

## **SAFEGUARDING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS, FOOD SECURITY BY ADDRESSING POVERTY AND REDUCING INEQUALITIES**

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### **Abstract:**

Eliminating poverty and decreasing inequalities in India demands a multidimensional strategy centred on sustainable jobs and food safety. Main tactics involve enhancing social safety nets, fostering inclusive economic development, and guaranteeing access to essential social services such as healthcare and education. By tackling the underlying factors of poverty and inequality, India can work towards the Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating poverty in all its manifestations everywhere. Expanding beyond conventional farming to incorporate skill building, business initiatives, and technological access can foster more varied and robust livelihoods. Enhancing farmers' access to markets, credit, and technology can boost their productivity and earnings. It is essential that all parts of society, especially women and marginalized groups, gain from economic growth. Initiatives such as MGNREGA and the National Food Security Act offer financial assistance and subsidized cereals to at-risk groups, enhancing their food security. Enhancing farm methods, irrigation systems, and infrastructure can increase food output and lessen dependency on imports. Reducing food loss and waste throughout the supply chain can enhance food availability and lower costs. Meeting the unique requirements of at-risk populations, including women, children, and marginalized communities, using customized programs is crucial. Guaranteeing access to education, healthcare, and social safety for every citizen can lessen inequalities and foster social mobility. Enhancing transparency and accountability in public service provision can boost the effectiveness of poverty alleviation initiatives. By embracing a comprehensive strategy, India can establish a more inclusive, fair, and food-secure future for all its people

**Keywords:** Food security, Poverty, PDS, sustainable development

### **Introduction:**

Food insecurity occurs when individuals, at any time, lack physical and economic access to enough safe and nutritious food to satisfy their dietary requirements and preferences for an active, healthy lifestyle (Food and Agriculture Organisation, FAO, 1996)<sup>(1)</sup>. Food insecurity may result in reduced cognitive function, impaired job performance, and significant declines in productivity. All of these can hinder the advancement and progress of the national economy. India has achieved significant advancements in health determinants in recent decades. Key health indicators, such as Infant Mortality Rate, maternal mortality ratio, disease prevalence, and both morbidity and mortality rates, have demonstrated a steady decline over the years. India's life expectancy has increased and infant mortality has almost decreased by fifty percent in the past five decades <sup>(2)</sup>. There has been remarkable economic development with accomplishments in agriculture playing a major role. India is positioned as the second largest producer of farm output globally. In 2005, agriculture and related sectors such as forestry,

logging, and fishing represented 18.6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and provided jobs for 60% of the entire workforce <sup>(3)</sup>. Nevertheless, the issue of persistent hunger and malnutrition appears to persist broadly. India has the highest number of undernourished individuals globally, totalling 212 million. The overall count of undernourished individuals was 172.4 million during 1990–92, escalating to 237.7 million in 2005–07, marking an increase of almost 38% in undernourished population <sup>(4,5)</sup>.

Insufficient educational and employment prospects in rural regions have exacerbated the issues. Climate change also influences agricultural productivity, impacting the availability of food items and consequently, food security. The significant effect of climate change primarily affects rain-fed crops, excluding rice and wheat <sup>(6,7,8)</sup>. The tribal communities' residence in challenging, isolated areas and reliance on subsistence agriculture has resulted in considerable economic disadvantage. The main factor driving the problem of food insecurity in cities, which requires attention, is the significant number of informal workers leading to unregulated expansion of slums that are deficient in essential health and hygiene services <sup>(9,10)</sup>. Residents of these unrecognized slums must purchase their food from the mainstream market at competitive rates and lack access to the subsidized provisions offered by the Public Distribution System (PDS) <sup>(11)</sup>. Despite swift economic expansion since the early 1980s and 1990s, the access and absorption metrics of urban food insecurity suggest that improvements in nutritional consumption have been quite minimal, alongside a decline in food security.

The children face food insecurity due to issues linked to overpopulation, poverty, insufficient education, and gender inequality. Poverty significantly contributes to the limited food supply accessible to children. Overpopulation is associated with competition for food and can result in malnutrition among children, particularly in rural regions where food access is restricted. Insufficient knowledge among mothers about nutrition, breastfeeding, and parenting is another significant issue <sup>(12)</sup>. Gender inequality puts the female child at a disadvantage relative to males, resulting in greater suffering as they eat last and are viewed as less significant <sup>(13)</sup>. Moreover, there is a lack of attention characterized by insufficient preventive care (particularly vaccinations) and postponements in obtaining medical treatment for illnesses <sup>(14)</sup>. Girls have significantly fewer educational opportunities compared to boys and men. Even when women can access fundamental services like primary health care and basic education, the absence of chances for higher education, vocational training, and professional development restricts their ability to achieve independence. <sup>(15,16,17)</sup>

Insufficient allocation of food via public distribution systems (PDS) contributes to increasing food insecurity in the nation. The Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) has the drawback that individuals who truly deserve the subsidy are excluded due to not meeting the below poverty line (BPL) ownership criteria, which is subjective and differs across states. Despite several programs aimed at enhancing nutrition being scheduled in the country, their implementation remains inadequate. Several states have not yet implemented the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS). In regions like Bihar and Orissa, where the poverty rate is quite elevated, inadequate execution of effective nutritional programs greatly affects food security <sup>(18)</sup>.

There is a strong necessity to implement the idea of nutrition security, which entails physical, economic, and social access to a balanced diet, safe drinking water, a healthy environment, and medical care. Guaranteeing food security can help lessen hunger, but it won't fully eradicate malnutrition or significantly improve nutrition status unless additional factors like safe drinking water and healthcare are also considered. The government policy should

implement a comprehensive policy framework to promote greater use of irrigation and modern farming methods. The measures need to concentrate primarily on equitable distribution of arable land, enhancing farm sizes, and ensuring security for tenant farmers, in addition to offering advanced technology for farming and improved resources such as irrigation systems, access to higher quality seeds, fertilizers, and low-interest credit options. A key reason food distribution is inequitable is that a large portion goes to waste <sup>(19)</sup>.

The government needs to develop more comprehensive initiatives similar to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Poverty reduction initiatives such as the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and employment creation schemes like Jawahar Rozgar Yojana and Nehru Rozgar Yojana must be restructured and expanded to effectively enhance the purchasing power of the lower socio-economic groups. Furthermore, boosting both the quantity and quality of wage-paying jobs is equally crucial. Attention must be directed towards workers in the informal sector by ensuring fair wages and safe working environments. In urban regions, supporting small-scale businesses will result in an increase in job opportunities. Nutritional goals must be incorporated as essential components of all poverty reduction initiatives.

Another aspect that requires examination is 'crop diversification'. Increased profitability and stable production underscore the significance of crop diversification, such as using legumes in place of rice and wheat. Encouragement is needed for the cultivation of non-cereal crops like oilseeds, fruits, and vegetables. Establishing decentralized food grain banks in every village or block of the district, where individuals can obtain subsidized food grains in exchange for food coupons, will be a beneficial alternative. This idea will enhance the distribution of food grains and eradicate corruption.

Revising current direct nutrition initiatives to facilitate oversight by women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) and/or local entities, coupled with the training and orientation of community health workers, Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members, influential figures, caregivers, and additional stakeholders can also yield beneficial outcomes if tackled. Providing a fundamental, precisely focused set of nutrition services with a multi-sectoral strategy will enhance people's nutritional status. Focus should be on school-based initiatives that encompass hygiene, sanitation, and nutrition instruction. Community-based nutrition initiatives (CBNI) that allow for community involvement need to be supported by efficient policy execution.

### **Conclusion:**

With a noteworthy decrease in multidimensional poverty and an increase in social security coverage, India has achieved great strides in tackling poverty and food security. But there is still more work to be done to end poverty and achieve true equality for all. The percentage of the population living in poverty fell from 24.85% in 2015–16 to 14.96% in 2019–21. In 2025, 64.3% of people were covered by social protection, up from 22% in 2016. As of 2024–2025, 99% of the eligible population is covered by the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA), which provides subsidised food grains. Free food grains were further guaranteed by PMGKAY throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Employment is guaranteed by programs like MGNREGA, while the PM Awas Yojana gives the impoverished access to homes. The goal of skill development initiatives like PMKVY and Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana is to increase job prospects.

Millions of people still struggle to pay for necessities like food, healthcare, and education despite advancements. Rural regions and vulnerable populations, such as Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, female-headed households and minorities, continue to experience the majority of

poverty. The Public Distribution System (PDS) has problems like corruption, leakage, and inefficiency despite its extensive reach. Extreme weather events impact agricultural production and increase vulnerability, particularly for small farmers and rain-fed regions, making climate change a serious danger to agriculture. The significance of varied diets and micronutrient deficits has frequently been undervalued in favour of calorie consumption. Despite being essential to the food security of households, women are not equally able to access resources, education, and opportunity.

Digitizing the PDS, executing Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), and broadening the range of food offered are essential measures. Encouraging climate-resilient crops, modifying agricultural practices, and investing in water management are crucial for sustainable food production. Encouraging non-agricultural jobs in rural regions, aiding micro-businesses, and offering skills training will expand income streams. Guaranteeing women farmers equal access to resources, credit, and education is essential. Enhancing infrastructure in rural regions, such as roads, irrigation systems, and storage facilities, is vital for boosting market access and minimizing losses. Encouraging varied diets, enhancing food nutrition, and increasing awareness about dietary health are vital measures for better health results. Utilizing progress in precision farming, digital tools, and climate-friendly technologies can enhance efficiency and sustainability throughout the food system. Through adopting a holistic approach, India can create a more equitable, inclusive, and food-secure future for its entire population

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