Hunger in the Time of Growth: Food Insecurity, Welfare Retrenchment, and the Politics of Nutrition in India

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Abstract

India has grown very fast in the last thirty years, yet hunger remains widespread across the country. Even with record levels of agricultural production and a food subsidy system that covers almost everyone, India still ranks 111th out of 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2023. It also continues to account for nearly one-third of the world's undernourished people (FAO, 2023; GHI, 2023). This paper explores this contradiction—why economic growth has not translated into better nutrition—by looking at the structural and political factors that shape food insecurity in India.

Using secondary data from NFHS-5 (2019–21), NSS 77th Round (2019–20), and FAOSTAT, the study examines how fiscal tightening, growing privatization in agriculture, and fragmented welfare programs have deepened nutritional inequality across class, caste, and gender. The analysis shows that low real wages, rising prices of essential food items, and shifts toward targeted welfare—especially in the PDS and ICDS—have weakened the social foundation of food security (Drèze & Khera, 2023; Swaminathan, 2021).

Taking a political ecology perspective, the paper argues that hunger in India is not due to lack of food but due to failures in governance and policy. The study concludes that India needs a universal system of nutrition entitlements, supported by participatory governance and fair distribution of public resources, to fulfil the constitutional vision of ensuring "freedom from hunger" in the 21st century.

1. Introduction

India's development story shows a major contradiction. Even though the economy has grown rapidly and agricultural production has reached record highs, millions still struggle with hunger and malnutrition. Between 2000 and 2023, India's GDP grew almost five times, and foodgrain production crossed 330 million tonnes (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). Yet India ranked 111th out of 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2023— behind several poorer African nations (GHI, 2023). Scholars have described this situation as "growth without nutrition" (Drèze & Khera, 2023).

NFHS-5 (2019–21) highlights the seriousness of the crisis: 35.5% of children under five are stunted, 32% are underweight, and 57% of women aged 15–49 are anemic (IIPS & MoHFW, 2021). These numbers show that hunger and malnutrition are not just personal or biological problems, but signs of deeper failures in food distribution and welfare systems.

The political economy of food security changed significantly after the 1990s. Earlier, the state played a larger role in redistribution and universal welfare. But with neoliberal reforms, the focus shifted to targeted schemes and cost-cutting, leading to reduced budgets and more limited access to welfare (Patnaik, 2020; Sinha & Jha, 2023).
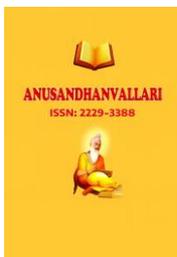
Programs like the PDS, ICDS, and Mid-Day Meal Scheme faced cuts or restructuring, affecting millions of families.

At the same time, rising inequality and food price inflation made access more difficult. NSS 77th Round data show that rural food expenditure has barely increased despite higher production (MoSPI, 2020). This shows a disconnect between availability and consumption, influenced by unstable markets, weak employment, and social exclusion.

Hunger in India is not only a nutritional issue—it is deeply political. Building on Sen's entitlement theory and further studies on welfare restructuring, this paper uses a political economy approach to examine how neoliberal policies and welfare cuts have created a pattern of "selective inclusion and silent exclusion." The study maps food insecurity, assesses policy gaps, and explores how inequality and governance shape nutrition outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Food Insecurity and the Political Economy of Hunger

Sen's entitlement theory (1981) remains central to understanding hunger in India. It explains that people often go hungry not because food is unavailable, but because they cannot access it. This idea is still relevant today, as India continues to face high undernutrition despite surplus food production. Researchers describe this as "growth without nutrition" (Bhalla, 2015; Eli & Li, 2021).

Other scholars point out that liberalization reduced state responsibility and made access to food more dependent on markets (Ghosh, 2010). Declining public investment in agriculture and food subsidies has further weakened the system (Patnaik, 2020).

2.2 Structural Inequalities and Nutritional Outcomes

Studies using NFHS and NSS data highlight persistent gaps in calorie and protein consumption among poorer households (Narayanan & Gerber, 2017). States like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh lag behind others due to weaker infrastructure and governance (Rahman et al., 2018). NFHS-5 also shows that women's anemia and children's stunting remain high, partly due to underfunded programs like PDS and ICDS (Lalwani, 2024).

### 2.3 Welfare Retrenchment and Policy Fragmentation

Post-1990s reforms limited universal welfare and moved toward targeted schemes. This weakened the redistributive power of India's welfare system (Saxena, 2021). Even though NFSA (2013) aimed for universal food rights, its implementation has been uneven, with exclusions caused by digitization and weak local systems (Saini et al., 2017; Radhakrishnan, 2022).

2.4 Political Ecology of Food and Governance Failures

Political ecology perspectives emphasize governance failures, market pressures, and structural inequalities. Privatization of agricultural markets and reduced public procurement harm small farmers and indirectly affect nutrition at the household level (Saxena, 2018). Studies show a growing gap between policy promises and ground realities (Lalwani, 2024).

2.5 Gaps in Literature

Existing research often looks at nutrition or welfare separately, without linking them to broader economic changes. Few studies focus on the nutritional impact of fiscal austerity or examine how political ecology shapes food insecurity. This study fills these gaps by using multiple datasets and a structural approach to analyse hunger in India.
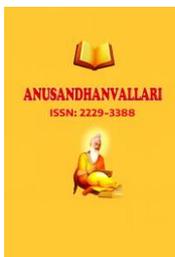
3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative analysis of secondary data, guided by the political economy of welfare retrenchment. Using Yin's (2018) explanatory research approach, it connects statistical indicators with broader policy and governance trends.

3.2 Data Sources

Data include NFHS-5, GHI 2023, FAO SOFI 2023, NSS 77th Round, RBI price trends, the NFSA (2013), PDS reforms, and academic literature from FAO, IFPRI, and UNDP.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The study uses descriptive statistics, thematic policy analysis, and comparative state mapping. Sen's entitlement theory and political ecology guide interpretation, while triangulation ensures reliability.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Since only publicly available secondary data are used, no ethical clearance was required.

3.5 Limitations

Secondary data may undercount marginalized groups, and many datasets reflect pre-pandemic conditions. Policy reports may also have implementation bias. Triangulation reduces these issues but cannot eliminate them fully.

4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Economic Growth and the Persistence of Hunger

India's economy grew at an average of 6.8% between 2014 and 2022 (World Bank, 2023). Yet hunger remains widespread. FAO estimates that 233 million Indians are undernourished (FAO, 2023). NSS data show that food expenditure has stagnated, while health and education costs have risen, squeezing household budgets (MoSPI, 2020). Inflation in essential food items further reduces purchasing power. This shows that growth has not improved everyday nutrition, especially for poorer families.

4.2 Nutritional Outcomes: The NFHS-5 Paradox

NFHS-5 reveals high levels of stunting, underweight children, and anemia among women (IIPS & MoHFW, 2021). The slow improvement in child nutrition and rising anemia reflect chronic underfunding of ICDS and Mid-Day Meals (Sinha & Jha, 2023). Gender gaps and regional disparities remain large, especially in poorer northern states.

4.3 Declining Welfare Investment and Retrenchment Trends

Government spending on nutrition programs has fallen over time (Ministry of Finance, 2023). Digitization of the PDS improved transparency but created new exclusions, especially for households lacking Aadhaar or reliable connectivity (Radhakrishnan, 2022). NFSA coverage has shrunk as population numbers increased but coverage quotas were not updated.
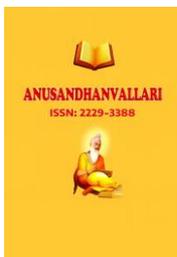
4.4 Inequality, Price Volatility, and Consumption Patterns

NSS data show that poorer households spend much less on food and have less diverse diets (MoSPI, 2020). Rising food prices worsen this situation. Climate change, unstable markets, and lower buffer stocks all contribute to reduced food security (FAO, 2023).

4.5 The Politics of Nutrition: Governance and Accountability

Nutrition governance has become more bureaucratic and technocratic. Budget cuts to ICDS and PM-POSHAN show reduced state commitment. Critics argue that hunger is increasingly treated as a technical issue rather than a rights-based one (Drèze & Khera, 2023).

5. Discussion

5.1 The Paradox of Growth without Nutrition

The study shows that India's food insecurity is closely tied to entitlement failures. Economic growth alone cannot guarantee nutrition, especially when welfare systems weaken and market dependence increases.

5.2 Welfare Retrenchment and the Neoliberal Turn

Targeted schemes, digitization, and austerity have reduced universal access to food. Spending on nutrition has decreased, while inequality and food inflation have risen. NFSA's rights-based framework is slowly being replaced by targeted, conditional access.

5.3 Gendered and Caste-Based Dimensions of Food Insecurity

Women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes face the highest levels of malnutrition. Poverty, limited access to resources, and gender norms all contribute to this vulnerability.

5.4 Political Ecology of Hunger and Governance Failures

Environmental stress, market volatility, and weak governance combine to deepen food insecurity. Digital reforms create new exclusions instead of solving old problems.

### 5.5 The Moral Economy of Welfare and the Right to Food

The shift away from universal welfare reflects a deeper moral and political change. Hunger becomes an issue of administrative efficiency instead of a fundamental right. This weakens the constitutional commitment to food security.

Overall, hunger in India is best understood as a structural problem shaped by economic policy, welfare cuts, and governance failures. Without rethinking food security as a right, the cycle of exclusion will continue.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Despite high economic growth, hunger and malnutrition remain serious issues. Food insecurity in India is rooted in entitlement failures, weakened welfare systems, and governance gaps. Addressing it requires major changes in policy design and political priorities.
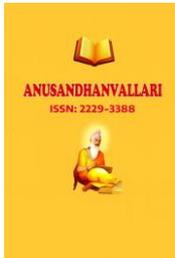
6.2 Policy Recommendations

1. **Reinstate Universal PDS:** Update beneficiary lists regularly, reduce dependence on biometric systems, and expand the food basket to pulses, oils, and nutrient-rich items.

2. **Strengthen and Integrate Nutrition Schemes:** Increase funding, improve coordination across programs, and involve local communities in monitoring.

3. **Reorient Fiscal Policy Toward Social Protection:** Increase social expenditure, establish a National Social Protection Fund, and expand employment programs with nutrition-linked initiatives.

4. **Ensure Gender and Caste Equity:** Provide additional entitlements for vulnerable women, improve anganwadi services, and ensure greater access for SC/ST households.

5. **Decentralize Food Governance:** Empower local bodies, support community grain banks, and promote social audits over digital-only oversight.

6. **Integrate Climate Resilience into Food Policy:** Encourage climate-resilient crops like millets, improve water management, and adopt climate-smart agriculture.

India's hunger crisis is both political and moral. The country has enough food, but not everyone can access it. Ensuring nutrition for all requires a renewed commitment to universal rights, dignity, and justice.

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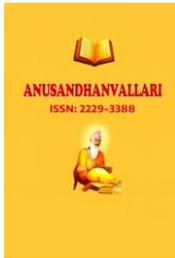
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