

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Public Distribution System (PDS) evolved as a system of management and distribution of food grains at affordable prices by the government at food deficit areas. Over the years, PDS has become an important part of Government's policy for management of food economy in the country. PDS is supplemental in nature and is not intended to make available the entire requirement of any of the commodities distributed under it to a household or a section of the society.

The history of Public Distribution system in India dates back to 1939. It was the compulsions at the time of World War II that forced the then British Government to introduce the first structured public distribution of cereals in India through the rationing system i.e. sale of a fixed quantity of ration (rice or wheat) to entitled families (ration card holders) in specified cities and towns. The Department of Food, under the Government of India, was created in 1942 to co-ordinate this arrangement. When the War ended, India, like many other countries, abolished the rationing system in 1943. India retained public distribution of food grains as a deliberate social policy, when it embarked on the path of planned economic development in 1951. In the First Plan, the system, which was essentially urban-based till then, was extended to all such rural areas which suffered from chronic food shortages. However, true to its cyclic nature, food production dropped in 1958, when the Second Plan had just commenced. This forced the Government to restart the procurement of food grain and cereals and impose control on trading of food grains. It also decided to re-introduce PDS. In 1992, changes were made through a crash programme designated "Revamped PDS" (RPDS was launched in June 1992 in 1752 blocks throughout the country), with components such as opening of several new Fair Price Shops (FPS) to improve physical access of beneficiaries.

Since 1997, the scale of issue of the BPL families has been gradually increased from 10 kg to 35 kg per family per month. The scale of issue to BPL families was increased from 10 kg to 20 kg per family per month with effect from 1.4.2000. The allocation of food grains for the BPL families was further increased from 20 kg to 25 kg per family per month with effect from July, 2001. Initially, the Antyodaya families were provided 25 kg of food grains per family per month at the time of launching of the scheme in December, 2000. The scale of issue of food grains under APL, BPL and AAY has been revised to 35 kg per family per month with effect from 1.4.2002 with a view to enhancing the food security at the household level.

In Assam, Public Distribution System is regulated under the provisions of "Assam Public Distribution of Articles Order 1982" and Essential Commodities Act, 1955. Under the provisions

responsibility of the State Food and Civil Supplies Department is to maintain overall stability of general price level and to ensure adequate supply of essential commodities in the State. At present, the department has been implementing welfare schemes sponsored by the Government of India such as schemes for Below Poverty line (BPL), Above Poverty Line (APL), Antyodaya Anna Yojana through its network of fair price shops (FPS) supplied by PDS cooperative society called GPSS across the state. Public Distribution System with a network of about 33 (thirty three) thousand Fair Price Shops (FPS) is perhaps the largest distribution network of its type spread throughout the State. During 2002-2003, there were 33,229 nos. of Fair Price Shops in Assam comprising 29,322 nos. in rural areas and 3,907 nos. in urban areas and the number of population covered per Fair Price Shop is around 803 for the aforesaid period.

Under the *below poverty line (BPL)** scheme, the State Government has been giving Rice @ 35 kgs to each of the 16, 11,210 families selected all over the State which are identified as living Below Poverty Line. In addition to rice, these BPL families are also provided atta - a wheat product, spirited kerosene oil (S.K oil), sugar, salt, etc through Public Distribution System at subsidized prices.

*Above poverty line (APL)** scheme normally covers the middle class people of the society. There are about 35 lakh families living above poverty Line (APL) with a population of 175.44 lakh in the State. These families have been provided APL rice, atta, sugar, s.k. oil and salt every month at Government fixed prices through Family identity Cards (FIC).

*Antyodaya Anna Yojana** has been implemented through fair price shops since November, 2001 in the State as per guidelines of the Government of India. Under this scheme, the State Government has been providing Rice @ 35 kilogram per family per month at a price of Rs 3.00 per kilogram to each of the families numbering 2,81,406 selected by the Government of Assam. In addition to ration rice, the families also get atta - a wheat products, sugar, s.k.oil*, salt etc.

Below Poverty Line, Above Poverty Line, Antyodaya Anna Yojana –Poor household are categories into these three groups based on income level as per the 2001 poor household census. The poorest of the poor is placed under the Antyodaya schemes

s.k.oil – kerosene oil

SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

Various civil society organizations and individuals claim that Public Distribution System in Assam has not been implemented as of the guidelines frame work and directives of the Supreme Court of India. When Assam has been facing acute shortage of food grain owing to poor agricultural practices and low productivity, huge quantities of food grain allotted to Assam under Public Distribution System continues to be siphoned off to the black market. A National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) 2008 evaluation taken from the Ministry of Food, Consumer and Public Distribution System (PDS) showing percentage diversion of rice from PDS quota, allocation and off-take of rice for the years 2007-2008, 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 under Targeted PDS; reveals that 44.97 per cent of 475,000 metric tones of rice allotted to Assam under the PDS for Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, 83.28 per cent of the PDS rice meant for Above Poverty Line (APL) families and the entire 100 per cent 235,000 metric tonnes of PDS wheat are diverted and sold in the black market.

In the state as many as 57,86,706 families have been brought under the PDS system with the issuing of BPL cards to 19,06,000 families and APL cards to 38,80,706 families as on the 11th of March this year, according to statistics tabled on the floor of the Assam Assembly. BPL cards were issued to those families whose annual income is less than Rs. 15,000/. The AAY cards are issued to those 5 per cent Indian families who cannot manage even a square meal a day. The state ranks 26th in human development index and 21st in the poverty index in India, according to the Human Development Report 2001. As one of the poorest states within India, Assam is among the lowest categories of HDI.

According to statistics tabled before the floor of the Assam Assembly in March this year, under the PDS system an AAY family is entitled to get 35 kgs of rice at the rate of Rs.3/, while a BPL family is entitled to get 35 kgs of rice at Rs. 6.50 Rs.7.00. The Fair Price rate per liter of kerosene is between Rs.15.00 and Rs. 16.00, sugar – Rs.17.00; wheat – Rs.8.00 and salt – Rs.3.50 and Rs. 4.40/. But from the IFSN project experiences, it is found the rates of the ration increases as it reaches the beneficiaries.

While statistics of the state government are very clear about the number of families under the PDS and rate of food grains and kerosene distributed to them, there is no monitoring system to assess whether the PDS materials have reached the poor particularly at a time when skyrocketing hike in prices of all essential commodities have made their lives miserable. With the NCAER evaluation, which revealed the huge diversion of the PDS food grain to the black market it is sure that, these families are subjected to continuous deprivation of their right to

get basic food through the PDS thus making the government's economic policy to ensure availability of food grain to the public at affordable prices and to enhance food security for the poor redundant. So to find out the loop holes in the practices of Public Distribution System, this study was conducted in some of the districts of Assam.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

It is often reported that in Public Distribution System there is huge mismanagement within its existing mechanism of distribution. In Assam, the civil society organizations/movement group has found out scam after scam in the public distribution system, where there is continuous leakage of items meant for the poor to black market. This happens because of the misconduct of functionaries or loopholes in the distribution mechanism. The objective of this in-depth study is to look into the details of these loopholes on the PDS mechanism in Assam.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The study is to understand the mechanism of public distribution system of the government, under which selected subsidized items are distributed among the ration card holders. The study is based on both primary and secondary data, collected from various sources. Secondary data was utilized to understand the overall concept of Public Distribution System and collected from various published books, journals, reports, official records etc.

Primary data was collected through both RTI and scheduled interviews from the stakeholders. RTI was used to collect information from Government offices and scheduled interview questionnaire was used to collect data from the stakeholders like *Gaon Panchayat Samabay Samiti (GPSS)**, agents/dealers of fair price shop, beneficiaries, etc. 10 districts were chosen for the study, three from upper Brahmaputra valley, i.e. Jorhat, Dhemaji, and Lakhimpur; Two from central Brahmaputra valley, i.e. Morigaon and Kamrup(M); two from lower Brahmaputra valley, i.e. Nalbari and Bongaigaon and three from BTAD i.e. Kokrajhar, Chirang and Baksa. From each of these ten districts one block was selected from one sub-division and a Gaon Panchayat Samabay Samittee was taken from the block as a sample. Under that particular GPSS two Fair price shop dealers/agents were chosen with two beneficiaries from each agent/dealer. The data was collected during mid 2011 and the subsequent analysis was done from the perspective of the research objectives.

GPSS: PDS cooperative society*

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The study is basically to know the mechanism of distribution of PDS commodities up to the beneficiaries and to understand the existing loop holes, which allow diversion of the items mid-way. Many issues were found in the study conducted in the sample areas of Assam. It was found that among the beneficiaries awareness is too low which allowed the said leakages in the PDS items. Most of the people do not even know their entitlement of items and its prices. Some of the major findings are as follows:

5.1. Scale of issue and issue prices:

"The Central Government shall make foodgrains available to the State Governments for distribution under the TPDS at such scales and prices as decided by the Government from time to time. The quantities of foodgrains to be supplied per family and issue prices as decided by the State Government for distribution to the eligible consumer households would be made available/known to the public through various means, including display on internet websites. These shall be invariably displayed at all FPSs." - Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution Department, Government of India, Revised Citizen Charter 2007.

Under the TPDS each card holder family is entitled to get specific amount of Rice under each scheme and other items as on the basis of allotment by the respective state governments. In Assam as per statistics tabled before the floor of the Assam Assembly in March this year, under the PDS system an AAY family is entitled to get 35 kgs of rice at the rate of Rs.3/, while a BPL family is entitled to get 35 kgs of rice at Rs. 6.50- Rs.7.00. The Fair Price rate per liter of kerosene is Rs.15.00, sugar – Rs.15.00; wheat – Rs.8.00 and salt between Rs.3.50 and Rs. 4.70. But in practice rates are increased when it reaches the beneficiaries. In some areas like Dhakuakhana AAY rice was received by the beneficiaries @ Rs. 4.00 to Rs. 4.50, BPL rice @ Rs. 8.50 APL rice @ Rs.11.50, MMASY* rice @ Rs. 7.00, kerosene oil @ Rs. 17.00, sugar @ Rs. 17.00 per kg/ltr. The same happened in other areas like Jorhat, Dhemaji, Morigaon, Bongaigaon etc, where a little difference in the items as mentioned above was observed. The items received under PDS are also not in the amounts prescribed by the government. In Teok beneficiaries received 30 kgs of BPL rations and in places like Dhakuakhana 32.5 kgs. The studies reveal that a beneficiary never receives the ration as allocated and at prescribes rate as set by the government. Mandatory provisions as of the Supreme Court directives and laws are in absolute violation by the state agencies themselves.

Table: 1 Rate of various items under PDS

Item/kg/ltr	Govt. Prescribed Rate in INR				Procurement rate by Agent in INR				Procurement rate by Beneficiary in INR			
	AA Y	BP L	MM ASY	APL	AAY	BPL	MM ASY	APL	AAY	BPL	MMAS Y	AP L
Rice	3.00	5.65	5.65	8.30	3.00-3.30	5.85-6.05	5.65-5.85	8.30-8.63	3.00-4.50	6.00-8.50	6.00-7.00	10.00-11.50
Sugar	13.50				14.10-16.00				17.00			
S.K.Oil	13.55				13.90-14.00				16.00-17.00			
Wheat	6.10				8.00				11.00			
Salt	Never allotted				Never allotted				Never received			

Table: 2 Quantity of PDS items

Item/kg/ltr	Govt. Prescribed Quantity in kg/ltr				Received Quantity by Beneficiary in kg/ltr			
	AAY	BPL	MMASY	APL	AAY	BPL	MMASY	APL
Rice	35	35	10/20	35	30-35	30-35	10/20	1.6-10
Sugar	Not specific				Depends on allotment			
S.K.Oil	Not specific				Depends on allotment			
Wheat	Not specific				Depends on allotment			
Salt	Not specific				Never received			

The transportation cost of PDS items like AAY rice should not be levied from the beneficiaries as per PDS rules. But it has not happened in practice. AAY beneficiaries have been paying the transportation cost up to Rs. 1.50 per kg extra in some areas of Assam. GPSS* said that they have sent the bills of transportation cost to the government office for reimbursement but the government does not reimburse these up to one year. So to manage the system, FP shop agents have to charge the transportation cost from the AAY beneficiary.

5.2. Quality of foodgrains:

“Joint sampling will be done by representatives of State Government and officials of FCI before issue of foodgrains from FCI godowns. Wherever any State Government is not

able to send a representative for joint sampling, FCI may issue the foodgrains after observing the necessary formalities to avoid delay.

FCI shall issue to the State Government/UT Administrations sealed samples of the stocks of foodgrains supplied to them (a sample will be retained by FCI Office/godown also for a period of two months from the date of its issue) for distribution under the TPDS at the time of despatch. The concerned State/UT Governments shall exercise necessary checks to ensure that full quantity lifted by them reaches their godowns and the fair price shops. They also ensure that the stocks are not replaced by inferior quality stocks during storage, transit or at any other stage in the distribution chain.” Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution Department, Government of India, Revised Citizen Charter 2007.

The study reported that 70% respondents said that the quality of the rice received under various schemes is not at all satisfactory. Average three months they have received good quality rice. Other nine months they have received poor quality of rice with pest etc. 30% said that they have received average quality of rice. In other items like sugar, s.k.oil* the quality is good.

Fair Price Shop dealers reported that they have to receive the rice without quality checking from the whole seller. They have no role in maintaining quality and whatever they receive they distribute in the villages. In case of sugar in rainy season the quality becomes poor due to the humidity, which is considered as generally accepted norms.

Wholesalers like GPSS etc. are also in the same position as described by FP shop agent. To avoid the poor quality of rice they take help of middlemen, who deliver the rice and other items at the wholesaler's godown. But the role of the middleman is not authorized by any guidelines of government.

The Food and Civil Supply authority is basically responsible for the quality of foodgrains stored at various FCI godowns or elsewhere. They have to maintain the quality of stored foodgrain, which is distributed to various parts of the state and though guidelines are prescribed, in practice the wholesaler has no option but to maintain the quality.

5.3. Delivery mechanism:

The procedure for distribution of foodgrains by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and the State Governments or their nominated / designated agencies shall be publicized widely for knowledge of the general public. ...

... The distribution system would be made transparent. State Governments/UT Administrations shall make information available to the public about various storage points/godowns from where the foodgrains are lifted and sent to the FPS. ... At each delivery point, samples of foodgrains meant for distribution under TPDS along with the quantity in stock shall be made available for scrutiny by any stakeholder (local citizens and their representatives). Stakeholders should be provided with an opportunity to inspect the sample on an appointed day of the week. A time of two hours should be earmarked on that day for such inspections.

The District Civil Supplies Office shall send copies of allocation orders to all the Fair Price Shops as well as to the Gram Panchayats/Nagar Palikas/Vigilance Committees/ and any other body nominated for monitoring the functioning of the Fair Price Shops. The details of allocation should be made available on the web-sites identified for the purpose (preferably at the district level).” Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution Department, Government of India, Revised Citizen Charter 2007.

The study conducted in the selected districts for the delivery of PDS items not only gives an interesting analytical cross section, but also lays the background for the introduction of the systemic failures.

- (i) The food grain entitlement to each State is worked out and allotted by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and Public distribution to the State Department of Food & Civil Supplies. However the allotted food grains are lifted at the State level; it is sub-allotted to the districts by the State Department.
- (ii) The major States have built up a three-tier/ four tier administrative set-up for managing PDS –the State Department at the apex level, the District Collector and District Supply Officer and his staff at the district level and the sub-divisional Supply Officer and Food Inspectors at the subdivision/block level.
- (iii) The actual lifting of food grains from FCI godowns is done by the designated wholesale dealers of food grains, who operate at the district or sub-district level, upon receipt of the allotment of grains from the district level. The food grains lifted by them are transported to their/other godowns at the sub-district level (stage I transport) and from there to the designated retail points (Stage II

transport). The nature of operation of wholesale dealers and the mode of transport vary across States.

The mechanisms built up for the delivery of items under PDS in the districts of Assam is almost similar with other North East Indian states. The district level mechanism for management, monitoring and supervision of PDS is headed by a Deputy Commissioner who is assisted by District Supply Officer, inspectors and sub-inspectors. Assam has a State Civil Supplies Corporation to manage movement of food items from the FCI godowns to the FPSs. The task of transportation of food grains from FCI is performed directly by the Samabay Samity which is termed as PDS cooperatives. The lifted food grains is then stored at the godown of Samabay Samiti. From the Samabay Samiti it's then lifted to the beneficiaries by the fair price shops dealers at the village level.

The process is almost the same as prescribed by the government up to the district level. But in some areas the GPSS/authorized whole seller does not collect the items from FCI godown. Instead of that a group of GPSS/wholesalers take the help of middle men as "contractors" to collect the items from FCI godowns. But it is not clear as to what benefits are gained by the "contractors". It is said that if GPSS/whole seller tries to directly approach for receiving the rations, lots of difficulties arise like quality of rice would not be selected, loading unloading problems, queuing for a day etc. So they prefer the "contractor" system to collect items from FCI godowns.

5.4. Fair Price Shop and Public Distribution System:

According to the guidelines issued each FPS shall display all relevant information such as each beneficiary's entitlement of various essential commodities, issue prices, name of Fair Price Shopkeeper, timings of opening and closing of FPS and weekly closing days, stock position, timing for inspection by citizens etc., at a conspicuous place. The study had found that in the districts where the research was conducted such cases were not reported except the name plate of the Fair Price Shopkeeper. There are no lists of beneficiaries, no opening and closing time table, no stock position etc. or any of the other information to be stated as per the guidelines.

The FPS should also display procedures for lodging complaints with reference to quality and quantity of ration commodities. The study said that in the districts of Assam such procedures are not followed to lodge complains regarding quality and quantity at fair price shop. Whatever

items are distributed no matter what quality they receive, beneficiaries have to accept without any complaints.

Another important point of the guidelines is that any consumer or local resident attached to the FPS is entitled to inspect the stock register, ration card register, other records and stocks available at the FPS at the appointed date/time. But the study has found no such cases. Lack of public awareness is basically responsible for non-adherence.

It is mentioned that FPS should display detailed lists of BPL & AAY households under its jurisdiction. Copies of these lists should also be displayed on notice boards of Panchayat office/Community halls of the village/ Municipal Council Office. The study had not found any such cases in the area.

Most importantly a complaint book with numbered pages should be maintained at each FPS and availability of the complaint book should be indicated for convenience of beneficiaries and for general public. The study has not found any complaint book at the FPS and no beneficiaries' are aware about the related issues.

5.5. Monitoring and transparency measures:

Monitoring and transparency measures are considered closely interlinked. Targeted Public Distribution System guidelines envisaged that the ground level monitoring of PDS could be effected through;

- a) Inspections of FPSs by district and Taluka* level officials;
- b) Involvement of PRIs in the identification of poor and in the functioning of FPSs; and
- c) Other transparency measures to be taken by authorities.

Three principal instruments are built in to ensure transparency in the distribution of ration items;

- a) Norms prescribed for the display of important FPS-specific details visibly in the FPSs;
- b) Directions for involving in the delivery and monitoring of PDS items; and
- c) Instruction to adopt measures for giving wide publicity to the Citizen's Charter which lays down the rights and privileges of the consumer.

Selected districts of the study did not have any administrative mechanism for PDS at the Block level and hence monitoring of FPSs was directly actualized by district/sub-division level officials. At FPS level no frequent inspection has happened. Only road side FP shops were visited and not

Taluka : A subdivision is an area, part, or section of something which is itself a part of something larger.*

with the intension to look at the matters as prescribed in the guidelines. There are no records of inspection at the beneficiaries' level in the sample districts. At GPSS* level sub-divisional inspector visited once in a month or bi-monthly.

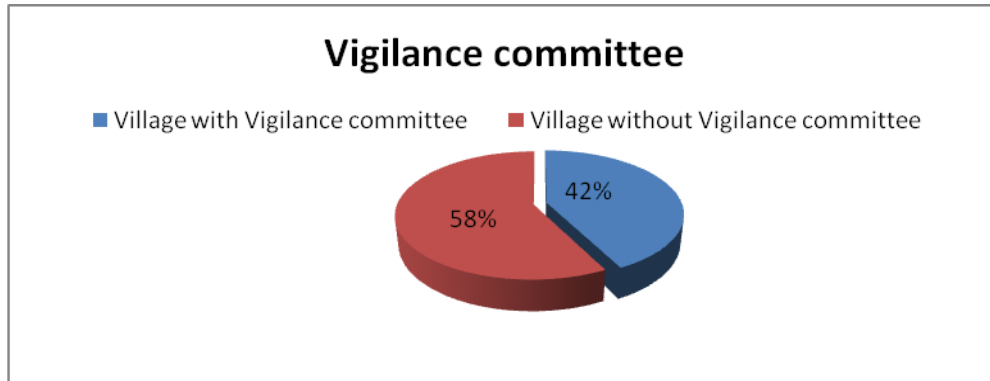
Transparency in allocation of rations in selected districts has not taken place. GPSS takes 10% commission from agents for s.k.oil, at Dhakuakhana without any reasons. The commissions paid by the GPSS* is incurred from the FPS dealers, who then in turn extra-charged the amount of the rations from the poor beneficiaries. In Chirang district 20 liters of s.k.oil* was deducted straight from the allotment as reported by the agent. Most of the depots of S.K.Oil have no electronic meter for accurate measurement and FP shops always found less quantity up to 20 liters when they distributed at villages. No Food and Civil Supply authority takes any initiative in the matter even after frequent requests by the FP shop agents about the irregularities of depots. They alleged that the F&CS authority had some understanding with the S.K.Oil sub-depot so the authorities do not undertake any scrutiny. Some GPSS members also said that sub-depot for s.k.oil distribution in some areas is not required. These have unnecessarily allowed for profiteering by the depot owner who instead collects commission from the agents and conveys the ultimate burden to the beneficiaries.

Among the respondents only 33% were aware about the agencies responsible to redress their complaints and the respondents have never asked for any measures against the agent.

5.6. Vigilance and public participation:

Vigilance Committees have been in existence since the inception of the rationing system. From time to time the Central Government has requested the State Governments to activate PDS Vigilance Committees and reconstitute them, if it has not been done so, by associating members from amongst the card holders and consumer activists as well as Members of Parliament. In the Model Citizens' Charter, issued in November, 1997, constitution of Vigilance Committees by the State Governments at the level of Panchayat /Ward, Taluk*, District and State/UT has been emphasized. As per the guidelines issued in June 1999 for the Involvement of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the implementation of TPDS, it is mentioned that the Gram Panchayat/Gram Sabha* should be encouraged to form FPS committees. The main functions of Vigilance Committee are to ensure smooth functioning of PDS and redressal of problems related with it.

Panchayat Raj Institution: Local governance system
"Panchayat" literally means assembly (ayat) of five (panch) wise
Gaon Sabha: Village Meeting*



The vigilance committees at the selected districts are not working in proper sense. Only 42% villages had vigilance committee and other 58% are running without any vigilance committee. Villages having Vigilance Committees are at present functioning at the following levels:

1. Village level
2. Block/Mandal*/Taluka* level
3. District level

Village level vigilance committee:

At the village level the beneficiaries formed the vigilance committee with an elected president and a secretary. The president is basically the village headman or sometimes an active person of the society/village. In most of the village vigilance committees the FP shop agent is an invitee and there is one member from the Gaon Panchayat who is elected as a member from the respective villages. The meeting of the vigilance committee is basically held when commodities arrive, fluctuation of rates due to transportation, any mismanagement reported and special invitation of the agent in any matter. The committee decisions are take in democratic processes and decisions are made available in public places, especially at of FP shop etc.

GPSS* level vigilance committee:

The GPSS committee is formed in a democratic process. The Committees will comprise five-six card holders attached to the FPS, representatives of local bodies, social workers of the area, etc. The Block Level Committee will cover FPSs in a Block and report to the District level Committee about functioning of FPSs and other related problems. The Chairman of the Vigilance Committee at Block Level may be the elected head of the Anchalik Panchayat/Block Level PRI.

Taluka : A subdivision is an area, part, or section of something which is itself a part of something larger.
Mandal* the third-level administrative areas of India, below states and districts*

District Level Vigilance Committee:

Each District level Committee, as constituted by the state Government comprises of 10 members from different segments like beneficiary groups, social/consumer organizations, people's elected representatives and it is headed by the Chairperson of the Zila Parishad. The District level Vigilance Committee is authorized to redress / solve the problems at his level to the maximum extent possible and, whenever it is not possible, he had to refer the same with his recommendation to the State level Committee.

Apart from these is the **state level vigilance committee** constituted by the State Government and which consists of concerned Senior Level Officials from the Government, a few Members of Parliament, a few Members of Legislative Assemblies, Consumer Activists and Youth & Women's Organizations. The Committee is chaired by the Minister in Charge of Food & Civil Supplies and includes other Ministers of related Ministries such as Rural Development, Panchayat Raj, Urban Development etc., as members in addition to the other members mentioned above. The Committee shall review quarterly the overall functioning of TPDS Scheme in the State, and difficulties being faced, if any, in smooth functioning of the Scheme in the State as a whole. The Committee members sometime visit FPSs, and offices of Food & Civil Supplies Departments, meet beneficiaries of the scheme and recommend to the State Government corrective action for any problems in implementation of TPDS.

The State Govt. implements a mechanism of grievances redress for issues pointed out by the Block/Dist./State Level Vigilance Committee.

5.7 Gaon Panchayat Samabay Samiti Shareholders Voting

The provisions of shareholders voting under section 17 of Assam Co-operatives Societies Act for GPSS general body's members are conducted in every three years. Core committees are also formed by elected/selected members in the annual general meetings by the shareholders. GPSS has 20% of the female members in the core committee. According to the report of *District Community Development Program* - a grassroots organization based in Vheluadanga, Sonitpur district, Assam found that no such general body elections of the GPSS are being held transparently. It happens during the day of shareholders election trifling issues are intentionally placed and reported before the meeting to delay the election processes. Neither the meeting discusses about the shareholders issues and calculates their share amount due. No shareholders know exactly what they should benefit from being such members of the PDS cooperative society. Consequently the shareholders findings the meeting quite tedious departs away. Half of the shareholders return home without casting their votes. As most of the people

starts leaving the election as well as meeting venue, the voting begins. Sometimes it is learnt casting of votes continues till midnight. At these realities, most women shareholders is deprived of the democratic process as they would not be able to wait for castings their votes till midnight. Hence to democratically elect the GPSS members and to discuss issues for better distribution of rations through such cooperative society, it is suggested the meeting as well as GPSS members' election should be held in two days. On the first day itself the voting by the shareholders needs to be done and the election should be organized in proper way like the other election procedures.

6. SUMMARY OF THE STUDY:

- More than 76% of PDS beneficiaries are not aware about their entitlement under BPL and AAY schemes. A beneficiary has to purchase the rations whatever is charged by the fair price shops dealers. Most beneficiaries have to pay the extra cost of the transportation of Rs. 0.50 to Rs. 6.00 per kg/ltr which is obviously charged more than the prescribed rate by the government? Under AAY the transportation cost is provided by central government. However a beneficiary has to pay Rs. 1.50 extra per kg.

Among those respondents, 70% beneficiaries said the quality of the food grain supplied under PDS is not satisfactory and 30% beneficiaries reported it as average. No display of stock, quality, time table of opening and closing etc. at the FPS. 10% of FP shops did not maintain the register of issue and stock. 58% of FP shop agents issued PDS items without any card except rice and they are hardly signed by the beneficiaries in the register. The quantities received by the beneficiaries are not allotted as per the prescribed guidelines, except *Mukhya Mantri Asoni Suraksha Yojana** rice. Most have received up to 5 kg less than prescribed under BPL/AAY rice.

Issues faced by the ration dealers: Almost all agents face shortage of rations at the Food Corporation India godown itself at the time of allocations of ration by them. The weight of the rations is inclusive of the sack bag weight which should have been without measuring it along/exclusive. This means agents are allotted less quantity of the ration.

It is reported agents has to pay more than the rate they are issued in the money receipt. This is to avoid stipulated price of the rations and gets protected from any corrupt practices/complaints. It is then; this weight lost is compensated by the agents by increasing the rate of the ration from the beneficiaries.

Whenever the ration dealers collect rations from the cooperative society they have to stand in unending queue. Sometimes the dealers who hires vehicles for lifting the food grains returns without any rations. The hiring charge of the vehicle is then re-compensated by the beneficiaries through the increased of rations rate by the agents. In the case of oil depots, around 20% of the respondents said they do not have electronic meter for the measurement of kerosene oil. It is experienced by the agents that manual measurement provides the depot, the scope of less weighing. So every time the agents are compelled to receive shortage up to 20 liters of kerosene oil.

Though complaints have been lodged no action has been initiated by food and civil supply department. Weak monitoring system, transparency and accountability of officials are in full scale lacking. No proper level of grievance redressal mechanism and frequency of monitoring to prevent leakage/black marketing

PDS cooperative society has no corpus fund to stock/lift of the rations from the FCI. So 40% cooperative society takes the financial support of other “contractors” to lift the ration from the FCI godown. Being supported, cooperatives sometimes have to pay the interest rate of the loan amount to the contractors. So to repay the loan amount along with the interest rate, GPSS a cooperative society has to increase the rate of rations which is being paid by the beneficiaries through the ration dealers.

- In some of the villages, beneficiaries have to purchase the ration as fixed by the village vigilance committees which is more than the prescribed rate. And in some areas of Assam, the rate is fixed by fair price shops association, so the rations would be rated according to their own sweet will. 42% of the respondents said that though their village vigilance committee is constituted according to guidelines, but monitoring mechanism is reported to be weak. Other 58% said that they have no vigilance committee and their agent and influential person of the village decides the fate of the beneficiaries rationing system.
- GPSS general body’s elections/selection which is conducted in every three years meeting by the shareholders of the cooperative society is not organized in proper democratic procedures. Most of the shareholders have to leave early of the venue of the meeting, as agenda of the election/selections of the members is delayed intentionally or done at midnight to serve their undemocratic processes. Absence of casting of votes by the stakeholders would provide the powerful and influential the free

hand to select or elect themselves. Women members of the cooperatives society would be most deprived in casting the votes as their presence is few at this delayed processes.

Though the Public Distribution System (PDS) mechanism of distribution has many problems, it is widely considered an essential element of a multi-pronged strategy to alleviate poverty issues. Indeed, the PDS is a critical resource for the food security of the poor. The continued value of such a mechanism has long been questioned by those who consider better market reforms to increase food availability to the poor. It's only through the increased engagement of the civil society groups in the region that would reduce the irregularities of Public Distribution implementation and ensure better delivery mechanism of the food rations.