

Right to Food, Food Security and Discrimination in the Indian Context

Jona Aravind Dohrmann and Sukhadeo Thorat

Summary

The right to food is a much-debated issue throughout the world. This paper shows how India has accepted the concept of a right to food through its constitution, its legislation and court decisions that give the broadest legal meaning to this indispensable human right. At the practical level, India has achieved independence regarding its food supply and is even able to export excess food grain today. Debatable policies have led to the accumulation of food stock, while at the same time most of the undernourished in the world live in India. Another aspect aggravates the situation of the needy: discrimination against certain sections of society. Part of this paper is based on a survey conducted by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies that highlights the specific discrimination Dalits have to face when trying to avail themselves of government schemes such as the "mid-day meal scheme" or the public distribution system. The discrimination of Dalits varies from region to region. In a nutshell, the paper suggests that even though the legal framework and the means of producing sufficient food may be available, this does not mean that food is actually secured for everyone. It requires the political and societal will of various stakeholders to overcome the discriminatory situation in order to give the right to food a real meaning. NGOs may play a vital role in this process to abolish "hunger amidst plenty".

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The Problem facing the country today is not one of shortage of food grains but of managing the surplus (Planning Commission of India, *10th Five Year Plan*¹).

1 Introduction

India is a country which is commonly attributed to starvation and distress, not a country of plenty. According to FAO-(Food and Agricultural Organisation-)figures, India still is home to the largest number of malnourished people in the world. The Planning Commission of India announced in its tenth Five Year Plan that the state is holding food grains surplus in its storehouses, as monsoons were good and the agricultural methods have been improved. But on a more cautious note the Commission adds, that:

¹ *10th Five Year Plan*, Chapter 3.4 (Public Distribution System), downloaded on 25th October 2006 from: http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/10th/volume2/v2_ch3_4.pdf.