

Poll gimmick vs ‘revolutionary scheme’: Bengal politics centres around food subsidy

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee last July announced that her government would sell subsidised food grains under the centrally-funded National Food Security Act (NFSA).

Written by [Sarah Hafeez](#) | Bankura | Updated: May 14, 2016 7:37 pm

Url: <http://indianexpress.com/article/elections-2016/india/india-news-india/food-subsidy-bengal-elections-2016-mamata-banerjee-narendra-modi-2800204/>

If Bablu Kha were richer like the others around him, he rues, he would have sold the monthly 5 kilograms of rice bought at Rs. 2/kg for Rs. 12 each in the open market. His friends Madhusudan and Kalikinkar quietly listen on.

Seated at Kalikinkar Songiri’s little kirana shop in Sanbandha village, off Bankura Town, the men discuss the government’s recently introduced rice scheme. Those who consume the higher quality Banskati and Ratna rice varieties are selling off subsidised rations for profits or feeding their cattle the same, Kalikinkar says.

“Look, we do not sell rice in the open market. We consume our 5 kgs of subsidised rice per person and then we buy rice at market rates for the remainder of the month. Initially, the subsidised rice was of the cheaper and poorer quality, the Rs 16/kg Sarna variety, which we usually use as cattle feed. We took it to the BDO in a polythene bag and he said he would do something about it. Now we are getting the kind of rice we can come around eating. Now there are no problems,” says 60-year-old Madhusudan Tripathi, from a family of monied ration dealers.

This time Bablu, from a family of oil pressers of the backward Teli caste, fidgets with his bicycle bell.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee last July announced that her government would sell subsidised food grains under the centrally-funded National Food Security Act (NFSA). The central funds cover around 6 crore people or roughly 67 per cent of the state’s 9.2 crore population. Banerjee, however, announced that she would pay for an additional 1.7 crore people excluded from the NFSA list including the APL (Above Poverty Line) category. The move is estimated to cost the state exchequer Rs 2000 crore annually.

The state opposition has been constantly harping about the move being a populist election gimmick.

“Mamata Banerjee opposed the NFSA when the UPA II passed it in 2011. Now all of a sudden she has implemented it. And especially when the state is reeling under a financial crisis of her making for so long now,” said Amia Patra, CPI(M) state secretariat member and candidate contesting from the Taldangra seat in Bankura.



“Mamata Banerjee opposed the NFSA when the UPA II passed it in 2011. Now all of a sudden she has implemented it,” said Amia Patra, CPI(M) state secretariat member. (Express Photo: Partha Paul)

Jyotipriyo Mullick, Food and Supplies Minister, told [The Indian Express](#), “This was not done keeping in mind the elections. We had been planning it for a long time.”

Mullick also admitted that people had been selling off subsidised rations at market rates, making money off the food scheme which was rolled out this January.

“Their morals should answer for them. What can we do about something like this? It is really sad.”

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has been taking digs at Mamata Banerjee in all his public speeches in West Bengal.

“The Centre has been providing a subsidy of Rs 27 per kg for the poor in West Bengal but Didi is taking all the credit,” he said. But the rice scheme has also come to become the locus for local politics, Banerjee’s move generating immense confusion with the potential to trigger ration riots like the ones that had broken out against the Left Front government in 2007 which claimed 6 lives and left around 300 others injured across Burdwan, Bankura and Birbhum districts.

Banerjee, in fact, alleged that the CPI(M) has been inciting and misleading people over the distribution of digital cards and ration dealers, many erstwhile supporters of the CPI(M), have been helping aggravate the problem. The CPI(M) government back

then had similarly alleged that the TMC had incited people against ration dealers accusing them of hoarding and stealing rations.

Ration dealers in Bankura were mobbed in February when people without digital cards, the newly introduced e-ration cards mandated by the NFSA, demanded their rations. Around 11 lakh ration card holders in Bankura alone have not yet received their digital ration cards.



Ration dealers in Bankura were mobbed in February when people without digital cards, the newly introduced e-ration cards mandated by the NFSA, demanded their rations. (Express Photo by Partha Paul)

“It was all because of the sudden announcement made by the Chief Minister informing people that the subsidised food scheme will be open to everybody. The next day people who have not yet been issued their digital cards mobbed me and my fellow shop owner Nisith Mukherjee. They demanded subsidised rice despite us reasoning with them that we could not do so because we had been sanctioned rations only for those with the digital cards. The people called the police and the matter was so tense that the police advised us to shut shop,” ration dealer Rajesh Ghorai, who mans a large store a little distance from Kalikinkar Songiri’s kirana shop.

Riotous situations broke out all across Bankura in the last few months. All 1,119 ration dealers across Bankura shut shops early February in protest against attacks on them and their businesses till the government pacified them, Gurupada Dhank, secretary of Bankura Ration Dealers’ Association said. The CM announced rice for almost everyone but distribution of digital cards needed to redeem the rice did not keep pace with her hurried announcements.

So nervous has the ruling party been about the backlash and resentment with weeks to go before the elections, that Banerjee quickly intervened and announced that those without digital cards could use their old ration cards for the time being. The government also called for applications from those whose names or addresses were

incorrectly recorded on digital cards and those economically weaker persons whose names were absent from the rolls.

“We have been told to be in constant touch with the ration dealers and explain how to deal with problems arising out of the new scheme. We are also training and teaching them to be polite to customers and patiently answer all queries regarding the scheme. The food security scheme is a noble and revolutionary one. It will take a couple of months to stabilise into functioning smoothly,” Shiv Narayan Pani, District Controller, Food and Supplies, Bankura told The Indian Express.