

India, a country with immense cultural diversity and a burgeoning population, is grappling with the grave issue of hunger and malnutrition. While government data suggests no recent starvation death reports from states or Union territories, a closer look at the situation paints a very different picture.

Deepening Concern: The Petition and Supreme Court's Ruling

A petition currently under consideration by the Supreme Court brings to light the persistence of starvation deaths that continue to infringe upon the right to life and dignity of individuals, proposing the widespread establishment of community kitchens as a solution. The petition spotlighted successful initiatives such as Rajasthan's Annapurna Rasoi, Indira Canteens in Karnataka, Delhi's Aam Aadmi Canteen, Anna Canteen of Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand Mukhyamantri Dal Bhat and Odisha's Ahaar Centre.

The apex court, in response, urged the central government to consider a "model" community kitchen scheme which could support states in ensuring food security for the poor, along with the proposition of creating a national food grid beyond the Public Distribution Scheme.

The Alarming Statistics: Hunger in India

A report by Food and Agriculture in 2018 revealed that approximately 195.9 million of the world's 821 million undernourished people reside in India, comprising about 24% of the global count. The prevalence of undernourishment in the country stands at a worrying 14.8%, exceeding both global and Asian averages.

In 2017, the National Health Survey reported nearly 19 crore people in India going to bed hungry each night. Moreover, an estimated 4500 children under the age of five years succumb daily to hunger and malnutrition-related ailments, leading to over three lakh child fatalities annually.

Adding to the concern, India's rank on the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2021 slipped to 101st position out of 116 countries, from 94th in 2020.

The Root Cause: Dimensions of Malnutrition

Malnutrition in India is a complex issue with multiple dimensions. Caloric deficiency is prevalent due to improper food allocation and distribution, despite surplus food grains. Additionally, protein hunger arises from insufficient budget allocations for rich sources such as pulses.

Micronutrient deficiency, also known as hidden hunger, is another significant problem caused by poor diet, disease, or increased needs during pregnancy and lactation. Additional factors include inadequate access to safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, immunisation and education, particularly for women.

Addressing The Issue: Government Interventions

Several initiatives have been undertaken by the government to combat this crisis. The Eat Right India Movement by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) aims to encourage citizens to make healthier dietary choices.

The POSHAN Abhiyan, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, National Food Security Act, 2013, and Mission Indradhanush target different aspects of nourishment and healthcare for women, children and the general population.

Food Fortification enriches staple foods with essential vitamins and minerals. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme offers six services to children, pregnant women, and lactating mothers.

Improving the Situation: A Way Forward

For a more impactful resolution of malnutrition, the government must link agricultural policies with nutrition schemes. Prompt disbursement and optimal utilisation of funds are essential, given the often-noted underutilisation of allocated resources in nutrition-based initiatives.

Moreover, implementing other schemes that impact economic, health, water, sanitation, gender perspectives and social norms could contribute significantly to better nutrition. The PM Poshan Scheme seeks to improve students' nutrition by offering balanced diets in schools, advocating for the inclusion of milk and eggs on each state's menu, and considering local foods and climatic conditions.