

The Chennai Foodbank

A Background Note

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How did the Foodbank start off? (A brief historical note)

The Rajasthan Youth Association (RYA), primarily an ethnicity-centric cultural organization (a “recreation club”), as its name suggests, nevertheless aims to contribute to and participate in the larger community as well. While their presence is marked across the country through various regional branches, it is the Chennai Metro branch that is central to this background note.

The Chennai Foodbank was originated by the Chennai Metro branch of the RYA, which is made up of leading businessmen in the area, typically belonging to the Rajasthani (Jain) community. With a stated “interest in service”, and informed with a religious ‘*anna daan*’ instinct, the group zeroed in on hunger as the social issue they would tackle and help eradicate. “Food is a necessity”, they declared, and a hunger-free world in which children, in particular, have enough to eat, an imperative. Hence, the resultant community project initiated in 1993, identified orphanages as the target population. Since its inception, this project has grown steadily, if gradually, into the Chennai Foodbank, both in terms of the number of sponsors as well as the range of beneficiaries. By 2007, they had helped to provide over 1 crore meals to the under-privileged.

What is the basic mode of operations of the Chennai Foodbank today?

The Chennai Foodbank primarily solicits household sponsors who make annual commitments to contribute in kind (typically rice and other storable foodgrain). This commitment is collected in monthly installments by Foodbank personnel. The foodgrain thus collected is sorted, cleaned, packed, stored and distributed to a pre-approved list of beneficiaries, on a monthly basis. These operations have been ISO-certified.

Who are the typical beneficiaries of the Chennai Foodbank?

The Chennai Foodbank continues to this day with its original focus on disadvantaged children; orphanages constitute the bulk of the program’s beneficiaries. Most of the orphanages served are small and run by private registered charitable trusts; a partnership with the Chennai Foodbank, is thus, rather critical to their functioning. A few are managed by religious organizations – orphanages with affiliations to Christian and Hindu trusts are found among the list of beneficiaries.

In addition to orphanages, the Chennai Foodbank also supports old age homes, and specialized institutions like those for the disabled and for rehabilitation of

AIDS patients. Recent additions have been two privately run schools for economically disadvantaged students, where the Foodbank supplies grain for the mid-day meal.

Some beneficiaries are managed by larger professional bodies (the Cancer Institute, for instance). Chennai Foodbank's partnership is restricted to the size of the need of the beneficiary – thus while some smaller beneficiaries with fewer sponsorship possibilities may be wholly dependent on the foodgrain supplied by the Chennai Foodbank, other, better endowed institutions may be supplied to the extent of one meal or even a portion of it.

In all, about 60 institutional beneficiaries currently constitute the “Foodbank family”.

How are beneficiaries identified?

Beneficiaries have, historically, been directed to the Foodbank by the members of the RYA who may have been approached by individual institutions looking for support. Till date, the Foodbank has not, itself, initiated partnerships with any beneficiary.

Organizations that approach the Foodbank are required to send in an application that states the size of their need, the number of children (or other inmates) served and details of their management set-up. Foodbank personnel, who form an ‘inspection team’, visit the premises of the organization in order to verify for themselves, the size of the need and the (in)ability of the organization to meet it themselves. Priority is given to those institutions that do not have large sponsors. Most applicant organizations are ‘approved’ by this inspection team; there have been very few rejections in the history of the Foodbank.

Most of the beneficiaries are located in Chennai. (As a result of the Foodbank's model of operations, beneficiaries are required to collect their foodgrain supplies from the premises of the Chennai Foodbank each month, which effectively restricts the area served by the Foodbank.) However, in the recent months, two organizations from outlying rural areas beyond Chennai have requested the support of the Foodbank, and have been accepted.

Are there any qualifying constraints imposed on beneficiaries by the Foodbank?

In addition to a commitment to providing quality food, the Foodbank requires an undertaking from the institutions it supports that no non-vegetarian food will be cooked or served by the institutions that are a part of the Foodbank family. However, from our interaction with a beneficiary, this qualifying requirement was not being strictly adhered to. The explanation given was that some non-vegetarian food had been medically recommended, and thus, flouting the undertaking was justified. We cannot say whether the Foodbank or its donors are aware of such violations. The Foodbank does, however, insist that no institution has been removed from its beneficiaries' list for merely flouting the undertaking.

The undertaking required by the Foodbank is in line with the religious sentiments of the ethnic group that manage and run it.

From our visits to donor homes, there is little to suggest that donors are either aware of the Foodbank's imposed diet restriction, or that their giving is conditional to it being followed strictly.

How is the beneficiary-need determined?

The "authorized quantity" supplied per person as determined according to FAO standards is 75 to 100 grams per adult and 50 gram per child. This is the basic measure used to calculate the amount of foodgrain supplied to the institution. Hence, verification of the number of inmates supported by an institution is key to the Foodbank's estimate of monthly commitment to the institution.

The largest single monthly pick-up by any institution is 500 kilogram. At the other end, there are smaller institutions which are supported to the extent of 40 kilogram per month. The grain disbursed consists mostly of rice. However, institutions have the opportunity to request for wheat as well. These requests are met depending on the wheat-to-rice proportion collected from donors in a month. The commitment made by the Foodbank is typically only for rice, and only in a few instances, wheat. However, when other non-perishable food material is received by the Foodbank - for instance, sugar, jaggery or some pulses - these are distributed evenly across beneficiaries.

When institutions anticipate increased or decreased need in any month, these changes are accommodated by the Foodbank staff, provided there is sufficient quantity of grain available in store. However, "discretionary extra allotments" to any institution on a continued basis is "not permissible". This stricture is closely

followed, particularly since any discrepancies would come to light in an ISO audit.

When excess quantity of foodgrain is collected in any month, the excess is not stored, but distributed evenly across all beneficiaries.

The Foodbank's stated policy aims to provide not more than one meal per day per inmate; thus, serving a wider number of institutions while ensuring that institutions are not overly dependent on the Foodbank alone for supplies. However, in the course of our interaction, we did find instances of this thumb-rule being overlooked, particularly in the case of very small institutions, where the Foodbank may provide grain that meets the needs of all the inmates for all three daily meals. It was not clear whether this was by design or was an oversight.

How is the distribution of foodgrain organized?

Beneficiaries are required to collect their allocated quantities from the Foodbank's premises once a month; the Foodbank does not itself deliver any foodgrain to any beneficiary. As previously mentioned, this effectively restricts the area served by the Foodbank to ones in its vicinity.

'Distribution days' are Fridays. On the first three Fridays of the month, based on a preset weekly beneficiaries' list, Foodbank staff oversee the disbursement of foodgrain; the last Friday is also open for those beneficiaries that were unable to make it to their scheduled slot, thus ensuring some flexibility for beneficiary institutions to collect their supplies.

The total monthly commitment of supplies across the Foodbank's 60 beneficiaries is in the region of 9,000 kilogram. This quantity is disbursed in weekly batches of 2510 kilogram in week 1, 1900 kilogram in week 2, 3470 kilogram in week 3, and the balance in the 4th week.

Rice and wheat are packed in bags that are 20 kilograms or its multiples; other items are weighed and packed in 2 kilogram packs. Beneficiaries are issued their quota based on system-generated delivery *challans*, which are then totaled up to create weekly distribution reports, thus ensuring that beneficiaries receive the correct allocated amount of foodgrain, and no quantity is leaked or lost.

How is the quality of the foodgrain ensured?

All foodgrain collected is cleaned, dried and repacked. Since many donors donate rice originating in the public distribution system, the grain has to be thoroughly cleaned to be rid of stones and other impurities (which may result in a loss of up to 3 kilograms a day). The Foodbank employs a cleaner who is therefore a significant cog in its operations.

In addition, the implementation of ISO 9001 ensures that established cleaning procedures are followed. ISO certification implies that feedback from beneficiary institutions is used to rate the functioning of Foodbank personnel, thus taking on the form of another quality control and monitoring mechanism.

How much foodgrain is collected by the Foodbank in a month?

The average monthly collection from households is in the range of 6,000 kilograms. While we were not able to obtain the exact number of donors enrolled with the Foodbank (the system was unable to generate the data), their number is estimated to be between 2,500 and 3,000 households. This is supported by the fact that about 3,000 collection containers are in circulation around the city. Moreover, the collection routes number 25 across the city, with an average of 80 households serviced per route, bearing out the estimate.

In addition to households meeting their regular monthly commitment, some may donate extra quantities of foodgrain for celebratory or ceremonial reasons. There are also a few larger donors like temples that donate materials in bulk, driving the amount of foodgrain collected in a month, higher.

What happens in case of a shortfall of foodgrain in any month?

Since the total monthly commitment by the Foodbank is 9,000 kilogram, while the household collection adds up to around 6,000 kilogram, and additional donations of food material may not be steady, any resultant shortfall must be met through additional donations. Typically, when a shortfall is expected at any time, the operations manager at the Foodbank informs the Board of Trustees; the Board informs other members of the shortfall, and required monetary donations are mobilized. These are then used to buy foodgrain at market rates, which are then supplied to beneficiaries.

The Foodbank has not, in its 15 year history, defaulted on its commitment. Donations from RYA members to meet any “emergencies” appear to be extremely forthcoming, and, according to the operations manager, do not require “more than a single phone call”.

Why is ISO certification important?

The Foodbank feels that being an ISO 9001 certified organization gives it greater credibility among both the beneficiary and donor community. While this may indeed be true, in our interactions with beneficiaries as well as donors, we did not find ISO certification to have much impact on their relationship with the Foodbank.

Where the impact of the certification is felt most is perhaps in its insistence on efficient and consistent processes at the Foodbank. This is critical for an organization whose primary responsibility is functioning as a logistics management/clearinghouse for food materials. Thus, ISO certification, for instance, ensures that first-in-first-out is effectively maintained. Moreover, leakage of foodgrain from the system at the Foodbank is minimized through a monitoring mechanisms maintained through *delivery challans* and donor cards, and other such process checks mandated by ISO 9001 standard operating procedures.

How is collection of foodgrain organized?

Foodgrain is collected once a month from each household. Collection is monitored using donor cards that are issued to each household. Based on the commitment made by the donor household, they are also issued foodgrain storage containers. These containers are collected once a month according to a predetermined collection schedule, by the Foodbank route vehicle; these filled containers are then exchanged for empty ones each month. The collection route vehicle is manned by a driver and his assistant, a “collection boy”, who are both employees of the Foodbank.

Donor cards are carried in the collection vehicle, which then are signed off by each household, thus certifying quantity and type of foodgrain collected. Donor cards serve to remind the household of their commitment to the Foodbank, while at the same time ensuring that there is no loss/leakage of foodgrain on the routes.

The city is organized into 25 geographically based routes. Each route is visited once a month, accounting for the 25 working days of a month. In case of a driver absence, Sundays are make-up days.

Each of the 25 routes has an average of 80 households to be visited; the route vehicle leaves the Foodbank premises each morning at 9 am, and often returns past 6 pm. The security guard at the Foodbank constitutes another monitoring mechanism, as he checks and signs in the collection vehicle.

How efficient is the collection process?

The cost of collection is in the range of Rs. 11,000 a month, distributed almost equally between the costs of running the vehicle and the salaries of collection personnel. If 6,000 kilogram of foodgrain is collected per month, this implies that collection costs stand at Rs. 1.833 per kilogram of foodgrain.

Foodbank personnel admit that this makes it an expensive proposition. Increasing the number of households on a given route to drive down costs is not an option given the constraints of time and the capacity of the collection vehicle. Routes exist across the city, sometimes in far flung areas, reflecting the spread of the Rajasthani community that form the bulk of the households contributing to the Foodbank. While routes may be better optimized to reduce costs, this reduction is unlikely to be a major saving.

The rationale put forward for persisting with this model of operations is the emphasis on public participation that is considered to a cornerstone of the program.

How is “public participation” understood at the Chennai Foodbank?

The modus operandi and the vision that drives the Foodbank both see the public as integral to the functioning and success of the program. Given the large number of households and the small Foodbank team, public participation appears to have been defined, by default, as households fulfilling their foodgrain commitment. There is little say of the households in how the program is managed, or what institutions it supports.

The annual “Project Day” organized to mark the setting up of the Foodbank presents an opportunity for households to interact with the Foodbank personnel.

The Project Days are however, more an opportunity to celebrate together the successes of the program, rather than an opportunity for program evaluation or public feedback. These 'events' are quite appreciated by the households, many of whom recollected one such Project Day held at a popular local water amusement park with great enthusiasm.

When households were asked whether their input was solicited by the Foodbank, all appeared surprised by the question. To be fair, most households visited did not see any larger role for themselves, nor did they express any desire to be contacted for suggestions or feedback – they appeared to be in agreement with the Foodbank's implicit assumption that public participation was only to the extent of having the foodgrain containers ready for collection each month.

The Foodbank does attempt to communicate with its donor households by means of a newsletter distributed by the route vehicle periodically. While appreciated by households, the newsletter content did not, however, appear to have much recall among the households visited. Of course, while exceptions, not all participating households are literate.

Households communicate with the Foodbank typically through the collection vehicle personnel. These communications are usually related to scheduling issues. If the route vehicle has not been able to service a particular household for a few times, the operations manager may contact the household to apologize/make alternate arrangements.

Households may also leave their feedback or share suggestions on the donor cards they sign each month. However, most households were surprised to learn that this was so. While a few appeared eager to make use of it (though they could not tell us what they would plan on saying), most were of the opinion that even if given a chance, they would not change any aspect of the Foodbank's functioning.

How are households recruited?

Households are recruited through 'Collection Camps' that are held thrice a year. News media publicity, the signing up of popular actor Prabhu Deva as the brand ambassador, distribution of fliers, etc., also help. However, most households that participate in the program have done so through word of mouth publicity. Many sign up having watched a Rajasthani neighbor participating in '*anna daana*'.

That the concept resonates with the public is evidenced by a household retention rate of nearly 90 per cent.

What is the profile of the households that participate in the Foodbank?

Most participating households are members of the Rajasthani business community, it is true, but by no means are they the only kind. While the Foodbank does not have much data on household characteristics, we estimate that about a fifth of the participants are non-Rajasthani, usually, local Tamil business folk. On the route that was visited, we found muslim and hindu households as well.

Irrespective of ethnic or religious background, the typical participating household is a middle-to-lower income family, running a 'family business'.

Are household donor models sustainable?

This is an important question to consider, both because the 'received wisdom' of the day appears to favor partnering with corporations rather than individual households - the rationale put forward is that of sustainability, given the reality of rising foodgrain prices. The Foodbank, while open to exploring partnerships with commercial enterprises, continues to value and puts its faith in its household participation model.

When households were asked about their ability to participate in the program in the face of steep inflationary trends, they were unanimous - indeed vehement - in pledging their continued support. As one of the housewives we spoke to declared: *"as long as I live, this house will keep setting aside foodgrain, even if the prices were to rise a hundred-fold"*. Her family had been a contributor to the Foodbank for over 13 years when we spoke with her.

Given the high retention rate among donors, and the strong conviction displayed by these households, there is little evidence to suggest that such a model based on the participation of private households may be short-lived.

What is the sustainability of the Foodbank model based on?

The recruitment of many households occurred under the auspices of "A Fistful of Rice", or, "Muttibhar Anaj". The campaign encourages households to spare a

thought for those less advantaged; as they begin preparing their family meals, could they not set aside a fistful of rice for them each day?

While households do not, in actuality, set aside foodgrain on a daily basis, preferring instead to make good their commitment in bulk, the idea of a fistful of rice making a difference to other families certainly resonates with them. Drawing on the hindu tradition of *anna daana*, which has its parallels across religions, the Foodbank has successfully built a strong support base among individual households. It is this religious instinct that prompts households to typically use hyperbole – “*I would see my own children go hungry before I reduce my contribution to the Foodbank*” – when describing their commitment to the program. Ideas of *dharma* are deeply engrained.

Another, perhaps more pragmatic aspect of this commitment is the access most participating households have to the public distribution system. ‘Ration’ rice is cheap and not famed for its quality – households prefer to donate their monthly quota to the Foodbank instead of using it themselves. Given the inflationary rise in food prices, the availability of this ration rice is perhaps an important part of the Foodbank’s sustainability story.

Nevertheless, there is little to suggest that the Foodbank’s current model is any less sustainable than corporate partnerships that most non-governmental organizations push for at the present moment. In fact, it may even be argued that by running their operations with a large support base and few large donors, the Foodbank has spread its risk thin.

Indeed, the Foodbank has developed a model that gives even lower middle class households an opportunity to practice small-scale philanthropy. In particular, it has created a space for women in these households, who manage the family kitchen, to participate in a larger social project. In our visits to households, we found, without exception, the woman of the house to be the keenest supporter of the Foodbank. To our eyes, these kitchen-activists (to coin a term!) are foundational to the sustainability of the Foodbank model.

Are there any sustainability concerns on the Foodbank side?

Pointing to the 15 year history of the Foodbank, and its growth over the period, the operations manager is quietly confident that organizational sustainability is not at risk. This is not a community initiative that fades after the first flush of enthusiasm – the establishment of the Foodbank on its own premises a few years

ago, provided by the RYA Metro, is a positive sign that inspires confidence for its future.

It is true however that the Foodbank model is an expensive one – the costs of collecting foodgrain, cleaning and re-packing it, and managing its operations are estimated at about Rs. 2.60 per kilo of foodgrain distributed. (This is despite the fact that distribution costs are zero.) As previously mentioned, collection costs are about Rs. 1.8 per kilogram; the balance goes towards employee salaries and other operational costs, including packing material.

While some funds are generated by renting out the Foodbank's conference room facilities, and sporadic donations received also supplement funds, the large majority of its costs are paid out of the Foodbank's corpus fund that was instituted by the RYA members at its inception. As we wrote before, any monthly shortfalls are met by SOS donations, typically from RYA members. All donations are tax exempt under 80G, and perhaps that is one of the reasons the Operations Manager is confident that the Foodbank will not default on its commitment to any beneficiary.

The corpus fund is overseen and managed by the Foodbank's 5-member Board of Trustees, to which RYA members are appointed for a yearly term. They work in conjunction with the RYA's own Board. With 140 members in RYA Metro and several hundred active participants beside, the Foodbank appears to have sufficient organizational backing and support.

Sustainability concerns, we believe come from another source: the Foodbank team is extremely streamlined, with much of its operations being run, admittedly, as a "one-man show". Any absence or change in personnel may bring its operations to a standstill, as indeed proved to be the case when the driver of the collection vehicle needed to be replaced. The operations manager's post, even more, is critical to the smooth functioning of the Foodbank.

How does the Foodbank Team function?

The Foodbank is managed by a small team lead by the Operations Manager, and includes a Supervisor, Driver, Collection Boy, Watchman, Cleaner and a part-timer Computer Operator. Given this size, there are few task overlaps or redundancies, and each position is critical to the Foodbank's operations. Their services are appreciated and retained through "competitive salaries", in the

words of the Operations Manager. (The size of the pay packet was not revealed to us.)

Being an ISO 9001 certified organization, daily tasks are structured according to pre-set standard operating procedures. The Foodbank functions as a warehouse primarily, and is responsible for collecting, cleaning, storing, re-packing and allocating foodgrain.

Most employees found it a “pleasure” to work with the Foodbank, and underlined appreciation as a key motivator, given the routine nature of their work.

The team reports to the 5-member Board of Trustees mentioned before, by means of weekly collection and distribution reports. The Board works with the Operations Manager to direct the Foodbank operations, developing and passing annual plans and budgets, and providing “SOS support” when necessary. Any operational changes are typically spearheaded by Board members, discussed with the entire Board and the Foodbank team, then moved for implementation. The Board members are appointed for a year-long term, and are drawn from a variety of business backgrounds – from auto financing and manufacturing to metal fabricating industries.

A point to note: the primary task of the Foodbank is defined in logistical rather than campaigning/marketing terms. What we mean is that the Foodbank is focused on running a well maintained warehouse, rather than spreading their investment to recruiting donors or raising funds, which, while being carried out, are clearly secondary activities. While we believe that by doing so, the Foodbank is in fact playing to its strengths, it does raise questions about the scalability of their operations, and their ability to expand either support base or their beneficiary reach.

What are some areas of improvement the Foodbank may consider looking into?

While ISO certification has been achieved, thus helping to rationalize daily operations, maintaining data is an activity that perhaps needs greater effort. For instance, exact enrollment data was not readily available. Historical growth data was, understandably, even more difficult to get at. Accessible data may help to plan activities better, and can serve to chart progress over time.

While the Foodbank team knows most beneficiaries individually, and Foodbank inspection teams visit them once a year, perhaps new additions to the beneficiary lists may need more visits to prevent any leakage of foodgrain out of the system. As mentioned earlier, when foodgrain collection exceeds the allocated quantity in any month, it is evenly distributed across all beneficiaries. While this approach may appear just, is it equitable or efficient, reaching those whose need is greatest? Perhaps a better system requires to be designed in such cases.

Reaching out to households and creating opportunities for individual households to interact with beneficiaries may also increase household commitment as well as simultaneously motivating beneficiaries to carry out their programs better.

No doubt the Foodbank is managed and guided by a committed and savvy Board, with a wide experience of business, but we would suggest that perhaps an advisory board constituted of a few eminent NGO leaders, academicians, etc., may help to guide future expansion plans.

Are there any plans for the Foodbank to expand its activities?

The Foodbank is considering foodgrain collection drives involving commercial enterprises in addition to its current roster of private households.

There are also plans to increase the number of enlisted households in order to support an expanded beneficiary list. The tentative expansion target has been set at 100 organizations, up from a current number of 60. This expansion is being envisioned as part of “Reaching Beyond Reach”, to target deserving organizations serving underprivileged populations in semi-urban and rural areas lying at the outskirts of Chennai city.

Interest shown by the Global Food Banking Network has also served to motivate accelerated expansion plans.

There are no plans, however, to diversify food supplies collected – the Foodbank is quite clear that they do not have the infrastructure to serve as collection and distribution points for cooked or other perishable food items.

What challenges face the Foodbank?

Even as we laud their efforts to expand their operations, we are not convinced that they have sufficient capacity to support this expansion without additional investment. While storage facilities appear adequate to meet the increased commitment of supplying 100 beneficiaries, and office staff may be able to extend themselves to take on additional responsibility, the collection routes and personnel, which are already stretched, would be a bottleneck. New routes cannot be added unless additional vehicles and staff are mobilized.

As expansion requires investment, and once embarked on, cannot be easily reversed, we also believe that this presents a good opportunity for the Foodbank to review its vision and priorities and come up with creative solutions for infrastructural constraints. For instance, personnel requirements may be offset to a certain extent through volunteer drives - but the challenge of expanding operations without losing managerial control or demanding huge investment, remains. The ISO system will certainly help prevent such loss of control or any unmanageable rise in costs, however, perhaps more strategic input that goes beyond administrative decisions is called for.

How is transparency of operations/accountability ensured by the Foodbank?

The implementation of the ISO 9001 standards was done with an eye to improve efficiency as well as accountability. The results of yearly ISO audits are shared with beneficiaries, Board members and announced at the annual 'Project Day' when Foodbank success and plans are shared with the public. In fact, closing and opening stocks are published in the Foodbank's newsletters.

Thus, the achievements and failures of the Foodbank are open to discussion by internal stakeholders, donors, beneficiaries and the general public. Any of the 140 members of the RYA that is the mother organization may make suggestions for change or question the Foodbank's activities.

The ISO audit also involves collecting feedback from beneficiaries, and thus serves as a monitoring mechanism for the Foodbank team. In fact, the performance of the team is reviewed by the Board based on the audit report. The Foodbank team reports on a weekly basis to the Board, which serves to ensure that operations are on track.

However, while open to feedback from donors, there are, as we already mentioned, few systematized efforts to reach out to them and have their voice heard.