
THE SILENT CRISIS - INDIA'S HUNGER AND THE ROAD AHEAD

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a critical issue facing India: hunger and food insecurity. It emphasizes the challenges that hinder the fulfilment of the Zero Hunger target of the United Nations by 2030. With a large production of agricultural goods, India remains one of the countries struggling with hunger, malnutrition, and food wastage. The article showcases alarming statistics. For example, India ranked 105th out of 127 countries in the Global Hunger Index in 2024, and there was a widening divide in consumption patterns that saw an increased rate of obesity in some segments of society juxtaposed with high rates of severe hunger in others. It calls hunger a complex problem, related to economic inequality, food waste from social functions, and dysfunctional politics.

It underlines the importance of agricultural issues, such as low farm productivity, exploitation of farmers, and environmental degradation, to achieve food and nutritional security. Further, the article highlights the interlinkages between Zero Hunger (SDG 2) and other SDGs, especially Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), which require a holistic and integrated approach. It calls for an urgent reform aimed at the handling of food distribution to ensure that there is no wastage and that everyone has fair access to food. There is also emphasis on the involvement of youth in agriculture, suggesting that they are the best way to modernize the sector as a career path. Ultimately, the article emphasizes that Zero Hunger is not only a way to food security but also a pathway to more general socio-economic progress, ensuring sustainable agriculture, better health, and a more equitable society.

1. Introduction:

According to the United Nations, “It is projected that more than 600 million people worldwide will be facing hunger in 2030, highlighting the immense challenge of achieving the zero-hunger target.”¹ The dream of zero hunger goes beyond merely securing food for all; it also encompasses achieving food security, improving nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture. In 2021, the number of people affected by hunger globally rose to approximately 828 million—an increase of about 46 million since 2020 and 150 million since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a United Nations report. This data provides clear evidence that the world is moving further away from the goal of eradicating hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition in all forms by 2030. Zero hunger is the second goal on the list of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is closely linked to the third goal, Good Health and Well-Being, as good and nutritious food is a cornerstone of health. Without fulfilling the second goal, achieving the third goal becomes impossible. India's progress towards the goal of zero hunger remains inadequate. “As per United Nations data, the proportion of the population suffering from hunger reduced from 18.4% in 2001 to 16.3% in 2020.”² This marginal reduction of only 2.1% over nearly two decades highlights that a significant portion of the population is still deprived of adequate food. Access to nutritious food is crucial for ensuring good health, which is ultimately essential for leading a dignified life. Under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, the right to life can be interpreted to include the right to food. The United Nations defines hunger as “periods when people experience severe food insecurity—meaning that they go for entire days without eating due to lack of money, access to food, or other resources.”³ Food, along with clothing and shelter, has long been recognized as one of the most basic human needs. However, if someone is forced to scavenge for food in a dustbin just to survive, it cannot be said that their basic needs are being met. “In the landmark case of *People’s Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India & Others (PUCL)*, the Supreme Court of India explicitly recognized the constitutional human right to food and determined a basic nutritional threshold for India’s impoverished millions.”⁴ This judgment underscores the state's obligation to ensure access to adequate food for all its citizens. However, the number of people living in hunger remains

¹ United Nations Statistics Division, Goal 2: Zero Hunger – Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023, UNITED NATIONS, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/goal-02/>

² Macrotrends, India Hunger Statistics, MACROTRENDS, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/ind/india/hunger-statistics>

³ Action Against Hunger, What Is Hunger? ACTION AGAINST HUNGER, <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/the-hunger-crisis/world-hunger-facts/what-is-hunger/>

⁴ *People’s Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, (2010) 17(3) SCC 547

alarmingly high. The reasons for this may include the unavailability of food, inability to purchase food due to unemployment, or high prices. One of the primary and often overlooked causes is the wastage of food, which also reflects the economic inequality prevalent in the country. While one section of the population struggles to afford basic meals, another section wastes food or consumes it in excessive amounts. “Nearly one in 16 women and one in 25 men in India is obese, and Indians have only been growing fatter over the past 15 years, according to data from the fifth and latest round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS).”⁵ Obesity results from an imbalance between energy intake and energy expenditure, highlighting disparities in food consumption patterns.

2. Zero Hunger: A Goal to Achieve Other Goals

The data presented earlier highlights the severity of hunger in India. This dire situation results from multiple factors, as hunger is influenced by a wide array of variables, including global diplomatic relations. For instance, following Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal with Ukraine, concerns about hunger escalated as wheat and corn prices soared. “According to the 2023 Global Hunger Index, India ranks 111th out of 125 countries, which places the country in the “serious” category for hunger.”⁶ This ranking is particularly concerning for a nation that is one of the largest producers of agricultural commodities in the world. “The 2024 Global Hunger Index (GHI) India ranks 105th out of 127 countries, with a GHI score of 27.3, indicating a serious hunger situation, India's performance in addressing hunger and malnutrition remains a significant concern, especially when compared to its South Asian neighbors like Bangladesh and Nepal, which fall under the “moderate” category.”⁷ Addressing hunger is not only a standalone goal but also a pathway to achieving other SDGs. Ensuring access to adequate food contributes to improved health (Goal 3), reduced inequalities (Goal 10), and the promotion of sustainable agriculture (Goal 12). By focusing on the eradication of food wastage and equitable food distribution, we can make significant strides toward realizing the vision of a hunger-free world.

⁵ Indians Are Growing Fatter and the Problem Is Biggest for Wealthy Women, Shows NFHS Data, THE PRINT (Feb. 20, 2023), <https://theprint.in/health/indians-are-growing-fatter-and-the-problem-is-biggest-for-wealthy-women-shows-nfhs-data/1350501>

⁶ Drishti IAS, Global Hunger Index 2023, DRISHTI IAS, <https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/global-hunger-index-2023>

⁷ India Ranks 105th in Global Hunger Index 2024, Labelled as Serious’ India Today (14 October 2024) <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/india-ranks-105th-in-global-hunger-index-2024-labelled-as-serious-2616476-2024-10-14>

3. Addressing Hunger in India: A Multidimensional Approach

To tackle the issue of hunger in India, several aspects need to be addressed. The goal of zero hunger is interconnected with other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), meaning that progress in one area contributes to achieving others. Below are some critical factors that need attention:

Illusion of Status

India is a land of diversity, with various religions, cultures, and societies coexisting. Each has its own set of customs and traditions. One significant tradition is the celebration of marriages, which are often grand affairs attended by family and friends. “Approximately 10 million weddings take place in India annually, many involving lavish parties.”⁸ These events, however, have moved beyond cultural or ritualistic practices and become a display of social status. In an attempt to flaunt wealth, people often spend beyond their means, sometimes even becoming insolvent. The excessive expenditure is not limited to the affluent; even middle-class families feel pressured to conform to these expectations, often taking on debt. An alarming consequence of this practice is food wastage. People order excessive quantities and varieties of food—sometimes 20 to 30 dishes—much of which goes uneaten. This phenomenon must be curbed through awareness it is crucial to understand that having 30 or 50 dishes at a wedding does not enhance one’s status but reflects poor priorities the money spent on such extravagance could instead be used to address the starvation of hundreds of poor families. The societal obsession with such displays is detrimental and needs to be addressed urgently.

Economic disparities: Is This a Real Democracy?

Economic inequality is another significant issue contributing to hunger. The poor's deprivation is often used as a political tool, Politicians, during the time of elections, make promises and distribute food, liquor, and money among voters to influence them. In a democracy, citizens vote to elect representatives who address their grievances and improve their quality of life. However, in many cases, the electorate is influenced by short-term incentives rather than informed choices. For example, a person who has not had a full meal for seven days may vote for a candidate who offers immediate relief, ignoring the candidate's long-term inefficacy or

⁸ India Brand Equity Foundation, Examining the Economic Impact of India’s Wedding Industry, <https://www.ibef.org/blogs/examining-the-economic-impact-of-india-s-wedding-industry>

corruption.

This cycle of perpetuating poverty and deprivation becomes inevitable because the leaders who depend on these tactics have no incentive to bring improvement in the conditions of the poor. They focus on maintaining the status quo to ensure voters remain dependent on such inducements. This undermines the democratic process. “The top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the total national wealth, 73% of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the richest 1%, while 670 million Indians who comprise the poorest half of the population saw only a 1% increase in their wealth.”⁹ In 2024, the sharp rise in prices of everyday essentials like tomatoes, onions, and pulses brought immense hardship to low-income households across India. For many families, the skyrocketing price of tomatoes, which reached ₹200 per kilogram in some states, wasn’t just a statistic—it meant fewer vegetables on their plates and less nutrition for their children. Daily-wage earners, already struggling to make ends meet, found themselves forced to choose between buying basic food items and covering other essential expenses. The unpredictability of these price hikes hit hardest where it hurt the most—on the tables of those who could least afford it, leaving many families unable to prepare balanced and nourishing meals.

Implication to Foreign Policy

There is a history of severe food crises in the country which has been found to pose a critical point in sustaining stability and foreign policies. On the eve of the war with Pakistan, in 1965, the U.S. threatened India with disruption of wheat imports under PL-480 since India could not produce her foodgrain requirements. Despite the severe situation, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri showed extraordinary determination, calling upon citizens to voluntarily forego one meal a week to conserve food for those in need. His leadership demonstrated India's resilience in the face of adversity. “India remained the eighth-largest exporter of agricultural products in 2023, despite exports dropping from \$55 billion in 2022 to \$51 billion,”¹⁰ a testament to its progress. However, the lessons of the past must not be forgotten. Ensuring food security remains a vital component of national sovereignty, and efforts must be made to avoid any situation that could compromise it. India's growing reliance on agricultural imports makes it

⁹ Oxfam, India: Extreme Inequality in Numbers, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/india-extreme-inequality-numbers>

¹⁰ GKToday, What is the Rank of India in the Global Agriculture Export Index?, <https://www.gktoday.in/question/what-is-the-rank-of-india-in-the-global-agriculture-export-index>

vulnerable to disruptions in global supply chains, such as those caused by geopolitical tensions, natural disasters, or trade restrictions. For example, in the event of a global crisis like a war or pandemic, the supply of key agricultural commodities like wheat, pulses, and edible oils can be severely affected, potentially causing significant shortages in the domestic market.

Role of Agriculture

Agriculture plays a pivotal role in achieving the goal of zero hunger, as food is the cornerstone of this objective. “Although agriculture employs 54.6% of India’s population (Census 2011),”¹¹ the sector faces significant challenges. Farmers, the backbone of food production, continue to struggle despite 77 years of independence. They are burdened by high production costs, inadequate returns, and exploitative practices. Buyers’ cartels often force farmers to sell their produce at lower prices, leading to financial distress. Additionally, agricultural activities are highly dependent on weather conditions, making farming a risky venture. The lack of adequate support systems exacerbates farmers’ hardships. Equipment like tractors costs between ₹8–10 lakh, often requiring loans with high-interest rates. Crop failure due to adverse weather leaves farmers unable to repay these loans, resulting in vehicle seizures or worse, suicides. Fertilizer costs, labour expenses, and other inputs further add to their woes.

The government and society must prioritize the welfare of farmers. Policies should ensure fair prices, better access to credit, and relief from exploitative practices. Farmers, the providers of food, deserve respect, support, and recognition for their vital contribution to the nation. During colonial rule, Indian farmers were heavily taxed and exploited by landlords. Unfortunately, even after decades of independence, most of these problems still exist. There is an urgent need to raise the agricultural sector and ensure the security of those who make the country food secure. Fall in soil productivity leads to poor yield many farmers complained about it as the increased use of fertilizers to maintain crop output counters declining crop productivity. The method is, however, significantly costlier in the long term, because excessive fertilizer usage renders the soil devoid of natural fertility and destroys its own sensitive ecosystem. Fertilizers, although helpful short term, generally destroy essential microorganisms that maintain the productivity and health of the soil naturally. It thus generates a vicious cycle wherein greater inputs of fertilizers become inevitable to sustain the increase in crop yields. Burning of stubbles

¹¹ GKToday, The Percentage of India’s Total Population Employed, <https://www.gktoday.in/question/the-percentage-of-indias-total-population-employed>

leads to poor microbial activity in the soil.

Stubble burning destroys organic matter in the soil and exposes the soil to high temperatures that destroy the delicate balance in microbial ecosystems in the soil. The intense heat caused during the burning of stubble kills a large number of microorganisms living in the top layers of the soil, most of which have roles in nutrient cycling and decomposition and maintaining soil health. Even one instance of burning drastically reduces the microbial population which takes ages to regain.

Role of Youth in Agriculture

The younger generation must recognize the importance of the agricultural sector. Instead of seeking employment opportunities abroad, they should focus on modernizing agriculture—a practice deeply rooted in India’s heritage. Agriculture has been an integral part of the nation’s identity for centuries and holds immense potential for innovation and growth. Many youths, in search of jobs, migrate to countries like Russia and are tragically losing their lives in conflicts such as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Rather than pursuing opportunities in unsafe environments, they should contribute to the agricultural sector, which can be made more appealing by ensuring better incomes for farmers and promoting the dignity of agricultural work. Recent farmer protests are concerning, as they disrupt the nation’s growth and highlight the need for better communication and harmony between farmers and the government. Ensuring the smooth production of raw materials is vital for economic stability. As a nation that holds the principles of “Jai Jawan Jai Kisan” close to its heart, fostering mutual respect and cooperation between all stakeholders is essential for progress.

4. Rising Inflation and Economic Disparity

Achieving the goal of zero hunger requires food affordability. Purchasing power is crucial to ensuring access to nutritious food. However, uncontrolled inflation and stagnant incomes can lead to starvation, unemployment, and even criminal activities driven by desperation. “India's Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, launched on January 1, 2024, aims to provide free food grains to 81.35 crore (813 million) beneficiaries, representing 57% of the total population.¹² While this initiative demonstrates the government’s commitment to tackling

¹² Department of Food and Public Distribution, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), <https://dfpd.gov.in/Home/ContentManagement?Url=pmgka.html&ManuId=3&language=1#:~:text=The%20Central%20Government%2C%20under%20the,the%20poorest%20of%20the%20poor>

hunger, it also underscores a deeper issue: a significant portion of the population cannot afford basic food grains, pointing to severe economic disparity. This disparity stands in stark contrast to India's anticipated economic milestones. "Between 2024 and 2029, India is expected to cross the \$5 trillion GDP mark and become the third-largest economy in the world."¹³ Yet, the distribution of free food grains to over half the population highlights the unequal distribution of wealth. "According to the World Inequality Report 2022, India is among the most unequal countries in the world. The top 10% of the population holds 57% of the national income, and the top 1% controls 22%, while the share of the bottom 50% has declined to just 13%."¹⁴ This stark inequality serves as a reminder of the principles of socialism enshrined in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution.

Constitutional Mandate to Address Inequality

Article 38 of the Constitution, introduced by the 44th Amendment Act of 1978, mandates the state to minimize inequalities in income, status, facilities, and opportunities. Upholding this principle is crucial not only for achieving social justice but also for securing the 10th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): reduced inequalities. Working towards reducing economic disparities will directly contribute to achieving the goal of zero hunger. By addressing income inequality, inflation, and unemployment, India can ensure that its population has the means to access nutritious food, thereby fostering a more equitable and prosperous society.

5. Loss of Nutrients in Rice and Wheat: A Growing Concern

To achieve food security, India rapidly introduced high-yielding varieties of rice and wheat. This initiative aimed to eliminate hunger by ensuring access to adequate food, but it also raised serious concerns about nutritional quality. A recent study conducted by scientists from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) reveals a troubling trend: these high-yielding food grains have significantly decreased in essential micronutrients like zinc and iron. This groundbreaking ICAR study analysed the nutritional content of high-yield varieties of wheat and rice, issuing alarming warnings. The staple grains that make up the primary diet for many

¹³ The Hindu, India to Become Third Largest Economy with GDP of \$5 Trillion in Three Years: Finance Ministry, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/india-to-become-third-largest-economy-with-gdp-of-5-trillion-in-three-years-finance-ministry/article67788662.ece>

¹⁴ Drishti IAS, Unjust Disparities: A Closer Look at Inequality in India, <https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-editorials/unjust-disparities-a-closer-look-at-inequality-in-india>

Indian households have lost crucial nutritional value and are now accumulating toxins.

What's Behind This Issue?

To grasp this problem, we need to reflect on the Green Revolution, a crucial era in India's agricultural development. From 1967 to 1978, the Green Revolution transformed India from a food-deficient country into one of the world's top agricultural producers. This change was largely driven by the introduction of high-yield variety (HYV) seeds with enhanced genetics, developed by organizations like the Indian Council for Agricultural Research.

While the Green Revolution successfully boosted food production—especially of wheat and rice—it also brought about unintended consequences. The emphasis on quantity over quality has led to a gradual loss of essential nutrients in these grains. Declining Nutrient Levels and Rising Toxins. Over the past 50 years, the nutritional content of rice and wheat has diminished significantly- Rice: Zinc levels have decreased by 33%, and iron levels by 27%. Wheat: Zinc levels have fallen by 30%, and iron levels by 19%. Alarming, the concentration of toxic elements has risen. For instance, the level of arsenic a harmful toxin has increased by an astonishing 1,493% in rice (as reported by Down to Earth). This nutrient decline and toxin accumulation have far-reaching implications. High-yielding methods, originally adopted to combat hunger, are now compromising the health benefits of staple grains. The result? People consume these grains without receiving adequate nutrition, while being exposed to harmful substances.

6. Way forward

While the government has implemented various schemes to improve the situation, the lack of awareness and widespread illiteracy among citizens has made progress difficult. For instance, the Soil Health Card Scheme, launched in 2015 to assess soil health across 12 parameters, has seen limited success, with only a small proportion of farmers testing their soil and adhering to the guidelines. Various summits were held around the world regarding Food security some of the conferences are as: 5th Global Food Security Conference, Special Event on Financing to End Hunger, Food Insecurity, and Malnutrition, World Food Forum etc.

Food security is also major problem according to a report “Nearly 28% of grains supplied by Food Corporation of India (FCI) and state governments never reach the intended beneficiaries

and the economic loss to the exchequer is estimated to be more than Rs 69,000 crore, a paper by an economic think tank has revealed and called for urgent reforms of the system.”¹⁵ To tackle these challenges effectively, several strategies can be implemented to make significant strides toward the zero-hunger goal:

1. **Integrated Nutrition Management (INM):** To mitigate the negative effects of excessive fertilizer use and safeguard soil health, a balanced fertilization approach is crucial. This means blending organic and inorganic fertilizers to enrich the soil while reducing the risk of harmful chemical overuse.
2. **Alternatives to Stubble Burning:** Stubble burning not only degrades soil health but also significantly contributes to air pollution. In areas like Delhi, where the impact is particularly severe, the stubble burning practices in neighboring states such as Haryana pose a major issue. Farmers should be encouraged to chop and decompose the stubble instead of burning it. This method not only prevents air pollution but also boosts soil fertility by returning organic matter to the earth.
3. **Adoption of Improved Agricultural Practices and Technology:** Farmers require access to innovative, sustainable agricultural technologies that enhance yield without exhausting the soil. Promoting precision farming techniques, organic farming practices, and drought-resistant crop varieties can greatly improve food security.
4. **Increased Awareness and Education:** For government initiatives like the Soil Health Card Scheme to succeed, there must be a strong focus on educating farmers about the significance of soil health and sustainable farming methods. This can be accomplished through extension services, training programs, and community outreach efforts.
5. **Government Support and Policy Reform:** The government should offer greater financial assistance, subsidies, and easier access to credit for farmers who embrace sustainable farming practices. Policies should promote diversification in agriculture, including the cultivation of nutrient-rich crops, which can help address malnutrition in the country.

¹⁵ The Times of India, PDS Leaks Costing Exchequer Rs 69,000 Crore a Year: Report, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pds-leaks-costing-exchequer-rs-69000-crore-a-year-report/articleshow/115392817.cms>

7. Conclusion

Working on these issues will undoubtedly yield significant benefits for India, safeguarding it against challenges such as starvation, inflation, and other socioeconomic threats. From the discussions and facts presented above, it is quite evident that drastic changes are desperately needed in the agricultural sector. Even after the long period of independence, India has not changed much in its agricultural landscape. This is shocking, especially at a time when unemployment rates are increasing, which indicate the untapped potential of the agricultural system. Agriculture has the power to provide not just food security but also employment opportunities. This can be done by introducing incentives and support for farmers, it can be done by incorporating new technologies, easy access to financial resources, and relaxing business regulations to make it more favourable for agriculture growth. These efforts will not only increase the profitability of farming but also encourage the younger generation to engage in agriculture as a viable and rewarding career, thus creating jobs and reducing unemployment. However, the current state of the agricultural sector of India has its major hitch. Corruption always comes as an inevitable barrier for a smooth way in the advancement of the system. The allegations that often strike on the primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) is unfortunate since the credit societies support most of the farmers in rural regions. No one expects to be part of an idealistic faultless society. It would only be pragmatic that improvement in farmers standard living will also slowly eliminate all negative practices in society. We can fight corruption at its roots by focusing on improving the standards of living, providing the resources needed for growth, and strengthening the systems of accountability. As the agricultural sector becomes more efficient, transparent, and profitable, the incentives for individuals to engage in corrupt practices will decrease. This will then create a virtuous cycle that fosters development, empowers farmers, and strengthens the Indian economy as a whole. India's agricultural sector holds immense promise, and through the right mix of reforms, innovation, and integrity, it can be turned into a sustainable engine of growth that benefits all sectors of society.