced the wrath of the subjects.

However, things changed dramatically after the advent of British colonial rule in 1756. Famines became more frequent, more severe, with more and more deaths. Between 1765 and 1943, at least twelve major famines were recorded, each claiming hundreds of thousands to millions of lives.

III. COLONIAL DISRUPTIONS OF SUPPLY AND DEMAND

The reasons for the spike in famine mortality under British rule lie in the simultaneous destruction of both supply and demand mechanisms:

- Supply Disruption: Indian agriculture was forcibly reoriented toward cash crops like indigo, cotton, opium, to serve imperial markets. The focus on monocultures reduced local food availability. The introduction of land revenue systems like the *Permanent Settlement* overburdened farmers, reducing incentives for food grain cultivation.

  The leading Indian economists, Shah and Khambata observed, the average income of an Indian was just enough either to feed two men in every three of the population, or give them all two in place of every three meals they need, on condition that they all consent to go naked, live out of doors all year round, have no amusement or recreation, and want nothing else but food, and that lowest, the coarsest, the least nutritious" (Shah and Khambata, " The Wealth and Taxable capacity of India, " 1924)

- Demand Destruction: Through heavy taxation, deindustrialization, and export-led policies, the British impoverished Indian peasants and urban laborers alike. Purchasing power eroded drastically.

  The report of the Bengal Director of Health for 1927-28 recorded that, "the present peasantry of Bengal are in a very large proportion taking to a dietary on which even rats could not live more than five weeks."

The British colonial rule started exploiting India from very early days of their rule but the situation was further exacerbated after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which made grain exports to Europe logistically feasible and economically lucrative. As food grains were shipped overseas, local populations starved. Famines like the Orissa Famine (1866) and Great Famine (1876–78) became symbols of structural violence—famines not of scarcity, but of exclusion.

The Bengal Famine of 1943, which killed an estimated 3 million people, epitomized this grim legacy. Despite adequate food stocks, administrative apathy, market hoarding, and war-time inflation decimated the purchasing power of the poor.

Partition and Post-Colonial Inheritance

Colonial Post-independence India inherited a shattered agrarian economy. Colonial extraction, coupled with the traumatic partition, led to massive displacement, communal violence, and the loss of vital agricultural zones. The twin pillars of food security—production and accessibility, were both compromised.

In the mid-1960s, back-to-back droughts in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh triggered another food crisis. With food production crashing by 20%, the country was pushed to the brink of famine. India emerged as the biggest food importer of the world. The U.S. responded with food aid under the PL-480 agreement, but this dependence highlighted the vulnerability of India's food security system.

It was a turning point that compelled the India to adopt long-term strategies to ensure food sovereignty. Government intervention in foodgrain sector marketing began in a big way in the mid-1960s. It was meant to create a favourable incentive environment for the adoption of new technology based on high yielding varieties of wheat and rice, which were seen to possess vast potential for raising grain production. India was then facing a severe food shortage. The new technology provided a ray of hope to tackle the problems of food shortage and hunger. But it was just one part. In its second part of dealing the food security the government took several measures to benefited the consumers.

These included

1) Price assurance for the producers by the system of minimum support prices (MSP)
2) Maintaining buffer stocks
3) Making the stock available for the people in affordable price by distributing the at reasonable prices through the public distribution system (PDS).

This situation paved the way for the adoption of Green Revolution techniques. India experienced a dramatic surge in food production within a short span of time. From being one of the world's largest food importers, the country transformed into a grain-surplus nation, creating the impression that food security had been achieved at the national level. It was a success in terms of boosting food production, especially in regions like Punjab and Haryana. But it addressed only the supply side of the food problem. India's claim to food self-sufficiency, often celebrated in political rhetoric, rests on a narrow interpretation of food security—one that equates surplus production with universal access. In reality, food security entails both availability (supply side) and accessibility (demand side), which are ideologically and structurally distinct domains. The Green Revolution, while successful in increasing agricultural output, was fundamentally a capitalist, technology-intensive intervention that prioritized production without parallel investments in infrastructure or purchasing power enhancement for the poor.

However, this assumption soon began to crack, as reports of hunger, malnutrition, and starvation deaths—particularly among tribal and other marginalized populations—surfaced. The reason was straightforward: while the government focused on the supply side by boosting food production, the demand side, shaped by people's access to food, was left largely unaddressed due to various socio-political factors.

Foremost among these was the failure of land reforms, which left a vast population landless and, consequently, without income. Deprived of land ownership, they remained confined to roles as agricultural labourers, and in some cases, even bonded labourers. Without land, they had no claim over the produce of the Green Revolution.

The outcome was stark. Enormous quantities of food grains accumulated in public stocks—exceeding one-fourth of the annual production of rice and wheat—while, at the same time, one in every five Indians remained undernourished when measured against the minimum caloric requirements for a healthy, active life (World Bank, 2002). This stockpiling of food coincided with a rise in undernutrition, as both calorie intake and calorie deprivation worsened during the same period (Meenakshi & Vishwanathan, 2003).

While production is often driven by policy decisions, subsidies, and political will, demand is shaped by economic variables—infrastructure, employment, income levels, and market access. In a country like India, where vast rural and tribal regions lack basic transport and market connectivity, food distribution remains logistically challenging. Consequently, surplus grains remain concentrated in urban centers, inaccessible to large segments of the rural poor due to low purchasing capacity. Moreover, the ecological and socio-economic consequences of the Green Revolution—soil degradation, groundwater depletion, chemical contamination, and rising farmer debt—have rendered agriculture unsustainable in the long run. Because every factor, be it, soil degradation, groundwater depletion or chemical contamination leads to the increase in the input cost and eventually the less profit and less purchasing capacity. The dismantling of traditional farming systems and biodiversity further compounds

the crisis. As costs of inputs rise and state procurement weakens, farming becomes unviable, prompting distress migration and agrarian exits.

Thus, while India may have achieved quantitative food surplus, it has not achieved qualitative food security. Hunger and malnutrition persist despite full godowns—a paradox resulting from the failure to integrate production with equitable access. This disjuncture underscores the need to reconceptualize food self-sufficiency beyond mere output, toward a rights-based, inclusive framework rooted in environmental sustainability and economic justice

The trajectory of India's food security framework highlights the persistent tension between state-led developmentalism and market-driven liberalization. The Green Revolution, which transformed India from a food-deficient to a food-surplus nation, was made possible largely through state interventions such as subsidies, price supports, the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism, and public procurement systems. These measures were grounded in Keynesian principles, which emphasized the state's role in addressing market failures and ensuring food security through redistributive policies.

With the onset of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, however, structural adjustment programs—shaped significantly by the influence of the IMF and World Bank—recast subsidies as fiscal liabilities rather than necessary safeguards. The irony lies in the fact that the very Western economies that had once promoted subsidy-driven agricultural modernization in India continue to shield their own farmers through extensive agricultural protectionism, even as they press for subsidy reductions in the Global South. This contradiction underscores the deep asymmetries embedded in global economic governance.

The 3Ps are essential to achieve the food security, namely the production, procurement and the price stability. India addressed the production issue with the green revolution. MSP was introduced to address the issue of procurement/storage and PDS was introduced in order to achieve goal of price stability regardless of bumper harvest or below-normal production, MSP was a guaranteed price mechanism for the producers, PDS for the reasonable prices for consumers and food supply at subsidised rates to vulnerable sections. The government has been carrying out procurement and storage (buffer stock) of foodgrains (rice and wheat) since the mid-1960s. These measures have been implemented through two important institutions, namely, the Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP), which is entrusted with the task of suggesting MSP, and the Food Corporation of India, which carries out the task of procurement to ensure that producers get a price not below MSP and that foodgrains required for maintaining a reasonable level of buffer stock and for the public distribution system are in place.

Then comes the economic reforms of 1991. Till the beginning of economic reforms MSPs for foodgrains were based entirely on domestic factors, mainly on the cost of production of crops. Though CACP was required to take into consideration the international price situation, this aspect was never given any weight while arriving at the level of MSPs. The first attack on this well placed mechanism of food security came in form of devaluation of the rupee in June 1991. It not only raised the gap between MSP (domestic prices) and international prices it also increased the budget needed for the food security measures. Instead of much hyped rhetoric of providing support, the new economic policy measures proved to be devastating for the farming community. The foodgrain scene of the post-reforms period is the outcome of this shift in food policy to raise domestic prices through government intervention completely ignoring domestic demand and supply factors.

IV. CORPORATISATION AND INDIAN AGRICULTURE: FROM COLONIAL LEGACIES TO GLOBALISATION

Corporatisation of agriculture refers to the transformation of farming from a subsistence activity into a commercial enterprise organised and managed with a corporate outlook. It involves large-scale private investment, standardisation of production processes, infusion of advanced technologies, and emphasis on product quality and price competitiveness to meet both domestic and global demands (Singh, 2000). Historically, the corporatisation of Indian agriculture can be traced back to the colonial era, when the British introduced plantation-style farming focusing on cash crops such as indigo, jute, cotton, and tea. A key milestone was the establishment of the *Assam Tea Company* in London in 1839, which institutionalised tea cultivation and marked the beginnings of corporate involvement in agriculture (Chakrabarti, 2013). Mechanisation gradually replaced manual labour in plantations, giving agriculture a distinct corporate character in select regions. The second major phase emerged with the Green Revolution in the mid-1960s, which transformed agriculture through the adoption of High-Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and expansion of irrigation facilities (Frankel, 1971). Implemented first in the Kharif season of 1966 under the High-Yielding Varieties Programme (HYVP), this strategy was initially confined to wheat, rice, jowar, bajra, and maize (Swaminathan, 2006). While the Green Revolution significantly boosted productivity and modernised farming practices, it also entrenched corporatisation by encouraging large-scale, technology-driven production supported by state and private actors. Thus, the trajectory of corporatisation in Indian agriculture reflects both colonial legacies of commercial farming and post-independence strategies of technological modernisation. These developments laid the structural

foundation for contemporary debates on contract farming, global market integration, and the socio-ecological consequences of corporate-led agriculture (Patnaik, 2007).

V. POST-GREEN REVOLUTION AND THE WTO ERA

The post-liberalisation phase of Indian agriculture, particularly after the 1990s, witnessed intensified debates around corporatisation under the influence of global trade regimes. The Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the subsequent establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 opened agriculture to global capital flows and encouraged the entry of private foreign corporations into the sector (Shiva, 2000). Industrialised nations, backed by multinational agribusiness firms, demanded complete freedom of investment with provisions for 100 percent equity ownership, unrestricted repatriation of profits, and the right to acquire land, set up plantations, engage in fisheries, and undertake livestock rearing (Patnaik, 2007). Such policies effectively positioned corporations as the primary beneficiaries of liberalisation, with little obligation toward ensuring food security. As Senator George McGovern of the U.S. Senate aptly remarked, "food security in private hands is no food security at all," since corporations prioritise profit maximisation over equitable food distribution (McGovern, 1991).

Globalisation in the early 1990s further camouflaged the corporatisation of agriculture through jargon such as "competitiveness," "market access," and "aggregate measure of support," which masked the emergence of corporate monopolies, the dumping of subsidised products from the Global North, and the continuation of corporate subsidies (Shiva, 2005). These changes contributed to a structural agrarian crisis by pushing farm-gate prices downward while simultaneously escalating input costs. The withdrawal of state subsidies, coupled with deregulation of the seed and input sector, exacerbated farmers' indebtedness and deepened rural distress (Sainath, 2014). Recognising these challenges, the Government of India announced its first comprehensive National Agricultural Policy on July 28, 2000, which implicitly reinforced a framework for greater corporate participation and control in agriculture (Government of India, 2000). Thus, the WTO era marked a decisive stage in the corporatisation process, intertwining agriculture with global capital and deepening concerns over food sovereignty and farmer livelihoods. The policy emphasised private sector participation, promotion of agricultural competitiveness, and greater integration with global markets (Government of India, 2000). While it promised modernisation and investment, critics argue that the NAP facilitated a shift towards corporate control of agriculture at the expense of small and marginal farmers (Shiva, 2005). Concerns raised in this context included the replacement of smallholder farming with corporate agribusiness, threats to food security from profit-driven corporations, skewed subsidy structures benefiting developed countries, and rising farmer distress due to debt from escalating input costs (Patnaik, 2007; Sainath, 2014).

In response, various models of corporatisation were explored in India to balance investment with farmer protection. The Golden Triangle Model integrated the farmer, banker, and corporate entity into a tripartite arrangement, with contract farming and assured prices at its core. The concept of Special Agricultural Zones (SAZs), pioneered in Uttarakhand, aimed to replicate SEZ-style development for agriculture by conserving prime farmland, promoting region-specific cropping, and ensuring infrastructure support. In West Bengal, corporatisation initiatives addressed middlemen monopolies and introduced reforms under the APMC Act, allowing direct corporate procurement from farmers. Specific corporate-led marketing models also emerged: the Frito-Lay model of contract farming with input support and price assurance; the Reliance model with a three-tier Agri-retail infrastructure; Bengal Fresh, a public-private joint venture focusing on packaging, grading, and smallholder support; and cooperative-oriented approaches like the Confed Model and Swarojgar Model, which sought to protect farmers from distress sales.

And at the same time dismantling of the Universal Public Distribution System (PDS) into a Targeted PDS (TPDS) in 1997 marked a paradigmatic shift—from universal entitlements to means-tested welfare. While designed to increase efficiency and reduce fiscal expenditure, TPDS suffered from poor targeting, exclusion errors, and chronic under coverage, problems rooted in the lack of a reliable poverty identification mechanism. Despite numerous expert committees (e.g., Tendulkar, Rangarajan), India has failed to establish a consistent poverty yardstick, leading to the bureaucratization of hunger relief.

This twin retreat—weakening of price support on the supply side and narrowing of entitlements on the demand side—has resulted in a paradoxical situation: India ranks 117th on the Global Hunger Index, despite holding surplus food stocks in FCI godowns. This exposes the hollowness of a purely production-centric view of food self-sufficiency and calls for a rights-based, universal approach to food access.

VI. CONCLUSION

The corporatisation of agriculture in India—shaped by colonial legacies, the Green Revolution, and WTO-led liberalisation—has undeniably transformed the sector. While it has brought investment, technology, and global integration, it has also intensified inequalities, eroded smallholder resilience, and deepened food insecurity despite surplus production. The paradox of "hunger amidst plenty" underscores that food security cannot be reduced to production alone; it must integrate accessibility, equity, and sustainability.

Moving forward, a balanced model of agricultural governance is needed—one that prevents corporate monopolies while leveraging private sector efficiency.

Solutions must focus on:

Reviving the Universal PDS with stronger digital tracking to curb leakages, ensuring every citizen has guaranteed access to affordable food. Revisiting MSP and procurement policies, expanding them beyond rice and wheat to include pulses, millets, and oilseeds, thereby enhancing dietary diversity and farmer incomes. Regulating contract farming and FDI through farmer-centric laws that mandate fair pricing, transparent dispute resolution, and protection from corporate exploitation. Promoting cooperative and producer company models, which pool smallholder resources, enhance bargaining power, and democratise market access. Investing in agro-ecological and sustainable farming practices, reducing input dependency and restoring soil, water, and biodiversity. Strengthening rural non-farm employment and social safety nets, so that farmers are not forced to distress-sell or migrate under debt pressure. Decentralising food governance by empowering panchayats, self-help groups, and farmer-producer organisations (FPOs) to design localised, context-specific food security strategies. Ultimately, Indian agriculture must not be reduced to a site of corporate profit-making; it is the lifeline of rural livelihoods, cultural identity, and national food sovereignty. Policies must re-centre farmers, especially smallholders, women, and marginalised communities, ensuring that the politics of food align with the ethics of justice, sustainability, and universal human dignity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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