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India, Malnutrition

**Malnutrition in Indian Society and How to Fix It**

Food security, as defined by the Oxford dictionary, is the state of having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. Unfortunately, maintaining food security is a huge issue in almost all countries around the world. Food insecurity is especially high in countries that have huge, dense populations and extreme amounts of poverty, like India. One of the biggest parts of food insecurity world-wide is the lack of nutritious food, which causes malnutrition. I chose to research India because of my interest in malnutrition and how to prevent it. Since India has a high malnutrition rate, it was one of the first countries to pop into my mind.

The Problem

As of April 2023, the Indian population passed 1.4 billion people (United Nations); this number is still increasing to this day. As a result of this massive population, there have been massive difficulties in supplying India’s residents with enough food to survive. Not to mention that even if they are getting enough food, most Indians often receive non-nutritious, unhealthy food that stunts their growth. This problem is called food insecurity and malnourishment. Naturally, managing 1.4 million people and giving them enough high-quality food can be a huge challenge. Especially because India is only the seventh largest country in the world by land size but is the number one most populated country in the world (World Population Review). Because of the over-crowdedness and lack of infrastructure, many Indians are forced to live in poverty and hunger. In addition, the average Indian does not have the money to buy healthy food or grow their own food. In fact, a huge 21% of the population lives on less than 1.90 USD per day (World Food Programme). That amount of money is not sustainable for anyone to even survive with, let alone live a healthy life. With over two hundred million malnourished people (National Library of Medicine) and ¼ of the world’s total malnourished people (World Food Programme), India has been suffering from an increasing need for food in rural areas around the country. As India’s population continues to grow in size, this problem will worsen if left unattended.

For the most part, Indian malnutrition has been occurring in rural societies. With an increased governmental focus on huge megacities like Delhi, those in more rural areas of the country have not been getting support from the government. Quite simply, the Indian government needs to get more involved with the support of rural families. While the government does supply some rural farmers with tax breaks, subsidies, and crop insurance (BBC), it does not matter for most. Most rural farmers have no way to compete with big businesses who steal their jobs, buy out their land, and decide the prices on agricultural products. Because of this, many small farmers end up losing their jobs and eventually, their ability to buy healthy food. Although there are many issues with food supply in India, not everything is all said and done. We still have plenty of time to fix these problems in rural India and around the world. Furthermore, there are a vast number of solutions that can be installed to solve Indian malnutrition and food insecurity, including, increasing investment in rural societies, increasing education on malnutrition, and increasing publicly available food distribution systems.

The Solutions

To begin, Indian malnutrition can be reduced through increased government investment in rural areas of India. One program that could easily be implemented by the Indian government is a new land grant institution system. Similar to colleges in the United States, like the University of Florida, these institutions would provide the working class of India with an opportunity to gain an education and learn about the structure and function of various advanced farming technologies. Furthermore, Indian countrymen would unlock the ability to learn best management practices that could help boost the efficiency and production of their farms. While there are already some land grant institutions in India (Just Agriculture), they need to be improved on, making the instruction better and more widespread. Practices such as drip irrigation would allow Indian farmers to use less water for more land, helping prevent drought, dehydration, and most importantly malnutrition. Another problem in India is the fact that many small subsistence agriculture farmers are having their land bought out by large-scale agricultural corporations (BBC). Quite frankly, these large corporations do not care about the Indian locals; they often force small-scale farmers to sell their land and move away. Consequently, a myriad of Indians have lost their jobs and lifestyles. This has led to regular, everyday farmers losing the ability to buy or grow healthy food used to support their families. In an article by BBC, an Indian farmer named Rakesh Vyas displayed his fears by saying “Just like the big fish eat small fish, big businesses will eat us up now.” The worry of being “eaten up” by a big business is a serious reality for countless Indian farmers these days. To solve this issue, it is critical that the Indian government gets involved fast. Every day that goes by, more people suffer from malnutrition. The most valuable and obvious solution to this problem is to look at other governments’ agricultural politics and procedures as a model. A great country to look at is the United States, a country which offers billions in support to their farmers every year. These billion-dollar government subsidies, which are often paid for by tax money, help everyday farmers to turn a profit, giving citizens enough money to buy a surplus of healthy, nutritious food. If and when the Indian government follows in the United States’ footsteps, they will certainly attain at least some degree of success. When the government begins to favor local farmers who grow food to be consumed in India as opposed to international businesses who grow crops for export, malnutrition and starvation will certainly shrink in magnitude. Although the Indian government does already provide a few agricultural subsidies for items like machinery and seeds, they evidently are not enough(BBC). Millions of people suffer from hunger and malnutrition to this day. The Indian government needs to go further than they currently do if any change is to happen. Considering that the average Indian salary is only about 11,000 USD per year (Forbes), a government payment of only a few thousand USD would make a world of difference for Indian farmers, increasing their yearly income by a vast quantity. A new government program to distribute monetary support to farmers would be like an oasis in the middle of a desert, reinvigorating the economy of small Indian farmers. It is also important to note that a government subsidy means absolutely nothing if it is not available to everyone, all the time. Government officials need to inform the public of the benefits they are available to receive and enlighten them on how to access them. While government payment programs could end up taking money out of other areas of the economy, subsidies will help improve Indian health nation-wide, which I ensure is a worthwhile cause.

To pile on, malnutrition in India can be reduced by educating Indians. While I have already elaborated on how new universities need to be introduced to India, it is also important to note that added information needs to be taught in these schools. It is of vast importance that the effects of malnutrition and how to prevent it are taught in Indian schools. To do this, school should instruct students of what foods to eat to obtain the daily nutrients that they need to survive and grow. Things like eating bananas for potassium or eating oranges for vitamin c. Furthermore, if this is to be done, the Indian government should look to other countries around the world for inspiration. One good role model is the United States. In U.S. schools, students are taught that to properly grow their bodies, they need all diverse kinds of foods, like proteins, fats, fruits, vegetables, and carbs. It seems that in India - possibly because of a lack of education or a lack of availability of food – many people only eat food from a select few of these food groups. Similarly, it is important to learn about agriculture in schools because agriculture is one of the largest economic industries around the world. On the website Indian Farmers, the authors explained that Indian agriculture “employs over 50% of the country’s population and has been the main source of livelihood for several decades.” It is clear to see that if Indian officials neglect the education of future farmers, then there will be major economic recession along with a reduction in food supply. All of which would lead to a spike in malnutrition rates, hunger, and death in India. While there are several educational programs already present in India like the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, these programs are not widely available to most farmers and are “fraught with challenges” as stated by Ph.D. research scholar Anugrah Sakshi (Just Agriculture). Whether it is because of the price tag of agricultural universities in India or the fact that the farmers have no way of reaching the universities, schools are obviously inaccessible for those that really need them (poor uneducated farmers). If we want malnourishment to decrease or disappear in India, then we need the Indian people to know why malnutrition exists in the first place.

Another idea I have that could lower malnourishment rates in India is to create food distribution services that are available to rural people. As of right now, India has several food distribution services for their citizens, however, many of them are limited in their availability to rural citizens. In one article by BBC, a pregnant woman, Nanda Bariya, who attempted to register for a local distribution center claimed that “she registered herself here three months into her pregnancy but is yet to receive the maternity cash benefits she is entitled to as part of a state scheme - 6,000 rupees ($82)” Clearly, being ignored by the government is not a rare occurrence in rural India. Many people make requests for government supplied distribution centers that are never fulfilled, often leading to the death or malnourishment of these impoverished people and their children (BBC). Once again, the Indian government should look to other countries’ governments for inspiration. Here in the U.S., we have unemployment programs for those who have lost their jobs and need money to survive. If you are eligible, you can earn a good enough salary to survive until you get another job. Alternatively, in countries like Canada or the United Kingdom, they have widely available healthcare for those that need it, such as Nanda Bariya. If India adopts any of these policies, I am sure that a decrease in the rate of death from malnourishment would occur. Those who were previously suffering from malnourishment or those who could not afford healthy food for their families would be able to use the government’s money to support their own dietary needs. To make these services more available the Indian government could allocate additional tax money to food distribution services. Alternatively, the government could financially support not-for-profit organizations like the Akshaya Patra Foundation. The Akshaya Patra Foundation is a program that provides nutritious school meals to children in over seventy locations (Akshaya Patra Foundation). While the Akshaya Patra Foundation is quite large, it alone is not big enough to fix the malnutrition issue in India. However, the Indian government can fix this. By funding the Akshaya Patra Foundation or starting a new foundation, millions of stranded, malnourished people could be saved from starvation. If this is not within the Indian government’s budget, then they should consider another change: using insects for food. Almost unbelievably, insects are a phenomenal source of protein that is both time and energy efficient. Insects require less feed to live, space to live, and time to grow than traditional agricultural livestock do. If the Indian government begins to raise mass amounts of insects for food, they will save time, money, and space, and gain more nutritious food in return, thus helping to minimize malnutrition in India.

In summation, malnourishment is a huge problem that is widespread throughout India. While malnutrition is a huge issue, there is still plenty of time to fix it. Furthermore, there are several ways to decrease malnourishment, all of which will help improve the quality of life and food security of the average Indian citizen. A few of the ideas I had to reduce malnutrition in India include increasing government investment in rural societies by prioritizing small businesses over large corporations, increasing government education of farmers by increasing availability of agricultural and nutritional education, and increasing the public distribution system for food by creating programs that are widely available to all Indians. While there are other prevalent issues threatening food security in India, I think eliminating malnourishment should be the top concern.

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