



Right to Food Campaign

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Instead of export, foodgrains must be used for ensuring food security of Indians

As the surge of Covid-19 continues and spreads to rural areas, along with lockdowns in most parts of the country, we are once again witnessing severe economic distress amongst people, especially informal sector workers in both urban and rural areas. The situation is even worse this time, compared to last year, as the burden of healthcare expenses is also high, many more people are dealing with illness in the household and this has come at the back of a year of slowdown, job loss and declining wages. The livelihood and food security crisis facing the poor and informal sector workers across the country has been completely invisibilised with hardly any special packages being announced towards supporting them in this time of crisis. While on the one hand the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKAY) has been announced covering only those who are already included under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and that too for only two months (May and June), the government's apathy towards people has been thoroughly exposed by the fact that this year has seen record exports of foodgrains.

News reports indicate that 13.09 mt non-basmati rice, 4.63 mt basmati rice and 2.09 mt wheat was exported in 2020-21, a year when millions of Indians faced a situation of hunger and food insecurity, reducing the quantity and quality of food they consumed. Had these exports been used for distribution among people through the PDS, over 25 crore people could have been given 5 kg a month for a whole year (excluding the basmati rice)! Based on the data given by Harish Damodaran in the Indian Express, 13.09 mt of non-basmati rice was exported for Rs 35,448.24 crore, therefore at the rate of about Rs. 27 per kg, which is even lower than the FCI's economic cost of rice (currently around Rs. 37/kg). The Right to Food campaign condemns such export of foodgrain when the people of the country are facing acute shortage of food.

It is further appalling, that there is yet no announcement for universalisation of the PDS and extension of the PMGKAY for a longer period even as it is becoming clear that the pandemic and its effects are going to last for some time. The foodgrain stocks in the FCI godowns are once again at a record high of over 100 million tonnes (including rice, wheat, unmilled paddy and millets). It is becoming quite apparent that the government does not care about filling the stomachs of the hungry in the country, and is happy to rather export the grains or use them for other purposes (like it was done for ethanol production last year).

It is because of the system of public procurement and MSP that today there is sufficient production of foodgrains that can be used for maintaining food security for all even in such times of crisis. For this, we have to thank the farmers of this country and join them in their struggle against the new farm laws and for strengthening this system of public procurement. On the other hand, the government's policies which are on the one hand threatening to take away this minimum support from the farmers, while on the other refusing to come forward to ensure the right to food for all must be resisted.

We demand an immediate universalization of the PDS and distribution of additional 5 kg of foodgrains per person and 1.5 kg of pulses and 800 gm cooking oil under the PDS with its expansion (while enhancing Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana). This should be continued for a period of at least six months.

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(On behalf of the Steering Committee of Right to Food Campaign)