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Proposed Amendment to NFSA Seeks Per Capita AAY Foodgrain Entitlement, Triggering Federal Debate over Food Security and Equity

Published On: 13-07-2026

Recent Developments:

- The **Union Government** has released the **Draft National Food Security (Amendment) Bill, 2026** for public consultation.
- The draft proposes replacing the existing **35 kg per household per month** entitlement for **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)** households with **7 kg per person per month**, subject to a maximum of **35 kg per household**.
- **Tamil Nadu** and **Kerala** have opposed the proposal, arguing that it would reduce foodgrain allocations for many poor households with smaller family sizes.

National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013:

Objective:

- The **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013** provides legal entitlement to subsidised foodgrains and seeks to ensure **food and nutritional security** through the **Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)**.
- The Act covers nearly **two-thirds of India's population**, making it one of the world's largest food security programmes.

Coverage:

- Covers up to **75% of the rural population**.
- Covers up to **50% of the urban population**.

Categories of Beneficiaries:

- **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY):** Covers the **poorest households**, receiving higher foodgrain support.
- **Priority Households (PHH):** Covers eligible households identified by States under the Act.

Foodgrain Entitlements:

- **AAY households:** **35 kg of foodgrains per household per month**.
- **PHH beneficiaries:** **5 kg of foodgrains per person per month**.

Subsidised Issue Prices:

- **Rice:** ₹3 per kg.
- **Wheat:** ₹2 per kg.
- **Coarse grains:** ₹1 per kg.

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Social Welfare Provisions:

- The **eldest woman** aged **18 years or above** is recognised as the head of the household for issuing ration cards.
- **Pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children** receive statutory nutritional support.
- Pregnant and lactating women are entitled to a **cash maternity benefit of at least ₹6,000**.
- **Children up to six years** receive age-appropriate meals through **Anganwadis**, while **children aged 6–14 years** receive cooked midday meals in schools.

Transparency and Accountability:

- States must establish **State Food Commissions, District Grievance Redressal Officers (DGROs), and Vigilance Committees**.
- The Act mandates **public disclosure of PDS records** and publication of beneficiary lists to enhance transparency.

Proposed Amendment to NFSA:

Provision Proposed:

- The amendment modifies **Section 3(1)** of the **National Food Security Act, 2013** relating to **AAY foodgrain entitlements**.

Existing Provision:

- Every **AAY household** receives **35 kg of foodgrains per month**, irrespective of family size.

Proposed Provision:

- Every individual belonging to an **AAY household** will receive **7 kg of foodgrains per month**.
- The total entitlement will remain **capped at 35 kg per household per month**.
- The **Department of Food and Public Distribution** has invited public comments before finalising the amendment.

Rationale Behind the Amendment:

Addressing Distribution Inequities:

- The existing household-based entitlement provides **higher per capita foodgrain allocation to smaller families**.
- Larger AAY households often receive **less foodgrain per person**, in some cases lower than **Priority Household** beneficiaries.

Objectives:

- Ensure **equitable per capita distribution** among AAY beneficiaries.
- Rationalise foodgrain allocation based on household size.
- Better align foodgrain distribution with nutritional requirements.

Limitation:

- The proposal does not address **ineligible beneficiaries**, outdated beneficiary databases, or exclusion and inclusion errors under the NFSA.

Reasons for Opposition by Tamil Nadu and Kerala:

Reduction in Foodgrain Allocation:

- Both States have a high proportion of **nuclear families**, many with fewer than five members.
- Such households would receive **less than the existing 35 kg**, reducing their monthly entitlement.

Impact on Vulnerable Households:

- Kerala argues that **AAY beneficiaries represent the poorest households** and therefore require stronger social protection.

Higher Financial Burden:

- Tamil Nadu estimates that its monthly AAY allocation could decline substantially because **most beneficiary households contain fewer than five members**.
- Poor households may need to purchase additional foodgrains from the open market, increasing household expenditure.

Concerns over Regional Disparities:

- Civil society organisations argue that **States with larger average family sizes** could receive relatively higher allocations.
- States with smaller household sizes could witness a disproportionate reduction in foodgrain availability, raising concerns regarding regional equity.

Historical Context:

Kerala:

- Kerala developed one of India's earliest organised **Public Distribution Systems (PDS)** in **1962**, before the establishment of the **Food Corporation of India (FCI)**.
- The State had also expressed reservations during the enactment of the **NFSA in 2013** over concerns relating to exclusion of beneficiaries and fiscal implications.

Tamil Nadu:

- Food security has remained a major political issue following severe food shortages during the **1950s and 1960s**.
- Since **2011**, the State has implemented a **universal free rice distribution system** through the PDS.
- During the enactment of the NFSA, Tamil Nadu secured protection to ensure that its existing foodgrain allocation would not be reduced.

Key Issues Involved:

Equity versus Social Protection:

- A per capita formula enhances distributional fairness but may reduce guaranteed support for smaller vulnerable households.

Federal Concerns:

- Uniform national criteria may not adequately reflect regional demographic patterns and household structures.

Food and Nutritional Security:

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- Lower allocations for certain households could weaken food security among the poorest families.

Fiscal Implications:

- The proposal may rationalise the Union Government's food subsidy expenditure while shifting part of the financial burden to beneficiaries.

Coverage and Identification Challenges:

- NFSA coverage continues to be based on **2011 Census population estimates**, leading to exclusion of many eligible households because of population growth.

Way Forward:

Cooperative Federalism:

- Wider consultation with **States**, experts, and civil society organisations should precede any legislative amendment.

Balanced Entitlement Model:

- A minimum household entitlement alongside a per capita component could balance equity with social protection.

Periodic Beneficiary Revision:

- Beneficiary lists should be updated regularly using the latest population data to reduce exclusion errors.

Strengthening Food Security:

- Foodgrain reforms should complement broader nutritional interventions, efficient PDS delivery, and improved beneficiary identification.

Balancing Competing Objectives:

- Policy design should simultaneously uphold **equity, nutritional security, fiscal sustainability, and cooperative federalism**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Constitutional Provisions:

- **Article 21:** Right to life has been judicially interpreted to include the **Right to Food**.
- **Article 39(b):** Directs the State to ensure equitable distribution of material resources.
- **Article 47:** Makes improvement of nutrition and public health a **Directive Principle of State Policy (DPSP)**.

Important Institutions:

- **Department of Food and Public Distribution** under the **Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution** administers the NFSA.
- **Food Corporation of India (FCI)** procures, stores, transports, and supplies foodgrains for the Public Distribution System.
- **State Governments** identify eligible households and implement the Public Distribution System within their jurisdictions