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Food Problem of Poor People in India

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Abstract

Food problem of poor people is a very common fact in India. Here food problem does not mean unavailability of food but deficit of proper nutritious food. Food system, caloric intake and level of nutrition are different aspects of nutrition syndrome. Here, this article highlights the nature of food problem and causes and remedies of food problem. Government also tries to solve the food problem to some extent. Basically under-nutrition is very common in poor people. Food pattern for poor people is generally influenced by food problem in matters of adequate diet for poor people. It is therefore necessary to rectify the food pattern of poor people which is caused due to food problem. There are some measures taken for the sanitation of food problem like balancing demand and supply of food articles in particular of food grains. Secondly, efficient public distribution system which ensures the supplies of essential consumer goods like food articles at reasonable prices, particularly to weaker sections of community. Thirdly, uplifting of the status of poor by providing them employment also requires focus. Government also provides some remedies like increase in the production through extension of irrigation, good quality of seeds; measures are taken to provide nutritive diet for children and supply of food grains to consumer at a reasonable price. Government also takes steps to reduce poverty through larger employment and higher consumption and provide land and loan for cultivation at a concessional interest to raise the economic to raise the economic status of poor & eradicate the food problem to some extent. The article strictly looks into the above issues and analyses the various methods of eradication of such a food problem.

Introduction

Definition of food: Every creature takes food to sustain its existence but the concept of nutrition is quite different from what we commonly presume. In general terms food is not only essential for the nourishment and growth of the body but rather more significant to strengthen the "soul" and inner spirit also. Much has already been written in the old Sanskrit scriptures on the nature of food and its impact on "soul" and "mana". In the "Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta", Lord Krishna had very succinctly delineated three types of food taken by different persons, viz, Satya, Rajas and Tamas.

It is a biologically known fact that right since the first living organism breathed for the first time billion years ago, it needed food. Food is something, without which growth, development and evolution would have been impossible. Every living thing on the face of the earth, irrespective of plants and animals, need nutrition to survive, grow and reproduce. All the living things on earth are therefore, dependant on each other for survival in some way or the other and that is what we call the eco- system.

Importance of Food for Survival

As mentioned above, without food there is no survival. When one consumes food, nutrition is

provided to the body for the production of energy and in turn, the body becomes functional.

Cycle of life consists of birth, growth, development, reproduction and then death. For an individual, during the travel from birth to death, there is a constant necessity for nutrition and catalyst, which is provided by the food which is consumed. The human body is one of the most complicated creations of the nature, as every pathway related to it is designed very uniquely. These pathways work together to function all the major human body systems and, in turn, keep the body fit.

Definition and Importance of Nutrition

In the scientific phraseology, Prakash (1983) defines food as "all the consumable substances which one eats and drinks for growth of the body and sustaining a healthy and happy life. According to Thaper, our body is a self-controlled and self-regulated tissue. For this purpose it needs some raw materials of nutrient *i.e.*, those of which the tissues themselves are made, those which provide energy both for the conversion of food into tissues and for the external and internal work that the tissues have to do. Energy is also needed to maintain the temp of the body and finally it controls and regulates the pace and sequence of various chemical reactions. He has also defined a correct food to be balanced nutritious in correct proportion, digestible, appetizing, palatable, acceptable, non-allergic and satisfying. The new Webster's dictionary defines 'food' as a nourishing substance taken into and absorbed by an organism to sustain life and enable growth and repair of tissues. Swaminathan (1986) has generalized food broadly into three nutritional groups *i.e.*, energy yielding foods constituting all foods rich in carbohydrates and fats. They are mainly cereals, roots and tubers, dried fruits, sugar and fats. The body building food constitute milk, meat, fish, eggs, pulses, oil seeds and nuts and low fat oilseed flours. The protective foods are rich in proteins, vitamins and minerals. These are mainly milk, eggs, liver, green leafy vegetables and fruits.

Food nutrition is a key element in maintaining our overall physical well being.^[i] We must always pay attention to the food that we eat, because they will eventually impact our health, for better or for worse. We have more information available about the benefits of every particular food group than we have ever had before, which is why we also have a bigger responsibility than ever before to make assertive and responsible food choices.

Carbohydrates, fats and proteins: Carbohydrates, fats and proteins have each got a specific function to serve in our bodies. The key to good health lies in maintaining balance food nutrition. Our body transforms carbohydrate to sugar that gives the necessary energy to perform daily activities.

Carbohydrate can be found in fruits and whole grains, bread, rice etc.

Proteins: Proteins are the main components of muscles of our body. Foods that provide protein include meat, milk, fish, eggs, nuts etc. We must take care of our health and seek to achieve and maintain a strong, flexible and vital physique. Adults should teach children about healthy food habits.

Fat: Fat consists of a group of compounds that are generally insoluble in water. These are found in items like butter, ghee, fish, oil etc. Fats are stored in the human body for use as energy at later stage.

Mineral: These are needed for the maintenance of proper functions in the body, like transport of oxygen through the body, stimulating growth, normalizing the nervous system etc. Minerals can be found from a variety of food items, such as meat, fish, milk and other dairy products.

Vitamins: They are an essential component of animal body required for good health. It is organic compound required as a nutrient. Good sources of vitamin are fruits, vegetables, cereals, egg and milk.

Water: It is popularly known as 'the elixir of life'. The human body comprises of 55 to 78% of water. It is required for the essential functioning of the various important parts of the human body.

The above definitions vividly show that food is one of the indispensable requisites of human life. But there are only a few who take full care of it. Sometimes owing to ignorance or carelessness people do not regulate their food habit and eventually expose themselves to various diseases. Thaper (1981) stated, "You can violate your country's laws and escape punishment but not escape by violating nature's laws of food. The punishment is automatic and there lies no appeal even for the most god-fearing".

Nutrition has a vital role in the health of community and profoundly influences socioeconomic and cultural development. Inadequacy of required calories and nutrients in the body is turned as malnutrition. It leads to deterioration of physical fitness and can adversely affect mental efficiency. In addition it can reduce working capacity of a man also.

Malnutrition is generated by poverty and leads to severe destitution almost poverty and malnutrition are two sides of a coin. The level of nutrition is measured in terms of calories:

- ✓ 1 gm CHO yields: 4 kcal
- ✓ 1 gm fat yields: 9 kcal
- ✓ 1 gm protein yields: 4 kcal

Every minute man spends calories received out of food consumed. It is not that calories are spent only while a man is at work but is also spent in basal metabolism during rest. Energy is spent for each and every activities performed by human being whether physical or mental.

The important sources of energy (kcal/100 g) are cereals and millets (340-360) pulses (330-350) nuts and oilseeds (430-650) pure carbohydrate foods (280-400) vegetable oil and ghee (900) and butter (720). Inadequate food intake causes loss in body

weight and emaciation. There is loss of adipose tissue and wasting of muscles. Besides energy yielding foods, about 14 vitamins and 24 minerals are essentials for human nutrition.

Need of Caloric Intake and Level of Nutrition

In the case of India the F.A.O committee recommended the calories intake needed for the reference individual in 1968 was placed at 2400 cal for man and 1900 cal per woman per day. These figures remained unchanged in 1980 revision. The joint expert group of the FAO/WHO had recommended a minimum of 2223 cal per capita per day for the people in Asia and the Far-East. Dandekar and Rath used 2250 cal per day while the Planning Commission used 2400 cal per person per day for rural areas and 2100 cal for urban areas which would work out to be 2350 cal for the population as a whole including both its urban and rural segments. This caloric intake also varies at different states in terms of different works. Additional calories are needed during pregnancy and lactation.

Level of Nutrition: The ultimate objective at any economic activity either primary, secondary is to provide optimum level of nutrition for good health and prosperity of the inhabitants. Different levels of nutrition are as follows:

- ✓ Critical level of under Nutrition (<1500 cal)
- ✓ Moderate level of nutrition (1500–2000 cal)
- ✓ Optimum low level (2000–2400 cal)
- ✓ Optimum high level (2400–3000 cal)
- ✓ High level of nutrition (above 3000 cal)

Inter Occupational Variations in Food Intake

In the Indian social and caste system prevailing unabated since generations, food intake varies greatly not only from one village to another but also from one occupation to another and even from one individual to another in a single household based on efficiency, nature of work and earnings of the person. Customarily where farm economy has been most prevalent almost rough and cheap food grains were being given to agricultural laborers. But the situation has changed now. Flour is available to all occupation groups as it constitutes major ingredient of cheap food for sustenance. Consumption of rice varies greatly from 78.2% amongst the petty shopkeepers to 100% in the service class amongst the cultivator, 84.6% among the artisan and 91.3% among the laborers who use rice in their normal daily diet. As regards pulses the highest percentage is being held by service class whereas the lowest by petty shopkeepers. Percentage of service class is higher than other occupational groups with respect to use of

green vegetables. Hardly few laborers afford to get green vegetables in their normal diet, and instead most of these people use tubers as vegetables and sometimes a good substitute to pulses. Percentage of people getting sugar and jaggery is higher among the service class followed by cultivators, shopkeepers and laborers. Milk is found to be scarce in all occupation groups except service class, shopkeepers and cultivators. Laborers are almost deprived of a drop of milk. Percentage of population not getting required food is highest among the laborers and cultivators. Percentage of people facing starvation and food crisis is the highest among the poor people like land less laborers.

Food Problem of Poor People

‘Sadly many people do not live, they merely exist. Some do not die; they kill themselves’ (Thaper, 1981). Food system, caloric intake and level of nutrition are different aspect of nutrition syndrome. Measuring level of nutrition in terms of quantity of food stuffs and caloric intake instead of nutrition is merely an illusion. Under nutrition is a gradual process of suicide through which, instead of sudden, man kills himself in course of time. Most of the people do not eat but fill their belly with food stuffs to extinguish hunger arising out of call of nature disregarding administration of nutrition required therein.

Basically under-nutrition is very common among the poor people. While they are deprived of normal clothing how do they think about nutritional food? Proper growth and development of the body depends on balanced diet.

A balanced diet contains all the nutrition in proper amount according to the requirement of the body. Due to poverty the poor people cannot provide proper food for themselves. They only eat to live the life. They only take the cheap variety of food like rice, potato, wheat etc. in order to fill the belly. As price of protein and fatty foods are high and costly it is very difficult for them to get these foods. In India food problem is a great problem and it is the problem of poor people. Food pattern of poor people is generally influenced by food problem, in matters of adequate diet for the poor people. India is facing a colossal problem and this is not withstanding the large increases in production of cereals in recent years and accumulation of big stocks of food grains with the Govt. It adversely affects the economy in a variety of ways and lies at the root of low variety, inefficiency as also the country’s slow pace of development. It is therefore necessary to rectify the defective food pattern of poor people which is caused due to food problem. So it is therefore necessary that for a correct solution we understand the problem fully and completely. This we do by enlarging upon its various facts bearing on the nature of the problem, its cause and remedies and the policies of the Govt. in this respect.

Nature of the Problem

In its present form as also before it for a long time, food problem is a problem of the poor. Largely of the inadequacy of food articles as also of the lack of sufficient purchasing power with the poor, the problem has been worsened by many factors over time.

The problem can best be conceived in its three fold aspects, namely the quantitative, the qualitative and the poverty of the poor.

Quantitative inadequacy: This aspect bears upon the supply of food grains which forms a major part of the diet of the people. The quantity needed has very often fallen short of that required for a minimum calorie intake. The overall per capita per day requirement of food grains has been put by F.A.O. at 440 g. For a number of years the actual availability has been less than that due to different factors. One is that the growth rate in the production of food grains is not yet satisfactory considering the high population growth. Secondly, there have been large year to year fluctuations in the output of food grains often met by imports. Thirdly, the improvement in the food grains groups has been mostly in respect of certain items like wheat, rice but not in all. In case of pulses there has often been fall in their production and in their per capita availability. Fourthly, with large income inequality, the per capita income among the poor is much less than the average for the entire population.

Qualitative Deficiency: The food taken by most of the Indians is deficient in nutritive elements. Proteins, vitamins and minerals are important element of a balanced diet. But the Indian food is always deficient in one or more elements of a balanced diet. So many people suffer from malnutrition. But while considering about poor people their diet is totally deficient in all the nutrients. Due to poverty they only eat to fill their belly and extinguish their hunger. As protein, vitamins, fats and minerals are costly, they cannot afford them. So their food usually contains high carbohydrate, low fat and low protein. Nutritive food to the poor is far less, in fact nil for the poor.

Lack of Purchasing Power with the Poor: The overall deficiency apart, the lot of poor is all the more miserable with highly unequal incomes and large unemployment. Among many, the deficiency of both food grains and nutritive foods is appalling. Studies about the consumption pattern reveal the utter inadequacy of food articles for a very large number of the people. If one makes a count of those below the poverty line then about 50 percent of the population would be found under-fed and under-nourished. The poor identified are the people who cannot work to support themselves (widows, orphans, the old and the infirm and the beggar etc.) and those with large members of the family.

The problem, summed up, is a threefold one. Firstly, there is the inadequacy of food grain which constitutes a major part of the diet. Secondly, the diet

is unbalanced with inadequacy of nutritive items in the diet of many people and almost absence of those items in the food of poor people. Thirdly, a large number of people do not get even the minimum supplies of the food grains/nutritive foods for want of purchasing power. It is no wonder then that one finds millions of people in the country leading a miserable life.

Causes and Remedies of the Problem

In order to solve the food problem, it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with the causes which have given rise to it and which have made it increasingly difficult to solve it for such a long time. There are several causes of the problem, namely, demand for food articles, supply of food articles and poverty.

Demand Factors: The demand for food articles has been generally on the increase. There has been a larger increase for certain items than for others. In the case of food grains, the increase in demand has been on a mass scale as an overwhelming number has not been able to meet their needs. The increase in demand has emanated from two major sources.

- ✓ Rapid growth of population: An important factor in the demand situation is the rapid growth of population. Population increase means very large additions to the mouths to be fed. By that shortfall in production has actually resulted in a fall in the per capita availability of the food supply.
- ✓ High income-elasticity of demand: The income elasticity of demand for food grains is very high in case of people with low income. Poor people whose per capita income is less spend a large amount for the demanding food grains. The increase in demand has been particularly large for wheat, rice and pulses and it is in respect of these that the country has been facing most of the difficulties at present.

Supply Factor: Supply of food articles has not kept pace with the fast rising demand. Though imports of certain items are large the availability has fallen short of requirement. Among the factors the important ones are as follows:

- ✓ Slow and uncertain rise in production: The most important component of the Indian diet at present is food grains. Their production has been slow and fluctuating. In respect of increasing the productivity of land the achievement under green revolution has been confined to a few areas. Overall in many places the average yield is much below that has been achieved in case of some crops and is much less than what is possible. The slow growth has been further marred by fluctuation in production which has often created serious food shortages during drought or floods. Thus lower growth rate

together with occasional shortages have made supplies less and uncertain. These aspects of production have made the food problem complicated.

- ✓ Low and fluctuating supplies: This problem occurs due to many factors. One, for example, is the wastage of the produced food grains in large part because of insects, rats and others. Thus, production reduces the supplies for consumption. Second is the low proportion of marketed surpluses till very recently. In view of the uncertainty about production greater consumption demands of farmers, inadequate marketing facilities etc. agriculturists have been with holding a larger amount of their production than is needed to meet the genuine needs for consumption. As a result food problem has been resulted for non-agricultural urban population. Third is when there is possibility of shortage of food grains producers and traders raise the price and in this way consumption get reduced and prices start climbing upwards.

Poverty of the Large Many: The above mentioned demand and supply factors explain only the overall situation. One needs to state that bad food situation becomes worse for the poor people. The following are the chief causes of the Poverty factor.

- ✓ Inadequate purchasing power: The poor people suffer from food inadequacy even in times of good production, because they do not have the required purchasing power to buy the goods. So their consumption falls to very low levels. Even inferior cereals on which they normally subsist go out of their reach.
- ✓ Work-less and large families: The poverty of these people and their low consumption are to be identified with certain groups of population which suffer from serious handicaps. There are for instance people who cannot work such as old and infirm people, orphans, widows etc. There are not then others who do not get work, nor do they have any asset to get income from the low consumption will again be found in households with large number of family members.

Measures for Solution

In the light of the above mentioned causes, it should now be possible to formulate an appropriate solution to the problem. The various components of the remedial action need be such as to 'balance the demand and supply of food articles', 'to distribute the available supplies judiciously' and 'to eradicate the poverty of the poor'.

Balancing Demand and Supply: The first and foremost step is to ensure an overall balance between the

demand for and the supply of food articles, in particular, of food grains. This should cover particularly those cereals and pulses which are for mass consumption. The balancing has to be done both, from the demand side as also the supply side, although the latter aspect is more important. On the demand side, the necessary measures should consist of the control of the fast population growth and of curbing the wasteful consumption. In addition, efforts should be made to change the consumption pattern in favor of balanced diet.

More important are however the remedies which can raise the supplies of food articles. These should, in the first instance be directed towards an increase in production, with incentive to the farmers in the form of remunerative prices and non-price facilities in respect of inputs to raise the productivity of land. Steps should also be taken to minimize the destruction of a part of crops from insects, etc. and for the better storage of the produce. While these measures will help in raising the marketable surplus, it is necessary also to provide extra incentives and make necessary arrangements for increasing the proportion of output that is sold in the market. Making available adequate supplies is essential because even a slight shortfall in them has often been found to cause disproportionate rise in prices.

Efficient Public Distribution System: An essential requirement of the solution of the food problem lies in the existence of an efficient public distribution system. Since, agricultural prices and output are subject to large fluctuations, the public distribution system can ensure the supplies of essential consumer goods like food articles at reasonable prices, particularly to weaker sections of the community. To manage it efficiently, several inter-related measures have to become a part of the overall policy of price stability, output increase and equitable distribution of food articles. These measures should consist of procurement (and inputs if domestic production falls short), stocking, transportation, fair price shops, etc. The distribution of food articles has to be on a permanent basis if it is to make any impact on the problem. And, since it is the poor people who need most state help, the public distribution system should be confined to them, and should deal in only those goods which serve their consumption.

Eradication of Poverty: The enduring solution to the food problem however lies in uplifting the economic status of the poor, who are the real victims of scarcity and high prices of food articles. The removal of poverty requires three-fold measures. In the first place, there is the need for giving employment-orientation to productive activities. This means the use of labor-intensive production techniques, consistent with efficiency. Secondly, there is need for skill formation and skill improvement of the unemployed/ underemployed so that productivity per head increases. The third set of measures should be directed towards distributive justice. In part, it will imply re-distribution of assets such as in case of the

rural poor, the distribution of surplus land under the policy of ceiling on land in their favor to raise their earning capacity. In part, it will mean tilting the Government expenditure on social services in favor of the poor as, for example, supply of milk, etc. at subsidized rates.

Government's Food Policy

From time to time, the Government has been taking various steps to solve the food problem. The measures have touched on several aspects of the problem, which taken together constitute the food policy. These may be considered in terms of the following major remedies.

Increase in Supplies: Most of the efforts have so long been made to raise the production of food articles, mostly food grains. These have consisted of several measures. One set of measures aims at increase in production through the extension of irrigation, propagation of high yielding varieties of seeds, etc. These measures also include, though on a very limited scale, improvement in the nutrition of the people, largely by fortification and enrichment of food supplies, modernization of rice, pulses and maize milling and production of nutritive diet for the children. The supplies of food grains have also been augmented through imports, as and when needed. For building the Government stocks, as also to feed the public distribution system, procurement from domestic production is also resorted to on a regular basis. With the passage of time, the procurement operations have improved a lot, resulting in large surpluses acquired by the Government. Efforts are also made to save food grains. These consist in providing the appropriate technology through education, motivation, and persuasion in preventing the losses and improving the farm and community level storage. Methods of pest control are also being popularized.

Improving the Distribution: Measures have also been undertaken to ensure fair distribution of food grains amongst regions and people, particularly amongst the vulnerable sections of the population. At times, when the food situation was not so easy, the country was divided into zones as self-sufficient as possible. For this, each zone was constituted of some surplus areas and some deficit areas. The trade was allowed within the zone with Government undertaking inter-zone movement of food grains. With the easing of conditions, the restrictions were relaxed and often lifted. Once when the food situation was very serious, the Government even nationalized the trade in food grains, which was given up after a year for administrative reasons.

Another set of measures relates to the strengthening of the public distribution system. It is constituted of a wide network of ration/fair price shops with the primary aim of supplying food grains to consumers. Statutory rationing has been undertaken in case of

severe shortage of food grains. This is given up when the supply situation improves. Then the informal rationing prevails, i.e., consumers can buy as per specification on the ration card, and can also buy in the free market. This system is intended to keep demand under control. From time to time, in the past, the per capita ration was reduced in case of shortages and increased in case of an easy position of supply in respect of food grains.

Stabilization of Prices: Efforts have also been made to evolve a reasonable price-structure of food grains and to impart an element of stability to its. Towards this end certain measures have been undertaken. One is the fixation of minimum support-prices which are in the nature of a guarantee to producers and which are maintained by the government by being prepared to buy all that is offered at this price. The aim is to prevent the process going below this minimum in case of glut in the market. Second aspect of the price-fixation is the government's policy of procurement at announced prices for building reserves and for feeding the public distribution system. Third is the fixation of issue prices usually lower than the procurement process at which food grains are supplied through the fair-price shops. Fourth, the food grains supplied at the fair-price shops are subsidized by the government to keep the prices at reasonable levels for the consumers.

Control Demand: For controlling demand and keeping its rise under check, the government has adopted three types of measures. One is rationing through which the Government regulates the demand for consumption. During the period of shortages in food grains, it extends the coverage of rationing and reduces the per capita ration. Secondly, the demands associated with the stocks of wholesale traders and retailers are required to declare their stocks and keep a minimum required for normal trading. Consumers too are allowed to keep a certain amount. Thirdly, there is the measure, with long-term consequences, directed to reduce the rate of demand for more food grains because of the reduction in the number of child-bearing mothers.

Reducing Poverty: While the above mentioned measures bear upon the food problem directly, the government's efforts at reducing poverty indirectly help in the solution, in so far as the poor are enabled to have more purchasing power. In this sense it is related to the demand side as it makes effective the demands of the poor for food. In this regard three types of measures are relevant. One concerns the general growth. To the extent the production became more labor-intensive (as for example in case of expansion of small scale and cottage industries, etc.), and product more oriented to mass consumption (as for example production and supply of food grains and other items of necessities), the poor have been benefited through larger employment and higher consumption. Second concerns measures adopted to transfer resources to the poor through, for example, distribution of land under the land-ceiling policy,

loans on concessional interest for productive activities, etc. Third are those anti-poverty programs (like integrated Rural Development Program, National Rural Employment Program, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Program, etc) specially meant to promote development and employment of specified weaker sections of the population. All these three types of measures together aim at raising the economic status of the poor

Conclusion

Food is otherwise known as a means of existence as without food there will be no life. From birth to death food is the only thing which keeps the life glowing. For the poor Indians food problem is very common. Poor people do not eat, but fill their belly with food stuff to extinguish hunger arising out of call of nature disregarding the intake of nutritious food. Food contains six nutrients which provide energy, strength, growth and also over all development of our body. Basically under-nutrition is very common among the poor people, as they do not think of nutritious food. The survival of poor Indian child is a matter of concern, because they are far behind in availing health care, nutrition and education facilities. India has progressed dramatically in various fields, but its mal-nutrition level has not shown the desired reduction. India which stands 66th out of the 88 developing countries in the global hunger index, 2008 reveals its lack of luster performance at eradicating hunger which occurs due to food problem. Proper growth and development relies on balanced diet. Balanced diet contains all the nutrients in proper amount according to the body's requirement. Due to poverty poor people do not get proper nutritious food. It is, therefore, necessary to rectify the defective food pattern of poor people which occurs due to food problem. Food problem occurs due to number of factors, like, demand factor, growth of population, the income elasticity of demand supply factor, workless and large family etc. Solution to the food problem of the poor people lies in uplifting the economic status of the poor. Government also is trying its best to eradicate the food problem of the poor people.

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