



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Malnutrition and Hunger in South Asia: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Malnutrition is a blot on India's quest for development and sovereignty. India's desire to be a developed nation by 2047 based on human-centric development is questionable without eradicating the problem of malnutrition. This article discusses the malnutrition and hunger in South Asia, particularly in India. The concept and problem of malnutrition have transformed from a colonial to a contemporary period. The article shows that malnutrition, once a problem of rural India, has transformed itself into a pan-India phenomenon. The hunger, poverty, and global development goals have reformulated the problem of nutrition and its associated solutions. The article also speaks about the dilemma of policymakers and experts to have a stable understanding of the nutrition problem. However, the need for a shift towards indigenous food systems to address the problem of malnutrition sprang up after the Green Revolution. The issues of geographical specificities, local governance structures, and basic infrastructural problems are adding to the complexities of malnutrition. This paper introduces the problematisation of nutritional problems in India after the Green Revolution.

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia faced the issues of hunger and malnutrition during the colonial and postcolonial periods. People of the lower economic strata are primarily affected, especially children. Due to this, children are stunted and wasted, making them prone to frequent illness; women face a risk of life during pregnancy. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2019-21, the 5th in the series India has seen no significant improvement in health and nutritional status among the population (Suri 2021). Economic growth and the curtailment of the balanced diet of rural people show prevalent inequality. Factors related to malnutrition include a lack of education, rampant poverty, and insatiable hunger. India was ranked 111 among 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index report released by two European agencies on 12 October 2023 (Kaur 2023). Year after year, India has attained a higher score, that is, its performance is poor in empowering poor communities. Even household financial security fails to counter nutritional deficits (Chakravorty and Manisha 2023).

Malnutrition and Hunger in South Asia

The Indian population in the colonial period and early decades of independence faced a lack of cereal availability. The consumption of staple food became an issue due to the large tracts of productive agricultural lands in Pakistan after the partition of 1947. The Government of India (GoI), losing its legitimacy to rule a decolonised state, opened several public sector projects. Policymakers, politicians, and scientists understood that Indians needed higher agricultural production in the modern agricultural research system. The priorities of high-yielding varieties (HYVs) and the capital-intensive green revolution became an essential outlook on rural development. The scenario was a lack of land reforms and the displacement of poor farmers from the benefits of the Green Revolution. Violence and disturbances erupted over the proportion of consumption and class division between small, medium, and large-scale farmers. Furthermore, in the

1960s and the 1970s, a different understanding of malnutrition developed against such occurrences back in colonial times. Experts redefined malnutrition as a broader problem than just insufficient intake of dietary energy and protein – so-called undernourishment – but it also encompasses two other dimensions, namely micronutrient deficiencies, overweight and obesity (Gómez 2013). The quality and quantity of diverse food cultures have been replaced by monoculture cropping. The emphasis on protein overshadowed the place of micronutrients in the diets. In the 1970s, the Government of India (GoI) and the international crisis of fossil fuels created global conditions for the biofortification of crops. Biofortification is the process of increasing the density of micronutrients in widely-consumed staple crops through conventional breeding techniques or genetic modification so that consumption of the same can provide essential micronutrients to improve nutrition and health (Deepika et al. 2023). Agricultural research institutions are exploring ways to revive the nutritional capabilities of crops through indigenous food systems.

Micronutrient Deficiency and Institutional Changes

The measure of malnutrition ascribed to micronutrient deficiency is selective to a few vitamins and minerals; arbitrary regional selections add complexity. Health agencies designate and define stunting in children as a marker of malnutrition. Development strategies have focused only on agricultural productivity to check for malnutrition after the green revolution. Allotting land to micronutrient-rich crops, such as millets and pulses, is an essential step towards nutrition security. Rajeswari S. Raina argues that responses to multiple interdependent crises in agriculture, nutrition, and the environment promote institutional changes and policy orientation in Indian agriculture, shifting on local knowledge, encouraging the diversity of production and consumption of millets, and creating rural jobs (Raina 2022). The food system is dominated by large-scale food processing companies and, in turn, fast-food chains are transnational supply giants that interfere with the culture of indigenous nutrient-centric food consumption, if available. The answer to this nutrition problem lies in the inclusion of farmers as contributors to indigenous knowledge in the agricultural innovation system. In addition, the agricultural production model of the West needs to be applied in such a way that the Indian socioeconomic and cultural requirements of nutrition are fulfilled.

Green Revolution and Malnutrition

The Green Revolution achieved temporary nutritional requirements for decolonized India. The international agricultural institutions, the GoI, and the UN World Food Programme (UNWFP) are taking measures to battle against local and global malnutrition and hunger towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030. The prevention of malnutrition by health experts is limited to the administration of medicines and lifestyle. Insecticides and pesticides, when present in excessive amounts in foodstuffs, can have a considerable effect on human health, as demonstrated by changes in the ultrastructure of target tissues, such as the liver or gonadal tissues. The investigation of medical science has highlighted that insecticides and pesticides transform genetic systems, change the functioning of enzymes, and even alter the function of neural systems. When numerous developed nations have largely discarded the use of chemical-intensive agriculture, why is India lagging behind in the initiatives? Political and ideological superstructures, economic structures, poverty, and maternal health are major factors that define malnutrition and its associated remedies. During the last two decades, India has experienced sustained economic growth (over 5% growth in GDP) and reduced its poverty level by half (from 50% in 1993–94 to 22% by 2011–12), but a reduction in stunting, underweight, and wasting has not been observed on the same scale (Khan and Mohanty 2018). Malnutrition after the green revolution, which was in British India, ascribed to the lack of food production initiatives of farmers, broached a new formulation of malnutrition problems in the 1970s.

Poverty-Undernourishment Relationship

The consideration of poverty-undernourishment relationship studies is inextricably tied to population health statistics. The analysis that suggests this issue compares an unbalanced ratio of household nutrition availability with a large mouth to feed. As a result, framing the problem of nutrition in the inadequacies comes up with the viewpoint of holding poverty as the primary cause of nutritional deprivation and food insecurity, which in turn makes poverty responsible for ‘visible’ undernutrition (Mazumdar 2010). A loop of discourse claims that the economic and technological development of a country fails to address malnutrition in women and children. Malnourished children

require more intense care from their parents and are less physically and intellectually productive than adults (Narayan et al. 2019). The factors discussed responsible for malnutrition are concentrated on individual social groups and their upliftment measures. Malnutrition before and after the Green Revolution undertook more deficiency syndrome. New interventions for this problem have cultural patterns of excessive consumption of nutrients besides classical inadequate intake, leading to overweight and underweight, especially in urban India (Sengupta and Syamala 2012).

CONCLUSION

The Green Revolution supplied India with surplus food production capabilities. The nutrition and its problems were not realized and understood during the technical change in agriculture. Malnutrition as a post-green revolution phenomenon was altogether different compared during British rule. The article appreciates the efforts of the government and scientists in coming up with a solution to the menace of malnutrition. On the other hand, new issues tend to emerge from the institutional limitations of creating responsible citizens who are eager and aware to cooperate. However, the inquiry discussed and begged the attention of the experts from diverse scientific fields have suggested the discard of obsolete technologies as agricultural inputs. Scientists had regularly communicated to the public and government agencies about the spreading tentacles of malnutrition since green revolution. And thus, explaining why in real terms the progress of country would be only economic, where without distribution of sustainable food resources malnutrition would persist. The traditional approach of dealing with nutritional problems in the everchanging intervention of global agribusiness corporations in the local food cultures is bound to shift priorities of social welfare over economics.

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