
INDIA MAKES CRIES OF HUNGER: ARE WE LISTENING?

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ABSTRACT

The Indian response to hunger is not up to the expectations. Over the years, people have been dying of starvation in a country which is one of the world's largest producers of food. People in rural areas do not have access to food because they do not earn enough and have large families thus, a meagre income cannot buy food for all. In fact, the subsidies or the incentives that are taken up by the government for the poor or underprivileged never reach them due to high corruption at administrative level. Instead of supplying the food to those whom it is actually meant for, these fair price shop owners store them and sell them at higher prices to earn greater profits. Various hunger indexes have been conducted over the years, which indicate that though there is some improvement but when compared with the neighbor countries that too is shrouded. In fact, several times India has been ranked under "serious" category under starvation issue. Even more, the recent pandemic has made the circumstances worse for these countries already struggling with hunger deaths and poverty. Loss of jobs and increase in unemployment are a fuel to the fire. This research paper analyses all such aspects and the efforts made by the government to tackle them and gives remedies that could be adopted for.

The hunger statistics of India are among the most unfortunate on the planet. Beset by poverty and unemployment, the large sections of the country mirror the stark images of hunger. Interestingly, India is one of the largest food producers of the world and simultaneously, it is a home to the one-fourth of the world's population marred by hunger and afflicted by starvation.¹

India is the second most populated country of the world and in the recent years it has achieved economic growth and development. Despite this, food insecurity, high levels of poverty and malnutrition persist. The levels of exclusion, imbalance and inequality are extremely high such that around 21.25% of the populace survives on below \$1.90 a day.² The distinction between the rich and poor has constantly increased during this time of economic growth and development. Though, over the years, the per capita income has dramatically tripled, yet the minimum dietary intake has fallen down.

- **Global Hunger Index (GHI)**

GHI is an international tool intended to exhaustively compute and track hunger at regional, national and global levels. Every year, GHI is calculated to evaluate progress and misfortunes in fighting hunger. It helps raise awareness and comprehension of the battle against hunger and provides a mechanism to compare the degrees of hunger among the nations all over the world.³

It is based on four indicators: Child mortality, undernourishment, child stunting and child wasting. Data on these indicators is obtained mainly from UN agencies like WHO, UNICEF, along with World Bank.⁴

GHI 2019 puts India at 102nd spot out of 117 nations. However, the good news is that according to GHI 2020, India ranks at 94th position and has improved a bit from its 102nd spot a year ago. However, still it is in the category of nations with a “serious” hunger issue. Just a bunch of nations are performing more regrettably than India, like Afghanistan, Chad, Mozambique and Rwanda.⁵

¹ India, WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME, (July 1, 2021, 9:29 A.M.), <https://www.wfp.org/countries/india>.

² Ibid.

³ Global hunger index (GHI), WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, (July 1, 2021, 10:40 A.M.), [https://www.who.int/data/nutrition/nlis/info/global-hunger-index-\(ghi\)](https://www.who.int/data/nutrition/nlis/info/global-hunger-index-(ghi)).

⁴ The concept of the global hunger index, GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX ORGANIZATION, (July 1, 2021, 1:00 P.M.), <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/about.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

This good news cannot shroud the fact that with an overall score of 27.2, India has performed adversely than its neighbors – Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Indonesia.⁶

On the other hand, the report said that about 38% of children in India experience the ill effects of stunting. In India, the report said that around one-fifth of the children are stunted in least-affected state in contrast with almost half of the children in the worst-affected state.

Also, UNICEF examined the condition of children's well-being all over the world in terms of anemia, malnutrition, and obesity, among other health issues. The report demanded attention to the problem of malnutrition that caused "69% of under-five deaths in India, adding that every kid had some or the other type of undernourishment."⁷

Anyhow, India has spent one year neglecting to handle its monstrous and chronic hunger issue. As indicated by true figures, over 14% of the populace is undernourished and the child stunting rate is more than 37.4%.

The major problem is the news of deaths by starvation is quite common notwithstanding the abundance of food grains stored in the godowns of FCI. Tonnes of food grains go waste every year for various similar outlandish reasons.

Precisely three years ago, 11-year-old Santoshi, child of Koyli Devi of town Karimati in Jharkhand's Simdega area had stunned the country—she died begging rice. She scarcely had any nourishment for almost eight days.⁸ Around the same time—Narayana, Subbu Maru Mukhri, and Venkataramma —three siblings, Dalits from Belehittala town in Gokarna, Karnataka, were apparently denied rations in light of the fact that their ration cards were not connected to an Aadhaar data set. The demise of Bhukhal Passi, who lived in town Karma in Jharkhand hit the headlines lately. According to the activists, Bhukhal was jobless, didn't have a ration card, and starved to death.⁹

The food minister failed to admit that these deaths in Jharkhand were because of starvation and offered statistics in an attempt to attempt to disprove the MLA's claim. The perilous

⁶ Subash Gatade, *India is hungry: Who is listening?* NEWSCLICK, (July 2, 2021, 3:00 P.M.), <https://www.newsclick.in/india-is-hungry-who-is-listening>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ S.Roy, *Jharkhand girl's 'starvation death': Mother attacked for 'defaming village.'* HINDUSTAN TIMES, (July 3, 2021, 10:00 A.M.), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ranchi/jharkhand-starvation-death-girl-s-mother-attacked-for-defaming-village/story-KPe9aZLDVZdZYAFczsUOaJ.html>.

⁹ Subash Gatade, *India is hungry: Who is listening?* NEWSCLICK, (July 3, 2021, 11:17 A.M.), <https://www.newsclick.in/india-is-hungry-who-is-listening>.

circumstance of the marginalized can't simply be rationalized by who holds the reins of force. The need is to address the underlying purposes for the present status of undertakings.

1. COVID-19 Pandemic and Starvation Deaths

The Covid-19 Pandemic has brought about a considerable loss to human life and property. It has posed an unusual challenge to food systems and public health. The pandemic's social and economic impact is catastrophic: "millions of people are in danger of sliding into extreme poverty, while the number of people who are undernourished is presently approximately 690 million, which may get escalated up to 132 million by the end of the year."¹⁰

A lot of enterprises are in jeopardy of extinction. Workers in the informal sector are especially defenseless since the majority of them lack access to adequate medical care, social protection, and valuable resources. Many people are unable to fend themselves and their family during lockdowns, since they do not have a way to earn a living. For most people, no money means no food, or, in certain situations, less food or less nutritious food.

The epidemic has impacted the whole food system, exposing its delicacy. Trade restrictions, border closures, and lockdowns have hindered farmers from purchasing inputs, accessing markets, and selling their products, destabilizing local and international food chains and reducing access to safe and nutritious food.

The pandemic has disrupted the employment and has put the livelihoods of many in danger. As the sole bread earner in the family loses job, falls ill or die, the life and nourishment of women and children who depend upon them are also in danger. In fact, people in low-income nations and among the most disadvantaged groups, like the indigenous people and the small-scale farmers are among the worst impacted.

Millions of agricultural employees are marred by high levels of malnutrition, ill health, poverty, and lack of job security and work assurance. Furthermore, when encountering job losses and

¹⁰ *Impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods, their health and our food systems*, WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. ORG, (July 3, 2021, 12:15 P.M.), <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-10-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-people's-livelihoods-their-health-and-our-food-systems>.

lack of money, they may turn to negative subsisting strategies like child labour, sale of assets or predatory loans. With low and uncertain wages and a lack of social assistance, many of them are pushed to continue working, often in hazardous situations, endangering themselves and their families.

- **The Food Insecurity**

Global food prices have ascended up by 38% since January 2020. Wheat costs are 23% higher and maize costs are 66 % higher than in January 2020. Rising prices contemplate high demand, alongside macroeconomic conditions, weather uncertainties, and COVID 19 related supply disturbances, despite the fact that the overall food production for major grains remains good.

The prominent threat to food security is at the national level: Reduced incomes combined with high retail costs, means an ever-increasing number of households have to reduce the quality and the quantity of their consumption.

Surging prices largely affect people in lower- and middle-income countries whose major proportion of income is spent on food than those in high-income countries. A large number of people are reducing their consumption or are running out of food. Compromised nutrition and decreased calorie intake undermine gains in health and wellness and poverty reduction thus, having a long-lasting impact on the intellectual development of young children.

Some food producers incur losses on nutritious and perishable food as the demand shifts towards cheaper and less expensive staples. It is not the food shortage, inflation or supply disruptions that drive the current food insecurity but the resources to buy the food for consumption. People lack basic income since most of them have lost their jobs or are probably restricted to their houses owing to the lockdown to tackle the pandemic.

In reality, a lack of critical agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, or manpower may diminish the yield for the following season. If farmers are experiencing severe hunger, they may prioritize consuming seeds as food today over sowing seeds for tomorrow, increasing the risk of food insecurity later on.

- **Causes and Effects of Starvation in India**

In India, starvation has mainly occurred in the poorest regions like in slums, provincial areas etc. In fact, the major reason behind starvation in India is not lack of production or poverty, but the ignorance of those in power towards the people. For example, years ago when British ruled the country, the food produced was not used to feed the starving ones but for exporting and earning wealth out of it.

As a fundamental right to procure essential necessities in life, it is the obligation of those in power to satiate the citizens of the country, however, as far as starvation is considered they have constantly neglected and have failed to carry out their responsibility. Even today, there are villages where people starve to death and still, no improvement in their life has been made.

It's not only the government that is to be blamed but the whole system is corrupt. Every officer and every government employee is responsible for lack of basics not reaching people, who need the most.

There are cases when the nearby stores liable for conveying the fundamental items like grains to individuals, which are given to them under various schemes, stop carrying out their responsibility, and in this manner starvation in India continues forever. The least fortunate are the poorest of the poor who are at the danger scale in the pool of starvation in India, as they are the most unconscious of the rights they should speak for.

One other reason for starvation in India is lack of opportunities and destitution. Only through advancement in way of life can awareness be created and consequently everyone will come to know about their rights and privileges.

Lack of education in the public arena, family or in an individual influence them and more often they don't have a clue when their rights are being denied or regardless of whether there is any right for them or not. Starvation in India brings about death when there is an absence of medical help as well.

The shortage in clinical therapies or lower quality medical apparatus, specialists, medication, and so forth, brings about the unattended death of poor people. There is nobody to instruct the ignorant society regarding their condition and to seed the knowledge about the plans they may opt to decrease the starvation in India.

2. THE HUNGER CHALLENGE

The world is leading towards an unparallel and unknown hunger crisis. The COVID 19 pandemic that has struck the world since a year has been everting the supply chains, eroding deteriorating the purchasing power of consumers and crippling economies. Some researches show that by the end of the year, greater deaths would have been caused due to starvation than from virus infections.¹¹

What makes the circumstances unparalleled and unprecedented is the colossal spike that is happening at the time of tremendous worldwide food surpluses. Furthermore, it's occurring all over the world, bringing food insecurity problems in countries which used to be stable earlier.

The COVID-19 pandemic has manifested the world's deepest inequalities. It's a deciding factor to determine who gets to eat and who does not, underlying global social divides between the few who enjoy all the resources and wealth and those who are at the verge of life and death. Many people have been rendered jobless and need cash to take care of their families and feed them.

On top of the financial crisis, broken supply chains and lockdowns have also created a pressing dilemma for food distribution. The unexpected shift away from eating in restaurants, which represents the greater part of dining, means farmers have been smashing eggs and dumping milk, with no simple way to reorient their production to either supermarkets or those in need.

The UN estimates show that in dire circumstances, about 1/10th of the world's population will not get food this year. The impacts will be far of as millions more will be prone to other forms of food insecurity, including unable to afford healthy diets which can result in obesity and malnutrition.¹²

- **Schemes Implemented**

Over the last several years, the government has put in place a variety of schemes and initiatives to reduce the number of fatalities caused by starvation and malnutrition in the country. For example,

¹¹ Megan Durasin, *A tenth of the world could go hungry while crops rot in fields*, BLOOMBERGQUINT.COM, (July 5, 2021, 8:05 A.M.), <https://www.bloombergquint.com/global-economics/hunger-is-threatening-to-kill-more-people-than-covid-this-year>.

¹² Ibid.

I.Public Distribution System- It is a scheme developed by Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution. It arose as a mechanism of scarcity management through distribution of food grains at low cost. It is jointly managed by the State governments and the Central government.

The Central government through FCI, has acquired responsibility for the acquisition, storage, transporting, and bulk distribution of food grains to State governments.¹³

The responsibility that rests with the State government includes allocation within the state, identifying the eligible lot, issuing them the ration cards, and monitoring the functioning of fair price shops.

II.Mid-day meal Scheme- It involves providing meals to all students enrolled in government schools, madrasas, Special Training Centres (STC) and maktabas. Every student from class 1-8, between the age group 6-14 years, is entitled to a cooked healthy meal every day, excluding the school vacations or holidays. It aims at boosting the enrolment of students from underprivileged backgrounds in schools and give nutritional support to elementary-aged children in drought-affected communities.¹⁴

III.MGNREGA Scheme- It is a lifeline designed to provide support to rural labourers. It assists the rural employees who are facing the country's most difficult problem of unemployment and restricted access to money and food grains. Every year, around 12.2 crore laborers work under MGNREGA.

It provides a minimum of 100 days employment to each worker who volunteers to do the work.¹⁵

It aims at proactively assuring social inclusion by boosting the foundation of the livelihood of the rural poor. To reduce the rural-to -urban migration. In fact, this unskilled lot is used for construction of long-lasting assets in rural regions, such as ponds, wells, roads and canals.

IV.Food Security Bill 2013- It was enacted on September 12, 2013 as a food security programme.

It seeks to grant subsidized food grains to up to 50% of urban families and 75 % of rural

¹³ *Public Distribution System (PDS)*, NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY PORTAL, (July 5, 2021, 8:47 A.M.), https://nfsa.gov.in/portal/PDS_page.

¹⁴ *Midday Meal Scheme*, DRISHTIIAS.COM, (July 5 2021, 10:57 A.M.), <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/midday-meal-scheme>.

¹⁵ Parliament, *Mahatma gandhi national rural employment guarantee act: Review of implementation* [Press release], PRSINDIA.COM, (July 6, 2021, 9:48 A.M.), <https://www.prsindia.org/theprsblog/mahatma-gandhi-national-rural-employment-guarantee-act-review-implementation>.

families.¹⁶ It aims at providing 5 kilograms of wheat every month, including wheat, rice and cereals, at nominal costs ranging from one rupee – three rupee /-kg.

3. CRUELTY OF STARVING: DEATH OF AN INFANT – A CASE STUDY

Nadia saw her baby's life fade away.

Her husband and she battled build a life; they struggled to earn even a rupee a day from their stitching business when India was shut down completely due to Covid 19 pandemic. They don't have anything to eat. Nadia would breast-feed her child Aaris, however with little nourishment for herself, Nadia essentially couldn't deliver sufficient milk. He became feeble and weak. Ravenous and in agony, he wailed and yelled. At four months old, he died in his mother's arm.

It is an extremely brutish and barbaric tragedy for a country that brags about having the world's "largest food-aid program". Nation's rice and wheat harvests have surged to records, government storehouses were full up to the brim with almost 15% of the world's global stock or more than 70 million metric tons of grains. Still, people like Nadia have to suffer, they never receive the incentives they are promised. They never got the subsidized food that they were guaranteed by PM Modi's administration. Her elder son, Salman, a five-year-old kid, has given up asking for food anymore, he knows it's futile.

"Nobody pays attention to or needs", says Nadia, a 24-year-old, from Banda district (Uttar Pradesh). Recalling how she applied time and again for the ration card, which if she would have got, she could have at least fed her children, she broke down in tears.

Governments all over the world have failed to forestall a hunger crisis that has struck the world. The crisis also exposes India's biggest differences between people, like proper sanitation and quality health care. Indeed, there still persists the question as to who gets to eat, and who does not. Even before the lockdowns, the situation was no better. Even then, around 3/4th (1billion) of the population couldn't afford a healthy meal.

To help people meet their basic needs, as per the law, the government is supposed to provide them underprivileged 5 kilograms of white, coarse grains and rice at subsidized rates as low as

¹⁶ *Zero hunger challenge*, UNITED NATIONS, (July 6, 2021, 11:40 A.M.), <https://in.one.un.org/task-teams/zero-hunger-challenge/>.

Rs.1/-kg. These grains are sold at fair price shops, where buyers can make a purchase at the give-away rates provided, they possess the ration cards that are issued by the government.

However, the biggest issue with this program is that it is underfunded. A lot of people have been left out of the program due to paucity of funds. The population of the country is so huge that it is fundamentally impossible to feed all the people. Also, there are some shopkeepers who instead of selling these grains to poor, use them for their own sales and pretend as if the entire ration has been distributed.

Siraj Hussain, former CMD (Chairman and Managing Director) Of FCI (Food Corporation of India), the agency supervises the food procurement program, admitted that there are complications with the old figures. The census data suggests that the genuine number of those in need “isn’t known”. That means local ration shops like the one where Nadia visited get more applications than they have ration for. Thus, thousands of applications are left pending in around every district. As per the law, majority of these applications ought to be granted approval but since local quotas are already full, they are typically dismissed. Just when somebody who had already enrolled into the program passes away or his name is erased from the list does a spot open to give space another card, the authorities said.

Nadia made various futile trips to the local office where ethically she should have pursued the ration card but every time, she was dismissed without one, and was never given an apparent reason as to why she was never granted.

"We are in an appalling condition," she said. "There isn't anything in the kitchen."

The virus outbreak requires that the entire food-rationing system is digitized, permitting people to receive their entitlements anywhere in the country as opposed to the current situation where they are granted rations just in their home towns.

However, the predicament still remains, millions have not been given an access to the program.

Ram Kumar, who also belongs to Nadia’s district – Banda, first applied for ration card in 2018. Since then, he has visited the agency several times to enquire on the status. He’s given each time what seems like a new justification for why it has not been approved yet.

When we go to check the status, the officials admonish us, the 30-year-old stated. He has been unemployed for months, depending on his savings to feed his four-person family. The funds are now depleted. His wife and two have shifted to his in-laws. To support himself, he has fallen into a debt trap, first borrowing from his employer and then from local lenders to repay that amount.

“I will apply for a ration card again when the next administration takes office, and if that does not happen, we will keep living like this,” he stated. “I had no idea it would be so tough to obtain a ration card.”

According to Jean Dreze of Ranchi University, the government hesitant to expand the reach of the program to more people since increasing costs on subsidized food will worsen the nation’s economic balance.

Everyone who comes to the ration shop should be provided food. They should not be turned away empty handed. The government should also subsidize the sale of other important products such as milk, sugar, edible oil, and vegetables.

*Based on the newspaper report.¹⁷

4. CONCLUSION AND REMEDIES

In India, deaths from starvation outnumber those from lack of food. It is also the result of the failure of administrative institutions tasked with assisting the poor and needy.

The government has really implemented a number of schemes to decrease and eliminate starvation in India. Free health care for pregnant and lactating mothers, mid-day meal provision in government schools, and other notable initiatives have been implemented to minimize deaths due to starvation in India. However, when it comes to reaching the poor and needy, each of these methods has its own flaws.

All these schemes and initiatives introduced by the government to combat starvation should be made efficient and effective by analysing the nature of people to whom they are concerned.

¹⁷ Pratik Parija, *Death of an infant shows cruelty of starving in a country of food abundance*, BLOOMBERG.COM, (July 7, 2021, 12:05 P.M.), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-10-19/death-of-an-infant-shows-cruelty-of-starving-in-a-country-of-food-abundance>.

These officials should ensure that all of these goods are provided to those in need and that everyone is involved in the scheme so that starvation in India can be eradicated altogether.

Most of the time, the distributed items are of poor quality, with a large portion of them leaking while they are carried from one place to another or are sold out in the market at a high price. These are fundamental reasons or major loopholes as to why starvation is a common tragedy in the country.

The only way to help poor and hungry people out of their plight is to create a more transparent and aware system. Starvation and corruption in India may be entirely eradicated by making it more public so that every individual is aware of the ongoing programmes and initiatives taken by the government.