

POSHAN GHAR OP-ED

The Need for Dietary Diversity in India: A Path to Improved Health and Nutrition

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This op-ed highlights the importance of enhancing dietary diversity in India to achieve better nutritional outcomes across all age groups. It stresses that incorporating a variety of foods, such as pulses, dairy, vegetables, and fruits, is crucial for providing the necessary nutrients for overall health and development. The op-ed also calls for collaboration between government agencies, civil society, and community organizations. Their collective efforts are key to improving access to diverse food options, increasing awareness, ultimately enhancing health outcomes, boosting productivity, and building resilience within the population.

In a country as rich in agricultural diversity as India, it is crucial to rethink our food habits and incorporate a wider variety of foods. Dietary diversity, or the inclusion of different food groups in daily meals, ensures essential nutrients are consumed that single food sources cannot provide. While rice and wheat have become staples over the years, embracing a wider variety of food groups—such as pulses, vegetables, and fruits—brings invaluable benefits. Incorporating these foods into our diets enhances nutritional quality, providing essential nutrients that support overall health and well-being.



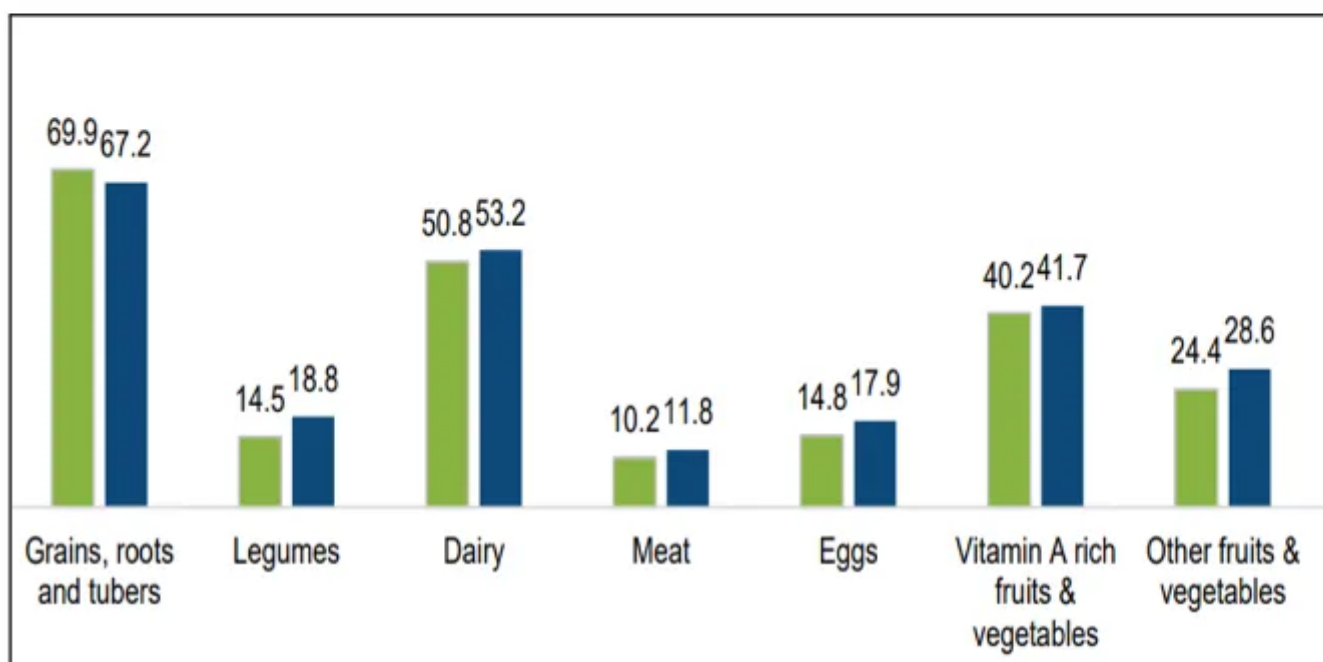
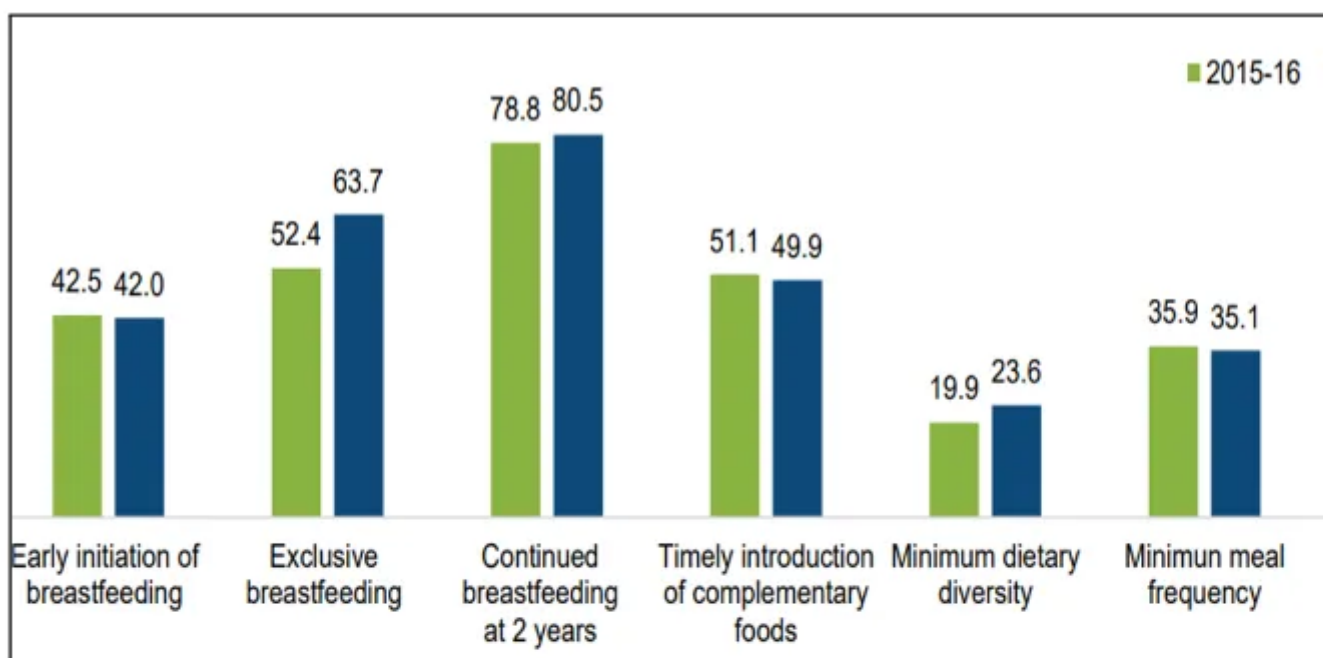
Source: UNICEF

India's Nutrition Status: The Data Speaks

India's nutrition status is a public health concern. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reveals that 35.5% of children are stunted, 19.3% suffer from underweight, and 32.1% are underweight. These conditions reflect not only inadequate food availability but also significant deficiencies in diverse, nutrient-rich diets. The survey also shows that 67.2% of children under five, 60.8% of women, and 44.1% of men suffer from anaemia, pointing to the ongoing need for dietary improvement across all age groups. Addressing these deficiencies is essential for enhancing productivity, improving health, and supporting the nation's development.

The NFHS-5 data also says that only 44.1% of pregnant women consume folic acid tablets for the stipulated 100 days. In infant and young child feeding

practices, only 63.7% of children below 6 months are exclusively breastfed, and only 41.5% are initiated breastfeeding within an hour of birth. While there is progress for improvement in introducing complementary feeding after six months, the rate remains below 50%, efforts are being made to strengthen these practices. The graph below shows that the minimum acceptable diet improved slightly from 19.9% to 23.6% and consumption of legumes, dairy, eggs, meat, vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables, and other fruits and vegetables improved by 2-5 percentage points.



Source: NFHS 4 (2015-16) and NFHS 5 (2019-21)

Furthermore, micronutrient deficiency, often referred to as “hidden hunger,” is a critical aspect of this concern across various age groups in India. Key micronutrients like iron, vitamin A, vitamin D, zinc, and iodine are crucial for immunity, and brain development. However, a lack of dietary diversity often leads to these deficiencies. For example, around 18% of children in India suffer from vitamin A deficiency, which weakens immunity and vision. Vitamin D deficiency is more widespread, affecting 70–80% of the population, which increases the risk of bone disorders like osteoporosis and rickets. Additionally, deficiencies in iodine, important for immune function and cognitive health, are common due to limited intake of zinc-rich foods like nuts, seeds, and dairy. Factors like limited access to diverse foods, high costs, cultural preferences, and lack of awareness contribute to low dietary diversity, particularly in rural and underserved communities.



Source: UNICEF

The Importance of Dietary Diversity

Dietary diversity is essential for health and well-being at all stages of life

from early childhood. For infants and young children, nutrient-rich diets are essential for overall health and development. In children up to 2 years of age, poor dietary intake leads to micronutrient deficiencies, which can hinder growth, increase susceptibility to infections, and elevate the risk of illness. Dietary diversity is a key indicator of nutritional adequacy, enhancing the micronutrient content of complementary foods that support optimal growth and development in young children.

In adolescence, a variety of foods is crucial for rapid growth and cognitive development. For adults, a diverse diet helps prevent chronic diseases, boost immunity, and preserve strength. Dietary diversity builds resilience through a balanced intake, and its absence can lead to long-term health challenges.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) recommends a balanced diet that includes cereals, pulses, dairy, fruits, vegetables, fats, oils, and protein sources such as meat, fish, and poultry. Adhering to these guidelines promotes individual and community health, laying the foundation for a healthier, more resilient population.

Source: ICMR-NIN Dietary Guidelines

Improving Dietary Diversity

Essential nutrition interventions are needed to promote dietary diversity. For instance, the Government of India launched POSHAN Abhiyaan 2.0 to tackle malnutrition among children, adolescent girls, pregnant women, and lactating mothers. It aims to raise nutrition awareness and encourage good eating habits for sustainable health and well-being. The Public Distribution System is being strengthened, with some states adding pulses and other nutrient-rich foods so that all families access a balanced diet at an affordable price.

Other key initiatives, such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Mid-Day Meal Scheme, provide nourishing meals to children and students during their formative years. The Ministry of Rural Development's Food, Nutrition, and Health (FNHW) program under DAY-NRLM integrates various sectoral interventions to empower women-led self-help groups. These groups actively promote improved nutrition practices, better hygiene, and enhanced access to essential health services, strengthening community well-being in underdeveloped and rural areas. The Ministry of Women and Child Development encourages the creation of Nutri-Gardens (Vatikas) at Anganwadi centres. These gardens provide fresh fruits and vegetables to support dietary diversity and food security.

The use of mass media to raise nutrition awareness and national initiatives like Breastfeeding Week, Nutrition Week, Poshan Maah, and Poshan Pakhwa underscore the importance of good nutrition and dietary variety across all age groups. These campaigns provide actionable insights to parents, children, and communities, helping bridge knowledge gaps and fostering healthier eating habits across schools, workplaces, and households.

Collective Action for Nutrition Outcomes

Government agencies, civil society organisations, faith-based groups, and the private sector entities have significantly improved nutrition outcomes through collaborative efforts.

efforts. Platforms like IMPAct4Nutrition and Poshan Ghar foster multi-stakeholder collaborations that build awareness, mobilise resources, and drive community engagement to combat malnutrition effectively. Community leaders are instrumental in encouraging positive nutrition behaviours, particularly in sensitive contexts.

While these efforts to increase food variety in programs show a strong commitment to improving nutrition, more convergence is needed. Strengthening implementation at all levels—from community health workers to national agencies—remains a priority. By working together, government agencies, civil society, and community leaders can ensure affordable, nutritious foods are accessible to all, bring about a balanced diet and a healthier future within reach across the country.

Conclusion

Increasing dietary diversity is not just about individual health; it is a strategy toward a healthier and more resilient population. The health of the nation's workforce, the academic potential of its students, and the well-being of future generations depend on it. A diverse diet builds immunity, reduces health risks, and enhances productivity—all critical drivers of national prosperity. Thus, dietary diversity as a central pillar of public health and nutrition policy can act as a catalyst not only for reducing malnutrition but also for uplifting entire communities.

Have stories, insights, or case studies to share? We would love to hear from you. Reach out at arpita.d@zealgrit.com.

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