

The Parable of Indian Food Insecurity

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ABSTRACT

India is a land of extremity. On one side we speak of economic growth, rapid urbanization, technological development and surplus growth of food crops. On the other, rapid growth of slums, rural backwardness and scarcity of food grains is also rampant. India is in global limelight for its economic transformation and growth. However, an area where India has not fared well is hunger, malnutrition, food and nutrition security. This paper aims to examine the hunger and nutrition situation prevailing in India.

KEYWORDS

Hunger, malnutrition, food and nutrition security

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a land of extremity. On one side we speak of economic growth, rapid urbanization, technological development and surplus growth of food crops. On the other, rapid growth of slums, rural backwardness and scarcity of food grains is also rampant. India is in global limelight for its economic transformation and growth. It has also made considerable progress on many social fronts, such as fertility decline, expansion of schooling and bridging the gender gap in education. However, an area where India has not fared well is hunger, malnutrition, food and nutrition security [16]. India is a home to the largest number of hungry people in the world. The Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2010 ranks India at 67 out of 112 countries; whereas '2012GHI' (IFPRI) ranks it at 65 among 79 countries [14]. India today faces a triple burden of malnutrition- the co-existence of inadequate calorie intake and under nutrition among a large section of the population, excess intake of dietary energy leading to obesity and other life-style health ailments in the creamy section of the population that are brought to the limelight by many surveys conducted both at national and smaller levels. While each aspect of the triple burden of malnutrition is relevant and demands specific attention, the prevalence of under-nutrition and micro nutrient deficiencies among vast numbers of people despite a huge leap on the economic front still poses to be a big challenge for the Indian government. Impoverishment in nutrition is the outcome of many elements of which food insecurity is the major one [21]. In this paper, the author does not attempt to provide a complete and fully documented story of hunger and food security in India. In fact, it is doubted that such an account is currently possible. Instead, the paper aims to examine the hunger and nutrition and food insecurity situation prevailing in India. This paper uses information from the websites, journals, magazines and articles already published making the data authentic and trustable. The first section is the introduction followed by the conceptual framework in the second section. The third section is the literature review and the fourth section is about food security in India. The fifth section highlights the challenges of food security in India and the paper gets concluded in the sixth section.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Food is considered as one of the basic amenities required for the survival and growth of an individual. Irrespective of India's 9% growth of GDP there is the continuing problem of persistent hunger, under nutrition and food insecurity. The Indian government is to pay more focus on this issue if it has to survive

a major chunk of its population. We are living in a world of plenty but yet there is scarcity in the supply of nutrition. Thus forcing us to redefine hunger as that state of a person where he/she do not get the minimum prescribed food that provides enough energy and nourishment required to lead a healthy life [8]. Though hunger and food security sound synonymous, an absence of hunger does not imply food security [10]. From the most comprehensive perspective, hunger describes the feeling of discomfort that is the body's signal that it is in need for food (World Food Program). Undernourishment is the measure of food deprivation. An individual is considered undernourished if he or she doesn't receive enough dietary energy to maintain a healthy and active life [13]. The minimum calorie intake recommended by a task force on projection of minimum needs and effective consumption (GoI, 1979) is 2400 kilocalories per day and 2100 Kcal per day for rural and urban area. Even if a person consumes enough calories, this does not guarantee adequate intake of essential micronutrients- vitamins, minerals and trace elements. Micronutrient malnutrition – often called hidden hunger because it is not readily apparent from clinical signs of a wasted body- afflicts a far greater swath of humanity than insufficient calorie intake (FAO). Micro nutrient deficiencies are viewed as an infringement on the human right to adequate food, which implies availability and accessibility of food in quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of everyone (UNCESCR, 1999). Malnutrition is not the scarcity of food quantity but is the deprivation of nutrition in the intake of food. Infections, disease, and unsafe water and sanitation can also cause malnutrition (UNICEF). Malnutrition is a process with consequences that may extend not only into later life, but also into future generations. Hunger and malnutrition if not tackled in time and adequately, deprives a country of healthy and educated citizens and skilled labour, something that stares India in the face today (India Together, 7th April 2015). Realizing the significance of the access of adequate nutritious food by all the individuals throughout the year, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) emphasized the need of attaining food security at all levels in the world. The World Food Conference in 1974 reaffirmed that every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop fully and maintain their physical and mental faculties.

Concerns about food security can be traced back to the Hot Springs Conference of Food and Agriculture in 1943 that highlighted the importance of providing right quantity and quality of food to every person. The next step was the setting up of bilateral agencies by donor countries such as the USA and Canada in the 1950s whereby their agricultural surpluses would be shipped overseas to countries in need. The birth of World Food Program (WFP) in 1963 evolved the concept of Food for development which further enhanced the matter of food security in 1970s that led to the 1974 World Food Conference in Rome in which a realization was made that the issue of food insecurity concerned the whole of mankind. This conference further elaborated the understanding of food security [12] so much that over two hundred definitions of the concept were drafted from different perspectives [20] of which the definition given by World Food Summit (WFS) in November 1996 was accepted in the broadest manner. "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" [11]. Food security in very broad terms deals with the production,

distribution and consumption of food. Food insecurity on the other hand leads to quantify the food and its nutrients available for consumption. The FAO defines food insecurity as: “A situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.”

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In spite of the significant progress that our country has made in food production and sufficiency over the last 60 years, most rural populations/communities have had to deal with certainties of food insecurity on a daily basis, and for generations. In aggregate, over one fifth of India’s population suffers from chronic hunger [22]. Hunger and malnutrition are, now synonyms so much that women especially the to-be mothers and children in India are in its entanglement at an alarming rate making this issue more gender specific, 42% children in India are underweight and 58% children are stunted by two years of age as per the findings of the HUNGaMA Survey Report 2011 (Fighting Hunger and Malnutrition). Every second woman in India is reported anaemic [14]. Food insecurity is a problem of high concern because it turns the citizens of the nation to a workforce of diminished work performance and substantial productivity losses that further curtails the prosperity of a country. India takes a pride in improving life’s expectancy and infant mortality [18] but still the demon of food insecurity lures the Indian economy. In the last 15 years, India has successfully embraced economic reforms, which has led to GDP growth of 9%. However, the continuing problem of persistent hunger, under nutrition and food insecurity demands urgent attention from policy makers so as to improve and save the lives of millions of people [4]. The success of increasing the food production in multiple times is owed to the green revolution of 1960s that halved the number of food insecurity and poverty in the country. The country succeeded in the laudable task of becoming a food self-sufficient nation, at least at the macro level [2].

4. FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA

India was at the threshold of a severe food crisis when it was liberated from the British rule in 1947. The Green revolution initiated in 1960s was a milestone that paved a new journey of self-sufficiency in food grains production. The Indian agriculture made a spectacular progress in achieving food security at the national level. This revolution enabled the country to increase food grain production from 50.82 million tonnes in 1950-51 to 252.23 million tonnes in 2015-16. Similarly the White Revolution made India self-sufficient in milk production and the Blue Revolution increased the marine and fresh water fish production. Now India is the leading producer of vegetables and fruits in addition to cereals and food products. This ensures availability of food grains of 181 kg per capita per annum. However, the country has not achieved food security at regional, household and individual levels [23][5]. It is a paradoxical situation that there is sufficient food production in the country capable of feeding its entire population, still a large proportion of the Indian population goes hungry to bed without two square meals a day in different parts of the country in varying proportions. The main reasons of chronic food insecurity in the country appears to be had lack of purchasing power, poverty, unemployment and in-access to productive resources. India is still home to the largest number of poor in the world with nearly 26 per cent of its total population living below poverty line. It accounts for one fifth of the world’s poor (260 millions). Nearly, half of the children suffer from malnutrition and half of the adult population suffers from chronic energy deficiency [17]. Thus achieving food security is the greatest challenge for the county in this new millennium.

5. THE HARD FACTS

India is home to 194.6 million undernourished people. That’s three times the entire population of France. One quarter of all undernourished people on the planet live in India. The country is home to over one third of the world’s stunted (chronically malnourished) children. Some 38.7 percent of children under 5 are stunted. Hunger has been dropping at a moderate rate since 1990. Yet progress in reducing stunting needs further improvement and

still lags behind many poorer countries. If progress continues at this rate, India will achieve the current stunting rate of Ghana only by 2030 and that of China by 2055. India’s economic growth has not been fully translated into higher food consumption, let alone better diets overall, suggesting that the poor and hungry may have failed to benefit much from overall growth. Low social status affects women’s health and nutrition and makes it more likely that they will give birth to underweight babies.

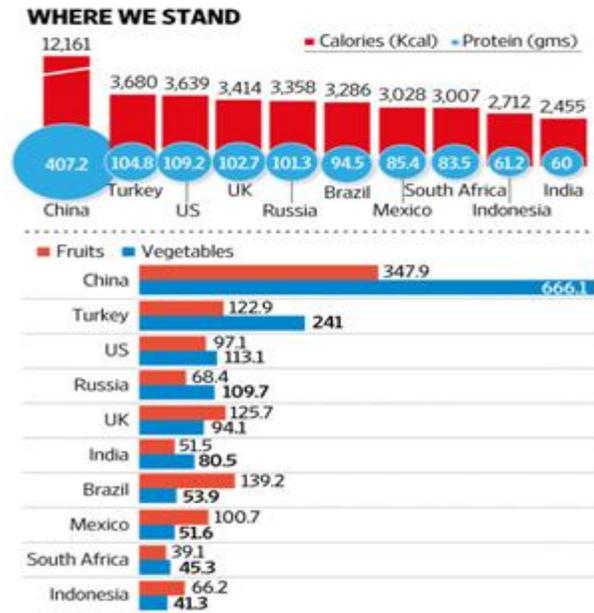


Figure 1: Indicate per capita supply of calories (Kcal), protein (gms), fat (gms) per day and sugar, fruits and vegetables (kg per year)

4.1 The Challenge of Food Security in India

It is believed that though India and China are similar in their population number, China is in a better condition of food security [25]. India, by and large is increasing its agricultural production but yet the insecurity of food is prevalent making the distribution system the real culprit. This is not to suggest that the challenges associated with ensuring food availability in sustainable ways is not a policy concern, but rather, in terms of the immediacy of challenges, ensuring food access would appear to score over concerns over food availability. The sudden rise in the prices of food commodities deepens the crack between the food available and the food accessible by the people living below the poverty line. India, as such is already waging its war on many existing social evils and food insecurity happens to be the new add-on to the list. Will India ever find a way to get out of the tangles of hunger? Some of the major policy interventions are:

- (a) The essential commodities act, 1955-under the act, all the food items are considered as essential commodities for a common man’s livelihood and the production, procurement, supply and distribution is under the control of Central government.
 - (b) National food security bill, 2013: The bill assures right to food to every citizen of India in subsidized price. The food is assured through:
 - (i) Right to receive food items at subsidized prices by antyodaya households, priority households (BPL) and general households (APL).
 - (ii) Nutritional support to children and pregnant women and lactating mothers (ICDS) and
 - (iii) Nutritional support to school going children (MDMP) [7].
- Despite its self-sufficiency in food availability, and being one of the world’s largest grain producers, about 25% of Indians go to bed without food.

The question that hauls us is what stops India from feeding each of its citizens with its own plentiful resources? Experts ascribe many reasons for the pervasive poverty and malnutrition of rapidly increasing Indian population. The other challenges

which India faces in attaining food security are the natural calamities like excessive rainfall, accessibility of water for irrigation purpose, drought and soil erosion. Further, lack of improvement in agriculture facilities as well as population explosion has only made matters worse [15].

6. CONCLUSION

Food security is the key to all other developments of a nation. It is aptly noted that when the stomach is filled, the mind gets its fuel to work. In a country like India food security has always been a problem of major concern. After the Indian Independence, the government had the dual problem of feeding its population and establishing the industrial growth. Over the years, India geared up its primary growth with its many policies like Green revolution, White revolution, Yellow revolution and Blue Revolution. According to Amartya Sen, the Indian Nobel Laureate, the problem of Indian food insecurity can be solved when an individual has accessibility to the available food resources and absorbs minimal nutrients from the intake of required food. The crux of India's food problem pertains not so much on increasing food availability but with the distribution of food. No doubt, the programs and policies framed by the government are apt but their execution is not as planned. Bias working style of the officers in-charge, negligence of the governance in checking the proper distribution of food grains in the public distribution systems may be some of the reasons for the growing food insecurity. India is now working in collaboration with Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to upgrade the sustainable technology in agriculture. The agency has helped India take the holistic 'seed to plate' approach [19]. India's progress to adopt inclusive growth is creating a ray of hope to provide opportunities for the deprived section of our society to improve their livelihoods and income making it as the most effective tool in fighting food insecurity. The road is long and the goals to achieve are many but the first step is taken towards making India a nation that has food security [15].

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