

ELECTORAL POLITICS AND CHEAP RICE SCHEME IN ANDHRA PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The primary concern and factor in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly elections is food security. The issue of food security is dominating the electoral agenda in Andhra Pradesh state in the past few decades. It shows the importance of food security and policy to provide subsidised food grains to people. In this context, the present paper intends to discuss the politics of cheap rice scheme and its origin with particular reference to the politics of Andhra Pradesh. The paper also intends to analyse the electoral politics and competitive populism with special reference to the cheap rice scheme otherwise known as Two Rupees-A Kilo Rice Scheme.

Keywords: Cheap Rice Scheme, Electoral Politics, Food Policy

INTRODUCTION

The primary concern and factor in the Lok Sabha (Lower house in Indian Parliament) and State Legislative Assembly elections is food security. The issue of food security is dominating the electoral agenda. While releasing the manifesto for 2019 elections both the Telugu Desam Party (TDP Hereafter) and Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP Hereafter) parties announced a race of sorts extravaganza of sops to different sections of people in total disregard for the State's fragile financial condition of state after bifurcation of state into Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.¹ In the past elections, the competition among political parties over cheap rice heated up with the release of manifestos for Assembly and Lok Sabha elections 2009. At the national level, both the Congress Party and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in their election manifestos for Lok Sabha elections 2009 have zeroed in on rice. The Congress party in its election manifesto promised 25 KGs of rice or wheat to families living below the poverty line at Rs.3 a KG every month and subsidised community kitchens will be set up in all cities for homeless people and migrants with the support of the Central government. The BJP in its manifesto promised 35 KGs of rice or wheat every month at Rs.2 a KG. This will be available

against 'Food Coupons' redeemable at both Public Distribution System (PDS hereafter) and private outlets. The rupees two a kilo rice scheme under PDS was revived recently by Rajasekara Reddy government in Andhra Pradesh. Telugu Desam party promised 4 kg of rice per head for free in its election manifesto. Prajarajyam Party by film star Chiranjeeviⁱⁱ has promised monthly provisions like 25 kg rice, one Kg cooking oil, one Kg Bengal gram dal, half kilo Tamarind and one kg Salt at the price of Rs.100 in its election manifesto.

The question which comes up is why the parties start a heavily subsidised rice scheme? Why food distribution policy has acquired an extra urgency and relevance today and what are the political compulsions behind it. To understand this, one has to take into account the political processes which have shaped and continue to shape the public policies. The review of the subsidised rice scheme and evolution of the PDS, is that food policy is not an automatic response to food insecurity. Food policies are shaped in and through political and economic processes. The direction in which the PDS developed has been influenced by the specific political context in which it was shaped. The food policy is strategically employed by governments in specific political and electoral situations. The political gains to the parties which promise a certain entitlement to poor and ensure its discharge can be an attractive undoubtedly. Thus guaranteed supply of essential food grains to the poor households by way of assured food security is also a good political and electoral strategy. It is important to understand hunger and food insecurity is from the standpoint of politics.

CHEAP RICE AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN THE SOUTHERN STATES OF INDIA

The potential of rice to tilt the electoral balance was first discovered by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (hereafter DMK) founder late C. N Annadurai whose promise of one 'Padiⁱⁱⁱ rice at one rupee brought him to power in the 1967 elections. The present DMK leader and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi lived up to that tradition by offering rice at rupees two per kg to all ration cardholders in the state in the last Assembly elections. Karunanidhi also offered free colour television for every family and free gas stove to all poor women. He came back to power with a thumping majority. In Karnataka it was Devraj Urs in the 1970s introduced several populist welfare measures. From the 1980s onwards, food became an issue in populist politics in Andhra Pradesh. Subsidised rice under PDS is one among the promises with which political parties tried to win the favour of the electorate. The political-economic background that gave rise to this development is the intensified political competition. Opposition parties emerged and became influential in many states. Moreover, the increasing political awakening and emancipation of large parts of the population made it necessary for politicians and political parties to formulate policies that appeal to these voters.

THE EMERGENCE OF TELUGU DESAM AND POLITICS OF FOOD IN A.P

The dominance of the Congress Party in the political history of Andhra Pradesh continued uninterrupted for three decades till it was upset by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in the 1983 elections. The Andhra Pradesh state was to go to the polls in January 1983 to the state Legislative Assembly. It was an important year in the political history of Andhra Pradesh. It saw the rise of a new political party, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which succeeded in ending the Congress hegemony within a very short time. In Andhra Pradesh, both the Congress(I) and TDP were prepared to promise some handouts to the poor in 1983. N T Rama Rao, the leader of TDP, boldly promised a higher subsidy than Congress(I) had ever provided, and they won the 1983 elections. When the TDP's leading position in the state assembly was questioned in 1985, their strategy of combining 'Telugu Jaathi', 'Telugu Prajala Atma Gouravam'^{iv} with the extensive food subsidy paid off in a solid electoral victory. The scheme was used as propaganda for TDP; the scheme was called as 'Anna-Varam'.^v Telugu Desam Party's populism and regionalism are also a convenient way of gaining power. The voters of Andhra Pradesh prefer the one which at least offers some concrete, immediate benefits; most voters have no expectations of any more fundamental change in society. After a short campaign, the party the TDP won the elections, thus marking the end of a long era of Congress in Andhra Pradesh. The leader of the Telugu Desam party was N.T. Rama Rao, a famous film star, who played ideal heroic roles as social reformer, social leader etc. In several films he also played the roles of Hindu mythological characters Lord Srirama, Krishna, Karna, etc and a towering figure who champions the cause of the weaker sections of society. He was very popular and had a great deal of charisma and following in Andhra Pradesh. Based on his earlier fame, extensive touring and smart campaigning, he was able to strike a chord with the people that would get power to him.

The Telugu Desam Party which came into existence in 1983 was trying to extract power from the ruling Congress Party and had repeatedly been promising that it would make rice available to the people under PDS at rupees two per kilo if voted to power. The election manifesto of Telugu Desam Party for 1983 elections, stressed the need for streamlining PDS so that essential commodities could reach the villages and be sold at reasonable prices, making the sale of rice at rupees two per kilo, the central objective of the broader policy.^{vi} The manifesto also stated that rice would be made available to the poorest of the poor. The TDP government, after forming the government in 1983, made rice available at rupees two per kilo in keeping with its poll promises. With the massive mandate from electorate, N.T Rama Rao went ahead with to introduce populist schemes, and especially he became very popular with subsidised rice at rupees two per kilo. This populist scheme has remained prominent in Andhra Pradesh's political history. The TDP was defeated in 1989, but it came back to power in 1993, partly again because of its promise to reintroduce the rupees two per kilo scheme. In September 1995, Chandrababu Naidu took over as

Chief Minister in Andhra Pradesh. After coming to power Chandrababu Naidu took several unpopular measures, such as raising electricity charges for a wide variety of consumers, enhancing the price of subsidised rice from Rs. 2 to Rs. 3.50 a kilo, and later on in year 2000 to 5.25 a kilo.

The account of the scheme's origin reveals that the rice subsidies primary purpose was never to help the poor. Instead, its main intention was to be visible if a small gesture of generosity on the part of the ruling parties in the state. Telugu Desam Party's election manifesto 1983 stated that Telugu Desam would strengthen the Public Distribution System and will see that the essential commodities are made available to people at very reasonable rates. It is the firm resolve of Telugu Desam to ensure sale of a kilogram of rice for rupees two. After winning power in 1983 TDP government implemented the rice subsidy scheme as it promised to the electorate. The ration shops have reliably supplied rice to cardholders, with the leakages and corruption problems faced by civil supplies kept to a minimum by the high visibility and local nature of fair price shops.

ELECTORAL POLITICS AND TWO RUPEES-A KILO RICE SCHEME IN A.P

The popular rupees two a kilo rice scheme was introduced in Andhra Pradesh by Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government as an election promise after it wrested power from Congress-I in 1982-83. Before 1983, the PDS mostly concentrated in urban areas like in many other parts of India except Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The government of Andhra Pradesh decided to extend the subsidised rice scheme to the poor living in rural areas. All those households were provided 10 kg of rice at Rs.2/- per kg through fair price shops. Later on, it was raised to 5 kg per head with a ceiling of 25 kg per household per month. This new task of food distribution policy in the political process has a lot to do with the search for political legitimacy, which is no longer given but has to be established and defended. This has to do with the dynamics generated by the parliamentary democratic system. The voters become more assertive and make demands on politicians and governments. Governments which do not deliver what they promise are quite often voted out. The erosion of the Congress party dominance and the increasing importance of competition among political parties led to political populism. One of the ways in which politicians and political parties now try to establish political legitimacy is through populist programmes that appeal to large parts of the population, and food distribution has obviously become one of them because providing essential commodities attracts people.

THE REVIVAL OF RUPEES TWO A KILO RICE SCHEME

Since the scheme has paid rich electoral dividends to Rama Rao in the past, the Y.S Rajasekhara Reddy government decided to revive it ahead of 2009 elections. Apart from direct electoral

political pressures, there was a tendency to assign minimum needs a high place on the political agenda. The Andhra Pradesh government under the leadership of Y.S Rajasekhar Reddy, had proposed a several populist programmes, including rupees two a kilo Rice Scheme, Indiramma Ellu, (Indira Gandhi Housing) Rajeev Arogya Sree^{vii} (health Scheme for poor) Pavala Vaddi^{viii} for DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) groups, rural roads and so on. These programmes were not only a brainchild of some benevolent planners but also the result of political pressure and demands. The ruling party hopes this scheme, coupled with free electricity to farmers, massive programmes of construction of houses for poor and irrigation projects, would help it retain the power. "The presentation of food programmes has been referred to as a donative discourse, because of the emphasis on charity and generosity of the government. The scheme is linked to the personality and care of the Chief Minister. In Andhra Pradesh, the rice scheme was not named after the Chief Minister himself, something which happened in Tamil Nadu for instance, but the Chief Minister was very much identified with it. This was done intentionally to improve the image of N.T. Rama Rao who was presented as a big brother, someone to be trusted and relied upon. He was presented as a benefactor who gives a helping hand to the poor."^{ix} The Andhra Pradesh government re-launched the Rs 2-a-kg rice scheme for below-poverty-line (BPL) families in the State on 9th April 2008, twenty-five years after it was first introduced in the state. Chief Minister Y.S Rajasekhar Reddy formally inaugurated the scheme at Jadcharla in backward Mahbubnagar district, even as his ministerial colleagues, Congress legislators and MPs had started the sale of subsidised rice to BPL families through fair price shops across the State. Legislators of other parties, too, participated in the launch in their respective constituencies. In all, about 42,000 fair price shops are networked to sell the subsidised rice. Apart from rice, kerosene and sugar, the state government is also planning to provide pulses and edible oil on subsidised prices for the white ration cardholders.^x

The review of the emergence subsidised rice scheme and evolution of the PDS, is that food policy is not an automatic response to food insecurity. Food policies were formulated in particular historical and politico-economic processes. The direction in which the PDS develops has been influencing by the specific political and economic context in which it is formulated. The political gains to the government which promises a specific entitlement to needy consumers and ensures its discharge can be attractive undoubtedly. Thus guaranteed supply of essential food grains to the poor households by way of assured food security is also a good political and electoral strategy. "Food in populist vote-catching practices, the development trajectory of food distribution policy has not become fully subordinate to political opportunism."^{xi}

The Rs. 2 per kilo scheme under the PDS became a big hand-out to almost the entire population of Andhra Pradesh. It became a major populist scheme, costing the Andhra Pradesh government about Rs. 2, 000 crore. The programme was allowed to expand so dramatically within a short

period, especially since 1983, for narrow political interests. Added to this is the sharply rising food subsidy bill, with the manifold increase in grain output, current buffer stocks are far above the required norms entailing a heavy burden on exchequer. Who will bear the burden ultimately? How will the government fill its treasury? However, people have to bear the burden by paying extra taxes. "Competitive populism and allotting a higher proportion of expenditure on welfare programmes and subsidies come invariably at the cost of education and health and slows down the growth. But in election year the dividing line between rhetoric and reality becomes really thin."^{xii}

BOGUS RATION CARDS

The White Card, otherwise known as 'Rice Card' in rural areas, is the most sought after piece of paper in Andhra Pradesh. It entitles the holding family not only to the cheap rice but also health care, pension, housing and many other benefits. The white (BPL) ration card is needed to avail benefits of many programmes of Andhra Pradesh, to a house under the Indiramma scheme, pension, and scholarships for students subsidised rice and social security. "According to the official figures by the state government, there are 1.87 crore white (BPL) cards, 15.57 lakh Antyodaya Annayojana cards and 93,200 Annapurna rice cards in the state."^{xiii} Taking four as the average number of one BPL family of those years, they account more than seven crores of the state population when the total population of undivided Andhra Pradesh itself is around 8 crore. Thus as per state's claim, 85 per cent of the state's people are living below the poverty line, which is unreasonable.

The analysis of PDS and subsidised rice scheme in Andhra Pradesh illustrate the changing function of food policy in economic development and politics. Food became an issue on the political agenda. Also, other electoral considerations have prompted politicians to promise expansions of the food distribution schemes. This connection between food and populist politics was not exceptional; this existed in other States as well, such as Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. There are important pressures like separate Telangana, classification of Schedule Castes etc, to which Andhra Pradesh State political parties and politicians have to respond. But there is no pressure or movements for food subsidies. But politicians themselves took the initiatives for electoral reasons. "Nevertheless, despite this balancing of the two faces of the regime and despite the presentation of rice at Rs. 2 per kilo as a gift, there is little doubt that the scheme has produced a change in the overall expectations of the citizens. The belief that poor people have entitlements and that the government has a duty to fulfil these to a certain extent, has become stronger. This means that, although the subsidised rice is an enormous burden to the AP exchequer, no government can afford to make drastic cuts. Populism has remained an important component of the AP governments, and perhaps it is possible to argue that it helps governments

to stay in power despite the fact that on other fronts policies are implemented that could be labelled as anti-poor or anti-worker.”^{xiv}

CONCLUSION

The origin of rupees two a kilo rice scheme reveals that the purpose of rice subsidies was not merely to help the poor. Instead, its main intention was to be a visible, token gesture of generosity of the ruling parties in the state. The government’s legitimacy enhanced by its electoral popularity and winning seats in elections. The analysis of PDS and subsidised rice scheme in Andhra Pradesh illustrate the changing function of food policy in economic development and politics. Food became an issue on the political agenda. Also, other electoral considerations have prompted politicians to promise expansions of the food distribution schemes. The failure to build a credible food security system continues unabated. In states where rice scheme was introduced at attractive prices under PDS, there were reports of large scale black marketing and diversion of rice from PDS to the open market. Such populist measures were introduced without making adequate provision in the budget. So such electoral gimmicks, unless backed by sound economics, are bound to boomerang on the people.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- i The state of Telangana was officially formed on 2 June 2014 after bifurcation Andhra Pradesh. However, the present paper concentrates on undivided Andhra Pradesh.
- ii Famous Telugu film star, he acted in many Telugu films and played a hero role who fight for social justice on silver screen.
- iii Padi is a colloquial word used in Tamil Nadu and southern Andhra Pradesh, which is about 1.5 Kg. Agricultural labour used to get foodgrains as wages in terms of ‘Padis’ for their work in agricultural fields in Tamil Nadu and southern Andhra Pradesh.
- iv Popular slogan of Telugu Desam Party, implying self respect, pride and dignity of Telugu people.
- v NT Rama Rao popularly known as ‘Anna’ in Andhra Pradesh, which means elder brother in Telugu, and also ‘Annamu’ means food, ‘Varam’ means gift or divine gift. Thus Anna-Varam connotes two meanings elder brother’s gift and food gift. He projected himself as the elder brother who gives rice and sarees to women, a benefactor doing good to Telugu people. This discourse can be characterised as donatives, since it stresses hand-outs, charity and welfare provided by a benevolent ruler

- vi Rice is the major ration item under PDS in Andhra Pradesh apart from rice, sugar, kerosene, and occasionally wheat and edible oil also includes under PDS. Since the other commodities are very nominal under PDS, political parties focus only on rice. PDS means only rice distribution in Andhra Pradesh. Thus the entire PDS revolves around rice.
- vii In Andhra Pradesh, Y.S Rajasekhar Reddy Government is extensively using Mrs Indira, Rajeev names as suffix or prefix to all programmes and policies. The names of the schemes clearly illustrate the significance of the personality cult of political leaders.
- viii Loan at interest rate of 25 paisa for self help groups.
- ix Mooij, Jos (2002) '*Welfare Policies and Politics: A Study of Three Government Interventions in Andhra Pradesh, India*' working paper, Overseas Development Institute, Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD, United Kingdom, p.28.
- x The Government is forcing the ration shop dealers to display Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's portrait while supplying rice under the Rs. 2-a-kg rice scheme. Congress party is insisting on such display and asking the Congress workers to oversee such display. Government is giving wide publicity for the scheme in all news papers.
- xi Mooij, Jos. (1998) 'Food policy and politics: The political economy of the public distribution system in India.' *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.25, No.2, January, p.94.
- xii India Today, 28th April 2008.p29
- xiii Ibid
- xiv Mooij, Jos (2002) '*Welfare Policies and Politics: A Study of Three Government Interventions in Andhra Pradesh, India*' working paper, Overseas Development Institute, Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD, United Kingdom,pp-28-29.