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# *Japan's Food Security Problem*

## *Increasing Self-sufficiency in Traditional Food*

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### **Abstract:**

Food security problem has become an important concern for the entire world. The problem of chronic hunger which has increased over the decades in the world clearly indicates that the world does not have sufficient amount of food to feed the people. The problem is further exacerbated by factors like effects of climate change, unstable global economy, low agriculture production, rising poverty and unstable food prices. Therefore, these factors have brought new challenges to the world for producing and supplying continuous staple food to the people. However, the food security problem in Japan is different from the world. Food security for Japan is increasing the self-sufficiency ratio by increasing the domestic production so as to meet the demand for both types of food belonging to the traditional Japanese meal and the western meal. Thus, this paper, besides understanding the problem of food security in Japan also makes a suggestion of increasing self-sufficiency of food that are part of the traditional Japanese meal.



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**Keywords:** *Food security, poverty, climate change, chronic hunger, self-sufficiency.*

## **Introduction**

Problems of food security existed since ancient times as people always had concern for the availability and continuous supply of food. However, food security first emerged as a problem of global governance in the wake of World War II and the destruction of the food supplies it had wrought; yielding the creation of the Food and Agriculture Organization in 1945.[1] Since then, the problem of food security has become an important concern for the whole world. Food security has many definitions but the definition widely accepted is that given by the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) during World Food Summit 1996. "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to enough safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle".[2]

In 2014-2016 a total of 795 million people or around one in nine people in the world, were estimated to be suffering from chronic hunger, regularly not getting enough food to conduct an active life (FAO, 2016)[3]. Further, the world is faced with problems of rising population, climate change, unstable global economy, low agriculture production, rising poverty and unstable food prices. Such problems have brought new challenges for the world in terms of continuous availability, supply and access to food at affordable prices. Thus, food security has become an important problem for the world.

However, the problem of food security for Japan is different from the problem of the world. For Japan, food security means increasing the self-sufficiency ratio of food by increasing the domestic production. Food self-sufficiency ratio on a calorie basis is an index that shows the ratio of calorie supply from domestically produced food compared to the total calorie supply from food in the country.[4] But today the problem for Japan is not only being self-sufficient in traditionally consumed food like rice but also being self-sufficient for the western style food like wheat, meat, and dairy products for which the Japanese have developed a taste due to the change in the dietary pattern. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand and highlight the problem of food security in Japan and to suggest an alternative way to ensure food security in Japan.

## **Overview of Food Security Problem in Japan**

Japan is an island country and most areas are mountainous with steep terrain and heavily covered with forest. In 2014 out of the total land in Japan 12.0 per cent was arable land, 3.1 per cent residential area and 66.3 per cent forest area [5]. Therefore, Japan has limited arable land and this has become the main obstacle to



the expansion of agriculture. Food security as a problem emerged in Japan during the 1960s rapid economic growth period. As the economy grew the per capita incomes of the people also increased and as a result, people's dietary pattern changed from traditional to the western pattern as people had more income at their disposal to spend on food. Traditional Japanese meal consisted of rice, fish, soybeans and seasonal vegetables and western meal consisted of wheat, meat, dairy products, eggs and increasing amount of fats and oils. This change brought the decline in the demand for traditional food and particularly for rice in which Japan was self-sufficient. On the contradictory, it led to rise in demand for western style food and to meet the demand Japan began importing food.

The rapid growth of the economy propelled by manufacturing and export industries led to increasing demand for labors as a result migration of the workers took place from the farms to the industries thereby leading to the overall decline in farming population. Further, as migration took place it was expected that the consolidation of small agriculture lands into large farms would be possible thereby making large scale farming possible. Instead, people held on to their lands because of the rise in the price of the land due to increase in land demands. As a result consolidation of small farms did not happen but it led to rise in the growth of part-time farmers farming rice only and earning substantial off farm incomes. Thus, limited arable land, the declining farming population, small size farms and increasing part-time farmers all contributed to the decline in the domestic agriculture productivity as a result self-sufficiency ratio on calories basis declined thereby creating the problem of food security. Japan's food self-sufficiency ratio on calories basis was 79 per cent in 1960 and had declined continuously reaching 39 per cent in 2015.[6]

The decline in agricultural productivity and to meet the demands of the people whose dietary pattern had changed Japan started importing food and within a short period of time, Japan became one of the largest importers of food in the world. However, initially, Japan felt that it can rely on the exports for its food but certain events that took place during the 1970s such as rise in price of food grains due to bad productivity in USA, Nixon embargo on soybeans export and the Arab oil crisis made Japan realise that its supply line for food is vulnerable to external forces. These incidents made Japan realize that they further threatened the food security of Japan. Having realized that importation of food has its own associated problems and as such, it can't guarantee the continuous and stable supply of food Japan began emphasizing on increasing the self-sufficiency ratio by increasing the domestic production to ensure food security.

### **Problems of Agriculture Structure in Japan**

In 2014 out of the total land only 12.0 per cent was arable land and this has been the greatest obstacle for Japan in terms of expanding agriculture sector. Moreover, rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth led to the rise in



demand for land and as a result cultivated land has declined. In 1961 the cultivated land was 6.08 (Mha) and in 2015 it had declined to 4.49 (Mha).[7] Thus, the limited cultivated land has further got limited and thereby hindering the expansion of agriculture.

The present agriculture structure type in Japan is that of cultivator- ownership of micro sized farms carrying out small scale farming and mostly engaged in rice farming. The present structure is mainly because of the land reforms carried out immediately after the war. However, the land reforms were not able to change the size of the farms, as such small farms continued to exist, but it only brought changes in the ownership of the land. Before the war, the ownership was mainly private but after reforms, the cultivator was the owner of the farms. Therefore, in Japan maximum numbers of farmers are those that have land under 0.5 hectares and farmers holding land above 2.0 hectares are less. This has been one of the reasons for the decline in productivity as small-size farms are not economically viable.

Further, as industries grew during the period of rapid economic growth demand for labor increased and as such migration of labor took place from the farms and this resulted in the decline in the overall population of farmers. Since the able farmers moved to industries the farms were left in the hands of the old farmers aging rapidly and this affected the productivity of agriculture. In addition, with the migration of the farmers, it was anticipated that land consolidation of small farms into large farms could be possible but the migrated farmers did not sell their lands and help on to their lands mainly because or rise in price as the demand for the land had increased due to industrialization and urbanization. Consequently, this led to the creation of part-time farmers earning substantial off-farm incomes and was mostly engaged in rice farming. Over the period of time, the numbers of part-time farmers increased whereas full-time farmers' number decreased. Since most of the part-time farmers were engaged in rice farming and less number of full-time farmers led to decline in the overall agriculture productivity. Thus, all these factors contributed to the downfall of the agriculture sector in Japan.

### **Agriculture Policies in Japan**

The decline in productivity of domestic agriculture made Japan depend on imports to meet its demand but having realized the vulnerabilities associated with the importation Japan enacted agriculture policies to strengthen the agriculture sector and to raise the self-sufficiency ratio. The important agriculture policies are summarized below:

**(a). *The Food Control Law of 1942:*** This law had its origin during the war but it was amended and continued throughout the post- war period till 1995. During the war time period, the main objective of this policy was to control the production,



supply, and distribution of food particularly rice. Similarly, in post war period also it had to perform the same function and at the same time, it was also used for controlling the prices of the food. This policy, in fact, helped Japan to gain self-sufficiency in basic food particularly that of rice.

**(b). *Agricultural Basic Law of 1961*:** As economic growth took place the income of the industrial workers increased as compared to farm workers. Within a short period of time, the gap in terms of income and productivity increased as compared to the agriculture sector. To remove the disparity between the two industries and to increase the income of the farmers the Japanese government enacted this policy. However, to meet its objectives the government provided subsidies to farmers particularly to rice farmers and this, in turn, led to rise in productivity of rice where as the productivity of other crops began to decline. Moreover, this law also led to the rise in a number of part-time farmers mainly because rice farming had more subsidies and benefits.

**(c). *New Food Law 1995*:** In 1993 Japan experienced rice crisis because of the poor harvest and to overcome the crisis Japan had to import rice. At the same time, Japan was pressurized by its trading partners to open its domestic market. In 1994 Japan agreed to Uruguay Round Agreements on Agriculture (URAA) and made necessary changes to open its domestic market. To comply with the URAA enacted the New Food Law of 1995. This law brought an end to the old Food Control Law and as per the law, the government had no control over the price, distribution or management of the agriculture commodities. Moreover, as per the new law farmers were no more to sell the rice to the government authorities as they could now sell them directly to the wholesaler or to the consumer.

**(d). *New Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas 1999*:** This law replaced the Agriculture Basic Law of 1961. This law was the paradigm shift in the agriculture policies of Japan and it widened the scope of agricultural policy objectives to include food security by ensuring a stable supply of food, multifunctionality of agriculture, sustainable development of agriculture and promotion of rural development. Moreover, this law promoted food-self sufficiency ratio to be raised and it set up a target of 45 percent to be achieved by 2010. Further, in 2005 the government introduced a New Basic Plan because of the failure of the 1999 law to achieve its objective of 45 percent of food self-sufficiency ratio. The new plan most important objective was to achieve the objective of increasing the self-sufficiency ratio to 45 per cent by 2015.

Agriculture policies were framed by the Japanese government to raise the level of income of the farmers and to remove the gap between the agriculture and industries as well as to raise the self-sufficiency ratio of food. However, only the incomes of the farmers were increased whereas other objectives could not be fulfilled. Despite



these policies share of agriculture declined such that its contribution to GDP declined from 9 per cent in 1960 to the current level of 1.2 per cent. In addition, the productivity of agriculture also declined thereby leading to further decline in the self-sufficiency ratio.

The decline in productivity, as well as the demand for western style food, made Japan be dependent on imports for food supply but the events during the 1970s have made Japan realized that depending on imports would not help Japan in ensuring food security. Therefore, it continuously emphasizes on increasing domestic production so that the food self-sufficiency increases.

### **Conclusion:**

In sum it can be stated besides having less land for farms other factors like small scale farms, declining farming population, aging farmers, the growth of part-time farmers farming rice only and decreasing full-time farmers have all contributed to the fall of agriculture sector in Japan, consequently, the productivity has also declined. Moreover, the change in dietary pattern into western pattern compelled Japan to import food mainly because the domestic agriculture was not able to meet the demand. However, importation also took place because the domestic productivity was not sufficient to meet the demands for traditional food except rice. Low productivity along with increasing importation of food led to decline in self-sufficiency ratio and thereby creating the problem of food security. To ensure food security Japan emphasizes on increasing self-sufficiency of food items through an increase in domestic production along with importation of food and stockpiling. However, self-sufficiency has not increased since it started to decline from the 1960s and food imports have its own limitations because it depends on external factors like transportation, production in exporting country, the rise in prices of the commodities, food safety, and others. Imports, therefore, are vulnerable to many factors and relying on it excessively will make a country vulnerable and it will further lead to food insecurity. Stockpiling can be used only during the immediate and short time crisis, as stockpiling cannot be done for a long period of time. Thus, though Japan wants to ensure food security through domestic production, imports and stockpiling but in order to ensure food security increasing the self-sufficiency of traditionally consumed food would be the best alternative. During the crisis despite the change in taste to survive people can revert to traditionally consumed Japanese food.

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