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Social Protection Programmes in India: An Overview of Recent Experiences with Different Types of Schemes

Jayati Ghosh

The social protection floor is envisaged as an integrated set of social policies designed to guarantee income security and access to essential social services for all, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups and protecting and empowering people across the life cycle. Several of these elements include the basic social and economic rights of citizens. Therefore, classing them as ‘social protection’ rather than as duties of the state, may be misleading. In India, the recognition that these are rights has been belated, in a broader context in which relatively rapid economic growth over nearly three decades has been associated with inadequate employment generation, continuing poor nutrition indicators and very little provision of basic social security. This recognition has led to a series of recent legislations, which attempt to ensure universal – or at least extensive – coverage in order to achieve some rights, including the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 in partial recognition of the right to work; the Right to Education Act 2009; and the Right to Food Act 2013.

Two specific interventions are discussed in this paper: the rural employment guarantee and the public food procurement and distribution system. These were not put in place only because of decisions made at the top; rather they were

outcomes of often prolonged pressure from below and systematic lobbying by activists and social movements. While this analysis is at the All-India level, there is wide regional variation since state governments play an important role in the organisation and delivery of all such schemes.

Rural employment guarantee

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is a historic legislation based on two interlinked goals. First, ensuring livelihood security to rural residents by providing up to one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Second, using the programme to mobilise existing surplus labour in the countryside, to unleash productive forces and generate more economic growth in the rural areas.

These features are complemented by a rights-based approach, whereby employment seen as a right of the

citizen that must be delivered by the state. This involves a crucial reversal of the underlying basis of public delivery in India, which has mostly been driven by a paternalistic view of the state as delivering “gifts” to the people.

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Currently, it operates in rural blocks of 644 districts. At its peak in 2010-11, it covered more than 55 million rural households (around one-third of all rural households), generating 2.6 billion person days of employment in that year. The programme is large, but it has been unevenly implemented across states and recently has faced waning interest from the central government. The peak years of MNREGA performance in terms of both financial and employment indicators were 2009-10 and 2010-11; since then, there has generally been a decline (Ghosh 2014). It is a relatively inexpensive programme: even at its peak, total spending on it was less than 1% of GDP, and currently, it accounts for less than 0.5% of GDP.

The programme works as follows (MORD 2013). Adult members of all rural households willing to do unskilled manual work must apply for registration with the local Gram Panchayat (lowest level elected body). Each household is entitled to 100 days of employment per year, although the programme has provided only 40-50 days of employment per household each year so far. The registered household is issued a job card. A written application for work forms the basis for the guarantee of providing employment within 15 days. If this is not provided, the state is supposed to pay an unemployment allowance (of half the wage rate) to the beneficiary. At least one-third of the beneficiaries under the Scheme must be women – and in practice women have accounted for around half the employment. Facilities such as crèches for children, drinking water and shade for rest are supposed to be provided. Material costs (including wages of skilled and semi-skilled workers) cannot be more than 40% of the total costs. Contractors and use of labour-displacing machinery are prohibited.

Wages are nationally notified and were recently indexed to inflation. Male and female wages do not differ under the scheme, unlike the wide gender wage gap in most of rural India, and this explains some of the attraction for women workers. However, piece rate wages (based on some physical measures of work outcomes) have been found to restrict wages below the legal minimum in many instances. While wage payments are meant to be paid on a weekly basis, cases of late payment are widespread. Since 2008, wages are mostly paid through bank/post office beneficiary accounts, so as to reduce leakages and ensure transparency. This has the additional benefit of financial inclusion of such workers, bringing the poor into the ambit of the organised financial sector, providing a secure formal savings route and, in some cases, better access to credit.

The Gram Sabha (village meeting) is supposed to be responsible for all plans and decisions regarding the nature and choice of works to be undertaken, based

on a list of “permissible works”. The works taken up have related to village roads, water conservation and water harvesting, irrigation canals and renovation of traditional water bodies, flood protection and drought proofing, land development and work done to improve the fertility of private lands belonging to small and marginal farmers and other deprived categories.

Clearly, as a ‘self-targeted’ scheme, this programme combines the benefits of universal access with greater focus on the poor. It also goes beyond the usual attributes of social protection of providing some livelihood stability and poverty reduction, to generate other positive supply effects and thereby enable sustainable increases in productivity and output. Thus far, the evidence suggests that the programme has indeed provided a crucial alternative source of employment and wages in rural economies where most workers are not able to access even minimally decent work for the greater part of the year (NSSO 2011). It has proved to be especially welcoming of women workers – even though the work is physically arduous and essential legal requirements like worksite crèches are frequently not made available – simply because it offers wages mostly on par with male workers (Sudarshan 2009; Verma 2011; Arulselvam and Deepika 2013). It has been important in improving income opportunities for single women and women-headed households (Khera and Nayak 2009) and providing more autonomy to women within their families (Dheeraja, Sivaram and Rao 2010).

The programme has played a positive role in stabilizing rural wages and in reducing gender wage gaps in much of rural India (MORD 2012; Berg, et al. 2012; Khera and Kukreja 2013; Dreze and Sen 2013; Ghosh 2013). Its significance as a built-in stabilizer and for consumption-smoothing has been noted (Deininger and Liu 2010; Jha, Gaiha and Pandey 2011; Ghose 2011; Engler and Ravi 2012). This was evident during the 2008-09 global economic crisis, when urban migrant workers who lost export-oriented employment were able to rely on some form of stable wage income being generated by their families in their rural places of origin. It has reduced, to some extent, the severity of short-term distress migration, which had become a pervasive feature of rural India in the period just prior to its implementation (Kumar and Prasanna 2010, Kareemulla, et al. 2009, Mistry and Jaswal 2009). All this has also had an impact in terms of poverty reduction among participating households (Babu and Rao 2010; Bordoloi 2010; IDYWC 2011; Rao and Singh 2013). The multiplier effects of increased wage incomes on local economic activity have been noted to be quite large (Hirway, Saluja and Yadav 2009; MORD 2012).

In states where it has been implemented with some seriousness and efficiency, it has not only provided

a boost to local wage incomes and markets, but also assisted in easing supply conditions by providing and improving minor irrigation works, improving soil quality, and so on (Verma 2010; IDYWC 2010; Kumar and Chandra 2010; MORD 2012). Studies have found multiple benefits of digging wells and related activities, including increases in multi-cropping with higher value crops and rising agricultural value added, diversification of local diets and greater access to sources of drinking water and other household water use (Aggarwal, Gupta and Kumar 2012; Esteves, et al. 2013).

There are some evident problems, which are acute in some states. These include corruption (although probably, the extent of this is actually less than in many other government programmes that get less publicity); inadequate implementation whereby most of the rules guiding the programme are ignored; lack of ensuring the right to work because the demand for work is often not registered until some work site is opened up; and delayed wage payments. The functioning of the programme in different states has been criticized for faulty and sometimes false muster rolls, inadequate supervision at worksites, and most of all, leakages that represent corruption in different forms (CAG 2009). Some states have clearly performed better than others in this regard (Rao and Upendranadh 2009), and in addition to political will, the ability to use new ICT methods effectively to ensure greater transparency and accountability and to reduce leakages in socially sensitive ways has also played a role. Also, not all faulty implementation is because of corruption. Sometimes even the most well-intentioned local authorities are not able to develop a useful and relevant shelf of works in the required time frame, because of lack of capacity and shortage of technical staff for planning (Mukherjee and Ghosh 2013).

Implementation is still far from being truly gender-sensitive. The absence of crèches on most work sites, the lack of flexibility with respect to hours, and inadequate concern for tasks suitable for pregnant or lactating women, as well as the insufficient number of women “mates” who actually monitor and run the work sites, are all problems. The use of piece rates based on some physical measures of work output that lead to lower payment for women, and the occasional reliance on the unpaid labour of women (as in the use of couples, one to lift and the other to carry loads, to account for one labour unit that in effect renders women’s work invisible) are also serious concerns (Gupta 2009).

One factor in poor implementation of the programme is relatively low awareness of all its features, not only among intended beneficiaries, but also among elected representatives and officials responsible for it (Tyagi 2008). In particular, there is low awareness

about work on demand, unemployment allowance and redressal mechanisms (MORD 2012). However, there is also the inevitable problem of local elite resistance, since both public functionaries and potential employers may be reluctant to disseminate information about a programme that codifies the rights of citizens and increases the bargaining power of workers. This has been exacerbated by fears of labour scarcity that have dominated the perceptions of local and national private employers. However, it is likely that such fears are overplayed. Since MNREGA works in most states mainly occur in the agricultural lean season (even though this is not required and effectively contravenes the law), they are unlikely to have affected labour supply for major crop operations (Murthy and Indumati 2011). However, since the MNREGA has operated to reduce labour distress to some extent, it has obviously improved the bargaining power of workers and helped to stabilize if not raise rural wages.

Ensuring food security

Food security has emerged not just as a welfare concern but as a major constraint to growth and a defining political issue. India has among the worst nutrition indicators in the world. The last National Family Health Survey (2005-06) found that 46% of children below 3 years were underweight; 33% of women and 28% of men had Body Mass Index (BMI) scores below normal; 79% of children aged 6-35 months had anaemia, as did 56% of ever married women aged 15-49 years and 24% of similar men. Two out of every five stunted children under 5 years in the world live in India. These indicators were much worse in rural India, especially in some states - but they refer to the period before food prices rose significantly in India. Since 2006, the prices of basic food items have nearly tripled in most major markets in India. This has been reflected in a medium term trend of declining per capita consumption of grain and therefore of diet energy (Gupta 2012).

This is the context of the recent Food Security Act, which focuses on enabling subsidized distribution of essential food grains to around two-thirds of the population. The programme on which this Act is based is not new, since public procurement and distribution of grain has been prevalent for more than six decades. India’s public food management system was originally designed to maintain a reasonable degree of price stability; to provide some producer incentives to cultivators by ensuring that prices remained above estimated costs; and to provide a degree of food security to consumers.

Given India’s federal system, this programme is funded and delivered by the central and state governments together, and operates through a Public

Distribution System (PDS) that is, in effect, jointly managed. The central government (through the Food Corporation of India) collects food grain through its procurement programme from farmers at declared Minimum Support Prices. These prices are determined so as to be just above the estimated average cost of cultivation of particular crops. Grain is then provided to state governments according to a supposedly “targeted” system (or TPDS) that has three retail price tiers: the Antyodaya price for extremely poor households, which has the highest level of subsidy; the BPL (Below Poverty Line) price, for households defined as being poor; and the APL (Above Poverty Line) price, for all remaining households that have ration cards, at a much lower level of subsidy, which could even be equal to the economic cost of providing the grain. These are known as central issue prices, at which state governments purchase the grain for their own distribution. In addition, states can choose to add their own subsidy to ensure wider coverage or cheaper grain, and can also undertake a certain amount of procurement for local distribution themselves. Indeed, several states already run very effective near-universal programmes of providing very cheap wheat or rice (often as low as Rs 1 per kilogramme) to the people.

The new legislation amounts to little more than restructuring of existing system, to enlarge it to some extent, changing the terms on which state governments are provided subsidized grain for distribution and ensuring some accountability. As noted above, the current system makes a distinction between APL and BPL households, with the centre pricing grain at “economic cost” for the former and a subsidized rate for the latter. The new law provides for wider coverage at a lower price, but with exclusion criteria that simply remove some households from any access to the system. The new system is to cover an estimated 75% of the rural and 60% of the urban population, to receive 7 kg per person per month of grain at Rs 3 per kg from the central pool.

The distribution of this across states will depend on poverty estimates of the central government derived from national sample survey data, rather than the states’ own estimates based on household censuses. Since individual states can carry on with their own enlarged systems with their own funding, all that this effectively does is to affect the price at which the centre sells grain to the states. This means that states with larger coverage will end up having to buy from the open market to meet their own requirements, while states with a greater proportion of poor people but poorly functioning systems will receive more grain at subsidized rates. As a result, states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Tripura that have good and near-universal

public distribution systems will be worse off, as will those like Chhattisgarh and Odisha that have recently universalized and strengthened their public distribution schemes.

Since the Act takes a life-cycle approach, it also includes other aspects of current nutritional entitlements such as the Mid-Day Meal scheme meant to provide hot cooked meals to school going children and the nutritional inputs of the Integrated Child Development Scheme for pregnant and lactating mothers and children under the age of 3 years.

It is evident that much of the outcry against this law, both within and outside the country, is misplaced. There has been criticism that this Act is unaffordable and will cost the exchequer far too much, even up to 3% of GDP (e.g. Bhalla 2013, Misra 2013), but this has been effectively countered by careful analyses that point to the flawed assumptions and lack of understanding of the nature of the programme (Kotwal, et al. 2013, Sinha 2013). Indeed, additional expenditure in terms of both food grain and financial costs is likely to be marginal, with total spending on food subsidies likely to go up from around 0.8% to just above 1% of GDP (Chandrasekhar 2013, Alkire 2013). In a context in which the central government’s taxes foregone as incentive provided to corporations account for more than 5% of GDP, this is clearly a small amount.

Another set of criticisms relates to the requirements of increased public procurement of food grain and the associated implications. It has been argued (Gulati, et al. 2012, Singh 2013) that the requirements of augmenting food production, enhancing procurement and increasing levels of government stocks in order to meet the obligations of the bill could have several undesirable effects. These include public monopsony in food grain markets and price “distortions”, thereby crowding out the private sector and leading to increased open market food prices as well as higher food subsidies in future; and slowing down the required process of crop diversification in Indian agriculture. However, this is not really a critique of the Food Security Act, since current levels of public procurement are already above those estimated to be required to fulfil the requirements of the Act. Rather, this is a critique of the existing situation with respect to public procurement, which seeks to ensure minimum support prices to ensure adequate domestic food production. This is part of a much larger debate around the political economy of support to agriculture, in which those who support the removal of “distortionary” measures (including the WTO) are pitted against those who believe that market signals alone would be inadequate to ensure the required levels of food production, especially when Indian prices of both crops and inputs are strongly affected by volatile

global prices. Given historical and international experience, there are good reasons for believing that domestic availability of essential food for countries with large populations like India requires public intervention to promote and enable sufficient cultivation of basic food crops.

Insofar as the new food law represents an expansion, strengthening and streamlining of the existing system and extension to a large number of people, it is likely to have positive effects on food access. As Sen and Himanshu (2013) have noted, based on an analysis of official survey data, the poverty reducing impact of food transfers in the form of PDS grain, mid-day meals, etc is significant, and has increased over time. They estimate that in 2009-10, the head count ratio of poverty would have been 16% higher and the Squared Poverty Gap (that gives more weightage to the extremely poor) would have been 45% higher without these transfers, whose total fiscal cost in that year was only 1.2% of GDP. It is certainly the case that there are legitimate concerns about design and implementation of the PDS, and much room for cost reduction as well as better coverage, but there is wide variation across states in this matter. The overall better performance of the PDS system in some states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Tripura, and the recent substantial improvement (Khera 2011, Sinha 2013) in other states, like Chhattisgarh and Odisha, which have put in place measures utilizing information technology along with greater focus on decentralized procurement and distribution, point to possible routes for improvement. It is likely that proactive implementation of the law will contribute to improving the food distribution system as well as nutrition outcomes.

The more relevant criticisms of this new law relate to the significant gaps that have not been plugged, making this somewhat of a wasted opportunity. Thus, in fact there is inadequate focus on ensuring that domestic food production is incentivized particularly by improving the viability of smallholder cultivation. In the context of high and volatile global food prices, this can emerge as a major constraint in future. The scheme is not universal, rendering it susceptible to well-known Type I errors of unfair exclusion and Type II errors of unjustified exclusion. It thereby damages the financial conditions of state governments attempting to provide near-universal food access. It does not provide for an integrated distribution of cereals, pulses, edible oils and other essential food items. Special interventions required for extremely destitute and/or homeless people, severely malnourished children, elderly persons and other marginal categories have not been factored in.

Cash transfers

One concern with the new food security law relates to the clause that state governments can substitute direct provision of food grain with equivalent cash transfers. There are many reasons why this may be problematic in the Indian context (Ghosh 2011). In situations of volatile and rising prices, the real value of cash transfers can be quickly eroded, and systems of price indexation of such transfers are typically too slow and insufficient to cover such price increases. There is the concern that – if ensuring better nutrition is the desired outcome – substituting food with even equivalent cash may not be associated with more food consumption. Indeed, empirical investigations based on NSS data (Sen and Himanshu 2013b) have found that the calorie-elasticity of food transfers through the Public Distribution System is twice as large as the additional out-of-pocket income that would be the cash equivalent. Structures of power within households as well as social constructions of gender behaviour can affect decisions about how the money is spent, in ways not always expected or desired. It has been argued that handing over cash payments directly to women will solve this problem, but this is not necessarily the case. Especially with respect to food, it has been found that women and girls are prone to voluntary self-denial rather than being forced into choices that reduce their own consumption. So, the possibility of cash transfers being used for other forms of expenditure that do not meet the intended purpose clearly exists. Hence it is not surprising that several surveys (e.g. Parsai 2011; Khera 2013b) have found overwhelming preference for in-kind, rather than cash transfers among poorer households and particularly among women.

All this should not take away from the positive role that cash transfers in general can play in income redistribution, especially when additional to other necessary public spending on food and nutrition security, sanitation, health and education. Cash transfers, may in any case, be socially necessary and can play an important role for those like the elderly, the disabled or children who are not in a position to earn incomes and must depend on others for material survival. Therefore, the recent social mobilization in India demands for universal social pensions for all elderly individuals, for allowance for disabled persons and for child support, are all worth supporting. Moreover, there is a logical core to the idea that in certain cases, it may be necessary to increase user charges for publicly provided goods and services, and to make universal compensatory cash transfers, rather than to keep prices indefinitely repressed, at the expense of quality, when the costs of public provisioning increase.

But such a strategy cannot and should not be at

the cost of universal public provisioning at generally affordable rates, whether in the case of health or education or in the case of food or fuel security. Rather, it should supplement such universal provision. In other words, cash transfers are desirable and can play a positive redistributive role if they are additional to other – and essential – public expenditure on essential goods and services that are required by all citizens, including the poor.

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