

HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION IN INDIA: STATUS, CAUSES AND CURES

- National Situationer -

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Executive Summary

India is home to the largest number of hungry people in the world. The Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2010 ranks India at 67 out of 122 countries; whereas the '2012 Global Hunger Index' (IFPRI) ranks it at 65 among 79 countries. Similarly, malnutrition in India, especially among children and women, is widespread, acute and even alarming. As per a Global Survey Report released by Save the Children on 19th July 2012, India is ranked at 112 among the 141 nations as regards child development index (CDI). And there are disparities across various sections of the society and states.

India has relatively too little land (only 2.5% of the world's area) for its large population (17% of the world's population). However, as of now, plenty of food grains and the large number of hungry and malnourished people coexist for want of purchasing power and distributive justice.

As per 'The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012', India remains home to the largest number of undernourished people in the world: 217 million (17.5% of its population) as of 2012. However, the status of hunger and malnutrition in India varies according different sources/estimates, and goes up to 67% to 77%. Nevertheless, 75% Indians suffer from hunger to varying degrees, 50% of them acutely.

Hunger and malnutrition are, to a large extent, two sides of the same coin. The recent Global Study referred to earlier says that 42% children in India are underweight and 58% of children are stunted by two years of age. The findings of the HUNGaMA Survey Report are also the same except that 59%, instead of 58%, children are stunted. Moreover, hunger and malnutrition have a distinct gender dimension and are widespread among the women/mothers. Every second woman in India is reported anaemic. Actually, anaemia affects 75% children below 5 years, 51% women of 15-59 years and 87% pregnant women. More than 70% women and kids have serious nutritional deficiencies. So it is but natural for IMR and MMR to be high. Similarly, Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and minorities ((Muslims) are greatly disadvantaged as regards hunger and malnutrition. Moreover, 12 of the 17 major states fall into the 'alarming' category, and one into the 'extremely alarming' category (ISHI); these 17 states comprise 95% of the population of India. Not the least, persisting food inflation (based on WPI), 7.8% as of 15th October 2012, further aggravates the problem, especially for the poor. Poverty, gender inequality and low level of awareness are, however, the primary/major causes of hunger and malnutrition.

Due recognition of the problem of poverty and hunger is there in the government at the highest level as aptly reflected in the excerpt from the Acceptance Speech delivered by the newly elected President of India immediately after the oath taking ceremony on 25th July 2012 as follows:

“Our national mission must continue to be what it was.....: to eliminate the curse of poverty..... There is no humiliation more abusive than hunger..... We must lift those at the bottom so that poverty is erased from the dictionary of modern India.”

Government has been responding with a number of measures to overcome hunger and malnutrition. Lately, as per the all-inclusive National Food Security Bill, 2011, introduced in the Parliament in December 2011 and referred to its Standing Committee, the government proposes to assist 67% of the total (rural and urban) households/people, comprising the poor, children, pregnant/lactating mothers, aged, widows, destitutes, disabled, etc, with food and nutritional subsidy/support in kind and cash. However, implementation of these measures leaves much to be done and desired.

Besides, small holder agriculture merits to be promoted for food self-reliance, employment and income generation, poverty reduction, hunger and malnutrition eradication, and distributive justice.

Nevertheless, in a large and diverse country like India with a federal structure facing alarming situation with regard to widespread hunger and malnutrition, it requires social will alongside political will and well planned participatory massive decentralized efforts from top to bottom and bottom to top by all the stakeholders – government, rural and urban local bodies, CSOs, private sector, professional institutions, international organizations and donors to overcome the problem and achieve ‘zero hunger and malnutrition’ rapidly, using optimally the National Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition.

Prepared for the Asian Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition (AAHM) and
The Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC)

- Complete Report -

AVARD

National Situationer - HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION IN INDIA: STATUS, CAUSES AND CURES

I. Introduction:

India is home to the largest number hungry people in the world. The Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2010 ranks India at 67 out of 112 countries; whereas '2012 GHI' (IFPRI) ranks it at 65 among 79 countries. Similarly, malnutrition in India, especially among children and women, is widespread, acute and even alarming. As per a Global Survey Report released by Save the Children on 19 July 2012, India is ranked at 112 among the 141 nations as regards Child Development Index (CDI). And there are disparities across various sections of the society as well as states. Obviously, poverty is the main cause of hunger and malnutrition, low level of awareness being another major cause. Accordingly, poverty eradication and awareness raising are essential to achieve 'zero hunger and malnutrition' in India. Government has initiated various measures to overcome hunger and malnutrition, but they are not so effectively implemented. CSOs, private sector, professional institutions, some international organisations, and donors are equally concerned and active on these issues. However, there are miles to go and hence coming, staying and working together of all the stakeholders is imperative for rapid progress.

II. Status:

As per the State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012 (FAO, IFAD and WFP) just released (on 09 October 2012), India remains home to the largest number of undernourished people in the world: 217 million (17.5% of its population) as of 2012;

whereas '2012 Global Hunger Index' (released by IFPRI on 11th October 2012) ranks India at 65 with a score of 22.9 among 79 countries. However, the status of the Indian population suffering from hunger and malnutrition varies according to different sources and estimates.

Admittedly, as per The National Food Security Bill 2011 (Bill No.132 of 2011), 'to provide for food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity, introduced in the Parliament in December 2011 and referred to its Standing Committee, 46% rural and 28% urban households, both categorised as 'priority households', proposed to be provided maximum food grains at the lowest (nominal) cost, subsidised to the maximum, are in the worst situation with regard to hunger and malnutrition. Additional 29% rural and 22% urban households, categorised as 'general households', also proposed to be provided subsidised food grains, though lesser in quantity and higher in cost but still very low cost, also suffer from hunger and malnutrition even if to a relatively lesser extent. These two categories add up to 75% rural and 50% urban households, which along with children, pregnant/lactating mothers, aged, widows, destitutes, disabled, etc, proposed to be assisted as per the Bill, would make 63.5% of the total Indian population. However, lately, under pressure from the civil society for universalisation of food and nutritional security and Public Distribution System (PDS), the government has reviewed the Bill and decided to assist 67% of the total (rural and urban) households in various ways, doing away with their categorisation into 'priority' and 'general' households. It implies that this much of the households suffer from hunger and malnutrition and deserve government's support. According to the Report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) (2009), headed by Arjun Sengupta, about 77% of the population in India continues to live on less than Rs.20/- per capita per diem on an

average; obviously, considering various poverty norms, this much of population suffers from poverty, hunger and malnutrition. So, it may be safely assumed that about 75% of Indian population suffers from hunger and malnutrition to varying degrees, 50% of it acutely. Not the least, persisting food inflation (based on Wholesale Price Index – WPI), 7.8% as of 15th October 2012, further aggravates the problem for the poor, more so following the recent raising of diesel price by Rs.5/- a litre and capping of the supply of subsidised LPG cylinders to only six per consumer per annum, besides other similar so-called ‘reforms’ likely to follow.

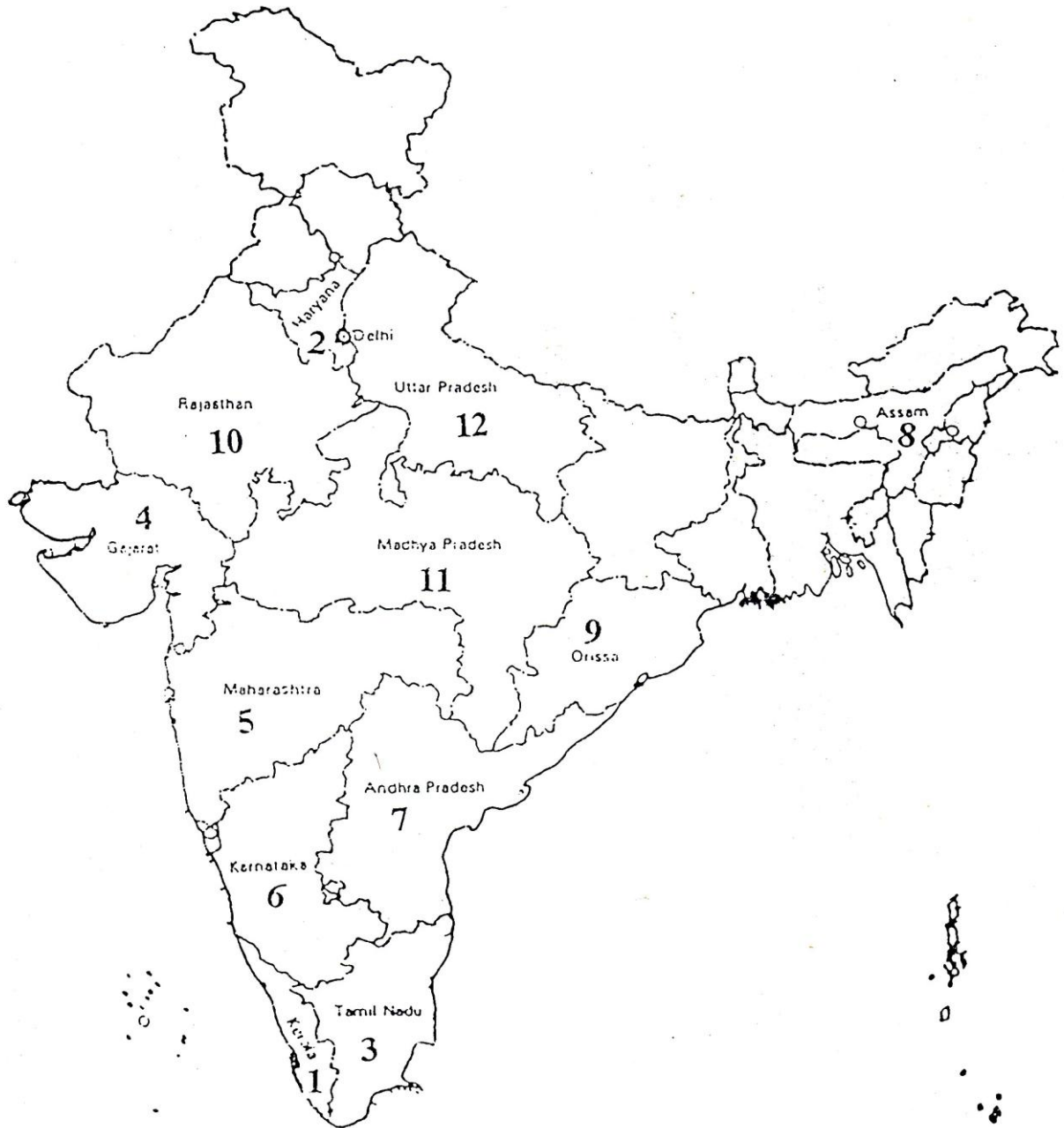
As mentioned earlier, hunger and malnutrition are, to a large extent, two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, malnutrition in India, especially among the children and women, is widespread, acute and even alarming. As per the Global Survey Report released by the Save the Children recently, 42% children in India are underweight and 58% children are stunted by two years of age. The findings of the HUNGaMA Survey Report 2011 (Fighting Hunger and Malnutrition) are also the same except that 59%, instead 58%, children are stunted. Even in relatively better off households, especially in urban areas, malnutrition and obesity among children due to imbalanced diet has been increasing; in the wealthiest 20% of the population, one child in five is undernourished.

Similarly, hunger and malnutrition have a distinct gender dimension and are widespread among the women/mothers, who are more disadvantaged as compared to men. Every second women in India is reported anaemic. Actually, India is among the countries with highest prevalence of anaemia affecting 75% children below 5 years, 51% women of 15-59 years and 87% pregnant women. More than 70% of Indian women and kids have serious nutritional deficiencies. Likewise, scheduled tribes (STs) scheduled castes (SCs) and minorities (muslims) are greatly disadvantaged.

In this situation, it is but natural for the IMR and MMR to be high.

As indicated earlier, there are disparities across various sections of the society as well as states. Ranking of the states according to the index of nutrition and social development (INSD) is reflected in the accompanying Map, depicting disparities. As per the India State Hunger Index (ISHI), 12 of the 17 states surveyed fall into the 'alarming' category and one into the 'extremely alarming' category. These 17 major states comprise 95% of total population of India. When compared to the GHI, Punjab state is ranked 34th, whereas Madhya Pradesh (MP) is ranked 82nd. In the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, MP, Chhattisgarh and UP, the child malnutrition is well above the national average of 46%. Besides, there is high level of adult malnutrition, affecting a third of the of the Country's adults.

RANKING OF STATES ACCORDING TO INSD*



INSD : Index of Nutrition and Social Development

Not the least, India's spending on health is abysmally low; only 1.67% of the GDP has been earmarked for in the 12th Plan (2012-2017).

However, It appears to be a case of poverty amidst plenty. India has sufficient, rather surplus, stocks of food grains and the largest number of hungry and malnourished people coexisting – 'grain, grain everywhere, not a grain to eat'. It is so primarily due to lack of purchasing power and distributive justice. There has been record food grains production in 2011-2012: 257.44 million tonnes of cereals and pulses. It works out to 209 kg per capita per annum. For want of adequate storage, about 6.6 million tonnes of it, stacked in the open and covered with polythene sheets, runs the risk of getting spoiled. In a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) petition filed by a civil society organisation – People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), the Supreme Court has passed an order that rather than letting food grains to be spoiled like this, it should be distributed to the poor and hungry free of cost. A similar recommendation has been offered by the Standing Committee of the Parliament. However, the government has so far not complied with the above order and recommendation under the excuse that it is a 'policy' matter under its own jurisdiction, and has rather decided to export two million tonnes of wheat to reduce surplus stocks in the current year.

There is another side of the story as well. In India there are too many people – 1.23 billion (2012) (17% of the world's/population), but there is too little land – 3,287,240 sq. km. (only 2.5% of the world's area). So it is imperative to produce more food with fewer resources i.e., land, water and energy, while eliminating wasteful practices and policies, in order to cope with the growing food needs. Besides, even the availability of the above 209 kg food grains per capita per annum in a record production year (2011-12) is inadequate and just above 200 kg required to avert famine deaths as determined by the Famine Commission of 1880; production in India has been stagnating around

this level as against the need of 300 kg per capita per annum (including feed, seed and unavoidable wastage) to feed the people well. So, the current surplus is unreal and illusory and there is a need to produce about 33% more and go on increasing it to keep pace with the growing population and matching need of food.

In India, 64.77% of the holdings are marginal (up to one ha) and 18.52% are small (01 to 02 ha); these add up to 83.29% of the holdings, but having only 43.14% of the total net area, reflecting skewed distribution of agricultural land. However, these self-cultivated marginal and small holdings ensure food security, provide employment, reduce poverty, hunger and malnutrition, and promote social justice, and hence make out a credible case for providing minimum an acre of cultivable land along with wherewithal for cultivation to every landless poor household to fulfil the promise of 'land to the tiller' under rapid land reforms.

Moreover, India has to manage and cope with fluctuations in food grains production, caused primarily due to agro-climatic uncertainties (erratic rains, droughts, floods, disasters, etc), as well as minimise alienation of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes, considering that there has been a decline of 02 million ha in agricultural land during the recent period.

III. Causes:

What are the main causes of the largest number of hungry people in India despite considerable stocks of food grains available? Productive assetlessness, remunerative joblessness and social and gender injustice and inequalities are the major causes of this malady, besides destitution, illness, disability, old age, widowhood, etc. Another equally important cause is inefficient and ineffective implementation of, and huge leakage in, government's schemes meant to overcome hunger and malnutrition.

Besides, low level of awareness about 'do's and don't's' of balanced food, health and hygiene as well as about accessing entitlements and rights under the government's schemes/resources and services compounds the problem. Centralisation of governance, resources, decision-making, and development action as well as concentration of productive assets, resources and wealth in a few hands further aggravates the problem. Lack of adequate political and social will is yet another cause. Although India is far better placed as regards availability and accessibility of data, lack of disaggregated data of district level and below up to Gram Panchayat (Village Council) level comes in the way of focused measures and efficient and effective monitoring, mapping and surveillance system.

About 68.84% of the population of India is rural, major part of which greatly suffers from poverty hunger and malnutrition. Besides, major part of the urban population (31.16%) afflicted by poverty hunger and malnutrition is actually rural that has migrated to urban areas and landed in urban slums while exploring employment and income opportunities. As is well known, India is a large and diverse country with disparities across various sections of the population, castes, classes, ethnic groups, gender and age as well as across the states and their constituents. It has a federal structure, comprising 28 states and 07 Union Territories. Further down, it has about 600 districts, 5470 blocks/sub-districts, 2,30,000 Gram Panchayats, 6,40,000 villages and 1.4 million habitations. Similarly, there are 5161 large, medium and small towns in India. It is an uphill task to deliver efficiently and effectively anti-poverty schemes/resources and services to such a large, diverse and dispersed area, especially in a greatly centralised system, which, therefore, needs to be replaced with a well-monitored and well-managed participatory decentralised system already in place in form, but yet to be strengthened with content (functions, funds and functionaries).

IV. Cures:

As mentioned earlier, government, CSOs, private sector, professional institutions, some of the international organisations and donors are already involved in addressing the problem of hunger and malnutrition in India in various ways.

Numerous government measures to overcome hunger and malnutrition include National Food Security Mission, National Nutrition Mission, National Policy On Farmers, National Horticulture Mission, National Mission on Pulses and Oilseeds, National Rural Livelihoods Mission, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act/Scheme, National Rural Health Mission Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) for children below 06 years to provide nutrition and pre-school education, Mid Day Meal (MDM) for children of 06-14 years, Public Distribution System, Janani Suraksha Yojana (Mothers' Protection Scheme) for pregnant/lactating mothers and Social Assistance to the poor/need (subsidised foodgrains, pension, insurance, etc), besides the all-inclusive National Food Security Bill as mentioned earlier. Some of these critical measures are in the 'mission mode' to ensure their efficient and effective planning and implementation with missionary zeal, but still leave much to be done and desired as regards their effective implementation.

There are 1.1 million Angan Wadi Centres (AWCs) across the rural India, catering to the children of 03-06 years; these are going to be restructured to include children of 0-03 years and pregnant/lactating mothers as well, but as of now, are not functioning efficiently. Similar is the case with the MDM. Likewise, there are about 4,89,000 Fair Price Shops(FPSs) under the PDS to distribute subsidised food grains, sugar, kerosene oil, etc to the targeted poor households; but their functioning is ridden with huge leakage and corruption. States like Chhattisgarh and Tamil Nadu have set examples by

revamping the PDS and ensuring its efficient, transparent, accountable and clean functioning.

However, there is a pressing demand from civil society and other like-minded individuals and institutions to retain, revamp and universalise the PDS. On the other hand, there is another section of thought in government and outside it, pressing for winding up of the PDS and replacing it with cash assistance to the poor to enable them to buy food grains from the open market. There are also suggestions for switch over to coupons and smart and/or biometric cards to ensure efficiency and probity. It is, however, pertinent to mention that the Central government has adequate buffer stock of food grains procured from the farmers at minimum support prices announced in advance to feed the PDS. The above mentioned Bill also provides for revamped PDS.

Moreover, there is adequate recognition of the problem of poverty and hunger in the government at the highest level as aptly reflected in the following excerpt from the Acceptance Speech delivered by the newly elected President of India immediately after his oath taking ceremony on 25th July 2012:

“Our national mission must continue to be what it was..... to eliminate the curse of poverty..... There is no humiliation more abusive than hunger..... We must lift those at the bottom so that poverty is erased from the dictionary of modern India”.

Internationally, MDGs also include eradication of poverty, hunger, malnutrition and gender inequalities.

As mentioned earlier, alongside the government, CSOs, private sector, professional institutions, some of the international organisations and donors have also

been making significant contribution to address the problem of hunger and malnutrition in India by advocacy as well as action.

V. Interventions Envisaged:

Accordingly, the need of the situation as discussed above is to translate words into deeds and implement the measures effectively to achieve 'zero hunger and malnutrition' in India rapidly and ensure adequate 'Food and Nutrition to All' as a matter of Right.

To this end, it is also imperative to manage and minimise fluctuations in food grains production, alienation of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes, and migration from villages/agriculture to urban areas/non-agricultural vocations. There is an equally pressing need to harness positive factors such as fertile land, plenty of water, congenial agro-climatic conditions, bio-diversity, the largest agricultural research network, and experienced and hard working farmers and labour to optimise food production with distributive justice.

As discussed earlier, in Indian context, decentralised participatory production, storage, distribution and consumption, bottom-up from Gram Panchayat/Village to the national level via sub-district/block, district, division, state and zonal levels, is imperative to minimise pressure on, and pitfalls in, the present centralised system of procurement, storage and redistribution, involving huge costs, wastage, leakage and inefficiency.

Marginal and small farmers should be provided wherewithal to optimise their food production for their food self-reliance; whereas the landless tillers should be provided minimum an acre of agricultural land per household along with wherewithal

for its cultivation under rapid land reforms to enable them to achieve food self-reliance and overcome hunger and malnutrition.

Besides, the democratic decentralisation already in place in the form of three-tier elected rural Panchayats and urban local bodies should be strengthened and actively involved in achieving ‘zero hunger and malnutrition’ in their respective areas and the country at large faster, ensuring that ‘none goes to bed hungry’ from day one.

As expected, the National Food Security Bill should be passed by the Parliament in its next (November – December 2012) session to operationalise it as an Act.

Not the least, all the stakeholders – governments, rural and urban local bodies, CSOs, private sector, professional institutions, international organisations and donors must come, stay and work together in tandem to accelerate and expedite achievement of ‘zero hunger and malnutrition’ in India, making optimum use of the National Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition.

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- NB: Several other sources/references used/tapped, but not listed herein.