

## **E8 | THE RIGHT TO FOOD CAMPAIGN IN INDIA**

The Right to Food (RTF) campaign in India has been mobilizing and advocating on hunger, malnutrition and food-related issues in the country for the last ten years. The RTF campaign's foundation statement asserts that it is 'an informal network of organisations and individuals committed to the realisation of the right to food in India' (RTFC n.d.). Over these years the RTF campaign has expanded into a wide network with members across the country representing different groups, including agricultural workers' unions, women's rights groups, Dalit rights groups, single women's networks, child rights organizations, those working with construction workers, migrant workers and homeless populations, and so on. These varied groups have come together in agreement with the campaign's belief that 'everyone has a fundamental right to be free from hunger and that the primary responsibility for guaranteeing basic entitlements rests with the state' (ibid.). The campaign has a small secretariat for coordination, a steering committee which takes decisions between conventions, while the agenda for the campaign is set in a National Convention that is open to all those who consider themselves members to attend.

### **Judicial pressure and popular mobilization**

The RTF campaign has its origins in a public interest litigation (PIL) filed in the Supreme Court in April 2001 by the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Rajasthan. The petition demanded that the country's gigantic food stocks should be used without delay to protect people from hunger and starvation (PUCL 2001; Drèze 2002; Guha-Khasnabis and Vivek 2006; Birchfield and Corsi 2010) (see also Chapter C3 on food sovereignty in India). Popularly known as the 'Right to Food case', this is now one of the longest-running mandamuses in the world. More than fifty orders have been passed, including some very significant ones such as universalization of school midday meals and the supplementary nutrition programme for children under six years, pregnant and lactating mothers and adolescent girls (RTFC 2008a). While some of these orders were path-breaking in their content, it was soon realized that for them to actually translate into action on the ground required pressure from the people. Different groups began to mobilize around the Supreme Court orders and came together to form the Right to Food campaign. Very soon, the scope expanded beyond the Supreme Court case towards building a larger public campaign for the right to food (Drèze 2002).

Through discussions and debates within its various constituencies the



**Image E8.1** March organized in 2012 by the Right to Food campaign in Sarguja, India (Right to Food campaign)

campaign began to understand the linkages between questions of access to resources and livelihoods and the right to food. The campaign argues that while demanding greater entitlements from the state, struggles have to be mounted to ensure that the compulsions of the present neoliberal economic order do not succeed in taking people away from what they have had access to over centuries – access to resources such as forests, land and water (RTFC 2008b, 2010, 2014). There needs to be constant pressure and mobilization for a more equitable model of development in which economic growth is not based on exploitation but rather creates equal opportunities for all.

At the same time, in the context of the general onslaught on public services and the role of the state in welfare provision, it is necessary to continuously fight for what is due to the people even if it provides only temporary reprieve. The campaign has therefore focused on bringing in and strengthening legislation and schemes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the Mid-day Meals (MDM) scheme and the Public Distribution System (PDS) (Khera 2013), while at the same time working in solidarity with movements related to land rights, opposing coercive displacement, forest rights, fighting social exclusion and so on (RTFC 2009).

The activities of the Right to Food campaign involve developing resource material for grassroots organizations in the form of pamphlets, primers, booklets; generating ‘evidence’ from the field on the status of hunger, starvation and implementation of government schemes; mobilizing people from across the country and leading public action in the form of protest demonstrations,

rallies, public hearings, sit-ins (*dharnas*); advocating with media, academics, politicians and parliamentarians on policies and legislation, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

### National legislation on food security

In the last four years (2009 onwards) the primary agenda on which the Right to Food campaign has focused is the National Food Security Act (NFSA). The Congress party in its election manifesto in 2009 promised to bring in a Food Security Act (Indian National Congress 2009). Once the government was formed under its leadership, it also declared this to be one of its priorities.<sup>2</sup> In the following four years there was intense debate on what such an Act should contain. The RTF campaign also actively worked to bring pressure on the government to introduce a Bill that was comprehensive in its approach. The Act that was finally passed was highly inadequate; however, it was still seen to be a step forward in the struggle for right to food (RTFC 2013; Aggarwal and Mander 2013). Some of the major challenges faced by social movements working with a rights-based approach in the context of globalization, privatization and liberalization can be highlighted from this experience.

While the government and all political parties took a narrow view of food security, reducing it merely to distribution of subsidized foodgrains to the poor (Sinha 2014), the campaign argued that one must take a more comprehensive approach, including issues of agricultural production, access to resources,



**Image E8.2** People's forum organized by the RTF campaign in New Delhi (Right to Food campaign)

livelihoods, minimum wages and so on (RTFC 2009). There was vibrant discussion within the campaign on whether it is possible to have a single piece of legislation which addressed these broad structural issues or whether the opportunity given by the promise of a Food Security Act should tactically be utilized to gain as much as possible within the framework of entitlements through public programmes.

The Right to Food campaign then drafted its own version of the Act. The draft was called the 'Food Entitlements Act' and not the 'Food Security Act' because it was believed that food security was a broader concept, as mentioned above. The campaign's draft demanded a decentralized procurement mechanism, a universal and expanded public distribution system including cereals, pulses, millets and oil, special provisions for vulnerable groups such as feeding programmes for children, social security pensions for the aged and disabled, portability of entitlements for migrants and so on. The draft also listed broad principles related to coercive land acquisition, protecting small and marginal farmers, a moratorium on GM crops, food production and availability and so on (RTFC 2009).

### **A minimalist approach to food security**

All along, the friction between this comprehensive approach and the minimalistic framework set by the government has remained. Even though the RTF campaign and allied civil society networks talked about linking production, procurement and distribution issues, the debate in policy circles and the media was largely restricted to whether the Public Distribution System (PDS) should be universal or not and what the extent of coverage should be. This was also an important debate needing serious engagement.

On the other hand there was an onslaught from the right-wing media against the idea of the Food Security Act, saying that it would destroy the economy by being a burden on the fiscal deficit and distorting the food market. Many influential voices, even from within the government, were opposed to the PDS itself and proposed that it be dismantled and replaced by direct cash transfer (Dutta 2012; Mehrotra 2011; Kotwal et al. 2011). In this context, the campaign was forced to defend the PDS and its role, the need for state intervention on hunger and malnutrition, even while there were no takers for the entire comprehensive approach that was laid out in the campaign draft.

Therefore, in some ways the boundaries of the debate were already set. Even though the campaign tried to expand these boundaries, in hindsight it could be said that it was not very successful in doing so. While there is no doubt that the NFSA has great potential to improve the PDS and therefore access to food for a large majority of people in some of the poorest states in the country, it remains to be seen how effective the implementation will actually be. On the other hand, there is the criticism that such legislation serves only to legitimize a fundamentally anti-poor state which gets away with yielding

very little. Parallels of similar tensions can be drawn with other socio-economic rights as well. Movements working on ‘health for all’ are forced to engage with ‘Universal Health Coverage’, those working on ‘education for all’ have to accept some access to education before talking about a ‘common school system’, and so on. Campaigns and social movements need to continue reflecting on how most effectively to negotiate with the system for small changes in such a manner that they take us towards the long-term goal rather than dilute the vision itself. This also raises basic questions on the relation between civil society and the state and whether civil society must restrict itself to a confrontational approach or be willing to engage in dialogue, and the issues that arise once dialogue begins to become an option.

### **Building solidarity across different movements**

A related issue is one of the mobilization capacity of campaigns such as the Right to Food campaign. While many of the groups that are part of the campaign work directly with thousands of people, some also being membership based, demonstrating this strength in the form of bringing all the people together in one place is a challenge. Considering that most of the time the people who are part of these organizations are also those who belong to some of the most marginalized social and economic communities, logistics and funding for mobilization become a serious restriction.

The Right to Food campaign’s secretariat is run on the basis of individual donations received only in rupees and all events are also financed either by



**Image E8.3** Street play in New Delhi in support of the RTF campaign (Right to Food campaign)

individual donations or some support from participating organizations for provision of food, lodging and so on (RTFC 2008b). Funds from donor agencies are not accepted. This funding policy has been important in ensuring that the campaign's positions are formed on the basis of the beliefs of the constituents and not under pressure from any external considerations. It has also helped in maintaining the credibility of the campaign.

Secondly, with a predominantly corporate-influenced media and an apathetic middle class, it has been demonstrated that a large number of people on the streets protesting against inflation or demanding land rights make headlines only for the traffic jams caused, with no immediate response from the state. Therefore while a protest demonstration with over five thousand participants led by the Right to Food campaign does not get any attention, neither does one with over 50,000 participants led by the main trade unions (Srinivasan 2011). This is not to argue that there is no meaning in popular mobilization of this sort, but that this is a challenge that movements have to grapple with. Strategies for communicating the need for structural change, albeit incremental, not just to politicians and policy-makers but also to the media and the general public at large need to be developed.

In the RTF campaign's experience one issue that managed to get the sympathy of the non-poor was that of defining the poverty line. The absurdity of a poverty line as low as 32 Rupees (half of a US\$) per person per day in urban areas, at a time of high inflation which was affecting people across classes, was something that everyone took notice of. On this issue, the street action by the campaign found widespread support from the media and the general public at large, with the government being forced to make a statement that poverty lines will be revisited.<sup>3</sup> However, the demand for a universal PDS on the basis that one of the reasons targeted schemes fail is precisely because they are based on such ad hoc criteria, failed to resonate with the people as much.

In relation to the NFSA as well it can be argued that the campaign to some extent managed to influence the Act. Although the final Act is nowhere close to what the campaign had demanded, in comparison with the government's own initial drafts, which did nothing but legislate for the PDS in its current form, the NFSA includes an expanded PDS, delinks it from the poverty line, includes universal maternity entitlements, nutrition for children and a framework for grievance redressal (Government of India 2013). This expansion was possible because of multiple factors, with the RTF campaign also playing a role. The challenge now for the campaign is to move on and consolidate so that the gains made so far fructify on the ground, and also that the larger vision is not lost and the fight for that continues.

In sum, the RTF campaign's experience highlights the strengths of a loose network of organizations and individuals coming together on one issue and at the same time the difficulties in engaging with the state and the public at large on structural causes.

## Notes

- 1 See the website of the Right to Food campaign, [www.righttofoodcampaign.in](http://www.righttofoodcampaign.in), for details on the various activities of the campaign.
- 2 See the president's speech to the parliament, [pratihtmlbhapatil.nic.in/spo40609](http://pratihtmlbhapatil.nic.in/spo40609).
- 3 See [www.righttofoodcampaign.in/below-poverty-line/articles](http://www.righttofoodcampaign.in/below-poverty-line/articles) for a collection of articles in the media on this issue.

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