



HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA:- A REALITY CHECK VIS-À-VIS SOME PRAGMATIC SOLUTIONS TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS OF QUALITY EDUCATION AND RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

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Abstract: It is undoubtedly a matter of great pride that India has made impressive economic growth over the past couple of decades and it has been very aptly predicted that the Indian economy will continue to grow at a fast pace in coming times. India is now firmly established as one of major economies in the world. Despite all its achievements, the Food and Agricultural Organization [FAO] in its report ‘The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, 2020, estimates that around 189.2 million people are undernourished in India. By these statistics about 14% of the population in India is undernourished. So also, 51.4% of women in reproductive age between 15 to 49 years are anemic. The report further exhibits that 34.7% of the children aged under five in India are stunted (too short for their age), while 20% suffer from wasting, meaning their weight is too low for their height. Malnourished children have a higher risk of death from common childhood illnesses such as diarrhea, pneumonia, and malaria. The Global Hunger Index, 2019 ranks India at 102 out of 117 countries on the basis of three leading indicators -- prevalence of wasting and stunting in children under 5 years, under 5 child mortality rate, and the proportion of undernourished in the population.

Keywords: Food and Agricultural Organization [FAO], Global Hunger Index, undernourished

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations Children Fund Report, India reported 8,82,000 death cases of children below five years on 2018 due to hunger and malnutrition. The brutal reality is disconcerting and poses a major moral dilemma. Despite being touted as a major economic power and a rising global power, India is also home to the largest number of hungry people in the world.

Why is the Indian performance in reducing hunger not any better? And why is India’s democracy unable to combat chronic under-nutrition? Despite its self-sufficiency in food availability, and being one of the world’s largest grain producers, about 25 per cent of Indians go to bed without food. Describing malnutrition as India’s silent emergency, a World Bank report says that the rate of malnutrition cases among Indian children is almost five times more than in China, and twice that in Sub-Saharan Africa. So what are the reasons for India not being able to rise to the challenge of feeding its poor with its own plentiful resources?

II. FOOD SECURITY SCENARIO IN INDIA: THE PITFALLS

Experts attribute many reasons for this deficit. They say the concept of food security is a complex and multi-dimensional one which becomes even more complicated in the context of large and diverse country like India with its overwhelming population and pervasive poverty and malnutrition. Let us try to understand that food security has three broad dimensions — *Food availability*, which encompasses total food production, including imports and buffer stocks maintained in government granaries. *Food accessibility*- food’s availability or accessibility to each and every person. And thirdly, *Food affordability*- an individual’s capacity to purchase proper, safe, healthy and nutritious food to meet his dietary needs.

With multitudes of reports and favourable statistics, this is clear at present that food availability is not the issue in India. We have surplus production of food grains. The food grain production is touching new heights every year and we are producing more than sufficient to feed our people without relying on

external support. However, sufficient food production is not the only criteria to provide food security in a country and eliminate hunger.

To grapple with its food accessibility problem, India currently has several active social protection programmes like the provision of subsidized food (through the Public Distribution System, PDS), targeted food supplementation (through the Integrated Child Development Services, ICDS); provision of a cooked meal once a day through the National Mid-Day Meals Programme and food/cash for work programmes (through schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, MGNREGA). India operates one of the largest food safety nets in the world — the National Food Security Act 2013. Typical problems associated with these programmes relate to identifying and reaching targeted groups in the population, weak purchasing power of food insecure households, corruption and leakage, lack of trained staff and equipment and inadequate storage facilities for food grains. The results of the program have been largely a hit and miss affair, with experts blaming the country's entrenched corruption in the distribution chain for its inefficacy.

Another critical factor that contributes to large scale hunger in India is the purchasing capacity of the households for nutritious and quality food. The households living below poverty line (BPL) do not have sufficient means to ensure food and nutritional security. Rising food prices, infrastructure constraints in supply chain, available agricultural land, high dependency on monsoon, production technology and techniques, poor management and distribution of food commodities, efficiency and transparency of the system, and several other factors are worsening the food security scenario of the country.

The food security challenge is unambiguous. The United Nations has set ending hunger and achieving food security and promoting sustainable agriculture as the second of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the year 2030. To achieve these objectives requires addressing a host of critical issues as elaborated above. India is a long way off from all these goals. One can hope of better coordination between the political, executive and judicial systems in India resulting in best possible implementation of food policies in food rich India to feed the hungry.

Amidst these hosts of complex issues, time has come when we have to think and act differently to work in tandem with the effort of Government to ensure at-least a square meal for every Indian especially the hungry one. We must realize that setting of goals and targets is great but achieving them to their meaningful extent is something we should cherish for. That is why the goal 17 of SDG 2030 calls for partnership for achieving the goals. In pursuance of the aforesaid argument the present article in short highlights the issue of wastage of food in India, the unsustainable consumption patterns and some efforts and modalities for a humble attempt towards “*No Hunger*”

III. PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION: SOME PRAGMATIC SUGGESTIONS

Food wastage is fast assuming serious dimensions. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a staggering 1.3 billion tonnes of food is being wasted annually. Food wastage is an issue that has a global scale. According to a report by the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), 40 per cent of the food goes uneaten in the US, whereas in Asia, India and China cause a loss 1.3 billion tonnes of food wastage every year. In terms of overall food waste — agricultural produce, poultry and milk — India ranks seventh, with the Russian Federation at the top of the list.

A very major source of food insecurity in India is the lack of functioning public utilities. For example, the Food Corporation of India holds more than 60 million metric tons of grain. This is not only sufficient to feed India's population this year, but it is adequate for meeting next year's requirements. However, the daunting task for Indian policy makers is that storage facilities are inadequate. Granaries are filled beyond capacity and many are in deplorable condition. A recent study conducted by Indian Institute of Management, Kolkata, revealed that only 10 per cent of foods get cold storage facility in India, this factor, accompanied by inappropriate supply chain management, has resulted in India becoming a significant contributor towards food wastage both at pre and post harvest waste in cereals, pulses, fruits and vegetables. India ranks 63 among 88 countries in Global Hunger Index with 20 crore Indians sleeping hungry on any given night, but in spite of this, nearly 21 million tonnes of wheat are wasted in India each year instead of reaching the needy.

This surplus can be utilized through the Integrated Child Development Services, ICDS and the National Mid-Day Meals Programmes and subsequently can be banked to drive the children to schools thus linking us to the 4th Goal of SDG 2030 i.e. Quality Education.

The Government has made many efforts to rein in food wastage but clearly, the depth of the problem is such that the impact of these efforts is hardly up to the mark. India should also take a cue from global practices that are both unorthodox and innovative in order to tackle food wastage problem. For instance, France has passed unanimous legislation requiring supermarkets to either give unsold food to charity or send it to farmers for use as feed and fertilizer. Similarly, institutions in Canada are recovering unused and unspoiled food from retailers, manufacturers, restaurants and caterers and sending them to charities, in the process delivering ingredients for over 22,000 meals daily. These powerful initiatives have made a big difference in how these countries have approached a vexing issue.

In addition to these efforts, the Government can make it mandatory for the food retailers across the country to adopt technology standards that allow incentives for the customer to purchase perishable products that are approaching their expiration dates. This will help reduce food wastage, maximizes grocery retailer revenue, and effectively reduces the global carbon footprint.

The World Economic Forum warns that even though the world produces enough food to feed twice the world's present population, food wastage is ironically behind the billions of people who are malnourished. It is time to recognize this colossal scale of waste and take appropriate action that not only benefits humanity but the environment as well

In addition to these methods some successfully adopted methods include developing *Food Parks*. Indian farmers are generally poor and do not have access to refrigerated warehouses and proper transport facilities, so they end up selling their produce at lower prices to middlemen to avoid spoilage. The government is building 42 'mega food parks' across the country to give a push to the processing industry in order to curb food wastage. Four of these mega food parks are already operational including one at Bengaluru run by the retail powerhouse Future Group.

Another good option is *Restaurants and Food bank NGOs*. India's food wastage statistics are shocking, while some of it is due to lack of cold-storage facilities, a majority of it comes from restaurants. It is very important that restaurants collaborate with food bank NGOs to avoid any food wastage. Some popular restaurants in Delhi like Dum Pukht, give away their leftover food to the AWB Food Bank at the end of the day. Varq, at the Taj Mahal Hotel said they give the leftover food to the NGO named AapkiRasoi. Zorzura said they tend to avoid any wastage of food as their place is not very big and even if there are leftovers, they give it to their employees. Mia Bellasaid they have a sort of per plate system so each portion is meant for one person which is why they usually don't have too much leftover food.

These restaurants are doing their bit to reduce food wastage, but there are scores of restaurants in the country which are lacking in this. Every restaurant should tie up with a food bank NGO to ensure food wastage is curbed. The food waste from the religious, social and cultural functions should also be utilized in the similar fashion.

These are only small illustrative suggestions which can be adopted and practiced at all levels in the society. Why only restaurants? Each and every individual should be vigilant and sensitive enough to avoid every possible food wastage believing that it is going to feed the hungry. Efforts can very well be taken by small NGO's, community associations, welfare societies and even group of people in every sector to see that food is not wasted and the leftover food or excess food reaches to the hungry. This approach links us to the 12th Goal of the SDG 2030 i.e. the *Responsible Consumption*.

Last but not the least; it is emphasized that "responsible consumption patterns" in present day scenario cannot be achieved without sensitizing the people and spreading value education. In fact responsible consumption should be developed, taught and practiced as conservation ethics. Society today badly needs ethical orientation and value based education which unfortunately has lost in fervor in today's materialistic and consumerist world. It is only then the SDG would be realized in their true perspective. It would be apt to conclude by pledging that;

Let not a single person sleep hungry. Let not a single child die of starvation.

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