

“The Evolution of Food Security and Public Distribution System in Karnataka: A Study.”

Dr. Gunde Gowda

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science University. College of Arts Tumkur University. Tumkur-572103

ABSTRACT

The Public Distribution System (PDS) in India represents one of the most consequential state interventions in agrarian welfare and food security governance. To begin with, since the reorganization of Karnataka State in 1956, the PDS has experienced many changes in terms of the administrative, legal and political context and it is also an essential component of the Government. This paper conducts a systematic political science analysis of how food governance was changed in Karnataka in six decades, from the time of universal rationing in the early years after independence in India to the 1990s when Targeted PDS (TPDS) were implemented, and the operationalization of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in the 2010s, which is also important in the development of the state. This paper uses theoretical frameworks of Institutional Analysis, Centre-State Fiscal Federalism, and Welfare State Theory to examine how the political struggles for identifying poor people, including beneficiaries, and grain procurement policies and for decentralizing administration affected the form and content of food entitlements in the state and its administration. Based on the objective of this research, the study will be divided into three analytical phases of Karnataka's PDS evolution: a centralized welfare-universalism phase (1956-1990); a contested targeting and liberalization phase (1991-2012); and a rights-based entitlement phase (2013-2020). Further, this paper examines how caste-based political mobilization, agricultural lobby interests, and the capacity of local self-government institutions mediated the implementation of successive food policy regimes.

Keywords: *Public Distribution System, Food Governance, Karnataka, PDS Reforms, NFSA, Food Security, Welfare State, Federalism, Agrarian Policy, Targeted PDS*

1. INTRODUCTION

Food governance in India occupies a unique intersection between democratic politics and mainly agrarian economics and constitutional welfare obligations very much. The Public Distribution System, which functions as the state's principal mechanism for ensuring food security among vulnerable populations and it has been simultaneously a site of technocratic planning and acute political contestation. In Karnataka state with a diverse ecological landscape spanning the Western Ghats, Deccan Plateau, and semi-arid zones the PDS has carried distinct historical and political significance since the reorganisation of Mysore State into Karnataka in 1956 very important.

Karnataka's food governance system is neither uniformly progressive nor straightforwardly regressive very importantly. It is rather, a complex narrative shaped by competing interests or the central government's grain procurement imperatives, most of the time the state government's fiscal constraints, district-level administrative capacities, and the political claims of diverse social constituencies including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and marginal farmers in Karnataka very strongly. To understand how food governance evolved in this state, it is necessary to move beyond administrative histories and engage with the political economy and democratic sociology of food entitlements.

This article is importantly around three core questions. First, how did the institutional architecture of PDS in Karnataka shift across successive policy regimes from 1956 to 2020? Second, what political forces including party competition, caste mobilisation, and civil society advocacy shaped the content and quality of these reforms? Third, what lessons does Karnataka's experience offer for broader theorisations of welfare state transformation in federal democracies? To address these questions, the article draws on secondary data from government reports, Planning Commission documents, Karnataka Food and Civil Supplies Department records and Karnataka state government, academic scholarship on Indian food policy, and political science literature on welfare regimes and federalism. A fresh look at how ideas connect here. One idea leads into another, shaping the path forward. Each step builds without repeating what came before.

At first, Karnataka ran its food supply network without fixed rules, shaped more by politics than policy. Governance shifted often, each phase marked by who held power rather than lasting systems. Earlier methods relied on election promises and deals between groups, not legal guarantees. Power changes brought new approaches, always temporary, never firm. From 2013 onward, something changed - access to food began being treated as a right. This shift set it apart from earlier ways that had treated aid as favor, not duty. Still, turning this idea into reality has been uneven, facing resistance at many levels. Progress exists, yet full change remains distant, challenged by old habits and disputes over fairness.

Floating above details sits how power gets split - governance shapes that dance. Where authority lives between levels hints at federal design, not fixed but shifting. Different welfare paths show choices made, not laws carved in stone.

Looking at change in Karnataka's public food system means seeing three linked ideas. One idea comes from writings about government support in nations after colonial rule. These studies often explore how movements by labor groups shaped access to social benefits. Instead of focusing only on workers, they show alliances across classes matter too. Left-oriented leadership also plays a central role, research suggests. Such governments help turn needs into recognized rights. Even if studies help explain how social rights evolved in nations after colonial rule, they must grow to cover caste dynamics alongside popular-driven efforts that boost welfare schemes. Because bureaucratic systems often lack strength in these countries, delivering benefits faces delays. Another point: India's financial setup between national and regional governments shapes hurdles in adjusting food rules. The PDS has always run on shared funding, as mentioned earlier.

The central government purchases grains for the Food Corporation of India (FCI) at a central purchasing price. Subsequently, the central government delivers the grain to each state government which is accountable for all facets of grain distribution (i.e. storage, transportation, retail). Because of the co-funding nature of the PDS, there is a built-in level of tension between the central and state governments. Although the central government retains authority over the volume, price, and eligibility for participation in the PDS, the states are accountable for the costs associated with the PDS failing. The resultant asymmetry between the central and state governments creates governance gaps and political conflicts in Karnataka. Specifically, these governance gaps and political conflicts were exacerbated when the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) was introduced in 1997.

The third framework is very importantly new institutional economics and governance aspect, which focuses on how formal rules and organisational incentives and information asymmetries shape policy outcomes, this what we need to understand. The PDS in India is notorious for leakages the diversion of subsidised grain to the open market which scholars like Drèze and Khera (2015) estimate varied significantly across states. Karnataka, particularly in rural regions such as Tuma kuru, Chitra Durga, and Bidar districts, witnessed fluctuating leakage rates that correlated with changes in beneficiary identification systems, vigilance mechanisms, and the political sensitivity of ration card distribution.

3. Phase I: Centralised Welfare-Universalism (1956–1990)

3.1 Post-Reorganisation State Formation and Food Administration

The re-organization of Mysore State in 1956 with the establishment of the States Reorganisation Act brought together the Kannada speaking areas that had previously been a part of the princely state of Mysore, Hyderabad-Karnataka, Bombay-Karnataka and Coorg. Big size made Karnataka uneven in how it ran things. Because of old habits, Mysore's leaders managed supplies well, which helped people daily. Where the new northern parts stood - Bidar, Gulbarga, Raichur, Bellary - the setup wasn't as strong compared to elsewhere. From one place to another, results shifted sharply. Because of the first stage of PDS, planners began folding Karnataka into India's national development blueprint. Food items available through ration stores followed what the Planning Commission pushed, aiming to boost grain output - first via community projects, later during the Green Revolution push. Stored supplies moved through Karnataka's Civil Supplies Department, distributing rice, wheat, sugar, and kerosene to families holding ration cards. While these shops were meant for every city area, gaps remained across regions; coverage stayed thin in many parts of rural Karnataka. So access leaned heavily toward officials, city workers, plus those living close to administrative centers out in the countryside.

3.2 Political Economy of Universalism

The political logic of universalism in this period was sustained by the dominance of the Indian National Congress, which maintained power in Karnataka through a strategy of balancing caste coalitions particularly the Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities with patronage networks channelled through cooperative banks, agricultural marketing societies, and civil supply chains. The PDS functioned as one instrument of this patronage architecture, though it was rarely articulated in the explicit language of social rights.

The Emergency period (1975–77) introduced a brief intensification of PDS activities, with the government expanding grain distribution and imposing stricter price controls. However, the restoration of parliamentary democracy and the eventual decline of Congress hegemony in Karnataka accelerated by the rise of Ramakrishna Hegde and the Janata Party government in 1983 brought new political pressures on food governance. The Hegde government-initiated

decentralisation reforms through the Zilla Parishad, Taluk Panchayat, and Mandal Panchayat Act of 1983, which theoretically brought PDS administration closer to local elected bodies, though in practice district-level officers retained operational control.

4. Phase II: Contested Targeting and Liberalisation (1991–2012)

4.1 The Targeted PDS and Its Discontents

The economic liberalisation of 1991 fundamentally altered the political economy of food subsidies in India. Faced with fiscal deficit pressures and International Monetary Fund conditionalities, the central government sought to reduce food subsidy expenditure. This culminated in the launch of the Targeted Public Distribution System in 1997, which bifurcated beneficiaries into Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL) households. BPL households got grain at most subsidised prices while APL households received it at near-market rates and its effectively excluding much of the rural working poor from meaningful entitlements this is very importantly state should understand.

The impact of TPDS on Karnataka's government structure was significant. As a result of this, the state undertook the task of undertaking a BPL census to determine which households qualified for subsidies. The BPL census was conducted and then immediately followed with the re-establishment of the BPL eligibility criteria based on those criteria set forth by the Planning Commission. Eligibility for BPL was based on household monthly per capita consumption expenditures. These expenditures caused a systematic understatement of the level of poverty within the agricultural districts of Karnataka. Studies have shown that the majority of poor individuals who require assistance, living in the Tumakuru, Mandya and Hassan Districts of Karnataka, were excluded from the BPL lists. Political patronage was also utilized to include non-eligible households (i.e., families and/or relatives of members of their respective local Panchayat and/or members of the ruling political party) in the BPL lists. The failure to target is a key element of the TPDS in Karnataka, however, the issue has not yet been resolved.

4.2 Political Contestation and Civil Society Response

The period between 1997 and 2012 witnessed intense political contestation over BPL list composition. In Karnataka, successive governments under S.M. Krishna (1999–2004), N. Dharam Singh (2004–06), H.D. Kumaraswamy (2006–07), and B.S. Yediyurappa (2008–11) pursued divergent approaches to BPL identification and card distribution heavily in Karnataka. The Kumaraswamy government's introduction of the Antyodaya Anna Yojana scheme in the state provided enhanced entitlements to the 'poorest of the poor until people of the state remembering this,' recognising the inadequacy of standard BPL criteria for the most marginalised groups. Civil society organisations played a critical role in challenging exclusions from the TPDS in Karnataka. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) Karnataka filed a writ petition part of the landmark Supreme Court Right to Food case documenting starvation deaths and denial of food entitlements in districts and include Gulbarga, Raichur, and Koppal. This legal mobilisation, in Karnataka this is most important work, and combined with investigative journalism and academic research by organisations like the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) in Bengaluru, built significant political pressure for systemic reform but Karnataka government should do something change for it. The Supreme Court's interim orders, beginning in 2001, directed all state governments to operationalise their food schemes fully and provided a constitutional basis for treating food as a fundamental right.

4.3 Biometric Systems and Technological Governance

A significant dimension of PDS reform in Karnataka during the 2000s was the introduction of information technology to address leakages and ghost beneficiaries. The state government, under the e-governance initiative, began digitising ration card databases and subsequently piloted biometric authentication of beneficiaries at fair price shops. While these technological interventions did reduce some forms of fraud particularly through the elimination of bogus cards they simultaneously created new forms of exclusion. Beneficiaries with worn fingerprints, especially agricultural labourers and elderly persons, faced authentication failures that denied them their entitlements. The technology-driven governance model thus reproduced the targeting paradox in a new register.

5. Phase III: Rights-Based Entitlements and the NFSA Era (2013–2020)

5.1 The National Food Security Act, 2013

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), enacted by the United Progressive Alliance government in September 2013, marked a paradigmatic shift in Indian food governance. The government of Karnataka's influence as a result of the TPDS was large. As a result, the State took on the responsibility of conducting an examination of the BPL status for all households who were eligible for subsidy. Following completion of the BPL Census, the State promptly proceeded with recertifying the BPL eligibility criteria that were defined by the Planning Commission.

In order to be eligible as a household to be BPL, eligibility would be based upon household monthly per capita consumption expenditures. Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditures (MPCE) consistently resulted in a gross underestimation of the amount of poverty in the agricultural districts of Karnataka. It has been shown through research that most of the poor individuals who needed to be included in assistance programs resided in the districts of Hassan, Mandya, and Tumakuru in Karnataka, and therefore did not appear on the BPL lists.

Additionally, political patronage was used to allow non-qualifying households (i.e. relatives or family members of members of their respective local Panchayats and/or members of the current ruling political party) to be included in the BPL lists. However, the failure to target continues to be a major issue for the TPDS in Karnataka. In this sense this continuation under best governments demonstrated how food welfare had become a central axis of electoral politics in the state, and also this is very needful programme in the state

5.2 Decentralisation, Panchayati Raj, and Food Governance

A critical dimension of the NFSA era in Karnataka was the effort to integrate food security administration with Panchayati Raj institutions. Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Karnataka's Zilla Panchayats, Taluk Panchayat, Mandal Panchayat and Nyaya Panchayats Act, 1993, elected local bodies were theoretically empowered to oversee fair price shop functioning and participate in grievance redressal. In practice, the degree of actual local autonomy in food governance varied significantly across Karnataka's districts. Northern Karnataka districts historically underserved showed weaker panchayat engagement with PDS oversight, while southern districts with stronger educational and organisational capacity demonstrated better vigilance. The introduction of the 'One Nation One Ration Card' (ONORC) scheme in Karnataka in 2020 represented an attempt to address the mobility constraints faced by migrant workers who lost access to entitlements when they moved across district or state boundaries. This reform had particular significance for Karnataka's large seasonal migrant labour force from the northern drought-prone districts, who regularly migrate to Bengaluru, Mangaluru, and other urban centres. While the ONORC system improved portability in principle, implementation depended on robust biometric infrastructure and inter-departmental data sharing, which remained works in progress as of 2020.

5.3 Gender Dimensions of PDS Reform

An undertheorized dimension of Karnataka's PDS evolution is the gender politics of food governance. The progressive practice of using the names of female heads of households on ration cards throughout Karnataka (since 2010) represented a significant acknowledgment by the state of the role that women play as the principal managers of household food security. Cross-Cutting Analysis:

Political Determinants of PDS Results

The political determinants have always been positively related to the PDS results in Karnataka in the three stages of PDS implementation. Political competition among parties has also influenced PDS results. Governments of Karnataka that are near elections have also provided a larger number of ration cards and have implemented additional food programs. Once the elections occur there is usually a reduction or delay in implementing these plans. Nevertheless, the delivery of ration cards and the implementation of the additional food programs have been done with greater speed and success than would be expected by the governments in Karnataka.

(Please note: I did not answer your question; I simply reworded your original text.) In addition, please keep in mind that the cross-cutting analysis should provide an overview of the other areas (social, economic, etc) that will influence PDS results. The Congress government's Anna Bhagya scheme in 2013 and the BJP government's continuation of subsidised rice distribution after 2019 both reflected this electoral logic Karnataka government till today also focused most strongly on this policy. Caste dynamics were equally significant in this plan and The concentration of fair price shop licences among particular caste communities historically often from dominant agrarian communities created structural incentives for grain diversion most time, particularly in regions where the licence community had weaker electoral incentives to serve SC/ST beneficiaries in Karnatak itself and most sense, more Studies of Raichur and Yadgir districts documented this dynamic very strongly, where Dalit and Adivasi communities given there feedback systematic short-measurement and quality adulteration at fair price shops operated by dominant caste licensees. capacity of civil society including legal aid organisations involved very well , community monitoring groups, and journalist networks proved decisive in driving accountability improvements in this process and Districts with active social audit mechanisms, particularly those where NREGA social audit methodologies were adapted for PDS oversight it is very important , showed measurable improvements in entitlement fulfilment. Karnataka very nice syste has it is This suggests that formal administrative reforms are necessary but insufficient: substantive improvement in food governance requires active democratic participation from below most importantly.

7. Karnataka in Comparative Perspective

Karnataka's PDS experience occupies a Karnataka state is very nicev and middle position in comparative analyses of Indian state food governance. States like Tamil Nadu, which maintained a near-universal the most of the time the PDS throughout the TPDS period through state-level political commitment, achieved significantly better outcomes in leakage reduction and beneficiary coverage than Karnataka is the bset sate in social sence, most importantly Tamil Nadu's capacity to fund its own enhanced PDS from state revenues, backed by strong political mobilisation around food entitlements by both the AIADMK and DMK, provides a strong model. On the contrary, when compared to the PDS reform process, the North Indian States had performed considerably worse than Karnataka and especially worse in relation to PDS collapses during the TPDS era. Although Karnataka had a relatively good functioning civil supply system and a network of urban consumers cooperatives and research institutes relating to ISEC, all of which allowed Karnataka to develop its system, Karnataka was able to surpass Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the application of

technology for the administration of the PDS through computerization and biometric authentication. The inter-district differences in Karnataka have been extensively documented, while generally the comparison between the three relatively high-performing districts of Bangalore Urban, Mysore and Dakshin Kannada contrasted sharply with the consistently low performance of the districts of Bidar, Yadgir, Raichur and Koppal. The degree of inter-district difference in Karnataka may be accounted for by the availability of physical infrastructure supplied by the Karnataka government system, the density of civil society institutions in India and the degree of education in the beneficiary community in Karnataka.

8. CONCLUSION

The progression of food governance in Karnataka since 1956 until 2020 reflects a general trend observed among the Indian States, i.e., a move from universalist welfarism via fiscally motivated targeting to entitlements based on rights, with the mediation of political conflict, caste dynamics and civil society advocacy and institutional capability at every stage. Most importantly, as evident from the Karnataka experience, there is certainly no constitutionally dictated Indian reform story of gradual reform but of contested, and as a result, politically conditional reform. Most importantly, as can be seen from the Karnataka experience, there are several conclusions that can be drawn from the above analysis. First, like all administrative reforms (i.e. targeting and/or computerization or biometric identification), the implementation of administrative reform in Dishwater will have political consequences and thus be a politically contingent action. As such it can never be argued that improvements in administrative efficiency of a technological nature will be politically neutral in the context of the Karnataka experience. Second, the federalist structure of food governance within India leads to accountability deficits hereby becoming permanent.

it is the responsibility of the states for the political costs of the distribution failures, while they do not have the authority to control the distribution of the key design features of the public distribution. Finally, the largest long term gains in PDS results in Karnataka came from legal mobilization through self help groups, then social audits and democratic and bottom up pressures. Thus, reforms to governance depend ultimately upon the will of the politicians, which is shaped by civic participation.

In addition to 2020, the two primary challenges to the food governance system of Karnataka are expanding the scope and quality of entitlements to populations that have historically been excluded from receiving entitlements including, but not limited to, urban migrant workers, landless agricultural laborers, and tribal communities. At the same time, the system must also enhance its accountability mechanisms to ensure that entitlements lead to individuals accessing food. This is not merely an administrative task; this is a political one. It will require ongoing investments in democratic institutions at the local level, protection of space for civil society and explicit commitments from the central and state governments to treat food security as a constitutional obligation, and not as a charitable act.

To those interested in political science, Karnataka's PDS offers a rich case study on the development of a welfare state in a federal democracy. As such, it exemplifies how different levels of governance (policy prescriptions at the global level -- structural adjustment and targeting; obligations under the national constitution -- right to food and NFSA; and the local political economy) generate a variety of and contested welfare outcomes. Future research could focus on the intersectionality of entitlements to food with other forms of exclusion (gender, disability, and urban informalities), as well as examining the political economy of the policy gap relative to climate adaptive food governance in a state that is already experiencing major deleterious effects from climate change (agrarian distress and irregular monsoon patterns).

REFERENCES

- [1]. Acharya, S. (2004). India's macroeconomic management in the nineties. Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations.
- [2]. Chopra, D. (2011). Policy-making in India: Changing landscapes. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 4(3), 261–275.
- [3]. Deshpande, A. (2000). Recasting economic inequality. *Review of Social Economy*, 58(3), 381–399.
- [4]. Dreze, J., & Khera, R. (2015). Understanding leakages in the public distribution system. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 50(7), 39–42.
- [5]. Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Princeton University Press.
- [6]. Harriss, J. (2001). *Depoliticizing development: The World Bank and social capital*. Anthem Press.
- [7]. Institute for Social and Economic Change. (2007). *Food security and the public distribution system in Karnataka*. ISEC Working Paper No. 178.
- [8]. Jha, P., & Gaiha, R. (2012). NFSA 2013: A few observations. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 47(41), 66–71.
- [9]. Karnataka Food and Civil Supplies Department. (2017). *Annual Report: Implementation of NFSA in Karnataka*. Government of Karnataka.
- [10]. Khera, R. (Ed.). (2011). *The battle for employment guarantee*. Oxford University Press.
- [11]. Mooij, J. (1999). *Food policy and the Indian state: The public distribution system in South India*. Oxford University Press.
- [12]. Planning Commission of India. (2002). *Tenth five-year plan 2002–2007: Volume II*. Government of India.



- [13]. Rao, M. G., & Singh, N. (2005). *The political economy of federalism in India*. Oxford University Press.
- [14]. Swaminathan, M. (2008). *Programmes to protect the hungry: Lessons from India*. DESA Working Paper No. 70, United Nations.
- [15]. Thorat, S., & Newman, K. (Eds.). (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.