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National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013: Proposed Amendments, Food Security Framework and Emerging Concerns

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Recent Developments:

- The **Department of Food and Public Distribution** has released a **draft amendment** to the **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013** for public consultation.
- The proposed amendment revises the **foodgrain entitlement for Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) beneficiaries** by linking allocation to the **number of household members**, while retaining a **maximum ceiling of 35 kg per household**.
- The amendment seeks to improve equity in foodgrain distribution and rationalise per-capita allocation among AAY households.

National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013:

- The **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013** is a rights-based legislation enacted to ensure **food and nutritional security** by providing **highly subsidised foodgrains** to eligible households through the **Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)**.
- The Act legally entitles eligible beneficiaries to receive foodgrains at affordable prices, thereby strengthening **food security, social protection and inclusive development**.
- Based on the **2011 Census**, the Act covers up to **75% of the rural population** and **50% of the urban population**, amounting to nearly **81.35 crore beneficiaries**.
- The Act derives support from **Article 21 (Right to Life)**, as interpreted by the Supreme Court to include the **Right to Food**, and contributes towards achieving **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-2: Zero Hunger**.

Objectives of NFSA:

- Ensure **food and nutritional security** by guaranteeing access to affordable foodgrains.
- Reduce **hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity**, particularly among vulnerable sections.
- Strengthen the **Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)** through legal entitlements.
- Protect economically weaker households against food price fluctuations.
- Improve social justice through a rights-based welfare framework.

Coverage and Foodgrain Entitlements:

- Eligible beneficiaries receive subsidised foodgrains through the **Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)**.

Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY):

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- Covers the **poorest of the poor** households identified by the States and Union Territories as per Central Government guidelines.
- Under the existing provisions, each AAY household receives **35 kg of foodgrains per month**, irrespective of family size.

Priority Households (PHH):

- Identified by State Governments and Union Territory Administrations according to their respective eligibility criteria.
- Every eligible person receives **5 kg of foodgrains per month**.

Eligible Beneficiaries under AAY:

- Households headed by **widows, terminally ill persons, persons with disabilities or elderly persons (60 years and above)** having no assured means of subsistence or social support.
- Single women, single men, elderly persons or disabled individuals without family support or regular income.
- All **Primitive Tribal Group (PTG)** households.
- **Landless agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, rural artisans, craftsmen, slum dwellers** and workers dependent on daily wages in the informal sector.
- Eligible **Below Poverty Line (BPL)** families having **HIV-positive** members.

Merger of PMGKAY with NFSA:

- During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the Government launched the **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY)** to provide additional foodgrains free of cost.
- From **January 2023**, PMGKAY was merged with NFSA and beneficiaries started receiving their regular NFSA entitlement **free of cost**.
- In **November 2023**, the Government extended the free foodgrain scheme for **five years (January 2024–December 2028)**.
- The merger simplified the food subsidy framework while ensuring uninterrupted food security support.

Proposed Amendments to NFSA:

- The amendment proposes changes to **Section 3** of the **National Food Security Act, 2013**.
- Every person belonging to an **AAY household** would become entitled to **7 kg of foodgrains per month**, subject to a **maximum limit of 35 kg per household**.
- Earlier, every AAY household received **35 kg**, irrespective of the number of family members.
- Foodgrains allocated to AAY beneficiaries will continue to be supplied **free of cost**.
- The amendment does **not alter** the entitlement of **Priority Household (PHH)** beneficiaries.

Rationale Behind the Proposed Amendment:

- The proposal seeks to **rationalise foodgrain allocation** by addressing inequity in per-capita distribution.
- Under the existing system, **smaller households** receive relatively higher foodgrain availability per person than larger households.
- Linking allocation with household size improves fairness while retaining the overall household ceiling.
- The amendment also aims to improve targeting and efficient utilisation of food subsidy resources.

Major Concerns:

- **Limited Nutritional Security:**
- The proposal continues to focus mainly on **cereals** without including **pulses, edible oils, protein-rich foods or micronutrient-rich commodities**.
- Food security without nutritional diversity may not effectively address malnutrition.

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- **Demand for Higher Entitlement:**
- Right to Food groups have demanded **14 kg of foodgrains per person** instead of **7 kg**, particularly for the poorest households.
- **Impact on Large Families:**
- Since the **35 kg household ceiling** remains unchanged, larger families may continue receiving lower per-capita allocations than intended.
- **Regional Disparities:**
- States with predominantly smaller households, particularly in southern India, may experience changes in allocation patterns under the revised formula.
- **Outdated Beneficiary Coverage:**
- NFSA coverage is still based on the **2011 Census**, despite significant population growth.
- Millions of eligible households are estimated to remain outside the Public Distribution System due to outdated population data.

Implementation Challenges:

- **Biometric authentication failures** continue to prevent genuine beneficiaries from receiving foodgrains.
- **e-KYC-related exclusions** have resulted in denial of benefits to several eligible households.
- **Internet connectivity issues** affect real-time authentication, particularly in remote areas.
- **Migrant workers, elderly persons and persons with disabilities** continue to face difficulties in accessing their entitlements.
- Leakages, exclusion errors and identification challenges continue to affect the efficiency of the **Targeted Public Distribution System**.
- Storage, transportation and last-mile delivery remain major operational challenges in several States.

Significance of NFSA:

- Strengthens India's commitment towards **food security** and **social welfare**.
- Contributes to reducing **poverty, hunger** and **malnutrition**.
- Provides income support indirectly by reducing household expenditure on food.
- Enhances resilience of vulnerable households during economic shocks and disasters.
- Supports India's progress towards **SDG-2 (Zero Hunger)** and **SDG-1 (No Poverty)**.
- Reinforces the constitutional commitment to **social justice** and **human dignity**.

Way Forward:

- Update NFSA beneficiary coverage using the **latest Census** to reflect present demographic realities.
- Ensure that no existing beneficiary loses access to food security during the transition to revised entitlement norms.
- Expand nutritional support by including **pulses, edible oils, fortified foods** and other nutrient-rich commodities.
- Strengthen consultation with States before finalising amendments in accordance with **cooperative federalism**.
- Improve transparency through technology-driven monitoring while ensuring that technology does not become a barrier for genuine beneficiaries.
- Strengthen grievance redressal, portability and doorstep accessibility for vulnerable populations.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Constitutional Provisions:

- **Article 21** – Right to Life (Judicial interpretation includes the **Right to Food**).
- **Article 39(b)** – Equitable distribution of material resources.
- **Article 41** – Public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age and sickness.

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- **Article 47** – Duty of the State to raise the level of nutrition and improve public health