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Food for thought

More than the corrupt ration dealers and greedy politicians, the recent food riots in West Bengal are all about the country's ability to guarantee basic human rights to its citizens

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The Marxists in West Bengal are drawing attention for all the wrong reasons. First, there were the food riots in the state and then the alleged land-grab in Nandigram. The party which has always spoken for universalisation of public distribution system and can partly claim credit for running for decades what is considered a model PDS in Kerala, has been accused of denying food at subsidised rates at ration shops in West Bengal.

People have been turning violent against ration dealers in at least five districts, including Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan Midnapore (West) and Murshidabad, in the last two months. Some dealers even committed suicide after mobs attacked them demanding rations for a year, which they alleged had been denied to them. Of course, the mob element was encashed by the Opposition parties, like Trinamool Congress,

which already has Nandigram as a stick to beat the CPI(M) with.

CPI(M) politburo member Biman Basu says the problem is with the price fluctuation in wheat in the open market, which has been sending buyers in and out of the ration shops. First, when the prices were similar in ration shops and outside, people were buying outside. When they went further higher outside, APL buyers flocked back to ration shops, only to find insufficient grains.

For many, these riots are signs of the failure of PDS and its redundancy. But reports and data are staring in the country's face, showing that half the country is starving. The recent report of the Global Hunger Index showed India slipping below the Third World in the matter of food security of the common man.

The government has already trimmed down the PDS to remove three-quarters of the country from its purview, limiting

it to BPL families. And Planning Commission findings are that half the BPL category people don't even have ration cards.

Meanwhile, the supply of wheat and rice to the ration shops has been dwindling. According to figures provided by the West Bengal CPI(M), until 2006-07, the quantum of rice allocated by the Union government to West Bengal for the APL category was 2,28,928 MT per month. From April 2007, however, the amount was cut to just 7,700 MT per month. The number of buyers has been on the decline due to the prohibitive prices, leading to the dealers selling in the open market in Bengal. In Kerala, many dealers have been committing suicides for want of buyers and many have given up their dealership, even as the Kerala government has found a way of getting more essential commodities brought under the ration shops to make them viable.

In Orissa, ration shops are

being replaced by a different form of distribution system where women self-help groups collect the food grains and distribute them among the villagers. These demonstrate that there are hundreds of ways to improve an existing scheme while it is easy to end everything in one stroke.

The food riots in Bengal can hardly be dismissed as the mischief of some corrupt ration dealers and some greedy politicians in the state. The question is whether the people deserve a political system which is capable of guaranteeing almost none of the basic human rights to its citizens. The only guarantees are uncommitted governments in different shades after every election in states and at the Centre.