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Draft National Food Security Amendment Bill, 2026 Seeks to Restructure Antyodaya Foodgrain Entitlements and Strengthen Food Security

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Recent Developments:

- The **Department of Food and Public Distribution** has invited public comments on the **Draft National Food Security (Amendment) Bill, 2026**, which proposes changes to **Section 3 of the National Food Security Act, 2013**.
- The principal proposal would provide every person belonging to an **Antyodaya Anna Yojana household** with **7 kg of foodgrains per month**, subject to a maximum of **35 kg per household per month**.
- The proposal would therefore shift the AAY entitlement from a purely **household-based entitlement of 35 kg** to a **per-person entitlement subject to a household ceiling**.
- The proposed change seeks to rationalise allocation by reducing the disparity between the effective per-capita entitlement of smaller and larger AAY households.
- The proposal has also revived wider debates concerning **nutritional security, outdated beneficiary coverage, household-size disparities and implementation barriers** under the existing food distribution system.

National Food Security Act, 2013:

Objectives and Legal Framework:

- The **National Food Security Act, 2013** marked a major shift in India's approach to food security by moving from a predominantly **welfare-based approach to a rights-based approach**.
- The Act legally provides for coverage of up to **75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population** through the **Targeted Public Distribution System**.
- The maximum coverage under the Act was originally calculated at approximately **81.35 crore persons** using population and consumption data associated with the **2011 Census framework**.
- The Act seeks to ensure **availability, accessibility and affordability of foodgrains** for eligible households.
- The Act also follows a **life-cycle approach** by providing nutritional support to pregnant women, lactating mothers and children through designated public programmes.
- The **eldest woman aged 18 years or above** in an eligible household is designated as the head of the household for the purpose of issuing ration cards, thereby incorporating an element of **women's empowerment**.

Entitlement under NFSA:

- The Act provides foodgrain entitlements through two principal categories, namely **Antyodaya Anna Yojana households** and **Priority Households**.
- **Antyodaya Anna Yojana households:** The poorest of the poor households are entitled to **35 kg of foodgrains per household per month**.

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- **Priority Households:** Eligible persons are entitled to **5 kg of foodgrains per person per month**.
- Beneficiary identification is primarily undertaken by **State Governments and Union Territory Administrations** within the coverage determined under the Act.

Who are the Antyodaya Anna Yojana Beneficiaries?:

Target Group:

- **Antyodaya Anna Yojana** is intended to cover the **poorest of the poor** households.
- States and Union Territories identify eligible households according to the applicable Central Government guidelines and their administrative framework.
- Eligible categories have historically included households headed by **widows, terminally ill persons, persons with disabilities and elderly persons** without assured means of subsistence or social support.
- Other vulnerable groups include **single women or men without family support, primitive tribal households, landless agricultural labourers, marginal farmers and rural artisans**.
- Vulnerable groups in urban areas, including **slum dwellers and persons dependent on informal-sector daily livelihoods**, can also fall within the identified categories.
- Eligible **Below Poverty Line families of persons living with HIV** are also included among the vulnerable categories.

Priority Households:

- **Priority Households** comprise beneficiaries identified by State Governments and Union Territory Administrations according to their prescribed criteria.
- The distinction between AAY and PHH reflects the NFSA's attempt to provide **higher household-level protection to the poorest beneficiaries** while extending broader per-person coverage to other eligible households.

Merger with Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana:

COVID-19 Response:

- During the **COVID-19 pandemic in 2020**, the government introduced the **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana** to provide additional foodgrains free of cost to eligible beneficiaries.
- The programme was designed as an emergency food-security intervention during widespread economic disruption and livelihood losses.

Integration with NFSA:

- From **January 2023**, the government made the regular NFSA foodgrain entitlement **free of cost**, thereby removing the financial burden on eligible beneficiaries.
- From **1 January 2024**, free foodgrain distribution under the scheme was continued for **five years**, covering approximately **81.35 crore beneficiaries** according to the Department of Food and Public Distribution.
- The current free entitlement continues to provide **35 kg per AAY household per month** and **5 kg per PHH person per month**.
- The policy aims to improve **accessibility, affordability and availability** of foodgrains while maintaining greater uniformity across States and Union Territories.

Proposed Amendments under the Draft Bill, 2026:

Change in AAY Entitlement:

- The Draft Bill proposes to substitute the existing proviso under **Section 3 of the NFSA, 2013**.

- Every person belonging to an **AAV household** would become entitled to **7 kg of foodgrains per month**, subject to a maximum of **35 kg per household per month**.
- The existing entitlement provides **35 kg per AAV household**, irrespective of the number of members in that household.
- The proposed formula would therefore combine **individual entitlement with a household ceiling**.
- The Draft Bill itself provides that the applicable price would be determined under **Schedule I**, although the government's existing policy provides these foodgrains free of cost under the current arrangement.

Rationale of the Proposed Change:

- The proposed reform seeks to address the disparity created when households of different sizes receive the same **35 kg household entitlement**.
- A small AAV household currently receives a substantially higher quantity per person than a larger AAV household.
- The proposed **7 kg per person with a 35 kg ceiling** would partially link entitlement to household size while retaining a maximum fiscal and foodgrain commitment per household.
- However, households with five or more members would continue to face the **35 kg ceiling**, making the reform only partially proportional to household size.

Major Concerns Associated with the Proposed Amendment:

Inadequate Nutritional Security:

- The proposed amendment primarily concerns the **quantity of foodgrains**, rather than the broader quality of nutrition.
- Cereals alone cannot fully address **protein, micronutrient and dietary-diversity deficiencies**.
- A comprehensive food-security framework should therefore consider complementary access to **pulses, edible oils, fortified foods and other nutrient-rich foods**.

Demand for Higher Per-Person Entitlement:

- Some food-rights advocates have argued that the proposed **7 kg per person** entitlement remains inadequate for the poorest households.
- A higher entitlement has been demanded to better reflect actual household food requirements, particularly among vulnerable populations.

Disadvantage to Larger Families:

- The continued **35 kg household ceiling** means that larger AAV households would not receive foodgrains in direct proportion to their population.
- For example, a household with five members would receive the maximum **35 kg**, equivalent to **7 kg per person**, whereas a household with six members would receive less than **7 kg per person** because of the same ceiling.
- Thus, the proposal improves proportionality for smaller households but does not completely resolve the problem of larger households.

Regional Disparities:

- Changes in household-size patterns across States can produce different effects from the same entitlement formula.
- Smaller households, which are relatively more prevalent in some southern States, may experience a reduction in total household allocation compared with the existing uniform **35 kg entitlement**.

- The final impact therefore needs to be assessed using **State-wise household-size and beneficiary data** rather than through a uniform national assumption.

Outdated Beneficiary Coverage:

- NFSA coverage continues to be anchored to the demographic framework associated with the **2011 Census**, even though India's population and household structure have changed considerably.
- The official NFSA portal states that the maximum coverage is approximately **81.35 crore**, while current coverage is around **80.60 crore persons** according to the latest information displayed on the portal.
- Updating beneficiary identification using newer demographic information is therefore important for reducing **exclusion errors**.
- A food-security system cannot fully achieve its rights-based objective if eligible households remain outside the coverage because of outdated population benchmarks.

Implementation and Exclusion Challenges:

- The effectiveness of the NFSA depends not only on statutory entitlement but also on the ability of beneficiaries to access foodgrains through the **Public Distribution System**.
- **Biometric authentication failures, electronic know-your-customer requirements, connectivity problems and migration-related difficulties** can prevent eligible persons from obtaining their entitlements.
- Elderly persons, persons with disabilities and migrant workers can face disproportionate difficulties when access depends heavily on digital authentication.
- The **One Nation One Ration Card** framework has improved portability for migrant beneficiaries, but effective last-mile implementation remains essential.
- Therefore, technological reform should complement rather than replace **accessible and human-centred grievance-redress mechanisms**.

Food Security beyond Foodgrain Quantity:

Nutritional Security:

- **Food security** involves more than the physical availability of cereals and includes adequate access to nutritious food.
- The NFSA already incorporates nutritional support for **pregnant women, lactating mothers and children aged 6 months to 14 years** through designated programmes.
- Future reforms should strengthen the connection between **food security and nutritional security** by increasing dietary diversity.
- Greater integration with programmes dealing with **maternal nutrition, child nutrition, school meals and public health** can improve outcomes beyond calorie sufficiency.

Foodgrain Procurement and Buffer Stocks:

- The food-security architecture depends on **procurement, storage, allocation and distribution** of foodgrains through institutions such as the **Food Corporation of India** and State agencies.
- The Food Corporation of India plays a central role in procurement and distribution of wheat, rice and coarse grains under TPDS and other welfare schemes.
- Adequate **buffer stocks** are important for maintaining food availability during droughts, floods, crop failures and other supply shocks.
- Foodgrain procurement and distribution must therefore balance **food security, fiscal sustainability, farmer incentives and environmental concerns**.

Federal Dimensions of NFSA:

Shared Responsibilities:

- Food security under the NFSA involves substantial cooperation between the **Union Government and State Governments**.
- The Union Government plays a major role in procurement, allocation and food subsidy, while States and Union Territories are responsible for identifying beneficiaries and implementing distribution at the local level.
- This division of responsibilities makes **cooperative federalism** central to effective implementation.
- State-level differences in beneficiary identification, administrative capacity and PDS infrastructure can produce variations in actual access to statutory entitlements.

Need for Consultation with States:

- Changes in entitlement formulas directly affect State-level beneficiary identification, ration-card management and distribution systems.
- The final amendment should therefore involve meaningful consultation with **States and Union Territories**.
- A cooperative approach can reduce implementation disputes and ensure that reform does not create new exclusion errors.

Way Forward:

Update Beneficiary Coverage:

- NFSA coverage should be periodically updated using the **latest reliable population and household data**.
- Any transition to updated coverage should ensure that existing eligible beneficiaries do not lose access to foodgrains.
- Special mechanisms should be created to identify **migrants, homeless persons, elderly persons and other vulnerable groups** who are more likely to remain outside conventional household databases.

Improve Nutritional Quality:

- Foodgrain-based support should increasingly be complemented by **pulses, edible oils and fortified foods** according to nutritional requirements.
- The objective should shift from merely preventing **calorie deprivation** towards ensuring adequate nutrition and dietary diversity.
- Nutrition-sensitive food policy should be linked with maternal health, child development, school meals and public health interventions.

Strengthen PDS Accessibility:

- Biometric authentication should have reliable **offline and alternative authentication mechanisms** so that technical failure does not result in denial of food.
- Migrant workers should be able to access their entitlements seamlessly through **portability mechanisms**.
- Grievance-redress systems should remain easily accessible at the local level, particularly for vulnerable beneficiaries.
- Greater transparency in allocation, stock availability and beneficiary records can reduce **leakages and exclusion errors**.

Balance Entitlement with Household Size:

- The proposed **7 kg per person subject to a 35 kg household ceiling** should be evaluated using actual household-size distributions and State-wise data.

- Any final formula should prevent both **disproportionately high per-capita allocations for very small households** and inadequate allocations for large vulnerable households.
- Periodic review should be built into the entitlement framework so that food requirements and demographic changes can be accommodated.

Strengthen Cooperative Federalism:

- The Union and States should jointly determine implementation mechanisms to ensure that statutory food entitlements remain accessible across diverse administrative and demographic contexts.
- The reform should preserve **uniform national food-security standards** while allowing States sufficient flexibility to address local nutritional and social vulnerabilities.

Conclusion:

- The **Draft National Food Security (Amendment) Bill, 2026** represents an attempt to rationalise the distribution of foodgrains under the **Antyodaya Anna Yojana** by introducing a per-person entitlement while retaining a household ceiling.
- The proposed **7 kg per person and maximum 35 kg per household** formula addresses an existing disparity between smaller and larger households but does not completely resolve the problem of household-size-based inequality.
- The larger challenge is to ensure that food security remains **rights-based, inclusive, nutritionally adequate and accessible** rather than focusing only on the quantity of cereals distributed.
- Updating beneficiary coverage, improving last-mile delivery, strengthening portability and authentication safeguards, diversifying nutrition and maintaining Union–State cooperation are therefore essential.
- The success of the amendment should ultimately be measured not merely by the quantity of foodgrains allocated but by its ability to ensure **food access, nutritional security, dignity and social protection for vulnerable citizens**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Constitutional and Legal Linkages:

- **Article 21:** The right to life has been judicially interpreted to include the right to live with **human dignity**, providing an important constitutional foundation for food and nutritional security.
- **Article 47:** The State has a duty to raise the level of **nutrition and the standard of living** and to improve public health.
- **Article 39(b):** The State should ensure that the ownership and control of material resources are distributed to best subserve the **common good**.
- **National Food Security Act, 2013:** It represents a shift from a welfare-oriented food distribution model towards a **statutory, rights-based entitlement framework**.

Important Institutional Linkages:

- **Food Corporation of India:** Central institution for procurement, storage and distribution of foodgrains under major food-security programmes.
- **Targeted Public Distribution System:** Primary delivery mechanism through which NFSA foodgrain entitlements are implemented.
- **One Nation One Ration Card:** Facilitates portability of foodgrain entitlements, particularly for **migrant beneficiaries**.
- **State Food Commissions:** Form part of the grievance-redress and accountability architecture under the NFSA.

UPSC Mains Analytical Framework:

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- **GS-II:** Welfare schemes, food security, vulnerable sections, cooperative federalism and Centre–State relations.
- **GS-III:** Agricultural procurement, foodgrain management, buffer stocks, subsidies and supply-chain efficiency.
- **Essay:** “Food security is meaningful only when availability is accompanied by accessibility, affordability and nutrition.”
- **Core analytical balance:** The policy must reconcile **food security, nutritional security, fiscal sustainability, farmer incentives and administrative accessibility**