The landmark Food Security Bill, that gives legal right to cheaper food grains to 63.5% of the country's population. Considered to be the world’s largest experiment in providing food security to poor, the Bill was introduced by Food Minister KV Thomas amid thumping of desks by Congress members led by party chief Sonia Gandhi, who has been strongly pushing the ambitious social legislation. Implementation of the scheme is expected to cost Rs 3.5 lakh crore and subsidy Bill is expected to be to the tune of Rs 95,000 crore. The National Food Security Bill, 2011, provides for coverage of 75% of the people in rural areas, including at least 46% under priority sections (which is same as below poverty line families in the existing public distribution system). Up to 50% of people will be covered in the urban centers, with at least 28% under priority category. Under the significant legislation, people eligible under priority category would be entitled to 7 kg of food grains comprising rice, wheat and coarse grains per person per month. Rice will be provided at Rs 3, wheat at Rs 2 and coarse grains at Re 1 per kg. General category would get at least 3 kg of grains at a rate not exceeding 50% of the minimum support price.

The bill in its current form is an expanded PDS as it operates today. It takes away the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) and combines it with below poverty line (BPL) and reduces the price for BPL and calls it a priority category and then retains the above poverty line (APL) formulation in another name called the general category.

The system as it is today the PDS is run through about 5 lakh-odd private fair price shops mostly. Leakages have been estimated of the order of 50 percent in 2004-2005. Probably things have improved a bit and now there is talk of about 40 percent leakage - even that is an unacceptable level of leakage.

**Voices & Concerns:**
The financial implication of this in the very first year of operation as per government’s calculation is about Rs 1.3 lakh crore. However what it does not take into account is the other peripheral costs that would be needed to set up the thing in a manner which is more sustainable and reliable.

For example the storage facilities have to be created, railways don’t have enough capacity to carry the food grains and then the volatility in the grain production needs to be stabilised otherwise there could be years like in 2002-2003 when in a single year the food grain production dropped by 38 million tonnes. Where will you go to buy that food?

Given this logistics problem, distribution of food grains and reaching them to places where they need it most will be a major challenge.

Given the fact that our production of rice is about 100 million tonne and wheat is about 85-90 million tonnes and the marketable surpluses are only about 55-60 percent, if the government is going to procure most of it then the private sector will be starved of supplies and that could lead to a certain set of inflationary pressures on the open market.
Making it clear that he was not opposed to the National Food Security Bill, Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar Friday said he would prefer it to be approved by Parliament after a debate. "I am in favor of approving the food bill through discussion in Parliament, which is the highest forum," he told reporters. Pawar, who had earlier voiced apprehension that huge concessions on food grains could endanger food security and harm the interests of farmers, said everybody in the government wanted it to be "cleared, approved and implemented." "The issue is how...Whether through ordinance or debate in Parliament. I am not opposed to the bill," he said.

Asked what would be his stand if Congress was insistent on promulgating an ordinance in this regard, Pawar said, "Such decisions are taken collectively." The bill, considered by many in the Congress as a game changer which could boost its prospects in the Lok Sabha election, was tabled in the Budget Session but could not be taken up for discussion as Opposition stalled Parliament over a rash of scams under UPA. There were indications that the much-talked about legislation may be brought before Parliament in the Monsoon Session. The Food Ministry, the nodal department for implementation of the proposed law, itself was said to be not in favor of an Ordinance to implement the food security law.

This point about protein inflation has been interpreted by some experts to say that the large part of the population has perhaps moved away from cereal to other kinds of consumption and therefore by simply concentrating on rice and wheat there could be serious distortions that the bill will introduce in the cereal economy itself, with farmers producing something which perhaps the population is not looking for. That the population is actually looking for probably pulses, milk, vegetables, fish, eggs and other kinds of things.

"The Opposition is also not against the food bill. They want something more and discussions are on," he said. He, however, said to maintain consistency in food security, thrust should be on improving production, greater investment in agriculture, and adequate availability of power and fertilizer. “The BJP is very serious on the issue of food security,” he said. At the same time, he said that in the proposed bill prepared by the government, “we see a lot of objectionable things”. These were “no importance” given to the food producing farmers, “no guarantee of giving the farmer a minimum support price for his yield” and no factoring in of natural calamities such as drought, Mr. Singh said. The Bill, being pushed by the ruling UPA, could not be considered by Parliament because of pandemonium created by the opposition which had been pressing for resignation of Mr. Bansal and Mr. Kumar.

At a press conference, party spokesman Prakash Javadekar said, “We are not opposed to the Food Security Bill. We were the first movers on this aspect as BJP government in Chhattisgarh has already implemented such a measure.” “It is the pot calling the kettle black,” he said, targeting Congress.

Read further: