

COVID-19 and National Food Security Act, (2013): Analysing experiences of food security in Assam, India

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Abstract

Availability, access, stability, and sustainability of food are four pillars of food security. In India, the pandemic has challenged these pillars, particularly for the most vulnerable and poor population. Scenes of empty shelves, long queues outside the fair price shops (FPS), community workers being jailed for questioning the siphoning of rice from the FPS stores, were widespread in the news channels and social media. They told of the anxieties surrounding glaring food shortages and supply lapses. The food security policy of India - National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA) - was supposed to take care of them. People were worried: Will and from where and how will the food come?

The key objective of the paper is to identify the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on the food security of women in the informal sector, within the broader context of the food security policy of the country. Data for this paper is drawn based on a primary survey in India. Theoretically, this paper examines how food is used to reimagine the social contract between the state and its citizens. Our findings suggest: Firstly, the state's decision of providing a few kilos of rice and pulses looks like an active and planned site of defining a dehumanised citizen, meant for large-scale governance policies. Secondly, there is a calculated attempt of the state to slowly do away with its' responsibility of distributing and delivering food, by shifting the task to non-government entities.

Keywords: Assam; COVID-19 lockdown; citizen; food relief packages; NFSA; NGOs

1. Introduction

A nationwide lockdown was implemented to tackle the first wave of COVID-19 on March 25, 2020¹ in India. This was one of the most stringent lockdowns in the world, seeing a complete shutdown of all forms of livelihood generation. Many of those livelihood avenues have completely disappeared. As a result, by the end of March 2020, a food crisis was brewing in India. In the north-eastern Indian state of Assam, where the study is located, the government announced 5 kg of rice per month per member to those without ration cards (Singh, 2020). This was part of the direct ration benefit scheme launched under food security policy of the country – National Food Security Act (2013), to mitigate challenges of complete lockdown during the first wave of COVID-19. But given India's weak food supply chain, these direct relief packages did not reach the desired hands. Nor did the additional free 5 kg of food grains reach those who had ration cards.

Availability, access, stability, and sustainability of food are four pillars of food security, as per the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) (World Food Summit, 1996). *Availability* of food in each country or household through any means (for example, production, import or food-aid); *access* to food by people or household through market purchases, own stock/home production, gifts, or borrowing; food utilisation, the actual processing and absorption capacity of the supplied nutrients by the body; *stability and sustainability* over time. COVID-19 has challenged these pillars, particularly for the most vulnerable and poor population. Scenes of empty shelves, long queues outside the fair price shops (FPS), community workers being jailed for questioning the siphoning of rice from the FPS stores, were widespread in the news channels and social media. They told of the anxieties surrounding glaring shortages and supply lapses, that was supposed to be solved through the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA). People were worried about the country's food infrastructure: Where and how will the food come from?

This piece builds on anthropological works, like Melissa Cladwell (2002), Neringa Klumblyte (2010), that examines food as not a neutral entity, but rather a fact intimately bound up with politics around production, supply and consumption of food. Affordable food has always been an important part of the social contract between the government and the citizens of India. The

¹ The lockdown starting from 25 March 2020 went on to 31 May 2020. Thereafter the lockdown remained for certain high risk ("containment zones"). In a steady process, of over sixteen phases sector wise "unlock" began.

NFSA was a culmination of this social contract that hinges on the universal right to food. In India, thus, the food contract goes beyond the question of merely universal affordability. Providing subsidised food and an abundant landscape of rights around food was a means through which the state gained legitimacy. Mentioned within NFSA are sections that demand that people of India should receive food security allowance in circumstances where food supply was disrupted. Secondly, that there should be transparency regarding how food is decided, procured, supplies and distributed. Thirdly, nutrition should be considered while deciding the food products to be subsidised within the NFSA.

On the ground, however, the NFSA had operational flaws. The first wave of COVID-19 infection and the following lockdown highlighted the issues. Firstly, as per the NFSA Chapter III, the state government should provide food security allowance when food supply is disrupted. During the COVID-lockdown when the disbursement of the regular food security benefits was irregular, the state should have opted for allowance as per NFSA. But it went on to announce direct food benefits despite being aware of the lopsided supply scene in the country. I argue thus that the state by deciding to provide some kilos of food grains, instead of the stipulated allowance, is dehumanising citizens by debarring them from availing their constitutional guarantees. Second, one could observe a diminishing role of the state and greater responsibility on the non-government entities to deliver food to the needy. This goes strictly against chapter VIII of the NFSA 2013, which clearly states that transportation and distribution of food grains will happen both through central and state governments and their agencies and not through any non-government parties. In the course of the paper, we will contextualise the NFSA and elaborate on my arguments.

2. A brief contextual note on NFSA

With a recommendation from the FAO, the Indian state had introduced the Public distribution system (PDS) with three categories of ration cards based on economic status: extreme poverty (Antyodaya), below the poverty level (BPL), above the poverty level (APL). On July 5, 2013, when the NFSA came into effect to ensure “food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live with a dignity” (GOI, 2013). It provided legal entitlement (or ‘right to food’) of subsidised food grain to 75 per cent of the rural population and 50 per cent of the urban

population of India. NFSA replaced PDS was replaced by the Targeted Public Distribution Scheme (TPDS) the APL and BPL categories were merged. It was decided that under TPDS the merged category will be entitled to 5 kg of food grains (wheat/rice/coarse grain) at a subsidised price. The Antodaya category under Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) remained as it is with beneficiaries receiving 35 kg of food grains per household at a subsidised price.

To an extent, as planned the PDS has been able to improve food security status and reducing poverty. At all Indian levels, the PDS has been estimated to reduce the poverty-gap index of rural areas by 18-22%. These figures are further encouraging in larger states with well-functioning PDS. Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh marked reduction of poverty gap as high as 39% and 57% respectively (Dreze and Khera, 2013). Particularly after being developed as TPDS, there is an increased purchase of subsidised grains recorded from fair-price shops and diversification of food baskets of poor households (Kishor and Chakrabarti, 2015). Thampi (2016) too underlined that TPDS was able to ensure dietary diversity and longer-term nutritional indicators. The NITI Ayog (2016) report underlines that TPDS was able to ensure more nutritional security to the Antodaya category.

Nonetheless, there is a long way for PDS to achieve the four pillars of food security. This is primarily due to large scale anomalies targeted within the TPDS scheme which weakens its effort. Khera (2011) and Gulati and Saini (2015) had referred to large scale leakages in the food distribution scheme. Khera had conducted her field data from Rajasthan, wherein there was low utilisation of the subsidised food grains and households were seen purchasing wheat from the market at higher prices before exhausting their subsidised quota. Under-purchase is mainly due to supply constraints. Gulati and Saini (2015) underlined that the per cent share of total leakage increased with states where the greater per cent of India's poor resided (five states of the Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal). Home to close to 60% of India's poor they accounted for close to 50% of total grain leakage. These disruptions in the supply chain had made many think that cash transfers are the way forward. Researches however have time and again proved that citizens prefer food over cash benefit, even where the supply chain is decent. Some amount of leakages are bearable it seems. (Muralidharan, Niehaus, Sukhtankar, 2011; Chanchani, 2017). In tribal areas of Uttar Pradesh, TPDS has not helped to provide food security to the vulnerable household in absence of assured regular income (Shankar, 2004). Others pointed out that while subsidies did change the consumption pattern it does not have any effect on nutrition measured by per capita calorie intake, per capita

protein intake, and per capita fat intake hinting (Kaushal and Muchomba, 2015). All these studies highlighted that even after revisions the current food subsidy scheme needs changes to be able to reach the NFSA goals.

The COVID-19 situation has further highlighted these anomalies. Studies like Ahmad (2021) and Boss, Pradhan, Roy and Saroj (2021) point out the issues of food security during COVID-19 arising from the malfunctioning of the NFSA. They question issues of eligibility and lack of commodity choices. None however show that analysing food security measures in COVID-19 does much more. It highlights the nature of the state and its citizens. This paper is an attempt to do so.

3. Methodology

Data for this paper is drawn based on the primary survey we conducted in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam. The survey was led by Assam based feminist organisation – the Women’s Leadership and Training Centre (WLTC). Co-ordinating the survey on behalf of the WLTC, we surveyed women working in a range of informal sectors – like poultry, animal husbandry, weaving, a domestic worker. The survey was limited to female workers of the informal sector as the pre-survey food relief drive suggested them to be the hardest hit of all. The absence of strong legislation (like flexible contracts and work hours) looking over the Indian informal sector were to be blamed. Even before the lockdown, these women were a vulnerable and underrepresented working group. They were paid low and income was highly insecure. These workers found it hard to meet their food needs (Gopichandran et al. 2010). The lockdown just exacerbated the situation.

Data was collected by 13 field researchers² across 14 districts³ of Assam between April to May 2020, for four weeks. A total of 244 responses were collected. Out of which around 25% of responses were from the Kamrup (Metro) district. Half of our respondents were married. 30% of our population were between the age group of 25-35. On average the household was four to six members. The survey aimed to put together information about how COVID-19 lockdown

² Anjuman Ara Begum, Asma Khatun, Bhaotina Mushahary, Hirmelim Beypi, Manjuwara Mullah, Mina Sutradhar, Nur Nasreen, Padumi Kalita, Rajida Kalita, Sanju Shaw, Shahida Khatin, Shahnaz Parvin, Silsila Das.

³ Kamrup (Metro), Kamrup (Rural), Barpeta, Karbi Anlong, Sonitpur, Kokrajhar, Darrang, Dhemaji, Udalguri, Golaghat, Chirang, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Dibrugarh

affected women located across age groups, marital status and geographies; within existing structural, social and economic vulnerabilities - wherein food security was one of the focus areas.

4. Findings

To identify the impact of COVID-19 lockdown concerning access to food, we asked three questions: (a) Was there enough food for the women and family? (b) Have they received any food support? (c) Where did they get food support?

The direct ration benefit scheme launched to manage COVID-lockdown was supposed to feed this section of the marginalised citizens. But as high as 80% of women in our survey responded about food shortages (Figure 1). There was just not enough food. Firstly they complained that the fair price shops did not have enough subsidised food for everyone like them. Secondly, even when there was information on food availability the strictness of the lockdown meant they were harassed when trying to avail any subsidised food. There are numerous cases of police harassing women when they stepped out of their houses to procure food. Women highlighted the additional burden of arranging food during the lockdown. Many were forced to forage food from the wild patches near their homes, as government schemes seemed distant. Foraging was additional work the women had to do in the event of sky-high prices of edibles during the lockdown (PTI, 2020). It was a choice between hunger and harassment for these women.

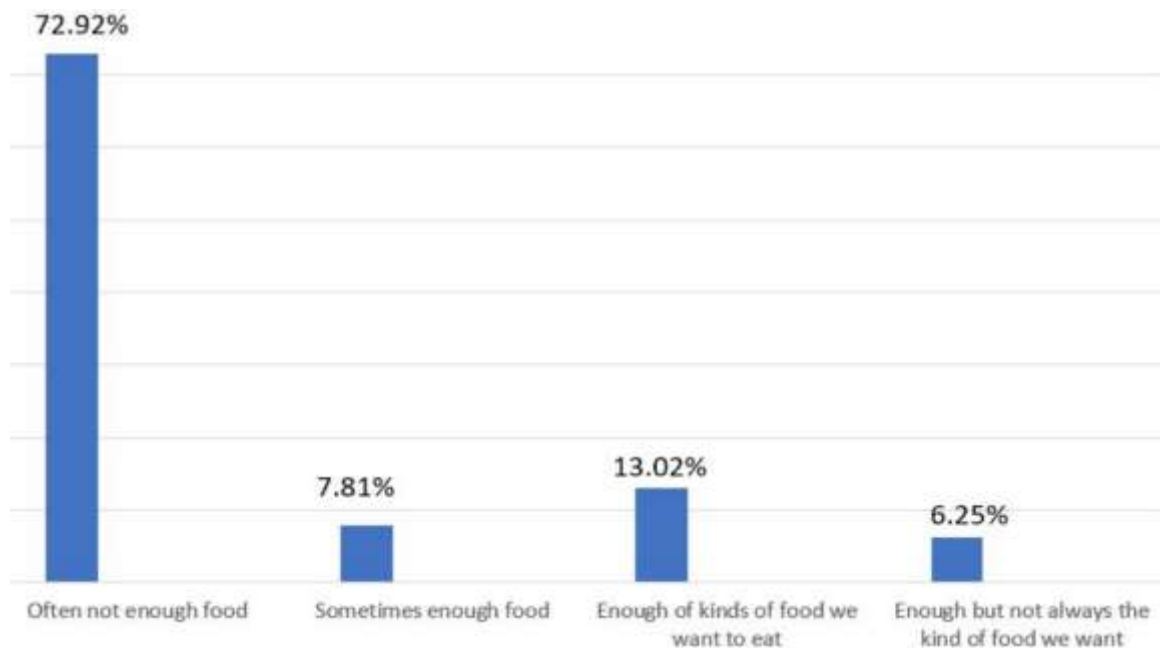


Figure 1: Availability of food

The food security services in Assam or the fair price shops were never efficient. Despite the prevailing TPDS and the newly announced direct food benefit, half of our respondents were dependent on civil society means to meet their food needs - the NGOs and community support (Figure 2). A major chunk of women, i.e. 19% were without any support whatsoever – be it government or non-government. None of them had a ration card. They were eligible for the COVID-19 special direct ration benefit but received nothing. Overall women pointed out the glaring food shortage. They felt that NGOs and community support can only provide additional help. It was the government’s job to provide food security. As providers of food, women were left in severe distress.

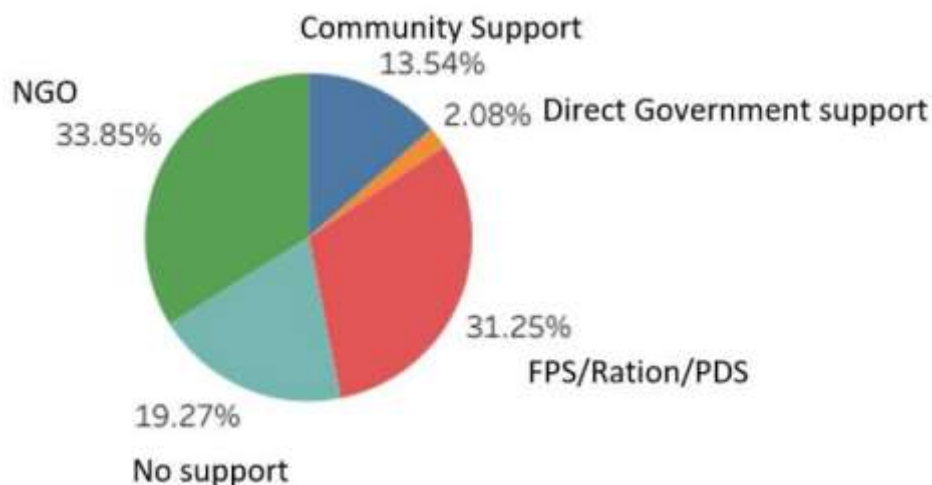


Figure 2: Sources of food supply

5. Analysis

a. Food relief and the dehumanised citizen

“But what about cooking oil? Spices? Vegetables? Milk for the child? Detergent? Do we have savings? How do we survive with just 5 kg of rice? Today I cooked jackfruit. Our neighbour gave it to me. I can cook another meal of jackfruit, but how many more? Does the government think that one can survive with just five kg of rice a month?” –

- *A respondent from Barpeta, Assam*

The state by deciding to provide some kilos of food grains, instead of allowance, is defining a standardized dehumanised citizen which is devoid of the ability to make choices. As noted scholar James Scott (1998: 346) outlines, the state machinery has always been defining generic subjects who “subjects who needed so many square feet of housing space, acres of farmland, litres of clean water, and units of transportation and so much food...”. These citizens have no idea of gender, tastes, history or opinions. Those building on Scott’s ideas like Martin Hall (2020) or Jeremie Sanchez (2020), also attested that the state’s imagination of its citizens was singularly abstract. The citizens should have no idea of tastes and needs. They are characterised by only those traits that the state deems relevant for their large-scale planning exercise. Such attempts at bracketing the population result in needless dehumanisation. It also goes against the very promise of NFSA which guaranteed that citizens would be allowed access to food that eventually will enable them “to live life with dignity” (GOI, 2013). Looking closely at the items given in the food relief packages illuminates how food is an everyday medium through which the state imagines its citizens.

The Indian state when ascertaining the COVID-19 food relief packages neglected the “absorption (nutrition)” component of food security underlined by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). They just gave a few kilos of rice and pulses. Social anthropologist

Graeme MacRae (2016) outlined that the state resonates with the view shared by multinational food corporations, like the World Bank, that the only realistic way to deal with food scarcity is through large-scale, high-tech and input-invasive methods. These processes come under the umbrella term of food security. Instead, of working with the idea of food sovereignty. The latter is a bottom-up approach to tackle food needs, that relies on understanding the specific food cultures and building agricultural systems towards supporting these food cultures, shared by target vulnerable communities and built on foundations of local and practical knowledge. Advocating the idea of food security, the Indian state categorises its vulnerable population as those who could sustain through the paltry amount of rice and pulses. The culinary imagination of its citizens by the state falls short on the ground. It stands in complete opposition to what our study has seen on the ground. “*We cannot just eat rice, can we? It is just not enough. I will go looking for some ferns*”, said one of our respondents. Studies in Bihar, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh too have reported that direct food benefits during COVID have been inadequate (Boss, Pradhan, Roy and Saroj, 2021)

A cursory look at the food security measures highlights how the Indian state perceives its vulnerable citizen as dehumanised abstracted citizens. A case in point is the falling per capita calorie intake for the rural population from 2240 kcal per day to 2047 kcal per day and the urban population from 2070 kcal per day to 2021 kcal per day, from 1983 to 2004-05. This is much less than the norm of 2400 calories in rural areas and 2100 in urban areas. In the same period, per capita, protein consumption declined from 63.5 grams to 55.8 grams per day in rural areas and 58.1 grams to 55.4 grams in urban areas (Suryanarayan, 1996). All of the above metrics are decided by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). Another case would be the falling rank of India in the Global Hunger Index (GHI), which captures three dimensions of hunger – insufficient availability of food, shortfalls in the nutritional status of children and child mortality. The 2021 GHI score of India has slipped from 94 to 101 rank amongst 132 countries, clearly faltering on the FAO principles India aspired to follow by introducing the NFSA.

As anthropologist Samson Bezabeh (2011) argues such patterns of marking and dehumanisation are rooted in the logic of the modern nation-state. These dehumanisation practices are part of the ongoing negotiations and contestations that produce and maintain statehood all over the world. They occur through various institutionalisation and social

relations involved in them. In this case, we see it as how it pans out in the provision of food security.

b. State responsibilities versus NGO goals

Unlike others, I do not have a ration card. I did not receive the 1000 rupees government was supposed to give us. No sight of the five kilograms of rice from the government. Someone in the contractor might have taken our share, who knows. Like always. The government should take care. They are the ones to lock the country. They should also be the ones to provide food. An NGO gave us a one-time food package of rice, pulses, soybean, sugar, mustard oil, biscuits etc. Many like us are dependent on such NGO packages to survive now. The PDS shopkeeper says he has no idea about my share of rice. But, how long can we sustain on packages of NGO? They come on occasionally. Hunger is permanent. If the lockdown continues, I am sure we will die not out of the disease but hunger. I do not know about others but surely, we cannot manage any longer without regular government assistance!

- *A respondent from Sonitpur, Assam*

Second, the state is relying on non-governmental organisations to feed the poor. This goes against Section 12 of the NFSA which aimed for shifting management of the food distribution from private owners to public bodies such as women's bodies under the TPDS. The responsibilities seem to have already shifted given our survey revealed that 33.85% of women relied on NGOs for providing food during the lockdown. Various newspapers had also reported that when the state was unable to provide any food to the vulnerable during the initial period of lockdown, it was the NGOs who stepped up to provide relief (Mazumdar, 2020). In fact, in some regions, NGOs had outperformed the government in feeding the vulnerable (SRD, 2021).

The long history of the takeover of various socioeconomic activities by NGOs for the vulnerable population – including food, education, microcredit and so on – has led to a situation in which the government can avoid its obligation to deliver food security services to the vulnerable communities. This primarily has to do with the post-cold war era developments that saw the rise of the market-based neoliberal ideology that tends to de-emphasize the role of the state and highlight the role of non-state actors. Political scientists, like John Clarke (1995), Shamsul Haque (2020) have shown that neoliberal beliefs in market-led solutions, less state

intervention and a greater role for non-state actors have considerably increased the reliance of developing countries on NGOs. Elsewhere regarding North-Eastern India, it had pointed out that that inadequacy with state services strengthen the rationale for partnership with NGOs to deliver basic services (Das, 2019).

This trend towards replacing the obligations and responsibilities of government with those of NGOs has adverse implications for the rights of citizens towards basic services. It also points to a direction where the social contract between the state and citizens is being redrafted due to the expanding role of NGOs replacing the state's obligation to deliver even essential services. Earlier, the vulnerable population had the right to hold public servants responsible, now this ability is only limited to paper. Instead, they have to rely on the charity or goodwill of the NGO. It seems as if the rights of the people are steadily replaced by charity or goodwill. That the state was mulling to rely on NGOs for lack of better food relief distribution highlights the growing capillaries of the non-state actors (Hazarika, 2020).

This excessive dependence on NGOs however means that society has to rely more on stop-gap measures substituting the much-needed structural changes. Sociologist James Petras (1997) had written how in countries like Bolivia, Chile, Brazil and El Salvador the coming of international NGOs have reduced government accountability on one hand, and pursuing a neo-liberal role to commercialise and depoliticise the public. Political scientist Julie Hearn (1998) underlines the long term dependence of the Kenyan state on NGOs for its health services. By placing excessive importance on NGOs, citizens are made to ask for social welfare. There is a depoliticization of the public and push towards a pro-market agenda. They disunite people into receivers and non-receivers of credit, relief and so on.

The shift privileges interest of the particular (individual or specific group) over the well-being of the general. For the state, the development goals are for the wider society, but for the NGOs it community-specific. For the latter, certain fortunate communities may experience an improvement in their living standards, here food security, while the rest of the society remains stagnant. Fragmentation is thus built into the NGO goals, with the provision of services or attempt to equity. NGO goals are targeted for survival, which goes against the very promise of the NFSA that promises a dignified life for all.

6. Ending thoughts

Fearing another lockdown in the coming weeks due to the third wave, some of our respondents still await the food packages government had announced in the first wave of infections year. In between news of food contractors siphoning of food meant for COVID-19 quarantine facilities, have further crushed their spirit. Their 'right to food' enshrined in the NFSA 2013 looks non-functional.

The lockdown more glaringly revealed that in terms of food relief government supply systems are broken and NGOs are not entitled enough to provide for everyone. Anxieties about food and hunger prevail. This anxiety about food is part of the more generalised anxiety that the government does not care about the vulnerable anymore. Years of broken political promises add to this anxiety. The handling of the food relief packages just made it obvious. As such food emerges as an everyday medium through which imaginations and ideologies of the state are articulated and circulated.

Women in our study tried to meet their food needs through the support of other women, within the family and otherwise. Community foraging also became the central means to feed themselves and their family. Wild food, like varied ferns and stems, which otherwise is seen as unpalatable, developed as an alternate local food system. In these performances of solidarity, sharing food was important. Emerging from the common experience of vulnerability, they were necessary for women to defend themselves against exploitative and numbing conditions of the pandemic. Their ways are marked with resourcefulness, openness, and responsiveness to healing modes. But these solidarities can only do so much. They are limited in character. The only way out was to hold the state accountable. As economist Jean Dreze (2018) outlines, for policies to be successful on the ground the state must listen more to its citizens. This is much in line with what James Scott (1998) propounded years ago, that the only way towards owing its responsibility, successful governance and reducing dehumanisation is by developing the spirit of mutuality. Mutuality will allow taking into cognizance the views of the common citizens. In this case, it will enable a bottom-up approach of understanding the specific food cultures and building agricultural systems towards supporting these food cultures, shared by vulnerable communities and built on foundations of local and practical knowledge. Perhaps why within the country, a state like Kerala, by exercising its' federal rights did a better job managing the food crisis. Precisely because it tried to take into account the needs of the target population (Poathan, Taguchi and Santini, 2020). It did so by decentralising power and finances, which enabled the local self-government institutions to think and plan effectively at ground

level. The Kerala model of tackling COVID-19 showed us that it requires proactive steps by the state to keep the marginalised from starving. For the civic bodies can do only so much. They are ancillary agents and cannot be made responsible for ensuring food security.

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