

Right to food ... incessant struggle

Demonstrating for the right to food

The picture of Minzi and Champo Bariha that hangs in my office calls for the urgency of making right to food a legal right in the country. Minzi Bariha, is a poor woman from Balangir, Orrissa who died of starvation. She is the fifth member of Bariha family who succumb to death in a period of three months

The alleged starvation deaths happening in various parts of the country have shoved a long standing struggle for a legal entitlement on the right to food. This, in fact, has been used as a political instrument in the recent elections by major political parties. The Congress lead UPA government also rose to power the second time around referring to an enactment of a law to address this concern

A lot of furore is now going on over the enactment of an act on the food right. The Empowered Group of Ministers (EGOM) came out with a minimalist draft which only talks about allocation of 25 kg of ration to all below the poverty line (BPL) families at three (3) rupees a kilo. It does not mention any other food related schemes like ICDS, MDM, and NOAPS etc; that already have been recognized as food entitlements by the Supreme Court.

The draft is objectionable for the National Right to Food Campaign (NRTFC), a body of civil society organizations and civil right activists fighting for a legal entitlement of the right to food.

The Dharana

The NRTFC hold a five-day demonstration-rally on 15-19 April 2010 expressing their vehement opposition with the content of the draft. The campaign comprised of diverse groups under its umbrella from different walks of social categories and corners of the country. A total of 2, 552 of its members, from 20 states, participated in this Dharana. Among distinguished personalities and civil rights activist present in the demonstration are former Chief Justice Justice Rajender Sachar, Senior Socialist leader Sh. Surendra Mohan, Magsaysay awardee Sandeep Pandey, and JNU Professor Anuradha Chenoy.

During the demonstration, Supreme Court lawyer Colin Gonsalvase, JNU Professor Jayati Ghosh, Supreme Court Special Commissioner on the Right to Food Case Shri Harsh Mander , and. Mr. D. Raja delivered inspirational speeches. They believe that the country have enough resources to afford the entitlements of the poor, the vulnerable, the disadvantaged and the marginalized who suffers from hunger and malnutrition. They also emphasized that the provision of mere 25 kilograms of rice is not going to solve the problem.

In the day to day progress of the demonstration, entertainment activities pact with activists' convictions, were undertaken. Singing plays, and puppet shows charged the

group's fervor on conveying their disappointments on the draft National Food Security Act (NFSA).

The demonstration-rally was permitted only in front of Jantar Mantar but members of NRTFC moved beyond the vicinity. They headed towards Indian Parliament House to express their hostility towards the draft NFSA.

Soon after pouring of sentiments and burning of the NFSA effigy the police forces stopped the rally. Around 200 protesters submitted to arrest. In the police station the protesters maintained their ardor; they kept their slogans and went on hearing speeches and singing sentimental songs. Astoundingly, they managed to involve the police forces inside the station. The policemen read the parchhas/ pamphlets distributed, listened to speeches, and enjoyed pondering on slogans.

The hallabhol staged by NRTFC members drew huge media attention which eventually placed pressure on government to rethink and rewrite the formulated draft NFSA.

Ms. Sonia Gandhi, UPA Chairperson and recently appointed head of the National Advisory Council (NAC), urged for the reformulation of the minimalist draft. This put hell-bent pressure to liberalization stalwart Dr. Montek Sing Ahaluwalia, Deputy Chairperson of the National Planning Commission, to accept the Tendulkar Committee Report which suggests that the government has to recognize that there are 37.2 percent of the country's estimated poor.

Consequently, Ms. Gandhi's stand towards the issue made an impact on the decision of EGOM headed by Finance Minister Mr. Pranab Mukherjee. They revised the draft document on NFSA. One of the most important revisions pertains to food-grain entitlement of BPL families: from the original plan of 25 kg per BPL family, it is increased to 35 kg. The revised draft also mentioned the coverage of the above poverty line (APL) families.

Clamors over the right to food

The distinguished speakers who addressed the protesters during the Dharana viewed that universalization of PDS is only solution to address the food insecurity in the country.

Representatives from Tamil Nadu even pushed for a lower price of food-grain (Rs. 3 of food-grain a kg is a loss for the resident of the State as they obtain PDS ration at Rs.1 per kg presently), and an adoption of transparency model that would be central in the implementation of the food-scheme.

Kavita Srivastava, General Secretary of PUCL and one of the leaders of the campaign on the right to food, condemned the plan of the government of Delhi to introduce a cash transfer system in-place of food-grain distribution in two districts of Delhi as pilot areas. She viewed it a dangerous move which will hamper the struggle for survival of the poor.

Madhuri Krishnaswamy, from Jagrit Advasi Dalit Sangathan (JADS) maligned the draft NFSA. He said that, the 'Act' when passed will dismantle the PDS system in the country. She put forth her demand that each individual should be entitled of 14 kg food-grain. Also, millets have to be included in the package of ration distributed under the PDS.

Meeting with the National Planning Commission

The demonstration-rally agenda included pressurizing Dr. Alhuwalia. They wanted to lay down to him their issues on the right to food personally, as, he had organized a special meeting to decide on the poverty estimation for the country.

To quote, Ms.Srivastava, "for NRTFC as far as food, health, work, education and social security are concerned the right entitlement has to be universal. With this view in mind it is essential to meet members of the Commission to convey this important argument", she asserted.

They rallied in an hour before the Deputy Chairperson of the Commission relented and sent two members of the Commission, Dr. Abhijit Sen and Dr. Syeda Hameed, to meet the protesters in front of the office. In a meeting with the Commission members, the protesters rejected the poverty estimation of the Tendulkar Committee and demanded for universal distribution of food-grain.

Dialogue with political parties

The Dharana concluded in a dialogue with political parties at the Constitution Club. It is aimed at seeking political parties stand on the issue and persuading them to take-up the 'Act' in the ongoing session of the parliament. Mr. Vinod Raina from Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) chaired the discussion with more than 200 people engaged in the dialogues,

Five party-representatives sat as panelists in the dialogue. They are Ms. Brinda Karat of CPI-M, Mr. Ali Anwar of JDU, Mr. Bardhan and Mr. D. Raja of CPI, Mr. Prakash Javdekar of BJP, and Mr. Dharendra Jha of CPI-ML. They were joined by Mr. Abhijit Sen, member of Planning Commission and Mr. Renato Maluf, President of Brazilian National Council for Food and Nutrition. The panelists overall perspective was in favor of NRTFC demands.

Next step

The Dharana, which gathered participation of people from many walks of life, particularly, of the daily wage laborers and the poor farmers, shows that the population of the marginalized majority of the nation is united towards getting an entitlement on the right to food.

One month has passed after the demonstration-rally. The government is yet to come up with a revised draft. According to the recent statement of the Union Agricultural Minister, Mr. Sarad Pawar, the NFSA is not coming out this year.

People may get tired of the government's promise for a legal entitlement on the right to food but they would willingly continue the fight until it is over... finally gain what they are entitled for.

-Sameet Panda-