

## ***Amma Unavagams* of Tamil Nadu Panacea for Urban Food Insecurity?**

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The Tamil Nadu state government has started 283 subsidised restaurants – *amma unavagams* – in nine urban centres. This initiative has been a hit with a wide spectrum of urban consumers. However, the majority of the patrons seem to be the working urban poor. These initiatives have been accused of being “populist” but this model of providing affordable cooked food in urban areas promises to not only ensure food security but also keep food prices in check.

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The launch of *amma unavagams* (restaurants) is yet another – populist – low-budget social welfare move by the Government of Tamil Nadu to reduce urban poverty in the jurisdiction of municipal corporations. Though Tamil Nadu is under the moderately developed state category in terms of economic development, the extent of population below the poverty line (BPL) continues to haunt policymakers. Due to rural distress and the availability of jobs in the urban areas people continue to migrate to urban areas in search of employment in the unorganised sector. In fact, as per the 2011 Census Tamil Nadu’s urban population grew faster than its rural population. A majority of the migrant and unskilled workers in the metropolitan municipalities lack basic amenities including housing, sanitation, safe drinking water and food at affordable prices. This warrants a concerted effort to tackle

urban poverty and the *amma unavagams* provide subsidised food as succour to urban poor.

*Amma unavagams* were initiated primarily to feed the urban poor with subsidised food. In municipal corporation areas a cross section of unskilled workers, students, floating population, itinerants, domestic workers, pavement and street vendors constitute a sizeable population, who earn meagre incomes and find it difficult to spend a considerable portion on food. Expectedly, *amma unavagams*, run by nine municipal corporations, in Tamil Nadu demonstrate that it is a successful anti-poverty initiative. Tamil Nadu is a pioneer in food security through an effective public distribution system, mid-day meals for schoolchildren, and nutritious food for pregnant women. This state introduced noon-meal scheme to schoolgoing children way back in the 1950s, which helped increase school enrolment, improved the health status of children and enhanced the retention rate. It has been acclaimed as an innovative model to strengthen school education. During the same period, Sarojini Varadappan, daughter of the former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, M Bakthavatsalam, set up

*annapoorna cafeterias* (non-profit outlets) to feed the urban poor at cheap rates in Chennai (then Madras) during the 1950s. This initiative was widely appreciated.

The amma unavagam was inaugurated on 19 February 2013 at the Chennai Corporation and now there are 200 such food courts functioning in the corporation area. Two months later, in April 2013 amma cafeterias were set up in eight other municipal corporations in the state and each of these corporations has a minimum of 10, with a total of 283 across the state. These restaurants provide hygienic, affordable and appetising food items from 7 am to 10 pm. The urban middle class including information technology workers and the poor are regular customers.

### Low Cost Food

Food such as idli, sambar rice, tomato rice, curd rice, pongal, *kariveppilai* (curry leaf) rice and chapati along with required side dishes, like chutneys, pickles and sambar are served. Realising the potential market, the Coimbatore municipal corporation has been attempting to provide food prepared on ayurvedic formulations. In the morning idli, dosa, pongal and chapati are provided with chutney and sambar and for lunch, sambar rice, curd rice, lemon rice and *kariveppilai* rice are provided at subsidised rates. In these amma unavagams one idli is sold at Re 1, curd rice at Rs 3 and sambar rice at Rs 5. In a modest restaurant in Chennai these items would cost around Rs 12, Rs 40 and Rs 60, respectively. Amma unavagam outlets serve two lakh urban poor in Chennai alone and the number of customers is growing rapidly, which indicates that there is a possibility to scale it up in the coming days.

A rough estimate<sup>1</sup> indicates that about 10% of the total population and 20% of BPL population of Chennai municipal corporation has been covered every day under this ambitious anti-poverty social welfare programme. A visit to outlets in Salem municipal corporation in central Tamil Nadu shows that often the food is insufficient to meet the demand, especially in the morning and in the

afternoon. This is mainly due to the fact that the small municipal corporations (such as Salem and Tirunelveli) have not taken this up on a large scale to meet the growing demand from customers. A parcel service of supplying food items in these food courts is discouraged as there is already a high demand for in-house self-service on the premises.

A quick survey<sup>2</sup> of the visitors to amma unavagams in Salem municipal corporation in October 2013 shows that 30% of the respondents were between 31 years and 40 years of age; 88% are male; 58% fall in the monthly income bracket of Rs 5,001-10,000; 35% visit these food courts four to six days a week; 75% said that quality food is supplied; 44% revealed drinking water is good and 58% reported that the restaurants are clean. All these show that amma unavagams attract customers on a large scale in urban areas.

### Fringe Benefits

Notably, those who reside close to amma restaurants also flock to have food as it is cheap and tasty. Food items in many outlets are quickly sold out due to the ever increasing demand. Realising the growing market demand at these outlets, some private hotels have slashed prices for various food items, which reveals that amma unavagams offer stiff competition and create other benefits. At the same time, petty eateries run by local vendors have been affected and some of them, located near amma unavagams, were shut down for want of customers. Though the municipal authorities are keen to start new outlets for amma unavagams, space is proving to be a major constraint. It is a Herculean task to identify space in a crowded metropolitan area. In addition to cater to the needy, this programme also educates and promotes hygienic practices like washing hands before eating and it is all the more important for people working in the automobile industry and street vendors. Billboards at the entry level of the food courts advise the customers to leave their footwear outside the canteen to maintain hygiene.

The Coimbatore municipal corporation aims to provide all kitchen implements,

provisions and items to women self-help groups (SHGs) to start canteens. In addition to providing regular foodstuff, for the first time it initiated a three-day training on ayurvedic food preparation. After constructing the building, the outlets would provide various ayurvedic food items. These food items are claimed to have ayurvedic medicinal properties to cure diseases like joint pain, cold, cough and nerve disorders. There has been increasing health consciousness among urban population and obviously growing demand for these food items. Here, food products made with minor millets, which are nutritious, are to be served. The corporation will rent out the premises to the SHG, whose members will pay back the kitchen implements' costs and provisions in 12 instalments to the corporation.

In Chennai alone in one day around Rs 14 lakh is spent, with a lion's share of Rs 8.5 lakh as wages to labour, Rs 3.25 lakh for other components, Rs 2.25 lakh for fuel charges and Rs 12,000 for rice and Rs 9 lakh is earned as income. In each canteen 12 to 16 workers along with a supervisor have been employed with average wages of Rs 300 a day. Rice-based food items are subsidised by 50% of the cost of production. This is somewhat offset as rice is supplied at just Re 1 per kg by the Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation for amma unavagams. The required quantity of rice is supplied once in a fortnight. Similarly, pulses (black gram, red gram and green gram) and edible oil are also supplied at subsidised rates and on a daily basis vegetables for sambar and other purposes are procured either from the open market or from cooperative stores. The recently-launched Farm Fresh outlets, which sell fruits and vegetables on a cooperative framework,<sup>3</sup> also supply vegetables. The mobile outlets of Farm Fresh in Chennai corporation area may be utilised for

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quick and economical procurement and transportation of vegetables. Nevertheless, a whopping 50% of the total cost of production of food item is borne by municipal corporations.

### Reaching the Poor

A cursory look at the sales points reveals that the locations with high concentration of slum population had more sales. Amma cafeterias located in Ambattur, an industrial belt, as well as Teynampet and Kodambakkam, which have higher slum populations, catered to the maximum number of consumers in Chennai. The Tamil Nadu chief minister after noticing the popularity of amma canteens wants to increase the number of outlets to 1,000, increasing the cost to Rs 90 crore. It is understood that the chief minister is firm about maintaining quality, hygiene and low prices of food. At present this ambitious programme is managed and funded by the municipal corporations. To sustain this in the long run, a separate administrative wing may need to be established.

Currently, Tamil Nadu allocates Rs 5,000 crore to urban local bodies and the burden is not difficult to cope with. Nevertheless, strong political will is essential to take this scheme forward in a sustained manner. While some characterise this as a novel anti-poverty programme that ensures food security in urban areas, others contend that it is vote bank politics (i.e., in lieu of the elections in 2014). Perhaps supplying cooked food could reduce the pilferage and wastage through effective monitoring that is essential to maintain hygiene and reduce malpractice. There are reports that at times of political party caucuses (irrespective of party affiliation) in municipal corporation areas, food items from these cafeterias have been supplied on a larger scale, thereby, denying food to regular customers. Already a five-member committee from the municipal corporations monitors the food quality and this regulation needs to be intensified.

### Also Water

Besides amma unavagams, another popular scheme of the present Tamil Nadu

state government, *amma neer* (bottled water), is also gaining momentum. On 15 September 2013, the chief minister launched the sale of bottled water marketed by the state transport department.<sup>4</sup> A litre bottle of amma neer is sold at Rs 10 in major bus stands. Indeed, it is expected to give stiff competition to private players for price stabilisation. Nonetheless, there have been huge gaps between demand and supply as within 10 minutes of launching the amma neer, it was sold out in major bus stands. Since this is marketed by the state, the public seems to have faith on the quality of water and the price. When the Delhi-based advocacy organisation, Centre for Science and Environment made its laboratory analysis public in 2002 almost all the major brands in the packaged drinking water segment showed pesticide residues. Followed by this, there was heated debate in Parliament but there has been no scientific regulation of this business or fixing of standards. In this context the Tamil Nadu government's initiative seems to be in the interest of the public. It has been reported that the subsidised amma neer would be distributed shortly through the amma food courts.

Providing affordable food to the poor is the responsibility of the state and in the present case the state government has taken a proactive initiative in ensuring

food security. At the same time it is the responsibility of the state to ascertain that good governance prevails in this ambitious programme with clean administration and zero pilferage. Also, authorities should make frequent visits to ensure quality of food and hygienic conditions in the canteen premises. Being subsidised, supply of food items may not have sufficient economic rationale, but as the urban poor who are unable to allocate enough resources for food are benefited. While it has been largely welcomed in the state, some argue that instead of subsidising and supplying food, more employment opportunities should be created to increase incomes and the purchasing power of the urban poor instead.

### NOTES

- 1 In Tamil Nadu 38% of urban population is reported as BPL and this figure may be more in slums of larger cities like Chennai.
- 2 S Thangamani and M Maragatham (2013): "A Study on the Performance of Amma Unavagams in Salem Municipal Corporation", paper presented at the seminar organised by the Planning Forum, Department of Economics, Periyar University on 18 October.
- 3 The present government through its department of cooperation, food and consumer protection with an intention of reducing "price spread" in vegetables and fruits set up 29 Farm Fresh outlets in the Chennai municipal corporation limits and the dividend is encouraging.
- 4 The state government is engaged in processing and bottling the amma neer in the transport department. This department through its outlets in bus stations markets the packaged water.

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