
POVERTY, HUNGER & SDGs IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT:

Globalisation in its wake has altered the existing economic structure giving rise to growth of complex and technological based economy growth. The changes introduced in different sectors of economy, use of modern technology, growth of new professions and businesses and steady withdrawal of government from priority sectors has widened income inequalities in society. Developing countries and countries in third world are at the receiving end of unequal, biased and exploitative economic system dominated by rich and powerful developed nations. India is facing an impending humanitarian crisis on account of widespread poverty, hunger and malnutrition among its population. The poor, underprivileged and marginalized sections of society are one of the worst affected having severe repercussions on social, educational, economic, and psychological well being of such deprived sections and general society as well. The far reaching coverage of PDS program of below poverty level (BPL) and deprived population has not been able to push millions of Indians out of abject poverty and hunger. The lack of clarity in planning, inefficiency in administration and widespread corruption are responsible for ever increasing poverty and hunger in India. India's adoption of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has a binding obligation on it to meet SDGs about poverty and hunger along with other nations. The paper reviews the situation of large scale poverty and hunger and analyses policies, programs and initiatives of government in reduction of poverty and hunger among its large population. The paper overviews efforts and preparedness of the country to achieve SDGs related to poverty and hunger.

Keywords: Food security, Hunger, PDS, Poverty, Sustainable development

Food situation in India: India is the most populous country in the world with an estimated population of 1464 million people living within its geographical boundary. It is fourth largest economy in the world with a GDP of \$4.19 trillion and one of the fastest growing economies. India's economy has been growing fast during the last decade. The overall pace of development in Indian economy is even reflected in the sheer number of billionaires the country has produced in last ten years; from just 70 billionaires in 2014 to 284 in 2025 India's billionaire count has soared over 300 percent in last decade (indiatoday, 2025). India is a food exporting country and has millions of tons of grain in storage. Today enough resources are available for India to implement the various programmes aimed at providing support to overcome hunger and malnutrition and fight poverty. However, India is classified by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, as a low income, food-deficit country. With more than 200 million facing starvation, India has the largest number of undernourished people in the world and the highest levels of child malnutrition, higher than most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (FIAN,2007). Different parts of the population are particularly exposed to right to food violations, amongst them huge parts of the rural populations, indigenous people, migrant workers, children, the elderly and handicapped persons. Across all these groups, women and girls are particularly affected by malnutrition and hunger. More than 806 million people are getting free food grains through PDS. India's rank in global hunger index is at 105 out of 127 countries and the value of the hunger index is 27.3 considered as "alarming condition" by the Global Hunger Report, 2024. Schemes aimed at alleviating poverty and distress through food distribution has been an integral part of five year plans. However, the government fails to implement these schemes effectively. Corruption and mismanagement are rampant in many social programmes making it difficult for the people to realize their right to food. The widespread apathy of states authorities fails to prevent starvation deaths in the country. In the light of above observations; the paper critically sets the following objectives.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the issues of poverty and hunger and problems associated with them.
2. To analyze the preparedness of the country to meet SDGs associated with poverty and hunger.

METHODOLOGY:

The methodology followed in this paper is qualitative and the data used are secondary in nature. This study extracts data from the sources like reports from Government ministries, international organizations, and other

related scholarly articles, online resources to comprehend the country's vision with respect to SDGs related with poverty and hunger. In addition to analysing challenges in attainment of SDGs, this study reviewed a range of literature to identify the probable remedies to overcome the problems related to poverty and hunger. The sources include government policy documents and journal articles.

MAGNITUDE OF POVERTY, HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION IN INDIA:

The poverty estimate of 2011 officially put India's poor population at 269 million (21.9% of the population), which was equivalent to 2.5 times the population of Bihar at that time. As the last census was conducted in 2011, there is wide variation in estimates of population of poor in India and also lack of official data from the government has made it difficult to arrive at exact numbers. There are at least five estimates of the number of poor people in India, which put the number of poor in India between 34 million—equivalent to the population of Kerala—to 373 million—more than four times the population of West Bengal. This puts the number of the poor between 2.5% of the population to 29.5%, based on different estimates between 2014 and 2022. Wage disparities remain significant, with median earnings of the top 10 percent being 13 times higher than those of the bottom 10 percent in 2023–24, underscoring persistent labor market inequalities despite gains in poverty reduction.

The recent World Bank Report (2025) reveals that over the past decade, India has made substantial progress in reducing poverty and gradually improving labor market conditions. From 2011–12 to 2022–23, the share of people living below the poverty line (\$4.20 per person per day, LMIC line, 2021 PPPs) dropped from 57.7 percent to 23.9 percent (7.7 percent annually). Both rural and urban areas experienced poverty reduction, each with distinct labor market trends. Rural poverty decreased from 64.9 percent to 27.7 percent (7.4 percent annually). Urban poverty fell from 39.7 percent to 14.3 percent (8.9 percent annually). Extreme poverty (\$3 per day) also fell, from 27.1 percent to 5.3 percent. In contrast, the World Inequality Database reports rising income inequality, with the Gini increasing from 52 in 2005 to 61 in 2023.

Government data has revealed dramatic situation of under nourishment and poverty in India. 20 percent of the Indian population is undernourished, of which 57 million children are malnourished and make up one third of the world's 146 million undernourished children. National Family Health Survey (NFHS) has persistently pointed to lack of nutrition among childrens and women. NFHS data has put forward startling facts regarding lack of nutrition and its harmful impact conducted in 2005-06, 46 percent children below 3 years are underweight; 33 percent women and 28 percent of men have Body Mass Index (BMI) below normal; 79 percent children aged 6-35 months have anaemia, as do 56 percent of ever married women aged 15-49 years and 24 percent of similar men; 58 percent of pregnant women have anaemia. . Nearly a third of children are born underweight (30 percent), which indicates that their mothers themselves are underweight and undernourished. Malnutrition also increases during early childhood, particularly for girls, reflecting persistent gender discrimination against girl children.

In terms of calorie consumption, the picture is even worse. National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) data shows that the average daily intake of calories of the rural population has dropped by 106 Kcal (4.9 percent) from 2153 Kcal to 2047 Kcal from 1993-94 to 2004-05 and by 51 Kcal (2.5 percent) from 2071 to 2020 Kcal in urban areas. The average daily intake of protein decreased from 60.2 to 57 gm in rural India between 1993-94 and 2004-05 and remained stable at around 57 gm in urban areas during the same period. From an estimated population of 1027 million people in India, 28.6 percent lives below the poverty line, of which 23.6 percent in the urban areas and 30.2 percent in the rural areas. There is strong correlation between under nourishment and poverty and discrimination. Poverty prevents persons from fully realising their potential and enjoying their rights. Poverty could be caused by denial of rights like access to land, forests, water; displacement for developmental purposes, inefficient agricultural practices or change in governmental policies leading to a slowdown in or closure of industry leading to loss of employment and income.

Hunger and malnutrition remain a significant challenge as food scarcity and poor dietary quality and nutrient deficiency is impacting a large section of the population. The latest SOFI and GHI data show a challenging landscape towards global efforts in attainment SDG-2: Zero Hunger. Around 8.2 percent of global population i.e. 673 million people are facing chronic hunger. While, 31.9 percent of global population i.e. 2.6 billion people are unable to afford a healthy diet. The report has identified important drivers of hunger in the world: conflict and violence, climate change and extreme weather and economic slowdowns with higher food inflation.

A recent UN estimates reveals that half of the world's undernourished population (195 million) is in India. Global Hunger Index (GHI), 2025 ranks India at 102nd out of 123 countries with a score of 25.8. The GHI

places India in the 'serious' category of hunger severity. Another important aspect of hunger is the availability, accessibility and affordability of food to the general population. It is estimated that around 74 percent of India's population could not afford a healthy diet. The lack of food and nutrition is a major reason for widespread malnutrition in India. NHFS (2019-21) data shows stunting in 35.5 percent of children under five as a result of chronic under nutrition. India has one of the highest child wasting rates globally i.e. 19.3 percent of children under five. The presence of chronic hunger and lack of nutrition is reflected in widespread presence of anaemia in the population; 57 percent of women aged 15-49 years and 67.1 percent of children (6-59 months) are anaemic.

GOVERNMENT MEASURES TO TACKLE POVERTY AND HUNGER:

There is need of multi-dimensional strategy for elimination of poverty and associated issues of hunger and malnutrition. A comprehensive strategy for combating poverty needs to be focused on three important areas; sustained rapid growth with intensive employment generation, social security programs addressing food and nutrition and investment in human capital and infrastructure. Sustained rapid economic growth generates employment opportunities raising real wages among population leading to growth in revenue in revenue generation thereby expanding social expenditure at a faster pace. Similarly, government welfare initiatives with respect to food and nutrition will help in developing strong and healthy population contributing to country's economic development. Programs aimed at investment in human capital and infrastructure development will enable to reap benefits of demographic dividend and providing faster, safer and efficient avenues for overall socio-economic development of the country.

Since independence, the government launched various welfare initiatives guaranteeing food along with employment. One of the historic programs is MGNREGA which provided right to work. The basic argument for the rights approach is that it gives some power to the unprivileged (Drèze, 2004; Joshi, 2010). MGNREGA (2005) guaranteed 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to adult of every rural household. It guarantees right to work, as the scheme is demand-driven providing social safety net along with creation of rural infrastructure. Giving legal rights to the underprivileged empowers them in at least three ways. First, it enables them, in principle at least, to defend their rights in court if need be. Second, legal rights place clear responsibilities on the government, and help to hold the government accountable to these responsibilities and legal rights can influence public perceptions and social norms (Drèze, 2004).

National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) launched in 2011 organises rural poor into SHGs providing them with necessary support in the form of skill development, capacity building, financial assistance and marketing support to create sustainable livelihoods. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) provides industry-relevant skill training program for youths helping them secure a better livelihood. The universal Public Distribution Scheme (PDS) providing subsidized foodgrains and other essential items to the poor has its roots in five year plans. The PDS runs different schemes like Antyodaya Anna Yojana, Annapurna, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) scheme targets specific groups like poorest of poor, senior citizens, persons with disabilities and other under-privileged sections of society providing them with food security and nutrition. The National Food Security Act 2013 gave further momentum to PDS reforms in many states. The Act includes three sets of entitlements: maternity entitlements in the form of cash transfers, nutritious food for children (under the midday meal and ICDS programmes), and subsidized grain through the PDS (Drèze & Khera, 2016). Presently, under the National Food Security Act (NFSA, 2013) 80.10 crore Indians are being provided with subsidized food grains under PDS.

Social security schemes provide important safety net to vulnerable people in households elderly, widows and disabled providing them with a minimum financial support for living life with dignity. Among households both, BPL and above poverty line, widows and elderly are often exposed to severe deprivation and insecurity. National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) introduced in 1995 is a social security and welfare program providing financial assistance to the elderly, widows and persons with disabilities from BPL households. Different schemes focusing on affordable insurance for accident (PMSBY) and life coverage (PMJJBY) have been introduced for all households to help them in times of emergency and provide support for life. A series of recent studies indicate that India's pension schemes are doing well in some important respects (Dutta et al., 2010; Gupta, 2013; Kaushal, 2013; Chopra and Pudussery, 2014). Modest as they are, the pensions tend to be highly valued by the recipients. Most of them live in penury, and the monthly pension is a chance to enjoy small comforts – relieving their pain with some medicine, getting their sandals repaired or simply avoiding hunger. The administrative costs are very low. Further, recent surveys found little evidence of serious corruption in pension schemes. There are leakages here and there, for instance when post-office employees take a cut to

disburse pensions, but nothing like the scams that plague many other forms of government expenditure in India (Dreze & Khera, 2016)

SDGs AND CHALLENGES IN ATTAINMENT:

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by United Nations in 2015 are a collection of 17 interlinked objectives which calls for an urgent action by all countries - developed and developing – to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy good health, equality and socio-economic progress. SDG 1 – No Poverty and SDG 2 – Zero Hunger are the most important of the goals on successful attainment of which a subtle attainment will be achieved in other goals. Poverty and Hunger all across the world are a result of misgovernance and lack of political will. Violence, wars and extreme weather are other significant reasons for a population of 700 million living in abject poverty facing deprivation, hunger and health issues.

According to Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Report (2025), 1.1 billion of 6.3 billion people live in acute multidimensional poverty, over half of them children. Common deprivations include a lack of clean cooking fuel, housing, sanitation, nutrition, and electricity. The report highlights that most people in poverty are exposed to at least one climate hazard; many confront several at the same time. By the end of this century, the countries projected to face the steepest temperature increases are those already burdened with higher levels of multidimensional poverty. The intertwining of climate and poverty risks is likely to intensify in the future further increasing the burden.

International organization and government of countries have initiated steps in tune with SDG to reduce poverty and hunger. Wide ranging welfare schemes focusing on employment, food security & nutrition, financial inclusion and social security are being implemented to tackle the problem of poverty and hunger. The recent World Bank Report (2025) reveals that over the past decade, India has made substantial progress in reducing poverty and gradually improving labor market conditions. From 2011–12 to 2022–23, the share of people living below the poverty line (\$4.20 per person per day, LMIC line, 2021 PPPs) dropped from 57.7 percent to 23.9 percent (7.7 percent annually). Both rural and urban areas experienced poverty reduction, each with distinct labor market trends. Rural poverty decreased from 64.9 percent to 27.7 percent (7.4 percent annually). Urban poverty fell from 39.7 percent to 14.3 percent (8.9 percent annually). Extreme poverty (\$3 per day) also fell, from 27.1 percent to 5.3 percent. In contrast, the World Inequality Database reports rising income inequality, with the Gini increasing from 52 in 2005 to 61 in 2023.

But despite agricultural self-sufficiency, a steadily increasing GDP, and increased per capita consumption, India finds itself engulfed in a serious hunger crisis. Poverty and hunger in India are inter-twined with agriculture. Reduced land ownership, reliance on monsoons, limited irrigation infrastructure, low agricultural financing, and minimal government initiatives in improving the agricultural infrastructure has made the situation of agriculture chronic in India. A vast majority of population (65 percent) living in rural areas are subsiding on agriculture and allied activities as main source of livelihood making the situation worrisome affecting the availability of food for all. The phenomenon of jobless growth, social and gender discrimination, lack of awareness, lack of empathy from authorities has compounded the problem of hunger. The low investment in social sector has made poor vulnerable to meet the basic requirements of healthcare and education, affecting their income expenditure, with priority shifting to non-food essentials.

The problem of hunger in India is the result of defunct system of food distribution and delivery. The neglect of agriculture sector by successive governments has totally eroded the efficiency of sector in meeting the requirement of masses. Lack of logistical support, poor storage infrastructure and transit facilities is an important reason for enormous wastage of vegetables and fruits. According to an estimate by FAO, 40 per cent of India's food is wasted: 30 per cent of vegetables and fruits expire owing to lack of cold storage, and hundreds of tonnes of food grains rot in unsafe warehouses. The result is that according to an estimate 20 crore people sleep hungry every night in country. The data clearly shows that with high percentage reeling under poverty and constant hunger, India is far behind in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-1 & 2) which aims to end global poverty and hunger by 2030.

CONCLUSION:

To overcome food insecurity and fight against poverty, hunger and malnutrition India has formulated several policies. However, these policies are insufficient to address the situation of hunger in the country implying policy loopholes and inefficient implementation. Lack of effective implementation, corruption, inefficiency and

discrimination has made poverty endemic across vast sections of population depriving the poor basic necessities of life. The

large scale poverty is responsible for different degrees of chronic and endemic hunger resulting in malnutrition and susceptible to health hazards. The centrally sponsored social welfare schemes are inadequately funded or funds are non-utilized defeating the very purpose of scheme. As a result, the country portrays a sorry picture of hunger and starvation amidst plenty. Market economy has adversely impacted poorer sections of society who are most vulnerable to vagaries of international economy and changing government policies accentuating their helplessness to meet basic requirements of life. The provision and protection of people concerning access to productive resources, water, employment and wages and proper implementation of social security programs will in the long run guarantee success against poverty, hunger and malnourishment in the country and help country reach the sustainable development goals.

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