

PROMOTING GENETIC DIVERSITY THROUGH THE PDS

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The proposal to decentralize procurement and the Public Distribution System (PDS) is being fiercely resisted by state governments who do not wish to end up footing the bill. The Centre should of course provide the resources for procurement of grain and its distribution to the poor, but implementation in the hands of states will be more effective. For one, it should end the ridiculous spectacle of procuring grain in Punjab and transporting it to Andhra Pradesh and procuring in Andhra Pradesh for the ration shops of J&K. It should also make the whole system more cost effective and better suited to the needs of local people. State governments will be in a better position to respond to the needs of vulnerable sections in their areas and have greater flexibility to provide support to them through the PDS. After all, the PDS was meant to provide cheap food grain and rations like sugar and oil to the poor. The PDS outlets called ration shops also used to supply kerosene oil (mostly for fuel) and even candles. Much of that has been discontinued now.

The PDS, especially the proposed decentralized PDS provides another tremendous opportunity , and that is to do something concrete about the alarming phenomenon of species loss and arrest the growing trend of what is referred to as 'genetic erosion' in the field. This refers to the loss of older, traditional crop varieties as farmers shift to the higher yielding varieties that were first introduced by the Green Revolution. Subsequent plant breeding work done in agricultural universities and institutions of the Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) have exacerbated the loss of genetic diversity by breeding new varieties for just one or two characters like higher yield or resistance to disease. Many other beneficial traits that are present in the traditional varieties are getting lost for this reason.

If the PDS would buy traditional varieties of crops from farmers and thus ensure them a market, there would be great incentive for farmers, at least in certain areas to continue growing these crops. Farmers in rainfed areas (which are those areas that do not have irrigation facilities and are fully dependent on the monsoons for their agriculture) are still growing traditional varieties. If there is a good price for these crops, the farmers will not feel the pressure to shift to high yielding varieties, which get them higher incomes. In irrigated areas where farmers have been practicing mono-cropping and intensive agriculture, the ecological impact of sustained use of agro-chemicals is becoming apparent. They would be happy to convert some portion of their land holding to traditional varieties but are hesitant to do so because they do not find it easy to grow and sell these crops.

In a study conducted in UP , Bihar and some parts of Madhya Pradesh, Gene Campaign, the Delhi based NGO working on genetic resources, has found that among other reasons, farmers tend to shift away from traditional varieties because seed is difficult to obtain and because the market which is standardized around the newer varieties, does not accept their produce. What is more, the government procurement system does not buy their grain either. The study reveals that were there to be an assured market for their harvest, farmers would continue to grow these varieties since it would be remunerative for them.

Here the Public Distribution System could play a significant role by making it an express policy to buy traditional varieties. This will also be easier to do at the state level than at the central level since the buying of grain for subsidised outlets can be much better matched region-wise by the state administration. In all probability, local tastes would find locally grown traditional varieties familiar and acceptable. The PDS system would have its grains and the country would have a policy which would effectively maintain at least some genetic diversity.

Another way in which the decentralised PDS can make a sensible contribution, both to genetic diversity and to better nutrition, is to bring in traditional cereals like millets into the ration shops. This used to be the case to some extent in the earlier years but has now been effectively abandoned in favour of wheat and rice. The reason is largely to be sought on the disproportionate influence of what is produced in surplus states like Punjab and Haryana. This has essentially meant the procurement of rice and wheat, which is what the Punjab grows. So rice and wheat became over time, the only grain that was procured by the central government for supply to the PDS. Rice and wheat are more expensive cereals than several other traditional grains like major and minor millets. Apart from the expense, these so-called elite cereals are also nutritionally poorer. Rice, the most expensive cereal is primarily a starch source, seriously deficient in nutrients. As compared to that, millets are rich in vitamins and minerals essential for human health.

Now that the PDS is being decentralized, each state can procure grain that is grown and eaten preferentially by the people. Karnataka could for example include Ragi (finger millet) which is the most popular food in rural areas there; Rajasthan could procure Bajra (pearl millet), for long its staple, for its PDS. Maharashtra where many people eat jowar (sorghum) in preference to rice and wheat could sell subsidized jowar through its ration shops. In fact Maharashtra did till not so long ago, have jowar in ration shops but unfortunately this was discontinued. Providing subsidized cereals other than rice and wheat will have the twin advantages of cheaper costs and better nutrition. A state level procurement and distribution system can be a good opportunity to rectify some negative developments of the past and serve an important ecological interest at the same time.