



India's Nutrition Problem

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This article is based on **“Nutrition and the Budget’s fine print”** which was published in The Hindu on 13/02/2020. It talks about India’s nutrition problem.

The **Global Hunger Index, 2019**, reported that India suffers from a “serious” hunger problem is ranked 102 out of 117 countries. It also held that just a tenth of children between 6 to 23 months is fed a minimum acceptable diet.

India’s Nutrition Policy of 1993 called for the adoption of a multi-sectoral approach and the implementation of a wide range of measures to achieve the goal of optimum nutrition for all. In pursuance of this, many welfare schemes have been launched to address malnutrition.

Despite these schemes to address malnutrition, funding and policy gaps are the problem areas.

Malnutrition in India and Related Schemes

There are multiple dimensions of **malnutrition in India** that include **calorific deficiency, protein hunger and micronutrient deficiency**.

- **Calorific Deficiency:** It is any shortage in the number of calories consumed relative to the number of calories required for maintenance of the current body weight.
The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme provides a package of services including supplementary nutrition, nutrition and health education, health check-ups and referral services addressing children, pregnant and lactating mothers and adolescent girls, services to address community malnutrition and that tackle calorific deficiency and beyond.

- **Protein Hunger or Protein Deficiency:** Pulses are a major contributor to address protein hunger.
 - Government of India has launched a scheme called Integrated Scheme of Oilseeds, Pulses, Maize and Oilpalm (later merged with National Food Security Mission) to address this problem.
 - The Mid-Day Meal Scheme aims to enhance the nutrition of school children by providing a balanced diet in schools.
- **Micronutrient Deficiency:** It is a term used to refer to diseases caused by a dietary deficiency of vitamins or minerals.
 - The **National Horticulture Mission** can be one of the ways to address micronutrient deficiency effectively.
 - In 2018-19, the Government of India launched a **National Millet Mission** which included renaming millets as **“Nutri-cereals”**.
 - Also, 2018-19 was designated as the **year of Millets**, to promote nutritious cereals in a campaign mode across the country.
 - As millets have the potential to address micronutrient deficiencies, the momentum given to these cereals needs to be sustained.

Why these schemes still not able to address Malnutrition problem?

The **Economic Survey 2019-2020** notes that **“Food is not just an end in itself but also an essential ingredient in the growth of human capital and therefore important for national wealth creation”**. Therefore, India should give special attention to nutrition, but the Budget has not explicitly spelt out nutrition in a greater detail in many ways.

However, there is no need for new policies on nutrition, existing schemes can well address India’s malnutrition dilemma. For this to happen, the following issues need to be addressed.

- **Underutilisation of Resources:** Budget 2020 highlighted that expenditure made under many nutrition-based schemes is considerably lower than what was allocated under them. Thus, emphasis needs to be on implementation.
- With underspending, allocations for subsequent years will also be affected, limiting the possibility of increasing budgets and the focus on nutrition schemes.
- **Absence of Agriculture-Nutrition Link:** An important approach to address nutrition is through agriculture. This link is important because about three-fifths of rural households are agricultural in India (National Sample Survey Office, 70th round) and malnutrition rates, particularly in rural areas are high (National Family Health Survey-4).

- **POSHAN Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission)** which is a major initiative to address malnutrition, had 72% of total expenditure going into "Information and Communication Technology.

The focus of the bulk of the funding has been on technology, whereas, actually, it is the convergence of many schemes that is crucial to address nutrition.

Way Forward

- **Agriculture-Nutrition linkage** schemes have the potential for greater impact in dealing with malnutrition and thus, needs greater emphasis.
 - Recognising the importance of this link, Ministry for Women and Child Development launched the **Bharatiya Poshan Krishi Kosh** in 2019.
 - There is a need to promote schemes directed to nutrition-agriculture link activities in rural areas. The announcement to form 10,000 farmer producer organisations with an allocation of ₹500 crores to nutrition-based activities is a step in the right direction.
 - However, implementation remains the key.
- The government needs to ensure early disbursement of funds and optimum utilisation of funds in schemes linked to nutrition.
- Nutrition goes beyond just food, with economic, health, water sanitation, gender perspectives and social norms contributing to better nutrition. This is why the proper implementation of other schemes can also contribute to better nutrition.

The convergence of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Jal Jeevan mission with schemes pertaining to nutrition, will bring holistic changes to India's nutrition scenario.
- With the largest number of undernourished people in the world, India needs to hasten to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2 of 'Zero Hunger' by 2030.

Conclusion

- According to the World Food Programme and World Bank, malnutrition affects cognitive ability, workdays and health, impacting as much as 16% of GDP of the world.
- In that sense, while Budget 2020-21 looks toward an '**Aspirational India**', fixing the nutrition problem of India, can make a difference not just to better nutrition but to build a wealthier nation too.

Drishti Mains Question

Nutrition is a key roadblock in the path of achieving an 'Aspirational India' as envisaged by budget 2020-21. Comment.