



# Evolution and Transformation of the Public Distribution System in India: From Food Security to Rights-Based Entitlements

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## Abstract

This paper examines the historical evolution and policy transformation of India's Public Distribution System (PDS), tracing its trajectory from a wartime rationing mechanism to a comprehensive rights-based framework under the National Food Security Act (2013). Using a qualitative and policy-oriented research methodology, the study analyses key phases including import dependence in the 1960s, Green Revolution-led self-sufficiency, targeting reforms in the 1990s, and recent technological and crisis-response developments. The findings highlight persistent challenges such as exclusion errors, regional disparities, and fiscal pressures despite significant expansion in coverage. The paper argues that a shift towards a more inclusive or quasi-universal approach may enhance effectiveness, particularly in high-poverty regions. It concludes by emphasizing the need to integrate food security with broader nutritional and developmental goals.

**Keywords:** Public Distribution System, NFSA, Food Security, TPDS, AAY, India.

## Introduction

In India, the paradox of surplus foodgrain stocks coexisting with nutritional deprivation underscores the importance of public distribution mechanisms. Over time, the understanding of food security has moved beyond a narrow concern with food production to a broader framework that emphasises access, affordability, and nutritional adequacy. In its contemporary sense, as articulated by the Food and Agriculture Organization, food security is achieved when individuals are able to obtain sufficient, safe, and nutritious food at all times to sustain a healthy and active life. This shift in perspective underscores the role of institutions and public policy in bridging the gap between food availability and actual consumption.

India's experience with food security reflects a complex interaction between economic constraints, demographic pressures, and policy responses. In the years surrounding

independence, the country grappled with recurrent food shortages and heavy dependence on imports, which exposed the vulnerability of its food system. It was within this context that state-led distribution mechanisms began to take shape. What started as a rationing arrangement under exceptional circumstances gradually developed into a structured system of public provisioning, laying the foundation for what is now known as the Public Distribution System (PDS).

The trajectory of the PDS has been far from static. Its design and scope have continuously adapted to changing policy priorities and economic realities. In its early decades, the system largely operated with a broad coverage but exhibited a clear urban orientation. The policy shift in the 1990s, particularly with the introduction of targeted distribution, marked an attempt to rationalise subsidies by focusing on identified vulnerable groups. Subsequently, the passage of the National Food Security Act signified a decisive move towards recognising food access as an entitlement rather than a discretionary welfare measure. More recently, the expansion of food support under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana highlighted the continuing relevance of the system in responding to large-scale economic disruptions.

However, the evolution of the PDS also reveals enduring tensions between policy intent and implementation outcomes. Concerns related to inefficiencies in delivery, identification of beneficiaries, and uneven performance across regions continue to shape debates around its effectiveness. These challenges make it necessary to revisit the system not merely as a contemporary policy tool, but as an institution shaped by a long history of economic and administrative decisions. Understanding this historical progression provides a more grounded basis for evaluating its present structure and future direction.

## Literature Review

The concept on food security in development economics has evolved significantly, moving from a production-centric view to a more comprehensive understanding of access and entitlement. The seminal work of Amartya Sen (1981) fundamentally altered this perspective by demonstrating that hunger and famine are often the result of entitlement failures rather than food shortages. This theoretical framework laid the foundation for analysing state interventions such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) as mechanisms to ensure access to food.

Subsequent contributions expanded this framework by emphasising the role of public policy in mitigating deprivation. Jean Drèze and Sen (1989) highlighted the importance of state-led welfare programmes, including food distribution systems, in addressing chronic hunger. Their work established that institutional arrangements are critical in translating food availability into actual consumption.

A substantial body of empirical literature has examined the functioning and effectiveness of the PDS in India. Early studies were largely critical, pointing to high levels of inefficiency, corruption, and leakage. For instance, Abhijit Banerjee and co-authors, along with studies by Angus Deaton, highlighted limitations in targeting mechanisms and questioned the overall efficiency of subsidy-based distribution systems. Similarly, evaluations by the Planning Commission (2005) identified systemic issues such as diversion of foodgrains and weak identification of beneficiaries under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS).

Later research introduced a more nuanced understanding of the system. Studies by **Maitreesh Ghatak and Karthik Muralidharan** examined governance and institutional reforms, emphasising the role of incentives, monitoring, and administrative capacity in improving delivery outcomes. In particular, research on technological interventions, including digitisation and biometric authentication, suggests that these reforms have contributed to reducing leakages and enhancing transparency in several states.

State-level analyses have further enriched the literature by demonstrating that the performance of the PDS is highly uneven across regions. Scholars such as Himanshu and P. V. Srinivasan have highlighted how variations in governance, political commitment, and administrative efficiency lead to significant differences in outcomes across states. These findings challenge the notion of the PDS as a uniform national system and instead present it as a **federated structure with diverse implementation experiences**.

More recent literature has focused on the transformation of the PDS in the context of rights-based welfare policies. The enactment of the National Food Security Act has generated extensive debate regarding its effectiveness and fiscal implications. Studies indicate that while the Act has expanded coverage and strengthened legal entitlements, concerns remain regarding targeting efficiency and the continued dominance of cereal-based distribution, which limits nutritional outcomes.

The role of the PDS during economic crises has also attracted significant scholarly attention in recent years. The expansion of food distribution under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the system's capacity to function as a large-scale social safety net. Empirical evidence suggests that these interventions played a crucial role in stabilising consumption and preventing a sharp increase in food insecurity among vulnerable populations.

At the same time, contemporary research continues to highlight persistent structural challenges. Scholars such as Reetika Khera and others point to ongoing issues related to exclusion errors, portability constraints, and regional disparities in access. Additionally, there is growing recognition that the PDS, while effective in ensuring calorie security, has been less successful in addressing broader nutritional concerns, particularly protein and micronutrient deficiencies.

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, historical, and analytical research design** to examine the evolution of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India and its implications for food security. Given that the objective is to trace policy developments over time and interpret their structural and institutional impact, a historical approach is particularly appropriate. The study combines **historical narrative with policy analysis** to understand how the PDS has transformed across different phases of India's economic development.

The analysis is based entirely on **secondary sources of data**. These include official government publications such as the *Economic Survey of India*, reports of the Planning Commission and NITI Aayog, and documents from the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution.

Legislative and policy frameworks, including the National Food Security Act, are also examined to understand the institutional evolution of the system. In addition, international perspectives on food security, particularly those provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization, are used to situate the analysis within a broader conceptual framework.

The study employs a **documentary analysis technique**, involving systematic review and interpretation of policy documents, committee reports, and archival material. This enables the identification of key policy shifts, such as the transition from a universal Public Distribution System to the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), and later to a rights-based framework. The approach focuses on examining the **intent, design, and implementation outcomes** of major policy interventions over time.

To complement the qualitative analysis, the study incorporates **select quantitative indicators** derived from secondary datasets, including foodgrain allocation, coverage ratios, and beneficiary distribution across rural and urban areas. These indicators are used illustratively to support the broader analytical arguments rather than as part of a formal econometric framework.

The methodology is thus both **descriptive and interpretative**. It is descriptive in mapping the chronological development of the PDS, and interpretative in analysing its effectiveness in addressing food security concerns. Particular emphasis is placed on issues such as targeting efficiency, regional disparities, and implementation challenges. By linking historical developments with contemporary outcomes, the study seeks to generate insights into the structural strengths and limitations of the PDS as a key instrument of food security policy in India.

## **Historical Evolution of the Public Distribution System**

### **Pre-Independence and Early Post-Independence Phase**

The historical roots of India's Public Distribution System (PDS) can be traced to the recurrent episodes of famine and food insecurity during the colonial period. While localized food shortages had occurred earlier, the frequency and severity of famines increased significantly under British rule, particularly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These crises exposed deep structural vulnerabilities in the agrarian economy and highlighted the absence of effective institutional mechanisms for food distribution.

Major famines such as those of 1860-61 in western Uttar Pradesh, the devastating famine of 1876-78 affecting large parts of southern and western India, and the Bengal famine of 1943 resulted in massive human losses. The Bengal famine, in particular, marked a critical turning point, as it was not merely a consequence of crop failure but also of economic dislocation, speculative trade practices, and administrative failure. Declining per capita food availability during the early twentieth century further compounded the problem, reflecting broader issues of poverty, unequal access, and weak distribution systems.

The colonial response to these crises was gradual and often reactive. Early policy thinking, influenced even by classical economists such as Adam Smith, acknowledged that market

distortions and administrative restrictions could aggravate food shortages. However, meaningful institutional intervention remained limited. The establishment of successive Famine Commissions in 1878, 1897, and 1900 represented initial attempts to address the problem. These commissions recommended measures such as state intervention in food trade during emergencies, expansion of irrigation infrastructure, and the development of permanent famine relief mechanisms.

Despite these recommendations, implementation remained weak, and famine policy during the colonial period was largely characterised by **ad hoc relief rather than a systematic distribution framework**. Nevertheless, these early efforts were significant in one crucial respect: they marked the beginning of state recognition that food security could not be left entirely to market forces. This emerging understanding laid the conceptual foundation for later developments in food policy and the eventual establishment of the PDS.

After following independence, the Indian state adopted a markedly different approach to food security, embedding it within the broader framework of planned economic development. Unlike the colonial regime's limited and reactive measures, independent India sought to create a **structured and proactive food policy** aimed at ensuring both availability and access.

One of the earliest steps in this direction was the appointment of the Foodgrains Policy Committee in 1947, which examined the challenges of food supply and distribution in a newly independent economy. While the initial policy stance favoured gradual deregulation of foodgrain markets, it soon became evident that market mechanisms alone were insufficient to ensure price stability and equitable distribution, particularly in a context of scarcity.

The enactment of the Essential Commodities Act marked a significant shift towards stronger state intervention. This legislation empowered the government to regulate the production, supply, and distribution of essential commodities, with the objective of preventing hoarding, curbing black marketing, and stabilising prices. By enabling the imposition of stock limits and control over trade practices, the Act provided an institutional framework for managing food security concerns in a more systematic manner.

Further policy refinement occurred with the establishment of the Food Enquiry Committee in 1957 under Ashok Mehta. The committee emphasised the need for price stabilisation, greater control over foodgrain trade, and a more coordinated approach to distribution. These recommendations reflected a growing recognition that food security required **integrated policy intervention**, combining procurement, storage, and distribution mechanisms.

A major institutional breakthrough occurred in 1965 with the establishment of the Food Corporation of India and the Agricultural Prices Commission (now the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices). The creation of these institutions marked the transition from a fragmented policy approach to a more **coherent food management system**. The Food Corporation of India was tasked with procuring foodgrains at Minimum Support Prices, maintaining buffer stocks, and ensuring their distribution across regions. Simultaneously, the Agricultural Prices Commission was established to recommend pricing policies that would balance the interests of producers and consumers.

Together, these institutions addressed two critical dimensions of food security: **price stabilisation and physical availability of foodgrains**. They also laid the operational foundation for the expansion of the Public Distribution System as a mechanism for delivering subsidised food to the population. By the mid-1960s, the PDS had begun to emerge as a central component of India's anti-poverty and food security strategy.

### **Expansion and Green Revolution Phase (1960s-1980s)**

In 1960s, India's food security framework remained heavily dependent on external support, particularly through concessional imports under the U.S. Public Law 480 (PL-480) programme. Between 1958 and 1966, India imported nearly 50 million tonnes of foodgrains, with imports peaking at over 10 million tonnes in 1966—accounting for a significant share of total domestic availability. These imports played a crucial role in stabilising food supplies during a period marked by domestic production constraints.

At the same time, the Public Distribution System (PDS) began to expand both in scope and institutional reach. The number of distribution outlets increased significantly—from approximately 18,000 in the late 1950s to over 50,000 by the early 1960s—indicating a growing emphasis on state-mediated distribution. The inclusion of essential commodities such as sugar, kerosene, and coal further broadened the scope of the PDS beyond basic foodgrain provision.

However, a fundamental transformation occurred with the advent of the Green Revolution in the mid-1960s. The introduction of high-yielding varieties, expansion of irrigation, and increased use of fertilisers led to a substantial rise in agricultural productivity, particularly in wheat and rice. This shift marked India's transition from **import dependence to relative self-sufficiency in foodgrains**, fundamentally altering the operational basis of the PDS.

Institutionally, this transformation was anchored by the strengthening role of the Food Corporation of India, which became central to procurement, storage, and distribution. By procuring foodgrains at Minimum Support Prices (MSP), maintaining buffer stocks, and supplying grains through Fair Price Shops, the system created a **state-controlled food economy** that linked farmers, markets, and consumers. This period thus represents the consolidation of a **procurement-distribution nexus**, which remains the backbone of India's food security architecture.

At the administrative level, the establishment of the Ministry of Food and Civil Supplies in 1984 further institutionalised the governance structure of the PDS. By separating responsibilities related to procurement and distribution, the government sought to improve coordination and efficiency in food management.

Despite these advances, the system continued to exhibit structural limitations, particularly its **urban bias and uneven regional coverage**, which would later become central concerns in policy reform.

## Revamped Public Distribution System (1992)

By the early 1990s, it had become evident that the existing PDS framework was not adequately addressing disparities in access, particularly in remote and economically backward regions. In response, the government introduced the Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS) in 1992, marking the first major attempt to restructure the system along more targeted lines.

Unlike earlier approaches that operated on a largely uniform basis, the RPDS adopted a **region-specific strategy**, focusing on geographically disadvantaged areas such as drought-prone regions, desert areas, tribal belts, and hilly terrains. Initially covering 1,775 blocks, the programme was subsequently expanded to include a larger number of blocks under the Employment Assurance Scheme.

The RPDS also introduced differential pricing mechanisms, with foodgrains supplied to designated areas at subsidised rates below the Central Issue Price. In addition, efforts were made to strengthen last-mile delivery through expansion of Fair Price Shops and improvements in storage infrastructure.

From a policy perspective, the RPDS represented an important shift from a **universal distribution model to a geographically targeted approach**. However, its effectiveness remained limited due to implementation challenges, including weak administrative capacity and difficulties in accurately identifying priority regions. These limitations highlighted the need for a more refined targeting mechanism based on household-level vulnerability rather than geographical criteria alone.

## Targeted Public Distribution System (1997)

A more decisive reform was introduced in 1997 with the launch of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), following recommendations from the Chief Ministers' Conference and policy deliberations reflected in the Economic Survey. This reform marked a significant departure from earlier models by shifting the focus from regional targeting to **household-level targeting based on economic status**.

Under the TPDS framework, the population was categorised into Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL) households, with differential entitlements and pricing structures. BPL households were provided foodgrains at highly subsidised rates, while APL households were offered grains at relatively higher prices. This dual-pricing mechanism was intended to improve the efficiency of subsidy allocation by directing greater benefits towards the economically vulnerable.

The reform also coincided with a substantial increase in foodgrain procurement and distribution. Offtake under the PDS rose significantly, and procurement of key staples such as wheat and rice showed notable growth during the 1990s. At the same time, the fiscal burden of food subsidies increased sharply, reflecting the expanding scale of the system.

While the TPDS aimed to enhance efficiency through targeting, it also introduced new challenges. The identification of beneficiaries relied heavily on poverty estimates and

administrative processes, leading to **significant inclusion and exclusion errors**. Moreover, the reliance on historical consumption patterns for allocation created rigidities that did not always reflect current needs.

Institutionally, the TPDS placed greater responsibility on state governments for identifying eligible households and ensuring effective delivery through Fair Price Shops. However, variations in administrative capacity across states resulted in uneven implementation, reinforcing regional disparities in access and outcomes.

### **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (2000)**

By the turn of the millennium, concerns regarding persistent hunger and extreme deprivation began to reshape the discourse on food security in India. Evidence from National Sample Survey data revealed that a segment of the population continued to face acute food insecurity, with a proportion of households unable to secure even two meals a day. This highlighted a critical limitation of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS): while it aimed to prioritise the poor, it often failed to adequately reach the **poorest of the poor**.

In response, the Government of India launched the Antyodaya Anna Yojana in 2000 as a sub-scheme within the TPDS framework. The scheme marked a decisive shift towards **ultra-targeting**, focusing exclusively on the most vulnerable households. These included destitute families, elderly individuals without support, widows, disabled persons, and those with no stable means of livelihood.

Under the scheme, eligible households were provided foodgrains at highly subsidised rates—₹3 per kg for rice and ₹2 per kg for wheat—significantly lower than the prices applicable to other beneficiary categories. The initial entitlement of 25 kg per family per month was subsequently increased to 35 kg in 2002, reflecting a policy adjustment aimed at better addressing nutritional requirements.

A key feature of the scheme was its **progressive expansion**, which reflected both political commitment and recognition of the scale of extreme poverty:

- **2003-04 Expansion:** Inclusion of 50 lakh additional households, particularly vulnerable groups such as widows, the elderly, and disabled individuals, increasing total coverage to 1.5 crore families.
- **2004-05 Expansion:** Further addition of 50 lakh households, including landless labourers, marginal farmers, and urban informal workers, expanding coverage to 2 crore families.
- **2005-06 Expansion:** Inclusion of another 50 lakh households, including primitive tribal groups and destitute individuals, raising total coverage to 2.5 crore households.

From an analytical perspective, AAY represents a **refinement within the targeting paradigm**, attempting to correct the exclusion errors inherent in the TPDS. However, its effectiveness remained contingent on accurate identification of beneficiaries, which continued to vary across states. Nevertheless, the scheme significantly strengthened the redistributive capacity of the PDS by prioritising those facing the most severe forms of deprivation.

## National Food Security Act (2013)

A major paradigm shift in India's food security framework occurred with the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA). Moving beyond welfare provisioning, the Act reframed access to food as a **legal entitlement**, thereby introducing a rights-based approach to food security.

The NFSA covers up to **75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population**, effectively extending subsidized food grain access to nearly two-thirds of India's population. Beneficiaries are categorised into:

- **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households:** Entitled to 35 kg of foodgrains per family per month at highly subsidised prices.
- **Priority households:** Entitled to 5 kg of foodgrains per person per month at subsidised rates.

This dual structure retained elements of targeting while significantly expanding coverage, thereby approximating a **quasi-universal system**.

Beyond foodgrain distribution, the Act adopts a **life-cycle approach to nutrition**, integrating multiple welfare schemes. It mandates:

- Nutritional support for children through ICDS and school meal programmes
- Maternity benefits of at least ₹6,000 for pregnant and lactating women
- Provision of food security allowance in cases of delivery failure

The implementation framework relies on state-level identification of beneficiaries, guided by poverty estimates derived from NSSO consumption data, Census figures, and Planning Commission methodologies. At the same time, the Act emphasises **transparency and accountability**, encouraging reforms such as digitisation of ration cards and removal of duplicate beneficiaries.

From a policy standpoint, the NFSA represents a significant expansion of state responsibility, embedding food security within a **rights-based governance structure**. However, it also raises concerns regarding fiscal sustainability, efficiency of targeting, and continued dependence on administrative capacity at the state level.

## Contemporary Developments

The evolution of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in the contemporary period reflects a shift towards **technological integration, portability of benefits, and enhanced resilience during crises**. These developments have aimed to address longstanding challenges such as leakages, inefficiencies, and exclusion errors, while also expanding the system's responsiveness to shocks.

A major reform in this phase has been the implementation of the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) initiative. This policy enables beneficiaries to access their entitled foodgrains from any Fair Price Shop across the country, irrespective of their place of residence. By linking ration cards with Aadhaar and digitising beneficiary databases, ONORC addresses the issue of

portability, particularly benefiting migrant workers and informal labourers who were historically excluded due to location-based restrictions. The reform represents a significant move towards **national integration of welfare delivery systems**, reducing both duplication and regional disparities in access.

Equally significant has been the role of the PDS during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly through the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY). Introduced in 2020 as an emergency response measure, the scheme provided additional free foodgrains—over and above NFSA entitlements—to approximately 80 crore beneficiaries. This large-scale intervention underscored the capacity of the PDS to function as a **shock-responsive safety net**, ensuring food security during a period of severe economic disruption.

The pandemic highlighted both the strengths and limitations of the system. On one hand, the extensive network of Fair Price Shops and the availability of buffer stocks enabled rapid and large-scale distribution. On the other hand, gaps in beneficiary identification and delays in inclusion of vulnerable populations revealed persistent structural issues. Nonetheless, the experience demonstrated the critical importance of maintaining robust public provisioning mechanisms in times of crisis.

In addition to portability and crisis response, recent reforms have emphasised **end-to-end computerisation, digitisation of ration cards, and transparency mechanisms**. These include electronic point-of-sale (e-POS) devices at Fair Price Shops, online tracking of foodgrain movement, and efforts to eliminate duplicate or ghost beneficiaries. Such measures have contributed to improving accountability and reducing leakages, although their effectiveness continues to vary across states.

Overall, the contemporary phase of the PDS reflects a transition towards a **technology-enabled, integrated, and adaptive system**, capable of addressing both chronic food insecurity and emergent crises. However, challenges related to digital exclusion, uneven state capacity, and the need for continuous updating of beneficiary databases remain critical areas for policy attention.

## Implications and Discussions

The historical trajectory of India's Public Distribution System (PDS) reflects a layered transformation from a **state-led mechanism of supply stabilisation** to a **targeted welfare instrument**, and eventually to a **rights-based entitlement regime**. While this evolution demonstrates adaptive policymaking, it simultaneously exposes enduring structural and administrative challenges that continue to influence the system's effectiveness.

A central concern pertains to the **limitations of targeting mechanisms** introduced under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) and further refined through schemes such as the Antyodaya Anna Yojana. Although targeting was conceptualised as a means to enhance allocative efficiency by concentrating subsidies on the most vulnerable, its implementation has been constrained by persistent **inclusion and exclusion errors**. The reliance on static poverty estimates and administratively determined eligibility criteria has often failed to capture the dynamic and multidimensional nature of deprivation in India. Consequently, a section of

genuinely vulnerable households remains excluded, while instances of ineligible beneficiaries persist within the system.

Equally significant are the **inter-state disparities in PDS performance**, which reflect variations in administrative capacity, governance quality, and political commitment. States such as Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh have demonstrated relatively effective delivery mechanisms characterised by lower leakages and higher coverage, whereas other states continue to grapple with inefficiencies and weak monitoring systems. These disparities not only undermine the equity objectives of the PDS but also highlight the need for a more **coordinated yet flexible federal framework** that accommodates regional heterogeneity while ensuring minimum standards of delivery.

The expansion of coverage under the National Food Security Act has further intensified the debate on **fiscal sustainability**. By extending subsidized food grain access to nearly two-thirds of the population, the NFSA represents a significant commitment of public resources. While such expenditure is normatively justified in the context of social protection, it raises critical questions regarding long-term fiscal viability and opportunity costs. This necessitates a continuous assessment of subsidy efficiency, procurement practices, and storage costs within the broader framework of public expenditure management.

Recent reforms emphasizing **digitisation and technological integration** have introduced a new dimension to PDS governance. Initiatives such as Aadhaar-based authentication, electronic point-of-sale systems, and the One Nation One Ration Card have enhanced transparency, reduced duplication, and improved portability of entitlements. These measures have been particularly beneficial for migrant populations, addressing a longstanding gap in the system. However, the increasing reliance on digital infrastructure also raises concerns regarding **technological exclusion**, especially in contexts marked by limited digital literacy, connectivity issues, and authentication failures. The policy challenge, therefore, lies in designing a **hybrid delivery architecture** that combines technological efficiency with administrative discretion and grievance redressal mechanisms.

The experience of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the continued relevance of the PDS as a **shock-responsive safety net**. The rapid scale-up of foodgrain distribution to a vast beneficiary base demonstrated the institutional resilience and logistical capacity of the system. At the same time, the crisis revealed gaps in coverage, particularly among migrant workers and informal sector households who were either unregistered or inadequately captured within existing databases. This highlights the importance of developing **dynamic and inclusive beneficiary identification systems** that can respond effectively to emergent vulnerabilities.

From a broader policy perspective, the evolution of the PDS reopens the debate between **targeted and universal approaches** to welfare provision. While targeting seeks to optimise resource allocation, its administrative complexities and associated errors often undermine its intended efficiency gains. In contrast, evidence from states implementing near-universal PDS models suggests that broader coverage can reduce exclusion errors, simplify administration, and

enhance overall welfare outcomes. In this context, a calibrated move towards **expanded or quasi-universal coverage**, particularly in regions with high poverty incidence, may offer a more pragmatic policy alternative.

Finally, the effectiveness of the PDS must be assessed not merely in terms of foodgrain distribution but also in relation to **nutritional security and human development outcomes**. Despite substantial improvements in food availability, challenges related to malnutrition, dietary diversity, and micronutrient deficiencies persist. This underscores the need to integrate the PDS with broader nutrition-sensitive interventions, thereby shifting the policy focus from **calorie sufficiency to nutritional adequacy**.

## Conclusion

The evolution of India's Public Distribution System (PDS) demonstrates a transition from a supply-oriented mechanism to a targeted and eventually rights-based framework, particularly with the National Food Security Act (2013). While these reforms have significantly expanded coverage, persistent challenges such as exclusion errors, fiscal pressures, and urban-rural disparities continue to limit effectiveness. Recent initiatives like One Nation One Ration Card and Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana highlight the system's adaptability, especially during crises. However, the limitations of targeted approaches suggest the need to reconsider policy design. Moving towards a more inclusive or quasi-universal framework, particularly in high-poverty regions, may improve equity and efficiency. Strengthening the PDS beyond food distribution towards nutritional security remains essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive development.

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