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 India, Factor 11: Malnutrition

The World's Poorest People Facing the World's Biggest Problem

“India happens to be a rich country inhabited by very poor people” (Singh, Manmohan). The words of Manmohan Singh are thought-provoking enough alone, but when the consideration for the world’s biggest problem joins the conversation, an entirely new level of irony is revealed. With that, as one might predict, an entirely new level of understanding is needed.

Within India, there are varying degrees of wealth and poverty, although the gap between rich and poor is not as great as in many developed countries. When defining the typical rural family, it is difficult to include all of the many aspects and differences among areas. However, there are many similarities amongst the twenty-nine states, seven union territories, and diverse regions of India. The typical rural family size in India consists of four or five with 47.1% of rural households now consisting of four or less family members compared to 40% of rural households ten years ago (The Indian). There is an average of 3 adults per family and an average of 2 members younger than age 18 (Wolpert). The adults are almost always the head of household (16% of the time are women), spouse, and an adult son or daughter (The Indian).

Diet of the typical rural family consists of many grains, spices, vegetables, carbs, and beans. As of 2007, India’s people had available to them, 2300 kilocalories per person per day, 500 above the minimum required calorie intake of 1800 per day set by the United Nations (Chopra). This number, however, is difficult to fully understand or interpret due to the levels of availability and access varying from place to place, wastage, and the year at which the information was gathered. In addition, the latest evidence has shown, as stated by India TODAY, a decrease in amount of food available from the 1980s to present day, despite the economic growth rate of nearly six percent annually. This is due, in part, to the extreme amount of wastage in India, as pointed out by Manu Balachandran and Kunal Sehgal for Quartz India in July of 2015.

“... Asia’s third largest economy also wastes an insane amount of food, even though some of the hungriest people in the world live here. India wasted as much as 40% of its total food produce annually as of 2013, according to a written statement given to India’s parliament by former agriculture minister Sharad Pawar. And this is just the beginning of a long list of rather grim numbers: India’s annual wastage of food is worth Rs 58,000 crore (\$9 billion) Each year, 21 million metric tonnes of wheat—almost equal to Australia’s production—rots in India due to improper storage,” (Balachandran).

For both urban and rural Indians to become aware of this waste would be a huge step forward in citizens pushing their regional governments and eventually the national government to invest in better storage facilities and a more efficient process. Whether the idea for better storage facilities means placing multi-million dollar “hubs” of storage within specified districts of India or increased transportation nationally or privately, money will be quintessential. Even more statistics point out protein consumption by rural families has fallen eight percent in the previous three decades (Chopra). In almost all areas, urban areas tend to be doing better; a testament to the importance of availability and location, location, location. Within the rural economy are “haats”, rural markets where villagers in rural India go to purchase their daily needs or small farmers sell their product, most often take place on 5-6 acres of land and (on average) are 24 kilometers from the nearest “big town” (Kashyap). Pradeep Kashyap discusses these rural markets in a 2011 article for The Financial Express.

“Haats are the nerve centre of the economic social and cultural life of villages. Producers and farmers depend on haats not only for the disposal of their produce, but also for purchase of their daily needs. Around 43,000 haats are held in India. Each haat is spread over acres of land and boasts 300 to 500 stalls selling anything and everything that villagers need in their daily lives,” (Kashyap).

Pradeep Kashyap goes on to discuss the ability of big brands to move into these rural markets with advertising and a form of “getting the word out”. With such a growing number of haats as an almost daily gathering place, there is no reason to not use that as an advantage for those suffering from malnutrition. Whether the government of India or private organizations uses these markets as educational centers on nutrition or as payout banks of food and/or conditional cash transfers (although controversial), a significant impact can be made in reaching the most rural and most malnourished Indians (Akileswaran). While there are downsides for urban-living by some notions, the discussion of malnutrition on the disadvantaged rural population makes its way to the forefront when Lisa C. Smith, Marie T. Ruel and Aida Ndiaye report on why childhood malnutrition is lower in urban areas than in rural.

“Large differences in favor of urban areas are found in women’s education, availability of water and sanitary facilities and socioeconomic status, and, to a lesser extent, women’s relative decision-making power. Across regions, women living in urban areas are 3–4 times more likely to have secondary schooling than those who live in rural areas. In South Asia, up to 60% of rural women have never attended school, compared to approximately one-third in urban areas. Similarly, while 10–20% of the urban population lacks access to sanitary facilities, more than three-quarters of the rural population in South Asia and close to half in SSA and LAC are in this situation,” (Smith).

Clearly, the divide between rural and urban life when contemplating the standard of living and education on and access to a safer and more nutritional upbringing is widening and plays a role in malnutrition.

“... potentiated by higher maternal education, higher incomes, greater decision-making power of women relative to men, and wider availability of health, water, and sanitation services result in lower rates of childhood malnutrition in urban areas...,” (Smith).

It is also important to understand the grand scope of things. Sixteen out of the twenty-two countries where more than one-third of the population is malnourished are a part of Africa (Tracking). With that said, India is often associated as the country with the highest prevalence of underweight children with numbers nearly double that of Sub-Saharan Africa ($\frac{1}{3}$ of malnourished children live in India) (India). Adding to the sad statistics that malnutrition has caused, one out of every three women in India is underweight (South). The previous fact concerning sixteen countries in Africa is something that adds to the relatively understandable ignorance of those in established countries who believe Africa is the one place where things are bad and assistance is needed. Referring back to the words of Manmohan Singh at the beginning of this introduction, with India having the tenth-largest nominal GDP in the world (Report), it is difficult to comprehend the inability of so many to have access or money to purchase needed food due to a country’s economic status having a close association with malnutrition and food insecurity. But with the utmost thought, attention and the occasional assertiveness, India’s future could not only transition itself into a hunger-free, malnutrition-less, and food secure nation, but will impact the hundreds of millions of others around the world suffering from what will hopefully be said in the past-tense in the near future.

With the issue of hunger (and more specifically malnutrition), there comes a stigma of either not wanting to be responsible for such a horrific life and eventual death in many cases, or not fully understanding the difficulties and atrocities faced by those suffering each day due to the general disbelief that in a twenty-

first century world anyone could go to bed hungry each night. This disbelief is rampant in the United States due, in part, to the huge amount of overconsumption. The stigma is somewhat warranted in the fact that the world is capable of feeding twelve billion people as of 2008 (FAO). Clearly, the underlying problem is not solely food production. It is a combination of increasing food costs, a lack of nutritious food, and the difficulty of reaching $\frac{2}{3}$ of the Indian population in rural areas.

At this present time, the number stands slightly above 805 million suffering from undernourishment, not far from one-seventh of the world (World). One of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals happens to be to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Pursuing this goal requires a look at the causes of the hunger, and ultimately, food insecurity, as explained below (United).

“Food security [is] a situation that 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. Swaminathan (1986) has stressed the need for shifting to the concept of ‘Nutrition Security’, which he has defined as ‘physical, economic and social access to balanced diet, clean drinking water, environmental hygiene, primary health care and nutritional literacy. Three dimensions viz. availability, access and absorption are encompassed in the definition...’
(Swaminathan)

Hunger is the world's biggest killer of children, accounting for over fifty-eight percent of child mortality annually (Walker). Hunger kills more than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined (World). This equates to approximately six million children every year who are not only lost year after year, but who die in vain if this issue concerning so many is not brought to mainstream media or the minds of people and boardroom meetings of organizations around the world who could make an impact on so many.

INDIA

The state of India provides free and compulsory education for every child from age six to fourteen. The current average literacy rate is 74% (well below the world average of 84%), but an enrollment of 93% in primary school (Provisional). This somewhat encouraging statistic is one of devilish deception due to the dropout rate in primary school being over 50% in 2004 due to several reasons; one being, the greater importance of survival and obtaining food for not only oneself, but for their family. One of the less noticeable, yet very important statistics belongs to the women due to the very prevalent gender disparity when it comes to literacy rates. The literacy rate for men in India is above 80%, while women struggle to surpass a 65% literacy rate (Provisional). A high literacy rate is urgently needed to educate women on the importance of contraception and the significance of breast-feeding.

There are several issues with sanitation (toilet availability) and water access at many schools which may be a point of discussion for the improvement of these schools eventually affecting the levels of malnutrition within the state. The benefits of the school as a general area for everyone attending in their families can be an important stepping stone in improving access to food and proper sanitation. India's universal healthcare system is often one of decent regard. It is the growing amount of money being spent, however, by those already impoverished that is driving down the ability for those in need to not only obtain the care, but to pay for it on top of the burden of malnutrition among so many families. This increase in expenditure by the lower classes is, in part, due to the growing medical costs and the decreasing amount of public expenditure upon the healthcare system. A report from Ravi Duggal in 2002 brought to light the very poor ratios of hospitals, hospital supplies, and staff to the growing population of India. For every 100,000 rural men and women, there is only 0.77 hospitals, 3.2 public health centers and 44 beds (Nigam, Understanding).

When it comes to rural India, small farms are the dominant and ever-growing foundation of agriculture and family life. The majority of farms are less than a hectare with focuses on wheat, rice, cotton, peanuts, fruits and vegetables. Overall, there are approximately 121 million agricultural holdings in India as of 2000, and 99 million of those are “small or marginal farmers” (Dev). One of the greatest challenges to agricultural productivity is access to irrigation. With that aside for a moment, it’s interesting to reference a 2012 report by NPR’s Dan Charles. The orange sweet potato, high in vitamin A, has been used to save lives in southeast Africa, specifically targeted at children suffering from malnutrition. These types of innovative and natural ways to save lives through the agricultural improvements is definitely a specific action for those such as India’s department of agriculture to look into. If such a broad department of India isn’t most efficient, allowing fluid work with the International Potato Center could allow for similar benefits as seen in Africa (Charles).

Moving towards the issue of malnutrition as a whole, it is the problem itself that will be the biggest challenge to overcome in order to improve agricultural productivity, employment, earning a living wage, and gaining access to food markets and adequate nutrition. As is similar to many issues the world faces, it most often relates to money and the steady trickle down to the people to put toward food and the development of our future generation’s health. In addition, this entrapment of so many caught in a repeating pattern of problems is deemed inescapable without assistance from the government and outside organizations. Something of what may appear to outsiders as a minimal challenge, is one of quite staggering attention and necessary detail.

Women are at a disadvantage due to income differences and as single mothers, would be more likely to succumb to malnutrition, as would her children. Poor socioeconomic position results in the inability to purchase nutritious food such as fruits, vegetables, and other food that is, in effect, increasingly more expensive compared to less nutritious and somewhat unhealthy food available to low-income households. Harvard University of Public Health recently published findings, concluding the healthiest diets compared to the least healthy diets would impose an additional \$1.50/day per person. For the typical family in India, that equates to nearly \$2800 annually for the healthiest diet. With average annual income per capita being \$1499 in 2013 and a national poverty percentage of nearly 30%, there is not a feasible option for even those at the middle-income levels (Eating). Unless, of course, action is taken to reduce these costs or provide more assistance to those struggling the most and at risk the most (these would include pregnant women). UNICEF, using a 2005-2006 NFHS-3 sample survey reported that 39% of women who gave birth were underweight at the time of delivery and 7.4 million babies had a low weight at birth (*National*). The disadvantaged does not stop there. As hinted at before, the rural poor are often worse off than the urban poor due to the simple, yet devastating effect of their proximity to local food markets or areas of sanitation and nutritious food. Women, once again, face a huge barrier in obtaining a place in the national workforce of just 30% women and only 13% of women in India listed as actively employed as a wage worker (Challenge).

The situation of malnutrition in India is one of slowly growing optimism in recent years because of several government agency programs put in place by the state and outside organizations to converge upon the issue, including the National Food Security Act (NFSA). The progress, however, may not be moving fast enough and will most definitely fall short of meeting the number one millennium goal set by the United Nations, to cut malnutrition by half (United). The current situation for the rural farm family in India is by no means improving in the ways that India wants it to. With very little success in reducing the staggering statistics of malnutrition, there now comes the time for recognition of the problem and implementation of solutions.

THE SOLUTIONS

As stated earlier, the World Bank currently ranks India as one the highest in the world for the number of children facing malnutrition (India). This situation not only negatively affects the economy and

productivity as a nation, but it also affects, with the biggest impact, the people of the nation and their livelihoods. In regards to all of the goals set forth in this generation's millennium development goals by the UN, whether it be: achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other illnesses, ensuring environmental sustainability, achieving global partnership for development, or even eradicating extreme poverty, hunger and reducing child mortality there has always been what appears to be, at least from the border of involvement that there is a sense of trial and error (United). The degree at which the trial and error takes place is prevalent within the multiple attempts to provide nutrition, health, vitamins and money to so many in need. Starting from the ground up, as opposed to a huge national initiative might have a more substantial effect. Quite possibly one of the more intriguing solutions would be to position a local, regional, and eventually national survey in the hands of those rural Indians who struggle the most. By making their livelihood and depreciated standard of living known to their fellow Indians and people around the globe, the organizations that facilitate the increased support of these people will benefit. It is important to consider, however, the possibility of starting at the local level, as mentioned, before expanding potential aid programs to a national degree. Not only would starting small, rather than big (as pursued by most), allow for better understanding of the success rate of a particular program, but it would allow for more power in the hands of those suffering. Without consensus from those in need on which issues to tackle, nothing can be achieved.

One of the deciding factors in easing international issues is the amount of press, media, and outright attention that it receives. From an individual's point of view, to claim that one issue is more deserving than the other can and most likely will sound narcissistic and out of touch. But the sheer lack of funding towards the cause of reducing extreme malnutrition within not only India, but around the world is one of an unprecedented intensity when compared to other diseases such as HIV/AIDS that receives \$2.2 billion in aid while only \$300 million goes to basic nutritional aid each year (Malnutrition). This is by no means a competition of who deserves more, but with more children dying from malnutrition each day than malaria, HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis combined, there is no question as to why it deserves attention and international concern (World). The subcontinent of India is one of many strengths and unique personalities, but one must push those thoughts aside and realize that it is not happiness that resides within the rural or even urban areas of India for millions. If foreign aid is to be established by the world powers, including the United States, the most likely form would be marginal and in the hands of confirmed organizations on the forefront of agricultural technology or the government of India when it has demonstrated an organized and successful plan. Assisting those in not only India, but the organizations that lead the way towards sustainable and nutritious advancements will benefit also the nearly 50 million Americans who report as food insecure. As a moral, economical, and global issue, foreign aid is one slice of the "improvement pie" that can make a difference.

Many tend to focus on economic development to therefore decrease levels of malnutrition within the country before addressing the root of the problem which is the malnutrition in itself and lack of access, education, and money. It is not an incorrect assumption to want to increase economic GDP per capita or overall industry and technology in the country. However, in addition to the continued growth of economies and agricultural technology, immediate recovery and implementation of life-saving feeding programs within community development plans is needed to curb and begin to lower the increasing levels of malnutrition. The complexity and intense implementation of so many additives to a community would be a lot of work and often seems as though it may be too much to be feasible, but as with any project or goal (such as writing this paper) you must first begin to achieve completion. The description of the ideal community development programme consists of the perfect goal in order to lower and ultimately deplete malnutrition in India; whether it be the engineering of rural activities, welfare for families, health and sanitation improvements, education of youth with emphasis on literacy, or child care directed towards women, children, farmers, and those under the poverty line (Setty).

Many nutrition programs such as: the Midday Meal scheme in Indian schools, the integrated child development scheme, National Children's Fund, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the Public Distribution System all have made impacts upon increasing access to nutrition and food to children and women (by honing in on a specific area and focusing on both children and women with emphasis on the disbursement of nutrients), but neither India nor the outside organizations have formed a comprehensive strategy for maximum success. India currently has the opportunity to take notes from other countries that have had much more success in leveling off malnutrition. The majority of countries that have implemented complex, sectional actions based on varying nutritional policies whether it be Mexico, Indonesia, or Thailand have experienced a tremendous decrease in malnutrition levels, in accordance with the UN Millennium Goals. Following the paths taken by other countries will not be the road to success, however, without major contributions by the Indian government to take charge and create its own cognitive plans through delegation of separate sectors within the country.

It is difficult to continue the flow of ideas and solutions with creativity and prowess for anyone involved with such a task, but solutions abound. Add the use of proper and conciliatory school lunch programs through a successful reform initiative of the education system and include restrictions upon food with no nutritional value. In addition, benefits and subsidies should be given to those companies that produce natural, nutritious, and cheap food that will increase the decline of malnutrition. Another step would be to raise awareness through people like Brandon Stanton who travelled through numerous countries to promote the United Nation's Millennium Goals. Success stories also come from Jerome Jarre (with an online following of millions) who brought solar lights to the dark, rural areas of the Philippines through awareness in adjunction with the "Liter of Light" project. Building on awareness, one may look to the success of the international day of awareness for AIDS.

"Ahead of the World Aids Day on December 1, Regional Director of WHO South-East Asia Poonam Khetrapal Singh today said the success has come due to concerted efforts through civil society movements, supported by national and international commitments and scientific research... Massive gains have been achieved in our fight against HIV. We now have more than 10 million people on HIV treatment globally." (World AIDS)

There is little reason why there should not be a day with just as much awareness, if not more, for those suffering from extreme hunger and food insecurity around the globe. There could be nothing more impactful than a global initiative for awareness to finally end world hunger, poverty, and malnutrition not only within India, but around the globe and achieve adequate nutrition, general prosperity and food security for every human being.

One of the greatest and most baffling concerns is the current disillusionment of success due to India's big GDP not reflecting upon the average annual incomes of the people themselves. With the first step being to make sure that the success of the nation makes its way down to every nook and cranny of India, a good step will be taken in the right direction. Secondly, there is a need for cohesiveness and continuity between the programs currently being moderately implemented. Through better implementation and coverage of more around the country, whether it be by the United Nations or by a specialized Indian taskforce, a better sense of the central goal will emerge.

Finally, there is no better time than now to focus on the women and the youth. As mentioned several times in this essay, women are severely disadvantaged when it comes to education on breastfeeding, literacy rates, contraception, workforce sexism, and more. Deploying stations where students and young people can be fully educated on not only stable employment, but on health and what every individual can do to curb malnutrition, India will create a significant "snowball" effect of alternative education. Experts are at a consensus when considering the best way to put a dent in child malnutrition. That consensus is based on the fact that pregnant women, mothers and the young (under-threes) have been ignored for so

long during the search for improvement. Victor Aguayo, Chief of UNICEF's nutrition programme in India says, "[India] cannot afford to do so any longer" (Pada).

CONCLUSION

When it comes to the third-largest country in the world in terms of GDP and the second-largest in the world based on population, too many times have plans failed to address the entire problem of malnutrition. The end to malnutrition in India does not require a one idea, quick fix solution. There are many aspects and it will require the rigorous focus and determination by not only the government of India, but by the people of India to address the situation with the force that it requires. With so many separate issues and dynamics of the situation, Albert Einstein put it best by saying, "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I would spend fifty-five minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions."

To put a dent in the malnutrition that is so devastatingly affecting India, its economy, culture, appearance, and the lives of its people; the continuity and cohesiveness of such actions and implementations of numerous programs will need to be directed accordingly. No action plan is complete or possible without the assistance and cooperation from the people who are affected the most. Through a system of surveys and input from the impoverished suffering from malnutrition, the people of India will understand and fully develop the best way to understand the proposed solutions within this essay. Without awareness and knowledge for everyone in India and the world upon the topic of the world's most significant problem, no more success than what has already been achieved will occur.

There is no excuse for India (and the world) to not address this problem immediately and without hesitation. There is no looking back for India and its people. Saving the lives of millions of future generations can and will be achieved by the world's poorest people in the world's third richest country facing the world's biggest problem. As with any movement full of reforms, some may wonder what the consequences would be if efforts are not stepped up. Asking questions you do not want to know the answers to, however, can be a mistake.

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