

6 Demanding accountability for hunger in India

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Introduction

The new politics emerging out of the food, fuel and financial crises that started in 2008 was born out of a sense of discontent with the ruling classes. The roots of the protests in country after country, and the responses they evoked can be best viewed, as this book argues, through the lens of a ‘politics of provisions,’ – the way in which “common people interacted with their rulers over subsistence,” and how these interactions were “permitted and shaped by pre-existing social and political networks, both among rioters and between them and their rulers” (Bohstedt 2016: 1036). Riots (or not) and responses (or repression) at moments of crises throw the ongoing politics of provisions into special focus by highlighting the boundaries of what the rulers will accept as a form of protest by the ruled, and what the ruled deem as necessary action.

In each of the country cases in this volume we have seen how this politics of provisions played out with particular nuances. The price spikes of 2008 and 2011 were the source of social unrest, with commodity-dependent democracies such as Cameroon, Mozambique and Kenya being particularly vulnerable to protests. India is far less dependent on food imports, and although it did experience rising inflation, it did not witness sudden inflationary spikes during this period (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2013). Protests around food were few and highly localized, mainly because India has had a large program of subsidized food for the poorest households through the Public Distribution System (PDS) since the 1950s. The only reported ‘food riots’ were in fact around perceived corruption in the PDS in West Bengal. Instead, between 2001–2014, India saw a rise in mobilization around a ‘right to food’ which was aimed at ensuring food security for all, especially the most marginalized, through guaranteed entitlements of basic food grains at subsidized prices. Significantly, such mobilization varied spatially across states. While a few states saw riots, in most states strong grassroots movements emerged and played a key role in the national right to food campaign.

In this chapter we explore the politics of provisions in the case of India.¹ We ask: a) why does popular mobilization take the form of riots in some locations and rights-based movements in others? b) how does popular mobilization draw upon the imaginary of the moral economy of hunger? c) what features of the

environment matter, especially the role of the media in framing and shaping discourse enable mobilization? d) through what pathways do responses to mobilization lead to institutionalized accountability for hunger?

We explore these issues by tracing popular mobilization and subsequent responses around food insecurity first in two states – West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh – and then exploring their linkages to the national right to food campaign. West Bengal witnessed widespread popular unrest in 2007, in what were called ‘ration riots,’ in which rural communities directed public anger at the malfunctioning of the subsidized food distribution system in the state. The riots were violent, spontaneous and characterized by burning and looting of PDS shops by angry villagers. Yet, these places had never been locations of widespread acute hunger or malnutrition. By contrast, in Madhya Pradesh, malnutrition and hunger had become a big public issue in the mid-2000s, when the National Family Health Survey showed that it had the highest rate of malnutrition in the country (60 per cent of the children were malnourished at the time). Chronic hunger was a feature of life, especially in tribal areas. Rather than leading to rioting however, popular mobilization led by local grassroots organizations took the form of a rights-based movement against malnourishment and hunger, which linked up with the national right to food campaign.

How do we explain these contrasting trajectories of two states within the same national system? Our research finds that both riots as well as rights-based movements were framed in terms of an implicit breach of the social contract; a rupture in what Hossain and Kalita elaborate as the contemporary moral economy (Hossain and Kalita 2014). However, the causes of the protests, who participated in them and the form they took were different in the two states. Moreover, while both elicited responses from the state, only the rights-based movements had the potential to translate into durable responses to hunger. However, protest alone was not enough – the potential for gains at scale can be realized only if the political context is favorable and protestors can seize opportunities that arise. For rights-based movements, key enabling conditions included: strong networks that linked national policy actors with grassroots groups, thus increasing both legitimacy and strength at the national and local levels; active strategic use of the media; close and regular interactions between national and sub-national structures of government; and a framing of demands in terms of socially and widely accepted rights.

Methodology

The research reported here draws on two sources of evidence. First, at the national level, we constructed an event catalogue using media reports, and interviewed government officials, politicians and members of the national right to food campaign. The empirical material generated through these methods was supplemented by data from official reports, newspaper articles and other documents.²

Second, in each of the two states (Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal) we carried out focus group interviews with a purposive sample of villagers in two villages,

supplementing those findings with semi-structured interviews with activists, journalists and relevant government officials at the state level.³ We selected Bankura district in West Bengal, as it was one of the places where the ‘ration riots’ of 2007 had started, and we had prior contacts with members of the agricultural workers’ union in that district.⁴ We carried out focus group discussions and local leader interviews in two villages in Bankura: Radhamohanpur (the site of the first riots) and Barokumira (where riots erupted later). Within Madhya Pradesh, we chose Satna district because it is one of the districts with the highest level of malnutrition, has a large tribal population and has witnessed local grassroots action and mobilization on these issues. Moreover, through the state-level right to food campaign, we had direct access to the work of one of the grassroots organisations working with tribals in the chosen district – the Adivasi Adhikar Manch (AAM). 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).

A word about our positionality: of our research team, two members were prominent members of the right to food campaign. While on the one hand, this meant that it was easier to gain access to senior policymakers and activists at short notice; it meant, on the other hand, that interviewees often presumed that as part of the campaign, interviewers had particular positions on the issues under question and occasionally responded in ways that addressed the campaign rather than the interview questions. Despite our best efforts to mitigate against this through triangulation, making non-activists lead interviewers and starting interviews with a more critical view of the right to food movement, some bias inherent in interview context remains. The findings need to be read keeping these limitations in mind.

Food security in India

Between 2006 and 2013, India witnessed increasing food inflation but in contrast with global trends, there was no food price volatility. From 2008 onwards, food prices in India showed a rising trend compared to the two distinctive spikes in global food prices in 2008 and 2011. Further, in the Indian context, food prices were driven up not so much by prices of food grains (except for a brief period) but by other food articles such as pulses, vegetables and fruits (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2013). Considering the poor diversity in diets of the poor in rural India, food price inflation does not seem to have had much of an effect on their access to food. This was also a period that saw an overall increase in real wages (Drèze and Sen 2013, Gulati *et al.* 2014).

However, hunger and malnutrition were (and still are) widespread in India. Despite high economic growth, the decades of the 1990s and 2000s did not show an equivalent improvement in food consumption and malnutrition figures (Deaton and Dreze 2009; Svedberg 2008). The average calorie consumption decreased, with the poor continuing to consume much less than those in higher-income deciles. While there was some increase in consumption of other food

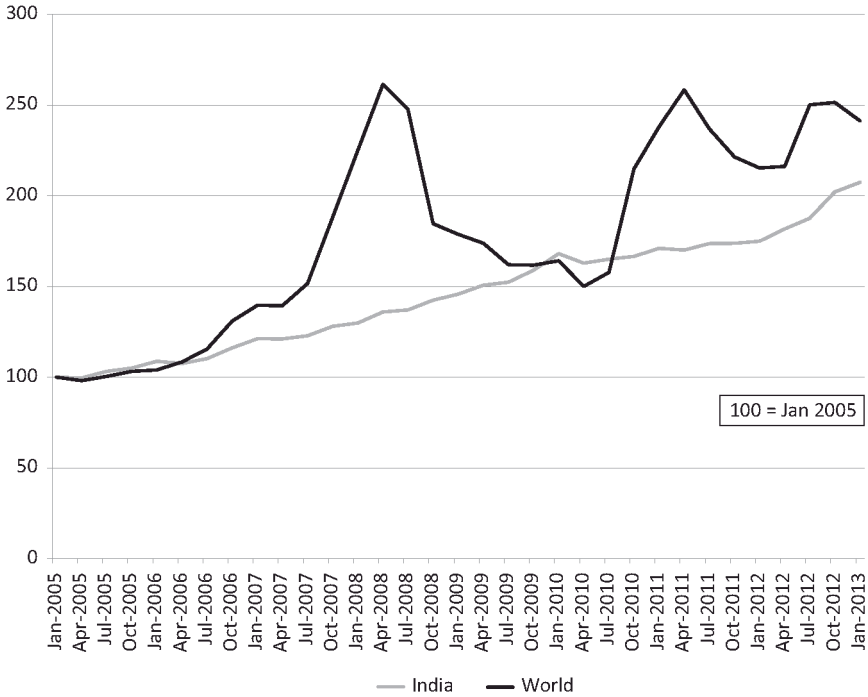


Figure 6.1 World and India cereal price indices, 2005–2013.

Source: Calculated from price index data available from FAO (for world) and Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India (for India)

www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/ accessed on March 25, 2015

http://eaindustry.nic.in/download_data_0405.asp accessed on March 25, 2017

items such as pulses, fruits and vegetables, they were still at extremely low levels. Available data show a slow improvement in nutrition status between the early 2000s and the early 2010s. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) of 2005–2006 showed that 44 per cent of children under five were underweight and more than half of women of reproductive age were anaemic (Indian Institute of Population Studies 2007). The NFHS-4 for 2015–2016 shows some improvement in malnutrition, with 35.7 per cent of children under five being underweight (Indian Institute of Population Studies 2017). Improvement in nutrition levels in this period could be because of the efforts made by the central and state governments towards providing social security and enhancing food security through programs such as the employment guarantee scheme and the public distribution system (von Grebmer *et al.* 2014).

Beginning in 2004, a number of rights-based legislations and schemes were introduced. Among the most relevant to food and nutrition security were the

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005 and the National Food Security Act in 2013. The MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of employment at minimum wage to every rural household that demands work. While there have been implementation gaps, the Act has generated millions of days of employment and had a positive impact on rural wages, food security and migration (Afridi and Iverson 2014). The impact of the National Food Security Act was still being assessed at the time of this study. However, most of the entitlements under the Act had already been in existence since 2001 through orders of the Supreme Court under the 'right to food' case. Through the food schemes covered under the food security Act and the Supreme Court orders, a range of entitlements help people meet their food and nutrition security needs.

The most important of these is the Public Distribution System (PDS). The PDS was started by the British as a wartime food grain distribution system, and later revised into a welfare measure in the 1950s. Initially the program was universal; however, over the years it underwent a series of changes and by the 2000s, the government targeted food subsidies to the poorer sections of the population through the distribution of three levels of entitlement cards (in order of decreasing vulnerability): the Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), the Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards and the Above Poverty Line (APL) cards (Swaminathan 2000). Under the scheme, households receive subsidized food grains (mainly wheat and rice), sugar and kerosene oil.

The aims of the PDS are twofold: to maintain stability of prices through government purchase of food grains at a minimum support price for farmers, and to distribute the food grains purchased at a subsidized rate to cardholders. The distribution occurs through a network of licensed Fair Price Shops, who hold a list of all the cardholders who are entitled to purchase the subsidized grain from their shops. Cardholders in turn present their cards to purchase their entitlements. The central and state governments are both involved in the PDS. A formula is used to assess how much subsidized food grain each state is entitled to receive, and states have to request the central government to send the amounts they need up to the entitlement limit, and the central government then distributes the grain through its stores. Thus, the actual availability of food grains in shops depends upon a certain level of central and state government interactions and a complex distribution system.

Other schemes addressing food security include the school midday meal scheme providing cooked meals to children in government schools, and the Integrated Child Development Services scheme providing supplementary nutrition, growth monitoring, nutrition counselling and pre-school education of children under six. Supreme Court orders in 2001, 2004 and 2006 directed that these schemes be made universal entitlements. These orders saw a tremendous expansion in these schemes, which currently cover about 120 million school-going children and 70 million children under six years of age.

The quality of implementation of these schemes varies greatly across states (Kabra and Ittyerah 1992, Jishnu 2004). Criticisms of the PDS are particularly trenchant and relevant here. The PDS is considered highly corrupt, and shop

owners are believed to divert subsidized grain to the open market to pocket the subsidies, while reporting the grains were not received, or not in the required quantity. The allocation of cards is also contentious: eligible households may be excluded while some ineligible households are included. Moreover, cardholders find it difficult to buy their entitlements in instalments even if this is formally allowed (Programme Evaluation Organisation 2005; Khera 2011).

Most food-related government programs are centrally funded (sometimes with matching state funds), with the implementation left to state governments. For example, all procurement and storage of food grain is primarily under the control of the central government through the Food Corporation of India (FCI). While the central government allocates the grain to the states, it is the responsibility of the state to ensure it reaches beneficiaries. Further, state governments have few sources of revenue of their own, and many have faced serious fiscal crises in the last two decades. Therefore, while there can be wide differences in the way schemes are delivered, there is little room for expansion or creation of new schemes at the state level. Even then, some state governments have provided social support beyond that allocated by the central government (Patnaik and Sinha 2016).

The politics of popular mobilization around social provisioning

New social movements emerging in India in the 1970s focused on issues such as environment, gender and housing to fill a vacuum left by political parties and older movements, and as a critique of the state and its inability to deliver basic entitlements for women, lower caste groups and the poor (Kothari 1984, Omvedt 1994). The neoliberal policies followed by the Indian government since the 1990s met with firm grassroots resistance (Baviskar and Sundar 2008). Civil society organizations that emerged out of these new struggles played a key role in expanding the democratic obligations of the state and creating expectations among the poor. Thus, the decades of the 1990s and 2000s saw the emergence of a number of networks, campaigns and social movements built around socio-economic rights, e.g., the Right to Education Campaign, the People's Act for Employment Guarantee, the Right to Health movement (Jan Swasthya Abhiyan), the Campaign for Survival and Dignity (which demanded the Forest Rights Act), the National Campaign for People's Right to Information and the Right to Food Campaign. One of the distinctive features of the campaigns was the simultaneous deployment of protest and collaboration strategies at different levels (Pande 2014).

In this context, 2004 was a watershed: the ruling coalition, the National Democratic Alliance led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, was overthrown in a landslide victory by the Congress party-led United Progressive Alliance. The ruling coalition had gone to the electorate with images of a prosperous urban India that included wide roads and shopping malls using "India Shining" as its main campaign slogan. By contrast, the principal opposition party – the Indian National Congress – claimed to represent the *aam aadmi* (common man), highlighting

the neglect of rural India, unemployment and the need for social security. Even though the broad economic policies of the two parties were not very different (in fact, it was a Congress government that initiated neo-liberal economic reforms in 1991), the surprise victory of the Congress-led alliance was widely interpreted as a mandate for explicitly pro-poor policies.

The alliance was able to form a government with a clear majority with the support of the Left Front (consisting of the communist parties), who between them had about a tenth of the parliament seats. The Left Front offered support on the basis of a National Common Minimum Programme which included many of the issues taken up by the rights-based campaigns such as the employment guarantee legislation, strengthening of the PDS, greater investments in education and health and so on. The program agenda was strengthened by the creation of a new body called the National Advisory Council headed by the president of the Congress party and including a number of activists who were part of rights-based campaigns and movements. This inside-outside position of the rights-based campaigns – demanding rights through protests outside the state while simultaneously pushing the rights agenda from within the Advisory Council, is one of the hallmark features of India's politics of provisions in the period from 2004–2014. As we will see later, linking protesters in the village to the corridors of policymaking in the capital through various points of access is one of the reasons for their relative success in institutionalizing entitlements (Khera 2013).

Riots in West Bengal and rights in Madhya Pradesh

In 2007, in a village in Birbhum district of West Bengal, APL cardholders angry about being denied subsidized wheat due to them under the PDS forced the local shop-owner to sell wheat at a lower price. The spontaneous mobilization soon spread and there were riots around PDS shops in several villages in the region. One shop-owner committed suicide; the police fired on crowds injuring several people, and shops were burned and looted (Bhattacharya 2008; Majumdar 2007). In West Bengal, the ruling left party coalition, led by the Communist Party (Marxist) (CPM), had been in power for over three decades. With party units in every village; local government, teachers' unions, and PDS ration-dealers' associations all politicized; spontaneous riots targeting PDS shops were an unusual occurrence.

The riots were neither initiated by the poorest villagers, nor about hunger or malnutrition; rather they were about accessing wheat (not the staple food in West Bengal) under the PDS, by Above the Poverty Line (APL) card-holding households. The proximate reason for the riots was the difference between the price of open market and the price of the subsidized wheat. For a decade previously, the APL prices of wheat had only been slightly lower than market prices, leading to lower uptake. In 2006 central government had decided to limit allocations under the APL category to the average taken up by states in the previous three years. At the same moment, however, the price of wheat began to rise, making the PDS wheat relatively more valuable. Given that the shop-owners and their association were closely linked to the ruling party, the state was seen as siding with corrupt shop-owners and protecting them.

This was also a period when the hegemony of the Left Front was beginning to weaken. Massive protests had broken out across the state in response to the state government's decision to acquire hundreds of acres of agricultural land for a private car factory, Tata Motors. The main opposition party in the state – the Trinamool Congress – seized the opportunity offered by the widespread discontent and assumed leadership of the protest movement. The state government responded with police action, but was eventually forced to withdraw the acquisition plans and return the land to the farmers (Banerjee 2011; Banerjee and Roy 2007). These larger political developments provided the 'environmental mechanisms', against which the PDS rioters leveraged general discontent with the Left Front government (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001).

The popular view was that PDS shop-owners were generally corrupt and that both inclusion and exclusion errors were pervasive. As one villager noted: "APL-BPL divide is not correct. The poorest people who should be BPL don't have BPL cards. There is a political reason." Another said: "some dealers are dacoits [armed robbers] and some are thieves."⁵ So although the immediate issue concerned the unavailability of APL wheat, both APL and BPL families participated in the riots. In Barokumira village, villagers dragged the shop-owner to a village meeting and made him accept that he had been charging cardholders above the official price. To compensate for his wrongdoing, he was asked to contribute 200,000 rupees toward village development. Unable to pay, three days later he committed suicide. Eight villagers had cases filed against them, but in the end, they were released.

Deep discontent with the way in which the ruling party had an iron grip on local governance also underpinned the riots. In Radhamohanpur village on September 16, 2007, the CPM was holding a zonal convention. Rumor had it that the CPM was part of the corruption in the PDS. Villagers decided to confront the shop-owner in front of other party leaders at the convention, to create pressure for reforms. However, when villagers went to the zonal meeting, the CPM protected the shop-owner. Violence broke out and police were brought in to control the protests. Ultimately several people were arrested and a curfew imposed on the village. Villagers expressed their discontent with political parties, which in West Bengal at the time, was synonymous with state government. As one landless woman observed:

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). We work and that is why we can eat a fistful . . . In every household, they will get seven to eight votes, that is how they see us. Why shouldn't we speak up?⁶

In these incidents, villagers framed their demands as a '*janagana andolan*' (people's movement), yet recognized that the mobilization had limited results. As one villager put it, "we went to ask for wheat, and 'ate' bullets." The political party in collaboration with the shop-owners association agreed to compensate the two

people who were shot, but little else changed. However, they felt the *khadyo andolan* (food movement) would continue if necessary – “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. There will be a struggle again.”⁷ In West Bengal, then, the focus was on rights, but narrowly, in the sense of the right to food through entitlement programs.

In Madhya Pradesh, the release of the National Family Health Survey (NHFS) data in December 2006 highlighted that the state not only had the highest level of child malnutrition in the country, it also saw an increase in the prevalence of malnutrition since the previous survey (1997–1998) (Indian Institute of Population Studies 2007). At the same time, a number of deaths due to malnutrition were reported in the media, bringing the issue of hunger and malnutrition to national attention. Simultaneously, grassroots groups like the Adivasi Adhikar Manch (AAM), were mobilizing villagers to demand better child care centers, improved delivery in the Public Distribution System and the establishment of nutrition rehabilitation centers. In collaboration with the state and national level right to food campaign, AAM was able to convert popular mobilization into sustained pressure for improving entitlements for the poor.

The story of popular mobilization and its effects in Madhya Pradesh has to be understood in terms of the ways in which local groups have managed to leverage activism at higher levels as well as creating allies within the media to gain traction on the broader issue of sustainable livelihoods. These provide the environmental mechanisms with which contention can unfold (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). The AAM, set up in the late 1990s by two activists who had been trained by a well-established non-governmental organization (NGO), initially started working on land rights and were successful in retaining land in de facto control of the tribal population. In Satna district, poverty and food insecurity are widespread, and the poor depend upon subsistence farming and forest produce. One villager described the food security situation as “four months of surplus and the rest a period of want.”⁸ Government programs such as PDS and midday school meals are critical for survival.

AAM’s links with a media advocacy organization working on the issue of child malnutrition – Vikas Samvad – led to AAM focussing on malnutrition and greater visibility for the issue. Between 2007 and 2012, AAM organized protest marches and public hearings at local and district levels, provided evidence of malnutrition from the grassroots, and participated in state and national protests led by the right to food campaign. In November 2009, 30 activists from AAM participated in a national rally in Delhi to reject the minimalist draft of the Food Security Act proposed by the national government. AAM connects child malnutrition to broader grievances which resonate with the population, such as malfunctioning government programs, increasing unviability of agriculture due to high input prices and inflation, and the lack of employment opportunities.

AAM also mobilized locally on policy issues in line with the national position of the right to food campaign. These local demands included universalization of the PDS, inclusion of pulses and edible oils within the PDS and improving

the quality of grain provided. One of the public hearings on malnutrition was attended by a member of the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights which is affiliated to the right to food campaign. The relative gains made by AAM locally were partly a result of these links to higher levels of activism and the media. After one of the protest marches, one tribal activist recalled:

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 fifteen days. All the sick children were taken care of and things became better.⁹

The presence of national-level influential people who witnessed first-hand the testimony of the poor about child malnutrition led to the opening of a nutrition rehabilitation center. Since 2010, mobilizations have declined, partly because most of the demands for direct interventions on malnutrition have been met.

The cognitive frame of those who participated in the struggles was one of rights. Describing the protests, a member noted, "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."¹⁰ Protest slogans reflected this rights-based perspective: 'government land is our land.' When asked if they were worried about state repression over their participation in the protests, one of the participants replied, "How will they arrest us? It was a rally." The mobilization by AAM activists has increased awareness of rights, emboldening poor villagers vis-à-vis their state. As one villager put it, "Now whenever anyone comes asking about our problems, we know how to present our case to the government and any other journalists." The rights that villagers refer to here are broader than accessing food entitlements.

The responses to the popular mobilization in West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh were very different and owe a lot to the political moment within which protests took place. In Madhya Pradesh, the response was twofold: the creation of a high-level structure to converge action around malnutrition in the form of the inter-departmental Atal Bal Mission for child health and nutrition, set up under the leadership of the chief minister; and increase in the number of PDS beneficiaries.¹¹ The Mission was comprehensive, looking at production and distribution of food grains as well as the social determinants of malnutrition, including water and sanitation, decentralization, and coordination of Women and Child Development, Health and Family Welfare, and Rural Development and Panchayati Raj ministries.

In West Bengal, the policy response around a year later, and was primarily the provision of a state subsidy to reduce the prices of rice and wheat available to families living below the official poverty line. But this was less an immediate response to the riots as it was to the elections, which were less than 100 days away when the scheme was announced. A senior Food Ministry bureaucrat pinned the blame for the crisis in West Bengal on local factors and corruption in the state

machinery, and not on the reduction of the APL quota for the state, attributing the crisis to large-scale hoarding by private actors within the PDS network:

In almost all other states, there is a state government entity, which picks up food grains from FCI 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 wholesaler 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.¹²

The policy response in West Bengal thus focused on a populist price intervention that was easier to undertake than more difficult structural reforms in the management of the PDS.

The case of Madhya Pradesh is more representative of what was happening elsewhere in India, particularly in the links between localized efforts and national policy advocacy by the right to food campaign. Supreme Court orders were disseminated by the state-level campaign to the AAM, which used them in their mobilization strategies. The networked nature of the AAM gave it power well above its modest organisational base. The local media, linked to and feeding the national media, were heavily involved in highlighting malnutrition, turning it into a political issue, as evidenced in state assembly debates. In Madhya Pradesh, while individual PDS shops might have been linked to particular political patrons, there was no state-wide capture of the PDS system by any political party, so mobilization for food security and malnutrition was not viewed as being against any particular political party. 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 mobilizational repertoires were common ones: of *dharnas* (peaceful demonstrations), petitions, *jan sunwais* (social audits) and rallies.

The difference in policy response in each case was driven by the underlying nature of the problem but also by its popular articulation. In Bengal, the riots were essentially 'ration' riots linked directly to the PDS, and the response was restricted to policy changes in PDS prices and beneficiary numbers. In Madhya Pradesh, the popular mobilization was around broad food security issues and specifically malnutrition, and the policy response was larger and more institutional, with influence on the national policy debates.

The Supreme Court and the right to food case

Inflation, and especially food price inflation, has been an issue of national public debate since the early 2000s, and by 2008 was a pressing concern. The initial response of the government to inflation was narrow, revolving around monetary policy in respect of banning rice exports and futures trading in four commodities presumed to affect domestic prices (De Schutter 2010).¹³ A more direct

government response to issues of hunger and access to food was forced by three interlinked factors: an activist Supreme Court, the rising political salience of food security in the media and continuous pressure by the right to food campaign.

The Supreme Court played an active role in shaping government responsibility for hunger through decisions on the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) vs. Union of India and others, Civil Writ Petition 196/2001 (popularly known as the right to food case) (Banik 2016). The case revolves around a petition filed by the PUCL, a leading Indian human rights organization, in the Supreme Court. This argued that in the context of successive droughts in 2001, it was imperative that the government use the accumulated food stocks of approximately 50 million tons to mitigate drought relief and hunger. The petition went beyond situations of drought and focussed on the need to uphold the 'right to food.' In ruling on the case, the Supreme Court laid out path breaking jurisprudence (De Schutter 2013).¹⁴ The orders converted all food and employment schemes run by the central government into legal entitlements, universalising food entitlement programs for children, and instituting an independent accountability mechanism, the Commissioners to the Supreme Court, to monitor all food and employment programs.

Supreme Court activism ensured that right to food issues became mainstream in the public discourse. Media coverage forced the government to act under pressure of judicial orders and the public debate that ensued.¹⁵ An illustration of this is the reversal of state policy linking the official poverty line to targeting of food security schemes. During 2011–2012, the Supreme Court made a series of observations 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.¹⁶ The barrage of reporting finally prompted the Minister of Rural Development and the deputy chairperson of the Planning Commission to issue a press statement de-linking the poverty line from the targeting of anti-poverty schemes (Government of India 2012).

By 2009, then, the right to food had been firmly mainstreamed in national discourse, and both major political parties included it in their election manifestos. The passage of the National Food Security Act in 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 met through the Act had been election promises. Both the major parties promised subsidized food grains and an expanded PDS. Notably, both manifestos mention a universal PDS and community kitchens for the urban poor. The Indian National Congress manifesto commits to the universalization of the Integrated Child Development Scheme and for the first time mentions a 'Right to Food Act.'

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 had state

assembly elections in 2008, and pioneering reforms in the PDS took place including a host of measures to increase transparency and accountability and reduce corruption. It was widely acknowledged that this contributed to the popularity of the Chief Minister and his party. Chhattisgarh became the first state outside the southern states to show that it was possible to improve the PDS and reap political gains from doing so. This period saw a host of other states also taking similar measures to increase PDS coverage and subsidies using their own revenues. It was therefore no surprise when the PDS became a major campaign pledge for both major parties.

The right to food campaign, which emerged out of the Supreme Court case, was also one of the principal agents of policy change in the period, including campaigning for the National Food Security Act. Between 2009 and 2013, the bill went through various drafts and amendments. The campaign prepared an alternative draft¹⁷ and at each stage mobilized public opinion and engaged with the press, politicians and policymakers to expand 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 (Sinha *et al.* 2014). For instance, the March 2010 draft of the Act by the Empowered Group of Ministers restricted benefits to 25 kg of rice/wheat a month at three rupees per kilogram for a section of the Below Poverty Line population (as defined by the Planning Commission). The second draft coincided with public debates about the poverty line, high inflation and lobbying by the right to food campaign, and entitlements were expanded to 35 kg for the poorest households, and coverage of 67 per cent of all households with 5 kg per person per month, with highly subsidized food grains. Other entitlements related to children and women also found a place in the final food security legislation, albeit in a diluted form (Sinha *et al.* 2014).

The final legislation, passed in 2013, guarantees subsidized grains to 820 million Indians. It provides for free midday meals to 130 million school children and supplementary nutrition to all children in the country below the age of six and guarantees a maternity entitlement to every pregnant and lactating mother. With an annual budget of nearly USD \$25 billion, the National Food Security Act is one of the largest food programs in the world. As we saw, its final shape was the result of a long trajectory of mobilizing, contestation and debate between the campaign, academic observers, politicians and bureaucrats.

It would be remiss to overlook the contextual features that have enabled the gains made by the right to food campaign. First, the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s has consistently triggered civil society protests against the elevation of private above public interests (for example, protests against land appropriation for Special Economic Zones). Rising food prices have been viewed as part of the broader impacts of liberalization. Second, the precedent of state obligations to protect the poorest from food insecurity had been well-established since the early 1960s. 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 the election with

Sonia Gandhi as chair 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 MGNREGA, the Forest Rights Act and the Right to Information Act. The impact of these was critical to support for the Congress-led UPA in the 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, by continuously passing orders compelling the government to expand and improve food-related programs such as the midday meal in the right to food case, many in government believed that the Supreme Court was overstepping its mandate and interfering in governance. Returning debates about entitlements to food to the parliament through the Right to Food Act was seen as placing policy and implementation back to its rightful place: the legislative sphere.

The politics of provisions

Were these politics of provisions rooted in an implicit social contract around protection against hunger? The evidence supports such an interpretation. Contention, by and large, was not in the form of riots but in the form of an expanded repertoire of engagement with the state through protests, social audits and media campaigns. Underpinning these was an expectation of justice, fairness and solidarity on the part of protestors and within government. The prevailing norm in India has always been that it is the state's responsibility to provide for the poor and protect them from the market, as exemplified by the mammoth food market intervention that is the PDS. Yet the roots of these expectations, the form they take and the responses they elicit, vary across the country. Thus, protests in Madhya Pradesh, or riots in West Bengal, and the broader right to food campaign must be seen in light of the expectations people have of their relationships with the landed elite, the community more broadly and the longer cycles of relationships between the state and its citizens.

Two points are of particular importance. The first relates to the erosion of patronage ties with landlords and other community elites and the rural poor. In many isolated and underdeveloped areas of India, the state has not been a significant presence and the landed elite have been the source of social protection. However, these relationships are 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, the roots of popular mobilization can no longer be tied to the moral economy of elites and landlords.¹⁸ While exploitative landlords have not disappeared, their hold has weakened in many parts of the country. Seemingly in contradiction, it appears easier to direct anger against a 'faceless' anonymous state than an identifiable local personage who might subject one to reprisal. Patronage ties have in general been replaced by electoral accountabilities.

The second is that rights struggles in rural India have to be seen within a long-standing politics of provisions 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 hunger has always been an emotional and political issue, suggests that mobilization against hunger and malnutrition, no matter what form it takes, is more naturally directed against the state. The state on its part has been extremely sensitive to the threat of hunger and famine, as, if anything, its legitimacy rests of preventing starvation.¹⁹ The colonial roots of the Bengal famine of 1943–1944, and its evocation in the struggle for independence give widespread hunger (or the risk of it) particular political salience. This is reinforced by the fact that civil society mobilization, under the auspices of the right to food campaign has managed to create an environment where the state is widely seen as responsible for addressing hunger.

These themes emerged from national level interviews and the state-level case studies. In Madhya Pradesh, the important rural social divisions are between the landed and the landless. Although awareness of state presence appeared to be relatively recent and partly an outcome of the mobilization work by AAM, there has been little expectation from patronage ties in the recent past (dependence on landlords ended at least two decades ago). Rather, prior to AAM's interventions, tribal populations had been left in a vacuum, squeezed between large scale economic changes that removed traditional sources of security and the absence of the – albeit limited – welfare of the state. The AAM was able to use 'moral economy' arguments of state responsibility to mobilize the poorest groups and demand accountability from the state.

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 period from 1977–2011, the moral economy has been always framed by expectations from 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, as we saw, were in the provision of wheat grains for those above the poverty line (APL) which led to the spontaneous protests.

In this context, where the state accepts responsibilities to address food insecurity, the role of the Public Distribution System (PDS) looms large. The PDS, by providing subsidized basic grains and fuel (even when functioning poorly), is viewed as the institution through which food security is to be ensured. This is so not only in the eyes of the poor, but also in the perceptions of the state, for whom intervening 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.

During (and slightly after) the period 2006–2011, there was a lot of policy action around food prices and food security. However, policy response during

this period has to be viewed 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. As one right to food activist put it:

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 subsidized and adequate cereals, pulses and cooking oil . . . that is why our response was in a comprehensive way in terms of a campaign for a FSA – a kind of guarantee.²⁰

In addition, 2009 was an election year during which issues of food had become politically salient. The whole period was characterized by the rise of a rights discourse, increasingly accepted by the government in power as part of realisable policy options.

The perceptions of policymakers 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 program, and partly because India's size and food production partially insulates it from world markets. A senior member of the Planning Commission noted, "in other countries the idea that world prices matter, that governments should do something about it is an issue, in India it is not."²¹ The implication was that India was less affected by food prices, but also that there was never any doubt that the government was responsible for securing affordable food. However, policy responses driven by Supreme Court orders did not automatically translate into action at the grassroots level: they had to be activated by campaign groups on the ground to mobilize people to make accountability demands. What some policymakers seem to argue is that the right to food campaign's mobilizing was perceived as more acceptable to the bureaucracy because the right to food campaign offered 'solutions' and worked on details of programs.

This observation held in our two state-level cases. In West Bengal, although there was some immediate response to the riots, there were few institutional responses – the riots did not trigger state-wide improvements to the PDS, and key responses are more properly seen as preparation for the forthcoming elections that were anticipated to be hotly contested. Neither did the opposition party, which used the mobilisation for its own political ambitions, offer policy changes to the PDS or other related food security programs. By contrast, in Madhya Pradesh, the responses in the form of improvements in the Integrated Child Development Scheme, the creation of nutrition rehabilitation centers and the better functioning of the PDS were institution- and state-wide. The implication is that the progressive responses by the state in Madhya Pradesh are also more sustainable.

Conclusions

Bohstedt argues that ‘politics of provisions’ – “the ways in which common people interacted with their rulers over subsistence, and that those interactions were permitted and shaped by pre-existing social and political networks, both among rioters and between them and their rulers” – help explain why faced with a crisis of subsistence (food), people riot (or not) and states respond (or not) (Bohstedt 2016: 1036). In this chapter, the Indian case develops the argument further, showing that the politics of provisions are thrown into light not just in periods of crisis, but also in ongoing conditions of chronic food insecurity. Food riots are not simply a response to hunger, but symbolize feelings about an unjust economic and political system that coalesce around the issue of food.

The contrasts between the two states reinforce arguments about the importance of political economy to social and state reactions to food insecurity. Different political opportunities and different local institutions resulted in different forms of mobilisation. In West Bengal, the ruling Left Front had addressed issues of subsistence over three decades of socialist rule and resulted in a deeply politicised welfare system; in Madhya Pradesh activists, in collaboration with the right to food campaign, were starting to make inroads into problems of malnutrition in a context where the state was sensitive to such pressure. And yet the broader political and economic imaginaries were the same in the two states as well as at the national level for both activists as well as policymakers. Ideas that India was not a price-taker in food markets; that the poor were defenseless against sudden price rises; that elected governments were vulnerable to protests if food became unaffordable were common currency in networks and negotiations between the right to food campaign as well as those responsible for PDS and food policy. The very existence and scale of the PDS over six decades shows that social protection policy was well entrenched in the visions of all political parties. The language of protest, campaigns and riots was well understood in the long trajectory of social movements in India since Independence. Collectively, the Indian political economy of food combined with the political popular imagination of responsibilities combine to explain a period of ongoing chronic food insecurity and rising prices set within a broader politics of provisions, which led to the National Food Security Act of 2014. Whether this Act delivers on its entitlement promises for all will depend upon continuous mobilisation and responses set within the changing political and economic context.

Notes

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- 2 The researchers had the privilege of access to the numerous grassroots organizations which constitute the Right to Food Campaign in India. Many of these organizations maintain a comprehensive database on food-related events in their area of activity. In addition, the team produced an event catalogue, mentioned in Chapter XX.
- 3 For details of each of the cases, see Sinha *et al.* 2014.
- 4 The 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.
- 5 From a focus group discussion with senior citizens in Bankura District, August 29, 2013.
- 6 From a focus group discussion with agricultural laboring women in Bankura District, August 29, 2013.
- 7 From a focus group discussion with protestors in Bankura district, August 29, 2013.
- 8 From a focus group discussion with landless indigenous people in Bankura district, August 29, 2013.
- 9 Interview with agricultural laborer and activist in Madhya Pradesh, June 15, 2013.
- 10 From a focus group discussion with activists in Madhya Pradesh, June 15, 2013.
- 11 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.
- 12 Interview with author, June 2013.
- 13 Personal interview, senior member Planning Commission, New Delhi, September 18, 2013.
- 14 What is notable is that the *only* short-term intervention of the Indian government to liquidate food stocks through the PDS came about in 2011, only after repeated directives from the Supreme Court, to release at least 5 million metric tons of food grains from the stockholding to the PDS. The orders were made in the context of media reports of rotting food grains in the government storage facilities even as inflationary pressures on food continued unabated.
- 15 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/2011-09-21/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; 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
- 16 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/2011-09-21/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; 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
- 17 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
- 18 This point was made repeatedly in focus group discussions in Satna, Madhya Pradesh.
- 19 The recent heated debate about definitions of the poverty line illustrate the extent to which poverty (including food security) and related relief programs are high-stakes issues.
- 20 Interview with author, June 2013.
- 21 Personal interview, senior member Planning Commission, New Delhi, September 18, 2013.

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