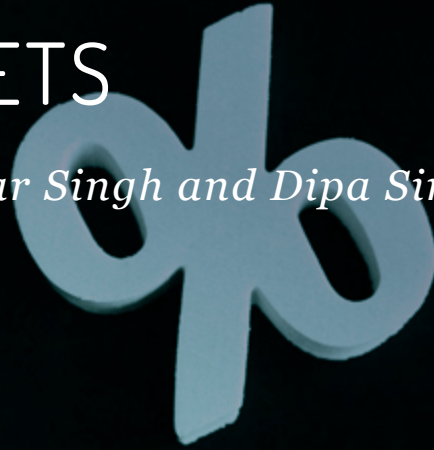


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FOOD AND NUTRITION: A LOWER PRIORITY IN INDIAN GOVERNMENT BUDGETS

Raj Shekhar Singh and Dipa Sinha



Raj Shekhar Singh and
Dipa Sinha members
of the Right to Food
Campaign, (India).

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“The declining priority for the social sector spending is witnessed in the form of declining allocations for various food and nutrition schemes in real terms, [...]. Millions are excluded from their basic right to education, employment, food, and health and are faced with weakening social infrastructure.”

INTRODUCTION

India is known for its extensive public programmes on food and nutrition. The Public Distribution System (PDS) currently distributes 5 kg of foodgrains per month to over 800 million people free of charge. Its school midday meal scheme (Poshan Abhiyan) and child-care centres (Anganwadis) under the integrated child-care services (ICDS) together reach over 120 million children. There are smaller schemes providing a cash maternity benefit and social security pensions for the aged. These schemes are crucial for the right to food and nutrition and serve as lifelines for marginalized communities. However, India stands out for ranking poorly in various nutrition and food security indices. According to the [Global Hunger Index 2024](#), India ranks 105 out of 124 countries. According to FAO statistics, 194.6 million people are undernourished (2021-23, 13.7%). While large public programmes do exist, most analyses suggest that India remains a laggard when it comes to public spending on health, nutrition, and [social security](#). In this context, budgetary allocations, especially of the Union government, have been moving further away from what is required to achieve nutrition goals.

INCREASE IN CAPITAL EXPENDITURE

During the last few years, especially since 2019, India has also witnessed an economic slowdown exacerbated by the COVID-19-induced lockdowns. Further, global uncertainties, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which led to supply chain chaos, volatile food prices, and a surge in hunger levels globally have also affected India. While there is some recovery in economic growth (with some dampening in the [current year](#)), this has been skewed in favour of the wealthy. While profits soared, wage rates in rural areas have mostly been [stagnant](#) (almost two-thirds of India’s population still lives in villages). At the same time, informal sector workers, especially migrants in urban areas, are also increasingly vulnerable to job loss, low wages, and food

insecurity. The government's main fiscal strategy towards recovery has been to increase capital expenditure focused on big infrastructure projects and also on tax cuts and other incentives to big corporations. As a result, the current situation is one of poor employment prospects and stagnant incomes for the majority of the population. Income inequality in the country is at its highest, with levels now exceeding [those of the 1950s](#).

While the enormous increase in capital expenditure is more recent, the general decline in social sector spending has been witnessed since 2014, with some exceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic years of 2020-22. Capital expenditure as a proportion of total Union government expenditure increased from 20% in 2014-15 to 31% in 2024-25 (Budget Estimates), while social sector spending as a proportion of total expenditure is at its lowest in the last ten years, at 18 %, down from 22% in 2014-15.

During the pandemic, the social sector spending went up to 30% but it has been decreasing since 2021-22. This disproportionately affects the marginalised sections of society, who depend on public schemes to meet some of their basic needs. The declining priority for the social sector spending is witnessed in the form of declining allocations for various food and nutrition schemes in real terms, a shift in the policy orientation of the government towards Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), insurance-based and contributory schemes, and away from direct and free provision of public services. Millions are excluded from their basic right to education, employment, food, and health and are faced with weakening social infrastructure.

FALLING BUDGETS FOR FOOD AND NUTRITION

The pandemic saw a [mass exodus of workers](#) from urban areas towards villages due to the extreme lockdowns. This added to the general distress that was already caused by the halt of most economic activities. During this period the two biggest social security programmes in India, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and the PDS played the role of providing crucial safety nets for millions. Although the budgetary allocation for the [MGNREGS in 2020-21 increased](#) by more than 46% compared to 2019-20, it was [still insufficient](#) to meet the huge demand in rural India. Similarly, the quantity of cereals given through PDS to the ration card holders was doubled (from 5 kgs to 10 kgs) as part of the pandemic relief. For a few months, there was also an attempt to provide other items through the PDS such as pulses and edible oils, mostly by state governments. With most people being unable to afford animal proteins, pulses are the most significant source of protein in Indian diets. The FAO estimates that [more than 52% of Indians cannot afford a healthy diet](#). Items such as pulses, oils, and vegetables and fruits are expensive and also face greater price volatility. In the case of pulses and edible oils, India is dependent on

imports and therefore exposed to global price volatility. For vegetables and fruits, seasonality and lack of storage and processing facilities play a big role. Neither during the pandemic nor at other times have there been any significant interventions by the governments (both Union and state) towards addressing these issues related to improving dietary diversity and quality among the population. Rather, their efforts have focussed on areas that have been contradictory to the nutrient-rich dietary diversity approach. One example is the Fortification Programme in India, where the Rice Fortification Programme in food schemes has raised some serious questions on the **public health and food security of millions**. Nutritious food commodities such as pulses, edible oils, etc. are not included in the PDS by the Government of India even though some states provide them. Moreover, household surveys show that during times of stress, people reduce the consumption of these more nutritious items as they are **more expensive**.

Overall, except for the two pandemic years, the food subsidy as a proportion of GDP has **remained stagnant**. Aside from the lack of diversity in the food basket provided through the PDS, as discussed above, one of the issues is related to coverage of the population under the PDS. The National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013 entitles 67% of the population in the country to subsidised foodgrains (cereals) through the PDS. The coverage figures are decided based on the decadal census, which was last conducted in 2011. The 2021 census has been indefinitely postponed, leading to an exclusion of a large population from food security coverage. Consequently, many deserving households (or some members of households) are excluded in many states due to identification issues as well as the caps placed on the number of ration cards (based on 2011 census data). The quotas under the NFSA can be immediately expanded based on the population projections for 2025 to include all vulnerable persons, especially migrant workers, homeless, sex workers, trans people, and all vulnerable communities without ration cards. It is estimated that around 130 million people in the country would be included if current population figures are used. Even the Supreme Court of India has directed all states and union territories to immediately undertake the exercise, in the *Problems and Miseries of Migrant Workers Suo Motu writ petition case*.³ However, none of the state governments have implemented the court's order effectively. One of the major reasons they cite for not expanding the coverage to include the excluded is the lack of budgets and foodgrain support from the central government. The Government of India can initiate this exercise and support the state governments by expanding the budgetary allocations for this scheme.

NEGLECT OF CHILDREN AND WOMEN

Along with the inadequate coverage and diversity in the PDS, the direct nutrition schemes that address the most vulnerable groups of young children,

3 In Re: Problems and Miseries of Migrant Workers (Suo Motu WP(C) 06/2020)

pregnant and lactating women, and adolescent girls have also been suffering budget cuts. The budgetary allocation by the union government for the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) which provides supplementary nutrition for these target groups of children and women as well as services such as growth monitoring and nutrition counselling has seen a decline by over **30% in real terms in this period**. The school's midday meal programme, which provides a hot cooked meal for children in the age group of 6-14 years, has also seen a similar fate of declining real budgets. Considering recent inflation in food items, and the reduced budget allocation in these crucial programmes, this may exacerbate the problem of poor dietary diversity and inadequate food consumption, especially among women and children. Similarly, the maternity entitlement scheme for pregnant and lactating women aims at providing wage compensation by primarily supporting women in ensuring nutrition for themselves and their children. Considering that over 95% of women in the country are not in employment that qualifies for maternity leave, this is currently the only maternity entitlement that is available for most pregnant women in the country. The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), maternity entitlement scheme by the Central Government of India is however in contravention of the NFSA as it provides only Rs 5000 per woman while the act says “not less than Rs 6000”. The scheme also restricts the benefits to only the “first living child” in a family, while the act places no such restrictions. Further, the scheme includes certain conditionalities related to accessing services, effectively shifting the onus onto the woman rather than guaranteeing that services will be available. The number of women who received some PMMVY benefits crashed from 9.6 million in 2019-20 to 7.5 million in 2020-21 and 6.1 million in 2021-22 – a decline of nearly **40% over two years**. The poor budgetary allocations have been one of the major reasons for the scheme's poor coverage.

All of these schemes are also important for nutrition outcomes. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) conducted by the Government of India in its latest NFHS-5 survey revealed that over 67% of children and 57% of women suffer from anaemia, reflecting poor nutritional status among children and women. The recent round of National Family Health Survey data (NFHS-5 conducted between 2019 to 2020 in two phases) shows that improvements in malnutrition have slowed down since 2015 (NFHS-4 conducted in the year 2015-16). Some progress had been made on this front with the universalisation of school meals and supplementary nutrition through the ICDS and the expansion of the PDS in the 2000s (orders passed under **the 'Right to Food' case, PUCL vs Union of India CWP 196/2001**). This was further strengthened by the NFSA of 2013, which aims to ensure food security for every individual in a life-cycle approach. However, despite all these positive efforts the reduction in the budget for these **key schemes is creating barriers in the path towards nutritional security for all**.

FINAL REMARKS

The declining budgetary priority for many of the schemes mandated by rights-based legislation should also be seen as part of the larger shift in the orientation of welfare policy in the country. The MGNREGS as well as the PDS, maternity benefits, school meals and Anganwadis⁴ under NFSA are legal entitlements that the people of India have secured through hard-won battles. The spirit of these legislations passed by Parliament requires that they be strengthened and given more resources so that the social protection system that ensures nobody goes hungry and malnutrition is eradicated. However, the current political environment in the country is positioning these schemes as doles or charity, thereby shifting attention away from them.

Meanwhile, commercial interests are increasingly intervening in these areas, encouraged by the government through its insurance-based schemes and PPPs. Along with declining budgetary support to direct welfare schemes, the lack of a regulatory mechanism is enhancing the corporate hegemony over the food system in India. The government's shift away from a welfare state model is **paving the way for private players** to enter these important areas of human development. Lack of transparency in the budgetary and policy-making processes remains a concern. Poor participatory processes in budget-making reduces the ability of stakeholders, such as civil society and people's representatives, to contribute to a just budgetary allocation.

⁴ Anganwadi Services is one of the flagship programmes of the Government of India providing early childhood care and development of the beneficiaries i.e children in the age group of 0-6 years, pregnant women and lactating mothers through a large network of Anganwadi workers (AWW) and Helpers (AWH).

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