

## **Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha's Continued Struggle for Nutrition and Food Security For All**

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### **Abstract**

Food Security generally refers to a nation's ability to provide for its citizens' needs in terms of obtaining, purchasing, and consuming an adequate amount of food. At the first World Food Conference in 1996, the United Nations Committee on Global Food Security defined food security as everyone having access to enough safe and nourishing food to suit their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life. Furthermore, the guarantee of food security is accessible to everyone, regardless of caste, religion, caste, gender, area, and economic class. The same World Food Conference declared that food shouldn't be a tool for putting political and economic pressure on people. The United Nations has ratified a number of accords, including the Sustainable Development Goals, to lessen hunger and poverty. Target 2 of this Agreement states that by 2030, there will be a widespread agreement to end hunger globally, ensure food security and better nutrition, and support sustainable agriculture. As a result, we can state that all people worldwide, regardless of caste, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, etc., would have access to food security. Right to Food is claimed to be free from hunger. There have been civil society movements for proper legislation to ensure enough food for everyone nationally and at the state level. These movements have helped in conceptualizing the act and improving its implementation. This article will explain the role Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha (Odisha Labourers Forum) played in advocating and implementing the Food Security Act 2013 in the state.

### **Evolution of food security schemes in India**

The infamous Bengal Famine of 1943 killed over two million people due to the unavailability of food. It reminds us of the vulnerability of Indians in terms of food security. The famine happened due to unequal food distribution, a lack of enough production, and limited storage capacities. After India's independence in 1947, high economic growth was the major policy objective for the Government, and industrial growth was bestowed major focus. But sooner, due to a famine-like situation in the mid-1960s, policymakers in India realized the need to boost agricultural production. In order to be self-sufficient in terms of food production, India adopted the Green Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Despite the criticism from many ecologists, the Green Revolution succeeded in producing enough staple food grains in the country. India also initiated the White Revolution to increase the production of milk.

The Government of India, truly proving itself as a welfare state, initiated several policy frameworks to provide easily accessible food grains to its citizens. The universal Public Distribution System continued till 1992. The revamped system was run in selected backward

blocks from 1992 to 1997. The targeted Public Distribution System started in 1997 for people below the poverty line and those above the poverty line. Additionally, schemes were announced for the poorest of the poor and indigent people over the period.

Moreover, the Government of India also launched schemes specific to food grain supply. These included Integrated Child Development Scheme, Rural Employment Program, Employment Guarantee Scheme, Mid-day Meal Scheme, and Food for Work Scheme. These helped supply food directly or indirectly to needy people.

### **The journey of food security schemes in India**

Despite the Government's noble intent, the scheme's benefits could not penetrate to many, including Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe, and daily wage workers. Rather than legitimately deserving recipients, dishonest families received this benefit. Under the 1997 targeted Public Distribution System, the ration prices were split into two for Above Poverty Line (APL) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) families. However, the prices of food grains remained high, sometimes even closer to market price. In such situations, BPL families were unable to purchase their rations. APL families were reluctant, given that the quality of grains was not at par with that available in the market. Among other factors, store agents, dealers, and supply department staff members continued to adulterate and sell food grains in the black market. Food grains were wasting away in the Food Corporation of India's warehouses. Thus, millions of tonnes of food grains were in silos, while thousands of people slept hungry.

In this situation, civil society bodies, welfare economists, and activists came together to demand an act that would legally compel the state to ensure food security for all citizens at a subsidized price. There were several countrywide demonstrations, petitions, and debates among economists, media, and public representatives.

On September 12, 2013, the National Food Security Act 2013, popularly known as the Right to Food Act, was passed. The administration of the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh presented it to the Lok Sabha on August 7, 2013, and it was approved on August 26. This law has designated the Public Distribution System as a targeted one rather than a universal one. This act made a historic move where women were regarded as the family's head. The primary recipients of the ration cards made available by the Food Security Act were women over 18. According to Article 3 of the Act, there is a provision to distribute 5 kg of rice at a rate of Rs. 3, Rs. 2 worth of wheat per Kg, and Rs. 1 worth of *mandia* or millet per head of each qualifying family member. Under the *Antodaya Anna Yojana* Plan, implemented on December 25, 2000, each extremely impoverished household receives 35 kg of food grains per family at the aforementioned rates. Rules for the Act targeted the coverage of 50% urban and 75% rural population. The children of government-run preschool centers and students of elementary schools up to 8<sup>th</sup> standard would be provided free food to ensure sufficient calorie and protein intake. The details are provided in the table below.

Sl no	Age Category	Type of food	Calorie	Protein
1.	Children (from 6 months to 3 years)	Take home ration	500	12-15
2.	Children (3 to 6 years)	Morning Breakfast and cooked food	500	12-15
3.	Malnourished children (from 6 months to 6 years)	Take home ration	800	20-25
4.	Lower Primary Classes	Warm cooked food	450	12
5.	Upper Primary Classes	Warm cooked food	700	20
6.	Pregnant and Lactating women	Take home ration	600	18-20

### **What is our role in the campaign for food security laws**

The *Odisha Shramjeebee Mancha* has been actively working in 10 districts of Odisha since 2009. These include Kandhamal, Boudh, Nayagarh, Gajapati, Koraput, Malkangari, Sundergarh, Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, and Deogarh. The *Mancha (forum)* reached out to six lakh families from backward, Schedule Caste, and indigenous communities.

We persisted in our efforts to ensure people could access the Mahatma Gandhi National Guaranteed Employment Act (MNREGA), a rights-based scheme. The *Mancha (forum)* was working to make a living for people and develop their individual and village infrastructure. The *Mancha's (forums)* internal family study of 2012 revealed that roughly half of the population of Odisha experiences food insecurity. Several households are experiencing ration deprivation even if they fall under the BPL list. MGNREGA somewhat increased their purchasing power. However, the high market price was unable to guarantee them access to food. Looking at the national level campaign for the right to food from civil society groups, the *Mancha (Forum)* also started a campaign for the nutritious food security act.

Coincidentally, in 2012, Chhattisgarh, another poor state of India, enacted an Act to provide food security to its citizens. This acted as a morale boost for our campaign. Listed below are our campaign efforts for the enactment of food security.

### **The campaign by *Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha* before the enactment of the Food Security Act**

- **In November 2012:** As part of an awareness campaign, long banners in villages and local markets for the nutritious food security act were put up.
- A memorandum consisting of proposals from 5000 villages in 47 blocks of 10 districts was submitted to the Prime Minister and Chief Minister of Odisha.

Additionally, each household sent a postcard to the Chief Minister of Odisha and the Prime Minister demanding the same.

- Processions were organized at the district and block levels to raise awareness among the masses, where demands were submitted.
- On March 20, 2013, a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Odisha was submitted after a state-level procession in Bhubaneswar.
- **In May 2013:** A campaign to collect 10 lakh signatures from 21 districts in support of the proposed food security act was launched.
- **In June and July 2013:** 26 block-level and four district-level processions were held to press the demand for the Food Security Act.
- At a state-level procession in Bhubaneswar on **July 20, 2013**, a demand letter was presented to the Chief Minister of Odisha and the Food and Supplies Minister of Odisha.
- **On 24<sup>th</sup> July 2013:** Then Food Minister of Odisha, Pratap Keshari Dev was delivered a demand in the state capital city of Bhubaneswar bearing 10 lakh signatures.

After pressure from civil society organizations like the *Odisha Shramajeebee Manch* from various parts of the country, the Union Govt agreed to bring a law to the Indian parliament on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2013. Simultaneously, a new political party was elected to power at the national level. There was uncertainty among the civil society members regarding the newly elected Government's approach. Thus, the struggle continued for proper rules and effective implementation, and the civil societies continued their campaign. Additionally, given previous experiences with food security schemes, the *Mancha (forum)* decided to campaign for effective criteria to be evolved for the selection of beneficiaries.

### **The campaign during the implementation phase of the Food Security Act**

- 47 block-level and 10 district-level processions were held between November 2013 and December 2013. The district collector sent a demand letter to the Chief Minister of Odisha and the Ministry of Food and Supplies of Odisha.
- During a state-level demonstration in Bhubaneswar on December 10, 2013, the then-Chief Minister of Odisha was given a petition.
- A campaign was launched to get support from political parties and elected representatives in January 2014 for speedy implementation of the Act.
- From June to July 2014: 39 block-level demonstrations and seven district-level demonstrations were held demanding the implementation of the Act.
- In July 2014: A state-level demonstration in Bhubaneswar in July 2014 was held to gain the attention of the Chief Minister of Odisha and the Food Minister of Odisha. A delegation of the *Mancha* met Food and Civil Supplies Secretary Madhusudan Padhi and submitted the grievances.
- A 'Thank you' letter from 449 Gram Panchayats of 42 blocks from the aforementioned districts was sent to the Chief Minister for establishing the criteria to exclude the Odisha Government in accordance with the suggestion and ongoing demand of "*Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha*" in August and September 2014. In nine districts, there were victory processions.
- A large-scale protest was conducted in front of the palace from December 17 to December 19, 2014. A meeting was scheduled with the Hon. Governor of Odisha and the Food Minister of Odisha, Sanjay Kumar Dasbarma, to discuss our requests.

- On February 11, 2015, Sanjay Kumar Dasbarma, the former minister of the Odisha government's department responsible for food supply and camp welfare, met with representatives of the *Shramjeebee Mancha* to discuss the state of the current survey, the block-level Help Desk, and nutritional food security.
- Start of the "10 Lakh Letters to Chief Minister" program on June 20, 2015. Districts like Phulbani, Malkangiri, Koraput, Boudh, Gajapati, Jharsuguda, and others simultaneously launched it.
- The Chief Minister of Odisha was sent ten lakh postcards between June 20 and September 20, 2015.
- From August 9 to August 12, 2015, demonstrations were held in front of the state assembly.
- The mass demonstration was organized at the district office on September 14 and 15, 2015.
- September 23, 2015: Discussion held with political parties in Bhubaneswar regarding the effective implementation of the Food Security Act.
- On November 27, 2015: A joint public demonstration was held with the Right to Food Campaign in front of the Odisha Assembly.
- On February 10, 2016, protesters in 25 blocks across 10 districts demanded letters to the Minister of Food Supply and Camp Welfare.
- May 1, 2016: The Chief Minister of Odisha was given a demand letter through the district government on World Labor Day. A symbolic roadblock was done prior to the submission of the memorandum.

The *Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha* is proud of its achievements during the course of the campaign. They include the following:

The demands by Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha	The response from the Government
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The APL/BPL system and priority household approach should be withdrawn, and it should be universal in approach. Only households with government services, income taxpayers, households with more than five acres of irrigated land, more than 10 acres of non-irrigated land, people with four-wheelers, and people with machine boats should be excluded.</li> <li>2. The household should be a unit instead of individuals.</li> <li>3. Each family should be entitled to the following:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. 35 kgs of food grain at Rs. 1 per kg.</li> <li>ii. 3 kg of pulses at Rs. 10 per</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<p>The government decided to exclude the following households:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The registered owners of four-wheelers, heavy vehicles/machine fishing boats.</li> <li>2. The households owning machine agriculture equipment, tractors, or harvesters.</li> <li>3. Any household having a salaried regular job in the union government, state government, public sector units, etc. The privately employed people with a monthly salary over Rs. 15,000 and Rs. 10,000 respectively in urban and rural areas.</li> </ol>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>kg.</li> <li>iii. 1 kg edible oil at Rs. 10 per kg.</li> <li>iv. 2 kg sugar at Rs. 10 per kg.</li> <li>v. Free iodized salt.</li> <li>4. Each food grain should be packed and measured accurately.</li> <li>5. If any household is unable to collect ration, they should get it next month.</li> <li>6. The fair price shop for distribution of ration should not be further than 2 km from any village.</li> <li>7. The fair price shop should be open minimum twice a week.</li> <li>8. The locally produced food grains should be included as PDS ration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. If the factory/industry of the family is registered with the government.</li> <li>5. Any household whose income is over Rs. 15,000 and Rs. 10,000 respectively in urban and rural areas.</li> <li>6. If any family member is paying income tax.</li> <li>7. 2 KV electricity connections to household or units consuming more than 300 units of electricity.</li> <li>8. The households availing monthly pension of Rs. 15,000 and Rs. 10,000 respectively in urban and rural areas.</li> </ul> <p>Apart from exclusion, the auto inclusion criteria decided were the following for households:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Homeless households</li> <li>2. The beggars</li> <li>3. All the particularly vulnerable tribal groups</li> <li>4. Household getting widow pension</li> <li>5. Any household with over 40% physically challenged members</li> </ul>
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## Conclusion

According to data from the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and other organizations, 55% of children in rural Odisha are still malnourished, which is a national disgrace. Similarly, 44% of young children under the age of five are malnourished and suffering from various diseases. The National Family Health Survey found that 38.4% of kids are underweight for their age. Similarly, 46% of kids are stunted and underweight for their age. It shows there is a need for more focused legislation to tackle the malnutrition issues in the state of Odisha. The campaign by *Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha* has forced the state government to launch a State Specific Food Security Scheme to cover the left out families under National Food Security Act from 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2018. The next campaign of the *Mancha* is for an effective nutritious food security act.

The campaign of Odisha Shramajeebee Manch proved that grass root people's organizations could play a vital role in bringing pro-people laws if done consistently. The policymakers can hear the people's voices. This can be an example for people struggling for food security across the globe.

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