

FOR A HANDFUL OF RICE

Background:

Jagori has been working in the Bawana Resettlement Colony for the past one and half years, supporting women to become organized and fight for their rights. Problems with the ration shops are a recurrent theme in our discussions with women. Not surprising, since they bear the major share of responsibility for feeding their families and are at the receiving end of the oppression and corruption built into the system.

What is the Public Distribution System?

The Targeted Public Distribution System is a subsidized pricing system introduced to benefit the poor. The essential features of Targeted Public Distribution System are: Government of India is committed to making available foodgrains to the States to meet the requirement of at the scale of 10 kg per month per family at specially subsidized prices to population falling below the officially estimated poverty line (BPL families). The states would also receive the quantity needed for transitory allocation to Above Poverty Lines (APL) population. The state governments were to streamline the PDS by issuing special cards to BPL families and selling essential articles to them at specially subsidized prices, with better monitoring of the delivery system.



The ration is distributed to the people through a chain of shops called fair price shops all over the country. The Government issues licenses to private people to run these shops. The shopkeepers get a commission from the Government to do so. Three types of cards are issued by the government - Above Poverty Line (APL), Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Antyodaya. There is little subsidy on rations meant for APL cards. Antyodaya cards are issued to the poorest of the poor.



A grocery shop frequented by residents of Bawana

The Public Distribution System is unresponsive to the people. The rampant corruption present at the Circle Office and a non-chalant attitude at the higher offices are the key problems. Most Fair Price Shop owners have immense political backing and are leaders in their own rights.

Corruption takes place in records. The ration is siphoned off by making false entries in the records. Fake thumb impressions or signatures are put by the shopkeepers in the names of the people and their rations are siphoned off. The fear of a backlash discourages people from complaining which portrays the picture that everything is functioning well. For those who overcome the fear and reach the Circle Office to file complaints, receiving threats is common. The nexus between the Fair Price Shopowners and the Circle Offices make it impossible for a fair Public Distribution System to operate. The matters are even more complicated for resettled colonies.

PDS ISSUES IN BAWANA

- Large numbers of people are without ration cards or have lost their cards whose duplicates have not been issued.
- Large number of people with APL (Above Poverty line) cards, who have applied for Antodaya cards, and deposited their APL cards in circle office, Bawana. They do not get any ration on the receipt of the application form of Antodaya card.
- Ration shops do not open on time and on all stipulated days. As a result, there is pressure on people to get their ration on the day it opens; else they miss out on ration of the month.
- This leads to long queues, arguments and struggles to get ration before it gets over or the shop shuts.
- The rationwalla usually misbehaves with people. He does not give ration to any other member of family except in whose name the card is issued, even if the person seeking ration has his/her name on the card. Thus, men have to take leave from work to collect ration, leading to loss of wages and further financial loss, even with no guarantee of getting ration.
- No information/ awareness in community on their rights or rules relating to Public Distribution System. Absolute ignorance on government procedures or methods of settling grievances. The situation is worsened because of high illiteracy. Everyday struggles of survival are so hard that there is very little hope or energy left to deal with issues like PDS.
- There is not much of faulty pricing, but fraudulent weights and measures by the ration wallas. Sugar distributed is always 4-5 kgs irrespective of the number of names entered in the card. Kerosene oil always falls short by a liter or two.
- Not very good quality of foodgrains especially of rice and sugar. Cereals have a lot of dust and sugar is wet so that it becomes heavy in weight.

A Short Survey:

Data from our quick survey of 500 households, showed that nearly half had no cards in hand. The main reasons being: they had submitted the original cards along with the application forms of Antodaya Scheme; their cards were burnt during evictions or torn up by the ration shop owner. Others, who originally had “white cards” (meant for families above the poverty line), were forced to deposit them with the authorities when they applied for the “red cards” (Antodaya Card meant for those below poverty line) to which they are entitled.

Although these families were told that the receipt they were given for their application form would serve as a ration card, this is not the case. Shop owners refuse to honour this receipt (a tiny slip of paper with indecipherable writing). Many applications are still pending after more than a year, while many have simply not been accepted. Only half of those who possess ration cards were actually able to get their quota of food grains. The Ration shops in the colony open rarely and at random, without advance notice of openings and closings - people have to run to get their rations whenever they find the shop open. Whenever the shop opens, there are long queues, arguments and struggles to get the ration before the shop is closed as arbitrarily as it opened. The shop owners are contemptuous of their customers and do their best to humiliate them. Rations have to be collected by the “head of the family” (usually male) which means that if the shop opens on a particular day, the family may not get their ration if the man is be at work that same day. Quality is poor and weights and measures are far from accurate. For example, at least a kilo of sugar (dampened to add to the weight) and a litre of kerosene are usually skimmed off every cardholder’s entitlement.

To add to the misery, nobody in the community has accurate information on the rules for the functioning of the PDS. Neither is there any awareness that their entitlement of rations is a right. Ironically, people feel a sense of obligation to the ration shop owners who terrorise and cheat them. This is particularly because they are completely dependent on these people and are scared of not receiving their entitlement if they raise a voice against the Fair Price shop owners.

OUR STRATEGIES:

This survey formed the base of future course of action. The first task for us was to empower the women in the community and to involve them in all future strategies. Women’s leadership was crucial to the struggle for ration and we knew that they must come forward to build *samitis* which would serve as mechanisms for women to raise their concerns, the concerns of their families and neighbours.



Women from the Community in a meeting at JAGORI

The following strategies emerged from our experiences:

Public Audit: There is a provision for checking the records of every fair price shop on the 1st, 3rd and 4th Saturday of every month. Figures in the daily sales register of the ration shops, once accessible, are compared with entries made in the ration cards of the cardholders and the actual rations received. The findings are then presented to the government, which is expected to take action as per the law. The exercise for us was a revelation. Of the six cards whose records were examined, it was found that four had been tampered with. Families who had not got even a grain of wheat or rice from the ration shop were shown as having drawn more than three times their entitlement. An immediate meeting was organised by Jagori with the Commissioner, Assistant Commissioner and the FSO (Food & Supplies Officer) of the Food & Supplies Department.

Jansunvai: This 'social audit' was followed up with a *jan sunwai*, where the discrepancies were presented and people testified in public. The *jansunvai* or public hearing became a tool for the people to experience their



collective strength and overcame their fear of challenging the system. The event had a very powerful symbolic value. Otherwise inaccessible officials were present on the platform, showing that they can be held account for implementing policies and following the rules.

Involvement of youth: The people has brought new energy into also go to take the ration, they people who can put pressure on the refusing to take wrong entitlement around them encouraging them to demonstrating the problem and was prepared by the yuva ekta in the community. It was



participation of young the struggle. Since they are very important *rationwallah* by and then talk to people do the same. A play information on ration manch (a local group) performed in the

community for people as well as presented in India Habitat Centre in a play festival organized by Hazards centre.

Information dissemination: Focused group discussions with women, particularly from A block which was identified as the first area of intervention. These meetings had dual purpose: of gathering information (to supplement the findings of survey) and of information dissemination. Pamphlets containing basic information on ration are distributed after the meetings. Another means of giving out information is through a newsletter

taken out by the Sathi Samooh, a girls group affiliated to Jagori, where articles on ration are a regular feature. Such information dissemination tools go a long way in building awareness in the community.



Nigrani Samiti

Monitoring: Nigrani Samitis or Monitoring teams of local people now monitor the functioning of fair price shop. Consisting mostly of young girls and women from the community, they keep watch over whether the Fair Price Shops are opening on time, whether stocks arrive properly and whether it is distributed properly. They are also in regular touch with the *rationwallahs* to ensure that a fair PDS prevails and to fight for others when they see that people are being cheated.



Checking on the quality of rice



Use of Right to Information: The use of the Right to Information (RTI) to get information for people as in the case of Antodaya Applicants who have been waiting for their cards to be issued for over a year. People filed RTI applications and an inspection was immediately carried out and their applications are being processed. The women who filed the right to information application are currently waiting for their cards to be issued. There are others whose applications were rejected who went on an appeal. They are currently waiting for a reply to their application. The

judicious use of RTI will lead to more accountability of public distribution system.



Casework: Direct intervention began with the women and reached to more people with every passing day. First issue was to get ration cards of people who have not got any ration for two years and have applied for Antodaya cards. There are regular meetings with Food and supplies officer (fso), visits to circle office, getting their application forms out of the total applications submitted, checking their status and getting them ration on the receipts of application form and enabling them to voice

their grievances to the FSO. There is also a provision where people from the community come to the Jagori Office with other problems related to the Public distribution system. These problems are then looked at and a solution suggested. Sometimes, these cases need to be taken to the required authorities and followed up. This is done by Jagori with the help of women from the *Nighrani Samiti*.

Conclusion:

We hope with the above strategies the scenario would develop and the discrepancies mended. But this is only the beginning of the struggle for the people's right to get the benefits of government schemes devised to help the poor. Every victory creates fresh energy, but also more and more violent reactions from vested interests, local political mafias and goons. Our workers have been threatened and several attempts have been made to "persuade" us to back off. But hopes are high and the determination to continue the struggle is strong - most importantly, the silent majority is speaking out and is not willing to be silenced any more.