



## Malnutrition in India

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### Abstract

There has been a high rate of malnutrition in India, underweight is considered to be the main sign of a malnourished person, whether it is in the case of a child or an adult. India is considered to be a habitat to about one-third of malnourished children in the world in the early 2000s. The differences in the status of malnutrition amongst the individuals may differ from state to state. There has been progress in the India's economic conditions, there has been emergence of policies and schemes so that they could look into the malady of malnutrition and tries to solve it; in spite of these schemes, it is surprising to see the problem of malnutrition. The reason this problem has been emphasized is that children and youth are considered to be the future of the country and if they do not intake proper diet they will not be able to develop any kind of cognitive, motor or developmental skills as well as appropriate mindset that is required for ones welfare and goodwill. Women within the country are facing this malady to a major extent and it has been understood that within the hands of women the development of their children is concentrated hence if the women will be malnourished, certainly their children will be malnourished therefore, remedies and measures have to be appropriately devised to exterminate this malady.

**Keywords:** Malnutrition; Hunger; Signs; Symptoms; Causes; India and Remedies

### Introduction

India is considered to be the country where the largest numbers of hungry people reside in the world. The Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2010 ranks India at 67 out of 112 countries; whereas 2012 GHI ranks it as 65 out of 79 countries. In the same way, the problem of malnutrition in India is acute, widespread and even disturbing especially amongst women and children. As per a Global Survey Report released by Save the Children on 19 July 2012, India is ranked at 112 among the 141 nations as regards Child Development Index (CDI); and there are disparities across various sections of the society as well as the states. It is obvious that poverty is the main cause of hunger and malnutrition, and low level of awareness is another major cause. Consequently, poverty eradication and awareness increasing are essential to eliminate hunger and malnutrition in India; these two factors are crucial to release people from the problem of malnutrition. Government has initiated various measures to overcome hunger and malnutrition, but they are not effectively implemented. CSOs, private sector, professional institutions, some international organizations; and donors are equally apprehensive and active on these issues. However, there are miles to go and hence coming, staying and working together of all the stakeholders is necessary for rapid progress [1].

The problems of hunger and malnutrition have a distinct gender dimension and are more prevalent amongst women and children as compared to men. Every second woman in India is reported as

anemic. In India, there has been a high prevalence of anemia; the individuals who are affected by this problem is 75% of the children below 5 years of age, 51% women of 15-59 years of age and 87% pregnant women. More than 70% of women and children have severe nutritional deficiencies; the most disadvantaged communities who are suffering serious nutritional deficiencies constitute the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and minorities which comprise of muslim communities [1].

### Understanding malnutrition

Individuals are malnourished or suffer from under nutrition when their diet does not make available adequate calories and protein which is essential for their growth and development or when they are not able to completely utilize the food that they consume due to illness. Individuals are also malnourished and suffer from over nutrition if they consume too many calories then what is required. Malnutrition can be defined as the insufficient, excessive or imbalanced consumption of nutrients. There can be development of several kinds of nutrients disorders depending upon which nutrients are lacking or consumed in excess. Deficiency of various kinds of nutrients such as vitamins, proteins, calcium, potassium, carbohydrates, fats and so forth can cause unhealthy growth of an individual and health problems. It has been reported by the World Health Organization (WHO) that malnutrition has been the major contributor towards child mortality globally, presently it is available in 45% of all the cases [2].

### Signs and symptoms of malnutrition

A symptom is understood as something that the patient feels and reports on the other hand, a sign is something that is detected by the other people such as a doctor. For example, pain may be a symptom; while rash may be a sign. The signs and symptoms of malnutrition have been classified as follows: [2].

1. Loss of fat
2. Breathing difficulties, a higher risk of respiratory failure
3. Depression
4. Higher risk of complications after surgery
5. Higher risk of hypothermia - abnormally low body temperature
6. The immune system is weakened, increasing the risk of infections
7. Higher susceptibility to feeling cold
8. Longer healing times for wounds
9. Longer recover times from infections
10. Longer recovery from illnesses
11. Lower sex drive
12. Problems with fertility
13. Reduced muscle mass
14. Reduced tissue mass
15. Tiredness, fatigue or apathy
16. Irritability

Children who are malnourished severely, they experience slow behavioral development, in this case they might become mentally unsound; even when children are undergoing some treatment for malnutrition, they do have long term effects of this malady with impairments in mental functioning and digestive problems may occur amongst them; in some of the cases these problems might continue throughout their lives. On the other hand, adults when they begin to suffer from malnutrition during adulthood, usually make a complete recovery when they undergo treatment [2].

### Nutritional status of children

It is well recognized that work and implementation in human resource development is a pre requisite for any nation to progress. Children of today are citizens of tomorrow, and hence improving nutritional status of children becomes extremely imperative. Early childhood, that is the first six years constitutes the most crucial period in life, when the foundations are placed for cognitive, social and emotional language, physical/motor development and cumulative lifelong learning. The young child under three years of age is most vulnerable to the cruel cycles of malnutrition, disease/infection and resultant disability all of which influence the present condition of a child at micro level and the future human resource development of the nation at the macro level. The appraisal of the ground reality as reflected by the statistics on nutritional status of children becomes very important in this framework [3].

The consequences of child malnutrition for child morbidity and mortality are massive and there is an unfavorable impact of

malnutrition on productivity so that a failure to battle child malnutrition reduces potential economic growth at the macro level. At the micro level, malnutrition both protein energy malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies directly affects children's physical and cognitive growth and increases susceptibility to infection and diseases. It is understandable that there is an urgent need to focus on the nutritional and overall developmental needs of children. The fair interval for intervention is considered to be from pregnancy to two years of age, after which under nutrition may cause irretrievable damage for future development. Poor fetal growth or stunting in the first two years of life leads to irretrievable damage. Insufficient cognitive or social stimulation in first two to three years has lifelong negative impact on educational performance and psychosocial functioning [3].

India is one among the many countries of the world where the malady of child malnutrition is stern and also it is a major underlying cause of child mortality within the country. The problem has caught the attention of policy makers and researchers for several decades. Various studies and surveys have been conducted to find out the core foundations of child malnutrition. All these studies including the three National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) reveal that malnutrition is not the result of a single cause; the problem is comprehensive, the causes acting individually or in combination with other complex factors like poverty, purchasing power, health care, ignorance on nutrition, unemployment, health education, female illiteracy, social convention, knowledge and awareness [3].

### Causes of malnutrition in India

There have been several reasons that prove to be the causes of malnutrition within the country and these have been identified as follows:

- Poverty is considered to be one of the most serious causes, when people dwell in poverty, they are in the destitute condition and do not have resources to make provision of healthy food and nourishment for their families.
- Another major cause is illiteracy, when people do not have awareness and knowledge that healthy food is essential for their survival and growth then they suffer from this malady; they tend to consume unhealthy food items and deprive themselves to basic nutritional requirements.
- When individuals are unemployed, they are jobless, this is also one of the most serious causes, when people do not have a source of income, they cannot afford to provide essential nourishment to their families; every individual needs money to buy food.
- Old age is another major cause of malnutrition; in India especially in rural areas, individuals normally move out of their homes in search for better job opportunities to earn their living, leaving their old parents, there are individuals

who send money home to assist their old parents but some individuals have meager incomes and they are not able to assist their parents hence when they are old they cannot work and earn their living hence suffer from the malady of malnutrition. Therefore, old age of an individual compels him to suffer from this problem especially within the rural areas.

- Illness, when an individual is ill, he cannot work, when he is suffering from health problems then the problem of malnutrition becomes prevalent. Illness, disabilities, and health problems can be the major causes of malnutrition.
- Widowhood, normally amongst the women, when they become widows and have young children, then malnutrition is serious, the reason being, that they are not able to find jobs easily, they have to take care of their children and being unaware they are not able to provide their children and themselves with adequate nutrition.
- Another relevant cause is that the government's schemes and policies have not been implemented adequately to overcome the problems of hunger and malnutrition. There has been extreme inefficiency and ineffectiveness in the implementation of government's schemes and policies.

The key question that should arise understanding this concept is that India is progressing, in spite of its progress, still high economic growth has failed to bring about a more rapid alleviation of child malnutrition. The position of the women is subdued and they are stated to be the child bearers and are responsible for the growth and development of children; when women will be restrained and there will not be opportunities for their empowerment then the malady of malnutrition amongst women and their children will prevail. The research has been conducted to analyze the causes of malnutrition amongst the children, income poverty, female education and self-sufficiency. Another objective of the research was to identify the areas that how lack of education, unemployment, poverty, ineffective implementation of government's schemes affect child's nutritional status [4].

#### Remedies towards eradication of hunger and malnutrition

Despite of economic growth, there has been a problem of malnutrition within the country, which is a national dishonor. The norms and policies that have been formulated to eradicate this problem have not been effectively implemented and this is extremely disgraceful. In this research paper, there have been remedies classified that would contribute towards eradication of hunger and malnutrition [5].

1. Universalize and ensure inclusiveness in all nutrition related schemes and policies with commitment towards universalisation and quality for all.

2. A drive should be launched to bring about rapid access to the poorest people and scale up the Antyodaya scheme; this involves special provision of standard, state-of-the-art feeding and care for the children who are suffering from severe malnutrition.
3. Decentralize service delivery, management and response so that the availability of food through the integrated child development services and the public distribution system should benefit the economically disadvantaged sections of the society and the farmers.
4. Restructure Integrated Child Development Services to include children up to two years of age and increase focus on pre-school education.
5. The community ownership of management and monitoring of the schemes should be encouraged that involve Panchayati Raj Institutions and other village level committees, and promote participatory planning.
6. Strengthen the focus on improving nutrition through leadership and coordination mechanism with appropriate authority and responsibility; this should work from local to national levels.
7. A program should be implemented that should involve information about national nutrition education and behavioral change.
8. Empowerment of women should be emphasized, they should be granted opportunities to promote themselves; have access to resources and address the socio-cultural patriarchal issues that affect women.
9. Awareness should be promoted about the infant feeding practices and build capacity of accredited social health activists volunteers as community ambassadors for the rights of women.
10. The focus upon the nutritional requirements of women and children should be broadened within existing national programs.

#### Conclusion

The problem of malnutrition within the country is very severe and is mostly prevalent and is present at a high rate within the rural areas as compared to the urban. Malnutrition can occur as a result of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, financial problems, widowhood, old age, and illness. There have been various signs and symptoms of malnutrition such as diseases, infections, depression, apathy, underweight, overweight, irritability etc. In this research paper, main emphasis has been laid upon the malnutrition problems faced by women and children. Children are the future citizens of the country and there has been an increase in the percentage of mal-

nourished children below three years of age. Remedies have to be appropriately initiated to overcome the problems of malnutrition within the country; schemes, policies, management and responses are essential to be formulated to look into the area of malnutrition. It is mandatory to conduct a research and then to report the findings about the malnutrition status within the country amongst the individuals and its causes.

Since it has been stated that malnutrition is prevalent amongst the children and women in rural areas more as compared to urban, it is required that rural women should be made educated about the healthy dietary requirements, micronutrients and all the basic nutrients such as proteins, vitamins, calcium, potassium, carbohydrates, minerals, and fats that are essential for ones overall growth and development. Centers should also be established to make available free food or at minimal cost prices for poorest, deprived and economically weaker sections of the society. These should be established at nearby locations so that these people have access to them easily and they get released from the problem of malnutrition and hunger.

In a large and varied country like India with a federal structure facing distressing situation with regard to widespread hunger and malnutrition, it requires communal will alongside political will and well planned participatory enormous decentralized efforts from top to bottom and bottom to top by all the stakeholders – government, rural and urban local bodies, CSOs, private sector, professional institutions, international organizations and donors to defeat the problem and achieve complete eradication of malnutrition in a speedy manner, utilizing most favorable the National Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition. Finally, it can be stated that it is essential to completely eradicate this problem for the overall country's development and joint effort and collaboration is required by the central as well as state governments, non-profit organizations, associations and other bodies to successfully achieve their goals and objectives.

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