

EDITORIAL

Eliminate exploitation of children

World Day against Child Labour aims to spread awareness about the illegal employment practice and also talk about the ways to eradicate it completely. Child labour exists across the globe and children, mostly from poor families, are forced to work in hazardous conditions which lead to unending physical, mental and social exploitation and suffering from the employers. Children are deprived of living their childhood to their fullest and also miss the opportunity of attending schools. Children in poor and disadvantaged households in India are now at a greater risk of negative coping mechanisms such as dropping out of school and being forced into labour, marriage, and even falling victim to trafficking. To meet the challenge of eliminating the exploitation of children will require ongoing efforts both by governments and civil society. Policies for the progressive elimination of child labor must be linked to long-term strategies on education and health services and to governments' willingness to contribute to their funding. Despite awareness initiatives, millions of children worldwide continue to work in dangerous conditions. They are found in factories, washing cars, making bricks, sharpening knives, polishing shoes, working in fields, and scavenging for food in garbage dumps. Experts highlight the need for more effective measures to combat child labour emphasizing the importance of a long-term government policy to eradicate child labour. The World Day Against Child Labour is a crucial reminder of the ongoing battle against child exploitation. It calls for collective efforts from governments, organizations, and individuals to ensure a brighter future for all children, free from the shackles of labour. By spreading awareness and taking concrete actions, we can work towards a world where every child enjoys their right to education, play, and a safe, healthy environment. Every child has the right to health, education and protection, and every society has a stake in expanding children's opportunities in life. Yet, around the world, millions of children are denied a fair chance for no reason other than the country, gender or circumstances into which they are born. International days and weeks are occasions to educate the public on issues of concern, to mobilize political will and resources to address global problems, and to celebrate and reinforce achievements of humanity. The abolition of child labour is indeed a fundamental aspect of the pursuit of social justice. It represents the belief that every worker, regardless of age, should have the freedom and equal opportunity to receive their fair share of the wealth they have contributed to generating.

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E-mail: jammubulletin@gmail.com

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Highways to prosperity and growth

BY
NITIN GADKARI

With game-changing projects like Greenfield expressways, aerial buses, and the Gati Shakti platform, the Modi Government is rewriting the narrative of development — one road at a time

When Narendra Modi took oath as India's Prime Minister in 2014, the BJP-led Central Government prioritised infrastructure development above all else from that very moment. In this direction, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways became the focal point of infrastructure growth.

Under Modi's leadership, this Ministry has not only accelerated the country's economic development but has also given it a new dimension over the 11 years since 2014. The construction of highways — both completed and upcoming — has played a significant role in changing the trajectory of the country's growth.

Efficient highways,

waterways, and railways can reduce logistics costs and boost the economy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi dreams of making India a 'Vishwaguru' (World Leader). India has emerged as the world's third-largest economy and a \$5 trillion economy.

To fulfil this dream, we need to increase exports, which will, in turn, boost growth in agriculture, services, and industrial sectors. In the past 11 years, the roads built have already reduced our logistics costs from 16 per cent to 10 per cent, and next year, we aim to bring it down further to 9 per cent. This will enhance our exports, make us more competitive, and help India advance more powerfully toward becoming a 'Vishwaguru'.

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways is building 25 new Greenfield Express Highways across the country. Over 3,000 km of highways are also being built to connect ports and promote religious tourism. The Government's efforts to boost religious tourism are also taking shape. The Buddhist Circuit project, completed at a cost of Rs 22,000 crore, has sig-

nificantly increased the number of tourists visiting the birthplace of Lord Buddha from South Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Singapore, and Japan.

Simultaneously, the number of pilgrims visiting the Char Dham sites — Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri — has tripled. A ropeway worth Rs 12,000 crore is being constructed to connect Kedarnath. About 90 per cent of the work on the road linking Kailash Mansarovar in Uttarakhand to Pithoragarh has been completed. In India, particularly in the national capital, the dream of 'flying buses' is on the verge of becoming a reality.

This includes aerial buses, flash-charging electric buses, and double-decker flying buses for hilly regions. The aerial bus service from Dhaula Kuan in Delhi to Manesar, based on a skyway system, is almost in its final stages. I am confident that this experiment will be crucial in resolving the persistent traffic congestion on this special route. Nagpur will soon see the launch of the first flash-charging electric bus. It will have 135 seats, executive class, front TV screens, and bus hostesses like air

hostesses. This bus will have a maximum speed of 120 km/h and will stop every 40 km for just 30 seconds to fully charge before resuming its journey.

Such work cannot be achieved by merely sitting in an office preparing DPRs — it requires wholehearted effort! A recent study by IIM-Bangalore on road construction revealed that every Rs 1 spent on National Highway (NH) construction has led to a Rs 3.21 increase in India's GDP, a multiplier effect of 3.2 times. Consequently, domestic production has grown by 9 per cent and car sales by 10.4 per cent. The work done by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has not only boosted economic activity but also created numerous job opportunities. Here are some figures worth noting: In 2014, India had only 91,000 km of national highways. By 2024, this network has expanded by nearly 60 per cent to 1.46 lakh km. The daily pace of road construction has increased from 12 km/day to 28-30 km/day. Under the ambitious Rs 5.35 lakh crore Bharatmala project, the target is to build 65,000 km of roads, including economic corridors, inter-

national border roads, and border area connectivity.

This plan is a decisive step toward reducing India's logistics costs further. The 'Gati Shakti' and 'multi-modal connectivity initiative' integrates roads, railways, air, waterways, and ports into a single digital platform, which has helped ensure timely project completion.

Our ministry has also started implementing road development projects through public-private partnership (PPP) models, which has attracted significant private investment. Under this model, road projects worth over Rs 12 lakh crore have been undertaken. This journey, which began in 2014, is not just about roads; in a way, it has become the lifeline of India's progress.

The expansion of the highway network has not only made travel easier but also boosted domestic trade, industry, tourism, and safety. From day one, our Government has been working tirelessly to ensure inclusive development reaches every person in the last row of society. We are committed to accelerating this work even faster in the coming years to achieve this goal as soon as possible. We

now have a clear vision of building world-class infrastructure and making our national highways network superior to even that of the United States by 2047, so that India becomes an economic superpower. "America does not have good roads because it is rich; America is rich because it has good roads." This quote by former US President John F Kennedy, displayed in my office at the Transport Bhavan in Delhi and earlier in Maharashtra when I was a minister, is not there by chance.

This has been our guiding mantra for the past 11 years under the leadership of Modi ji. We are determined to carry this work forward even faster in the future. In the coming years, India's road infrastructure will be better than that of the United States — this is not a dream, but a reality taking shape. By maintaining a balance of quality, speed, transparency, and environmentally-friendly policies, India's national highway network will be recognised at the global level.

(The writer is the Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways. Views are personal)

Free food scheme is inherently prone to misuse

BY
UTTAM GUPTA

As the Government continues to provide free foodgrain to over 800 million people, a closer look reveals troubling patterns of misuse, policy distortion, and an urgent need for reform. The question now is not whether food should reach the poor — but how best to do it without enriching the corrupt

Last year, the Indian Council For Research On International Economic Relations (ICRIER) released a Study titled 'Rationalising Public Distribution System in India' saying there was grain leakage under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) of 20 million tons entailing an estimated annual fiscal cost of around Rs 70,000 crore to the central exchequer.

Under the PMGKAY, the Union Government asks the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and other state agencies to procure food from the farmers at MSP (minimum support price) and organise its distribution to around 820 million people for free. This is done through a network of fair-price shops under the Public Distribution System (PDS). The entire cost i.e. MSP paid to farmers plus handling and distribu-

tion cost (HDC) is reimbursed to the FCI/other state agencies as a subsidy.

While, the PMGKAY has been in force since January 1, 2023, before that, the Centre was giving food to 820 million persons at a heavily subsidised price of Rs 2/3/1 per kg for wheat/rice/coarse cereals under the National Food Security Act or NFSA. In addition, since April 2020, it has given 5 kg of food per person per month for "free" to all 820 million beneficiaries under PMGKAY to mitigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

From January 1, 2023, they have been getting free food under the PMGKAY. Umpteen ground reports corroborate the substantial leakage of cereals from the PDS. The most recent revelation is from Uttar Pradesh's Bareilly, Agra and Meerut divisions where between 2015 and 2018, the heavily subsidised food at '2/3/1 per kg for wheat/rice/coarse cereals under the NFSA was given to 'ineligible persons' thereby depriving the real beneficiaries of their due.

Last year, there were reports of a massive scam in West Bengal where rice meant for distribution through the PDS made its way to privately owned rice mills who after remilling (polishing) sold in the open market raking in a moolah.

The scale of diversion can be gauged from the fact that the Enforcement Directorate (ED) —

currently investigating — estimates the proceeds of crime to be Rs 9,000-10,000 crore. The leakage has continued for more than a decade.

In 2016, there were reports of the disappearance of a significant amount of food grain stocks from godowns in Punjab raising concerns about potential losses and the financial implications for banks involved in the state's food borrowing program. Under directions from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), banks were forced to make provisions for such losses estimated to be around Rs 12,000 crore. This was even as the Central Government didn't allow this loss to be absorbed under the 'food subsidy' budget.

There could be other numerous instances of leaks hidden from public glare. All put together, these could be denting the state exchequer by colossal amounts. So, when we talk of the ever-increasing food subsidy bill of the Centre (over Rs 200,000 crore during FY 2024-25), it includes a sizeable portion towards the leak.

Its root cause has to do with how food subsidy is administered. Under the extant system, the subsidy is built into the price which under this Scheme is Zero; even under regular NFSA from 2013 till December 2022, the price was close to zero at Rs 2/3/1 per kg. Compare this with the cost of supply (MSP plus HDC) which is currently around Rs 27 per kg for wheat and Rs 39

per kg for rice. The availability of a mammoth of around 55 million tons (the quantity distributed through the PDS) in the supply chain with zero price tag is an open invitation to dubious stakeholders to derive unintended gains.

Fundamentally, subsidised food is meant for the poor. The number of poor isn't more than 15-20 per cent of India's population. Yet, the current number of beneficiaries is 59 per cent of the population. Even as per the Shanta Kumar Committee (2015), the beneficiary number under the then NFSA shouldn't be more than 40 per cent. Furthermore, according to Niti Aayog, since 2015, 250 million persons have come out of poverty. This should have led to a corresponding reduction in the number of beneficiaries. But, this was not to be.

Even as millions of 'undeserving' people refuse to exit, the Supreme Court (SC) has directed the Central Government to update the list of beneficiaries to take into account the population during 2021 (the existing list is based on 2011 Census estimates). On this basis, the latter will need to give free food to an additional 100 million. With no deletion, the Scheme will have to cater to 920 million.

The NFSA legislation enacted in 2013 required beneficiaries to pay Rs 2/3/1 per kg for wheat/rice/coarse cereals. It froze these rates for three years. Since 2016, there has

been no legal bar on increasing the price. Yet, far from increasing, the Modi-Government has reduced the price to zero.

The nexus of corrupt politicians/officials and local ration dealers/millers stares at the 'huge differential' between the zero-priced PDS stuff and the high market price with hawkish eyes. They can circumvent even the best of technology interventions made by the Modi-Government; those include installing PoS (point of sale machines) at ration shops; digitisation of the supply chain from procurement to distribution; authentication of beneficiaries with their Aadhaar numbers and so on.

On the procurement front, cases have come to light where small/poor farmers are unable to sell their produce to the State agencies — despite registering at the latter's portal. This deprives them of the MSP benefit and guaranteed purchase even as dubious traders acting in collusion with the officials manipulate the system to their advantage.

Leakage can be curbed in fact, eliminated if only the Government gives subsidy directly to the beneficiaries using DBT mode. For instance, taking the cost of supplying wheat Rs 27 per kg, it can transfer Rs 135 a month (Rs 1620 per annum) to a beneficiary's account being the eligible subsidy amount for 5 kg of monthly food entitlement under the Scheme. With this

money, she can purchase her needs from the market. The ration shops — currently catering to PDS — will have to recalibrate and work like any normal retailer. The state agencies need not procure food for distribution to the beneficiaries which under the proposed DBT mechanism, won't be required. The farmers will sell their produce in the same manner as happens for any other commodity in a market-driven framework. The three central farm laws should be revived as that will give them more options to them sell their farm output and fetching a good price.

With no zero-priced food available in the system, there won't be any temptation to divert. Also, there won't be any clamour to corner food (albeit free) in the name of fake beneficiaries.

The Government will be able to better target subsidies by excluding the undeserving persons. It will also be spared the 'guaranteed' purchase from farmers and associated high cost and subsidy outgo which it can't avoid under the existing dispensation. In short, by restructuring the Scheme, the Government has much to gain by way of eliminating misuse and leakages, bringing about huge savings in subsidy, putting in place competitive/efficiently driven markets and ensuring remunerative prices to farmers.

(The writer is a policy analyst. Views expressed are personal)