BOOK REVIEW

Food Policy: A Lesson from History

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Knight, Katherine (2011), Spuds, *Spam and Eating for Victory: Rationing in the Second World War,* The History Press, Brimscombe Port, United Kingdom, pp. 240, £ 8.99

War is remembered mostly for the misery it causes. The book under review, however, is an account of one of the positive aspects of the period of the Second World War: the elaborate system of food rationing that was established in Britain at that time.

Rationing in Britain started soon after the war started in 1939, first with petrol. In January 1940, bacon, butter, and sugar began to be rationed. Shortage of foodstuff was an immediate consequence because Britain was greatly dependent on imported foodstuff. Before the war, the country imported 55 million tonnes of foodstuff; soon after the war began, these imports dropped to 12 million tonnes. Rationing lasted well after the war ended, till July 4, 1954.

How this system of "fairer shares" was established, how it functioned, and how it played a crucial role in keeping high the morale of a nation at war is the subject of Knight's book. The credibility of the rationing system hinged crucially on its ability to ensure that the hardship caused by the decline in the availability of foodstuff was equitably shared – between the rich and the poor, and between people living in urban and rural areas.

> Clearly, the affluent classes felt the greatest culture shock, as meals were simplified, portions reduced, variety severely limited. But for those who had previously known real hunger, there was a guarantee of a minimum quantity of essential foods at reasonable prices.[1]

In order to succeed, rationing had to be fair. Its credibility hinged on the system being transparent, flexible, and integrated to food production in Britain. Dissemination of timely and accessible information to the wider population was vital. The most

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[1] *Spuds, Spam and Eating for Victory*, p. 20.

striking aspect of the rationing system in Britain during the war – important now in India in the context of the moves afoot to enact a National Food Security Act – was its *universal* coverage.

> The scheme was designed to share out food as fairly as possible, so everybody was entitled to the rations. Even royalty were issued with the document, with the implication that the privileged would get exactly the same treatment as everyone else.[2]

The British government's plans for universal coverage were evident even before the war began. By the summer of 1939, it had printed 50 million ration books for a population of 48 million.[3] The Ministry of Food, which had been wound up in 1921 after the First World War, was re-established to run the rationing machinery. In order to be in a position to actually distribute food to the population, it had command over all bulk stocks of food, including all imports and all that was produced in farms in the country.[4]

The food distribution system had the Minister of Food at its apex. Then came 19 Divisional Food Offices across the country, which coordinated with the Food Control Committees (numbering 1,520 at the beginning of the war). These committees, which had representatives not only of consumers, but also of local retailers and shop workers, were responsible for enforcing the rationing regulations.

Knight describes the manner in which the rationing system was tweaked as it evolved, showing a flexibility of which government agencies nowadays are often thought to be incapable. For instance, while most other foodstuff were governed by quantitative restrictions, meat supplied through local butchers was governed by price restrictions. Knight observes that this was a sensible decision because it enabled people with different income levels to balance the quantities of meat with the quality of the meat cuts, depending on what they could afford.

After Lend Lease began in 1941, the government introduced a points system by which points were assigned to different kinds of food. By assigning higher points to foodstuff that were scarce, and by reducing points on those that were more readily available, the government could direct the demand for specific commodities in conformity with their availability while offering people a greater range of options from which to choose.[5]

The two main sources of carbohydrates – bread and potatoes – were outside the rationing system throughout the war. The system was also flexible in terms of the

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 26. Queen Mary's ration book is on display at the Imperial War Museum, London.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 28. Knight observes that larger families, with a larger bundle of entitlements, could have a wider set of food options (p. 30).

quantities rationed to different sections of the population. For instance, pregnant women and children were entitled to larger quantities of milk and "vitamin foods."

The attacks by U-Boats on the supply lines of a country so dependent on imports, especially from across the Atlantic, not only resulted in shortages, but also required that the population adjust their food habits to accommodate whatever substitutes were available. A substantial portion of Knight's book is about how this substitution was managed by the government during the war. The dissemination of information in a form that was easily understood by the people (especially housewives) played a crucial role in the success of these efforts.[6]

Chapter 2 of the book, "Food Values and Valuable Foods," provides an account of the options that were exercised by ordinary people in order to ensure as balanced a diet as possible. Knight illustrates the manner in which the Food Advice Division of the Food Ministry gently nudged people, through advertisements in the media and through radio broadcasts, into exercising options that were compatible with the context of war.[7] Such advice was not confined to explaining the various options available to housewives, but also the manner in which kitchen implements could be modified to suit the needs of a nation at war.[8] Innovative recipes using scarce resources or new ones that were hitherto unknown to the housewife, cooking tips, and methods of preserving food were also propagated in the advertisements.

The Welfare Foods Service was aimed at providing food such as milk and orange juice to pregnant and nursing women, babies and children.

> Being poor before the war had meant bad health for children and high rates of infant mortality. Rationing was seen as a chance to improve things as a deliberate social policy, building on previous welfare schemes such as cheap or free milk for elementary school children.[9]

After being an "undoubted success," the scheme "started to dry up." In 1971, when Margaret Thatcher was Secretary of State for Education, the scheme effectively was wound up.[10]

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 37: a reproduction of an advertisement issued by the Ministry of Food, "How to eat wisely in wartime" (date not mentioned), which lists the four main categories of foods without using scientific terminology.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 49. Knight observes that the Ministry of Food's propaganda efforts sometimes went overboard, while trying to urge people to grow vegetables in order to limit the country's reliance on imports. "Carrots," she writes, "were taken for a spin!" in the government's campaign urging people to eat more carrots to prevent night blindness.
[8] *Ibid.*, Chapter 3, "The Housewife, Her Kitchen and What She Was Told," p. 62: for instance, Knight cites an appeal by the Minister for Aircraft Production asking citizens to send in aluminium pots and pans for conversion into Spitfires and Hurricanes.
[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 54–6.
[10] *Ibid.*

Such an elaborate system of rationing could not rely merely on attempts to reorient the demand for foodstuff. Alongside these efforts, Britain also mounted a sustained campaign to increase agricultural production. More grassland in the country was brought under cultivation between 1939 and 1944, and the use of tractors increased by more than 200 per cent between 1939 and 1945.[11] The strategy had two elements: first, encouraging or even using force to make farmers grow more food; secondly, persuading urban residents to grow more vegetables in their gardens, on golf courses, and even on cricket pitches.[12]

In 1961, the Ministry of Agriculture launched the Dig for Victory campaign, aimed at increasing vegetable production. It was accompanied by an advertisement campaign that urged women to turn their gardens over to vegetables in the interest of their children.[13] Knight's book highlights the importance of even small patches of land for poor households, and the role they can play in enabling poor households to avert malnutrition.[14]

A significant result of rationing, and evidence that the most vulnerable sections were its biggest beneficiaries, was the sharp increase in life expectancy in Britain during the war. Amartya Sen has famously observed that the sharpest increase in life expectancy in England and Wales in the first six decades of the last century occurred from 1940 to 1951.[15] Life expectancy during this period increased by six-and-a-half years for men and by seven years for women. Although the expansion of public health services in the 1940s also contributed to the extension of life expectancy, it is evident that the elaborate system of food rationing, which is portrayed in great detail in Knight's work, played a critical role. This is particularly striking considering that the nation was in a prolonged war for much of that period. As Sen has observed:

> These were, of course, the war years, and the improvement is to a great extent recording the impact of public distribution systems that came in with protecting the general public from the possible effects of war. Public provision of food rationing and distribution, expansion of health services (including the introduction of the National Health Service in the 1940s), and other expansions of the involvement of the state in distributing food, health care, medical attention, etc., made a radical difference to the entitlements to these vital commodities enjoyed by the population at large, including its most vulnerable sections.[16]

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 97: "Like the Ministry of Food, the Ministry of Agriculture created a steady crop of information designed to appeal both to patriotism and self-interest."
[14] This experience has particular relevance for a country like India, where curtailed access to homestead land – especially among socially deprived sections such as Dalits and the Scheduled Tribes in both urban and rural areas – denies people the opportunity to grow nutritive vegetables or fruit.
[15] Sen (1987).
[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 20–1.

Comparing data on Gross Domestic Product per head in Britain and incremental life expectancy rates, Sen (1998) noted "remarkable features" about the spurt in life expectancy.

> The pattern of life expectancy increase is almost exactly the opposite of the expansion of gross domestic product per capita. Whatever might have led to the high achievements in some decades, it was not faster economic growth in those decades.[17]

Further, drawing from his earlier work, he observed that the increase is life expectancy "almost certainly lies in the improvement in public delivery of food and health services over these decades, contingently associated with the war efforts."

> While the total supply of food per head went down in war time, the incidence of bad undernutrition also declined because of the more effective use of public distribution systems associated with war efforts and more equal sharing of food through rationing systems.[18]

Knight points to another remarkable aspect of the period in England and Wales: the decline of infant mortality. The infant mortality rate fell dramatically during the Welfare Foods period, from 59 per 1,000 live births in 1941 to 46 per 1,000 live births in 1944.

> The birth rate itself increased too, and the number of women dying in childbirth declined. There was a baby boom, which reached its peak in the two years after the war.[19]

Spuds, Spam and Eating for Victory: Rationing in the Second World War, which draws upon a range of sources – leaflets and advertisements, interviews with those who had experienced rationing, and Knight's own childhood experiences of the war period – is significant for India today. The debate over access to food in our country has generally been confined within a framework that is excessively concerned with the state of the fisc. "There is no money to fund a food distribution scheme whose coverage is universal," seems to be the official refrain. Knight's work on an earlier – and momentous – era in history offers a refreshing antidote to this narrow point of view.

References

Sen, Amartya (1987), "Food and Freedom," Sir John Crawford Memorial Lecture, Washington, D.C.

Sen, Amartya (1998), "Mortality as an Indicator of Economic Success and Failure," *Economic Journal,* January.

[17] Sen (1998), p. 6.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 56.