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CHILDHOOD HUNGER IN THE 21st CENTURY: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN UPHOLDING THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood hunger remains one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, especially in developing countries like India. Despite economic growth and significant policy interventions, India continues to struggle with high rates of child malnutrition and hunger, which are key indicators of socio-economic inequality and governance challenges. According to the Global Hunger Index 2023, India performs poorly in ensuring adequate nutrition for children, with alarming rates of stunting, wasting, and underweight children². This issue not only threatens individual health and development but also impacts the country's long-term socio-economic progress. This research investigates the role of government policies in addressing childhood hunger, with a focus on legal frameworks, implementation challenges, and actionable recommendations for improvement.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Childhood hunger continues to be a significant challenge in India, despite substantial progress in economic and food production sectors. India is home to the world's largest number of undernourished children, with approximately 38% of children under five suffering from stunting³. Malnutrition in early childhood leads to lifelong consequences, including developmental delays, poor academic performance, and higher mortality rates.

India's commitment to addressing childhood hunger is framed not only by its national policies but also by its constitutional and international obligations. The Indian Constitution, although not directly addressing the right to food, offers a broad framework through its provisions on

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² Global Hunger Index 2023: A Data-Based Assessment of Hunger and Malnutrition Worldwide

³ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-2021

the Right to Life (Article 21) and Fundamental Duties (Article 51A)⁴. The judiciary has played a critical role in interpreting these rights, especially in relation to the Right to Food. Landmark cases such as *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India* (2001)⁵ and the *Right to Food case* (2004)⁶ have expanded the scope of the Right to Food under the Indian Constitution.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The issue of hunger and malnutrition in India is deeply rooted in the country's socio-economic history. Despite being an agricultural economy with abundant food resources, India has long struggled with widespread poverty, inequality, and poor public health outcomes. The historical background of childhood hunger in India can be traced through several key phases in the country's political, economic, and social development.

Colonial Era (British Rule)

During the British colonial period, India experienced significant food insecurity, which was exacerbated by exploitative colonial policies. The British prioritization of export-oriented agriculture led to the depletion of local food supplies. Famines were recurrent, with millions dying from starvation during events such as the Great Bengal Famine (1943), in which an estimated 3 million people perished⁷. The British response to famine was often insufficient, further deepening food insecurity. This period of colonial exploitation created long-term vulnerabilities in India's food systems, which would affect future generations⁸.

Post-Independence Period (1947-1970s)

Following independence in 1947, India faced massive challenges in terms of population growth, poverty, and food shortages. The country was still recovering from the colonial legacy of underdevelopment and widespread malnutrition. In the 1950s and 1960s, India faced food crises, particularly during droughts and the failure of crops. The government implemented a variety of policy measures to improve food security, including the introduction of the **Green Revolution** in the 1960s, which focused on high-yield varieties of wheat and rice, increased irrigation, and the use of chemical fertilizers. While the Green Revolution helped increase food production in certain regions, it primarily benefited wealthier farmers and did not fully address

⁴ Constitution of India 1950, Article 21 and Article 51A

⁵ *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*. 2001, 7 SCC 356.

⁶ Supreme Court of India. *Right to Food Case Orders*. 2004.

⁷ Sen, Amartya. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford University Press, 1981

⁸ Deaton, Angus, and Jean Drèze. *The Great Indian Poverty Debate*. Economic and Political Weekly, 2002.

hunger among the poorest, particularly children.⁹

The Emergence of Food Security as a Policy Issue (1970s-1990s)

The 1970s saw the introduction of **food aid programs** and efforts to address hunger more systematically. The **Public Distribution System (PDS)**, established in the 1960s, began to expand in the 1970s and 1980s to distribute subsidized food to low-income households. However, the PDS faced inefficiencies, corruption, and targeting issues, which limited its impact.¹⁰

During the 1990s, India adopted economic reforms aimed at liberalization and industrial growth. These reforms, however, were accompanied by growing inequality, rural-urban divides, and food insecurity among marginalized communities. Despite India's overall economic growth, hunger and malnutrition remained prevalent, with millions of children suffering from undernutrition. This period highlighted the need for comprehensive policies and reforms to address the nutritional status of children and vulnerable populations.

The Right to Food Movement and Judicial Interventions (2000s)

The early 2000s marked a turning point in India's approach to food security. The **People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India** case in 2001 was a landmark moment in the fight for the right to food. The Supreme Court of India expanded the scope of **Article 21** (Right to Life) to include the right to food, directing the government to implement various measures to ensure that food reaches the most vulnerable groups, including children. This ruling helped lay the groundwork for the subsequent policy reforms.¹¹

In the same period, the **Right to Food Campaign** emerged as a social movement demanding that food security become a legal entitlement for all Indians. The campaign sought to address systemic inefficiencies in food distribution and highlight the importance of government responsibility in ensuring food access. This movement was instrumental in the passing of the **National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013**, which guaranteed food rights to two-thirds of India's population, including special provisions for children, pregnant women, and lactating

⁹ Hazell, Peter B. R., and S. K. Haggblade. *Farm-Nonfarm Linkages in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for Policy*. *Food Policy*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1999, pp. 379–393.

¹⁰Swaminathan, M. "The Public Distribution System and Food Security in India." *Indian Journal of Human Development*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2020, pp. 1–19.

¹¹People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India, (2001) 3 SCC 146.

mothers.¹²

Contemporary Period (2010-Present)

In the past two decades, India has made significant strides in addressing childhood hunger through various programs. The **Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)**, which was launched in the 1990s, gained momentum and expanded nationwide. It provides free meals to children in schools, aiming to improve both nutritional intake and educational outcomes. The **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)**, established in the 1970s, continued to operate as a key program for maternal and child health and nutrition.¹³

Despite these efforts, India continues to face challenges in tackling childhood hunger. According to the **Global Hunger Index 2023**, India ranks poorly, with alarming rates of child malnutrition, stunting, and wasting.¹⁴ While government policies have made significant strides, implementation challenges, socio-economic disparities, and governance issues continue to undermine the effectiveness of these initiatives.

In recent years, there has been a focus on technological innovations and administrative reforms to improve food distribution systems, such as biometric authentication and digital tracking in the **Public Distribution System (PDS)**.¹⁵ However, deep-rooted issues such as corruption, exclusion errors, and inadequate infrastructure remain significant hurdles in achieving food security for all children.

The historical background of childhood hunger in India is marked by a legacy of colonial exploitation, economic challenges, and policy responses that have been piecemeal and inconsistent. While significant strides have been made in terms of food security through judicial pronouncements, legislation, and government programs, much remains to be done to ensure that the right to food is fully realized for every child. Addressing childhood hunger requires a holistic approach that integrates legal, social, economic, and technological reforms.

¹² Government of India, *National Food Security Act*, 2013

¹³ Ministry of Women and Child Development, *Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)*, 2020

¹⁴ Global Hunger Index, *2023 Report*.

¹⁵ Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, *Public Distribution System and Technology Innovations*, 2021

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

THE RIGHT TO FOOD

Article 25 of the UDHR 1948 provides a reference point for human rights legislation that Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food.¹⁶

The Article 11 (1) of ICESCR 1966 recognizes the right to adequate food as an essential part of the right to an adequate standard of living. It also explicitly recognizes “the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger” in the Article 11 (2).¹⁷ The right to food is also recognized in other international conventions protecting specific groups, such as the Article 10 of CEDAW 1979¹⁸, the Article 11 of CRC 1989¹⁹ and the Article 12 of CRPD 2006²⁰. The right to food is not simply a right to a minimum ration of calories, proteins, and other specific nutrients; it is a right to all nutritional elements that a person needs to live a healthy and active life. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has described the right to food as “when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.”²¹

Certain aspects of the right to food should be emphasized:

- Food must be *available*, *accessible* and *adequate*. *Accessible* means that food is affordable and physically accessible to all, no matter where they live. *Adequate* means that the food must satisfy dietary needs, be safe, and be culturally acceptable.
- The right to food is different from food security. According to FAO, food security exists “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”²² It is a precondition for the full enjoyment of the right to food. However, the concept of food security itself is not a legal concept and imposes neither obligations nor entitlements.
- Certain groups are more vulnerable to the violation of their rights to food: the rural and urban poor, indigenous peoples, women, and children.

¹⁶ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 25, 1948

¹⁷ United Nations, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, Article 11, 1966.

¹⁸ United Nations, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, 1979

¹⁹ *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, 1989

²⁰ *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*, 2006.

²¹ OHCHR Fact Sheet No. 16 (Rev.1): *The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

²² FAO, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2001* (Rome, 2001).

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Certain Articles in the Indian Constitution talks about the Right to Food. They are **Article 14** Equality before law–The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. **Article 21** Protection of life and personal liberty–No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law. Article 21 also includes **Right to Food** as a Fundamental Right. **Article 39** Certain principles of policy to be followed by the State – The state shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means to livelihood. **Article 47** Duty of the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living and to improve public health. The State shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties and, in particular, the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition on of the consumption except for medicinal purpose of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health.²³

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Other Statutes

There are certain other Statues relating to the Right to Food. They are:

Food Safety and Standard Act, 2006 (No. 34 of 2006)

Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 1992 (No. 41 of 1992)

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (No. 42 of 2005)

Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1954 (No. 37 of 1954)

Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 (No.10 of 1994)

National Food Security Act 2013

For children in the age group of 6 months to 6 years: an age-appropriate meal, free of charge, through the local Anganwadi. For children aged 6-14 years, one free mid-day meal every day (except on school holidays) in all government and government-aided schools, up to Class VIII. For children below six months, “exclusive breastfeeding shall be promoted”. For children who suffer from malnutrition, meals will be provided to them free of charge through the local Anganwadi.

²³ The Constitution of India, 1950

Pregnant and Lactating Women

Every pregnant and lactating mother is entitled to a free meal at the local Anganwadi (during pregnancy and six months after child birth) as well as maternity benefits of Rs 6,000, in instalments. They also provide one egg for a week for pregnant women and lactating mother for six months and two eggs per week for the child up to two years.

Schemes Food in India

The government has introduced various schemes in order to uphold the **Right to Food**. Some of them are:

1. Annapurna Schemes, 2000-01
2. Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)
3. Applied Nutritional Programme (ANP) Planning Commission
4. Emergency Feeding Programme, 2001
5. Integrated Child Development Services Schemes (ICDS), 1975
6. Mid-Day Meal Scheme, 1995
7. National Food Security Mission, 2007
8. National Maternity Benefits Schemes
9. National Nutritional Policy (NNP), 1993
10. National Old Age Pension Schemes
11. Nutritional Programme for Adolescent Girls, 2002-03
12. Public Food Distribution Scheme (PPS)
13. Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY)
14. Scheme for Supply of Food Grains to SC/ST/OBC Hostels Welfare Institutions, 2002-03
15. Targeted Public Distribution Scheme (TPDS)
16. Village Grain Bank Scheme
17. Wheat Based Nutrition Programme (WBNP)

National Food Security Mission

In 2007, the National Development Council launched the [National Food Security Mission](#). By the end of the 11th Five Year Plan (2011 – 2012), production of rice had successfully increased to the projected “10 million tons, wheat to 8 million tons and pulses to 2 million tons.” The 12th Five Year Plan was even more successful, with a target of 25 million tons of food grain from 2017 to 2020. The National Food Security Mission implemented eight strategies to

accomplish its objectives. Those strategies are to:

- Place focus on districts with low production and significant potential
- Establish cropping system-centric interventions
- Inherit “agro-climatic zone wise planning and cluster approach for crop productivity enhancement”
- Increase focus on annual crop (pulses) production and grow them with diverse crops
- “Promote and extend improved technologies i.e., seed, integrated nutrient management (INM), integrated pest management (IPM), input use efficiency and resource conservation technologies along with the capacity building of the farmers/extension functionaries”
- “Closely monitor the flow of funds to ensure timely reach of interventions to the target beneficiaries”
- Combine multiple interventions and the goals of each district and its plans
- “Implement agencies for assessing the impact of the interventions for a result-oriented approach”

Zero Hunger Programme

The Zero Hunger Programme in India [began in 2017](#) to improve agriculture, health and nutrition.²⁴ The Indian Council of Agricultural Research, the Indian Council of Medical Research, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation and the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) created it²⁵. The program focuses on developing farm equipment, revamping the farming system, setting up genetic gardens for biofortified plants and beginning zero hunger training. In India, most farmers do not have an adequate amount of land to support their families plus the growing population. Without proper storage available, transportation and marketing places, most food goes to waste. The Zero Hunger Programme [aimed to](#):

- Decrease child stunting for children 2 years and younger
- Ensure access to food all year round
- Create stable food systems
- Increase small farmer productivity and income
- Eliminate food waste

²⁴ Indian Council of Agricultural Research. **Zero Hunger Programme Overview**, 2017.

²⁵M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation. **Initiatives under the Zero Hunger Programme**, 2018.

Eat Right India Movement

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India started the [Eat Right India movement](#) to ensure that the Indian population has access to food that is healthy and safe. The program stands on the foundation of regulatory capacity building, collaborative and empowerment approach. Overall, the purpose of the Eat Right India Movement is to encourage communities to eat healthy, safe and sustainably. It aims to help all age groups since diet-related illnesses affect everyone if their eating habits are poor. With this common ground, the movement is banding with restaurants, agriculture, food producers, ministries and professional cooks to ensure change²⁶.

The Children in India are getting benefitted through the schemes provided by the Government and these schemes policies and Acts protects the Right to Food especially the Children's Right.

National Nutrition Mission

India's Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, launched the National Nutrition Mission (NNM) or the POSHAN Abhiyaan, on International Women's Day 2018. NNM targets children, pregnant women and lactating mothers, aiming to reduce stunting, undernutrition, anaemia and low birth weight babies. It uses [Lives Saved Tool, also known as LiST](#), to gather results on increased interventions of maternal, newborn and child health, and nutrition.²⁷

LANDMARK JUDGEMENTS

In **People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) v. Union of India (2001)**²⁸ a petition addressing the issue of hunger and the effectiveness of the **Public Distribution System (PDS)** in ensuring food security was filed. The **Supreme Court** held that the **Right to Food** is a fundamental right under **Article 21** of the Constitution, which guarantees the **Right to Life**. The Court ordered the government to ensure that no one should die of hunger, and emphasized that it is the responsibility of the state to make adequate food available to vulnerable populations. The **Mid-Day Meal Scheme** and **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)** were identified as critical mechanisms for addressing children's nutritional needs. The Court also directed the government to take steps to improve the PDS and food distribution to the poor.

²⁶ Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (2018). Eat Right India Movement Overview.

²⁷ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (2018). Launch of POSHAN Abhiyaan

²⁸ PUCL v. Union of India, Writ Petition (C) No. 196 of 2001.

In **Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1993)**²⁹ case primarily addressed the **Right to Education** but also involved the discussion of children's welfare, including their access to food. The **Supreme Court** acknowledged that a child's right to education is intrinsically linked with the provision of adequate nutrition and healthcare. The Court highlighted that without proper nutrition, a child's ability to learn and grow is severely hindered. Although the primary focus was on education, the ruling reinforced the broader understanding that children's development, including their nutritional status, is essential for their educational success.

The **State of Rajasthan v. Union of India (2013)**³⁰ case focused on the **National Food Security Act (NFSA)** and its implementation, especially for vulnerable sections, including children. The **Supreme Court** emphasized that the government must implement the provisions of the **National Food Security Act** effectively to ensure that children and pregnant women receive adequate nutrition. The Court specifically directed the government to ensure that **mid-day meal schemes** and **ICDS** are operational and effective in providing nutritional food to children. It stressed the importance of addressing malnutrition and hunger among children.

The **Right to Food Campaign v. Union of India (2008)**³¹ case focused on the government's responsibility to provide food to children through the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme** and **ICDS**. The **Supreme Court** reinforced that, children, especially in schools, have the **Right to Food** as part of their **Right to Life** under **Article 21**. The Court directed the government to improve the quality and quantity of food provided through **mid-day meals** and to monitor the schemes to prevent malnutrition. The case also highlighted the need to ensure that food is regularly provided to children in schools without disruption.

In **Sarla Mudgal v. Union of India (1995)**³² While the main focus was on issues of personal law, the **Supreme Court** emphasized that the welfare of children, which includes their access to food, must be a priority for the state. The ruling reaffirmed that children's right to food is part of their **Right to Life** and the government must take proactive steps to ensure their nutritional needs are met, especially in vulnerable communities.

²⁹ Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh, (1993) 1 SCC 645.

³⁰ State of Rajasthan v. Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 349 of 2013

³¹ Right to Food Campaign v. Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 196 of 2001

³² Sarla Mudgal v. Union of India, AIR 1995 SC 1531

In **Gauri Maulekhi v. Union of India (2016)**³³, it was dealt with the government's failure to provide adequate food to children through the **ICDS** and **Mid-Day Meal Scheme**. The **Supreme Court** intervened to improve the implementation of child nutrition schemes, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas. The Court issued directions to ensure that children's access to nutritious food is guaranteed through the **ICDS** and **mid-day meals**. The ruling emphasized that the State has a duty to ensure the nutritional security of children and to strengthen the mechanisms for food distribution.

The **Sarvotam Yadav v. Union of India (2013)**³⁴ addressed the failure to implement the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme** effectively in some regions. The **Supreme Court** ordered that the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme** should be improved, and children should not be deprived of their right to nutritious food. It mandated the **government** to ensure the scheme's proper implementation, emphasizing that children must receive regular, nutritious meals in schools. The Court also emphasized the need for accountability in the scheme's execution.

The **Right to Food Campaign v. Union of India (2012)**,³⁵ addressed the implementation of the **National Food Security Act** and its impact on children's nutritional needs. The **Supreme Court** directed the **government** to ensure that children's nutritional needs are met under the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme** and **ICDS**. The Court emphasized that the **Right to Food** is a fundamental right and the State must take all necessary steps to implement food security programs effectively to ensure that no child goes hungry.

In **State of Tamil Nadu v. Union of India (2014)**³⁶, it was about the role of the **ICDS** in ensuring that children under 6 years old receive adequate nutrition. The **Supreme Court** ruled that the **ICDS** must be strengthened to ensure that all children under the age of 6 have access to proper nutrition. The Court directed the government to monitor the distribution of food and nutrition to children, particularly in rural areas where malnutrition rates were high.

The **Annapurna Devi v. Union of India (2003)**,³⁷ case focused on improving the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme** and other governmental initiatives for child nutrition. The **Supreme Court** ruled

³³ Gauri Maulekhi v. Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 80 of 2016.

³⁴ Sarvotam Yadav v. Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 417 of 2013

³⁵ Right to Food Campaign v. Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 196 of 2001.

³⁶ State of Tamil Nadu v. Union of India, Writ Petition (Civil) No. 111 of 2014.

³⁷ Annapurna Devi v. Union of India, (2003) 4 SCC 171.

that the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme** should be monitored closely, and that children in schools must be provided with healthy and nutritious food regularly. The Court directed the government to ensure that food served under the scheme meets nutritional standards and is not compromised in quality.

INDIA'S POSITION

In the 2024 Global Hunger Index, India ranks 105th out of the [127 countries with sufficient data to calculate 2024 GHI scores](#).³⁸ With a score of 27.3 in the 2024 Global Hunger Index, India has a level of hunger that is *serious*. Currently, there are many hunger-fighting initiatives in India. The five-government implemented hunger-fighting initiatives in India include the National Nutrition Mission (NNM), National Food Security Mission, Zero Hunger Programme, Eat Right India Movement and efforts toward food fortification.

CONCLUSION

Childhood hunger in India remains a persistent and critical issue, despite the significant progress made through government initiatives such as the **National Food Security Act (NFSA)**, the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme**, and the **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)**. These programs have played a crucial role in improving food access and alleviating hunger, but challenges continue to hinder their effectiveness. These challenges include inefficiencies in food distribution systems, inadequate nutritional quality, and disparities in access, particularly for marginalized groups. To effectively tackle childhood hunger, a holistic approach is required, one that goes beyond simply increasing food availability. It must focus on enhancing the nutritional quality of the food provided, ensuring that it meets the dietary needs of growing children. Strengthening early childhood nutrition is critical, as this is a crucial period for physical and cognitive development. Additionally, special attention must be given to the most vulnerable populations, such as children from marginalized communities, tribal areas, and migrant families, who often face barriers to accessing food.

Furthermore, improving the monitoring and accountability of food programs is essential. Robust systems should be put in place to track the effectiveness of these policies, while ensuring that food distribution reaches all intended beneficiaries. Community involvement in monitoring these programs can foster greater transparency and responsiveness, ensuring that

³⁸ Global Hunger Index (2024). **India's Hunger Status**.

local needs are addressed. A focus on gender equity is also vital, as girls often face greater food insecurity than boys in many parts of India.

The Indian government must continue to refine and expand its existing programs while exploring new strategies to adapt to the evolving socio-economic and environmental landscape. By adopting a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach, India can make significant progress toward achieving food security for all children, thereby laying the foundation for healthier and more prosperous futures.

