

India's future goes to bed hungry

Three in four children in India are anaemic and one in three are stunted, found the National Family Health Survey-III, the largest ever health survey done simultaneously in 29 states during 2005 and 2006. With 21 per cent stunted children, Kerala has the best child nutrition indices. The worst is Uttar Pradesh, where 46 per cent children are underdeveloped, both physically and mentally, because they do not get quality food to eat.

These statistics are shocking but not new. All three National Family Health Surveys between 1992 and 2006 have consistently shown that the nutritional status of children in India is abysmal. “The nutritional status of children has gone up marginally, but in some states like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, it has actually worsened. India cannot hope to compete in the global market in the future if the physical and mental development of children is stunted,” says Dr Werner Schultink, head, child development and nutrition programme, UNICEF India.

India’s hunger indices – measured by child malnutrition, child mortality and estimates of the proportion of people who are calorie-deficient —are marginally better than sub-Saharan Africa. According to the Global Hunger Index released in October this year, only Bangladesh has worse levels of hunger than India in South Asia. India is cited as one of the countries that has been unable to use its available economic resources effectively in reducing under-nutrition.

The NFHS-III shows that though the nutritional status of children has improved marginally, the improvement has not been as high as expected, given the amount of money spent on nutritional supplementation schemes both by the Centre and states. “The government has implemented existing programmes half-heartedly and any improvement over the past five years has been due to pressure from the Supreme Court,” says Biraj Patnaik, principal adviser to the Commissioners to the Supreme Court looking at Right to Food and Employment Schemes of the government.

To give the Mid-Day Meal Scheme — which ensure the child gets one hot, nutritious meal every schoolday — a boost, the Centre increased its outlay by 60 per cent in the 2005-06 Budget, up from Rs 3,345 crore in 2005-06 to Rs 5,348 crores for 2006-07. As the largest school nutritional programme in the world, the scheme is meant to provide at least 450 calories and 12 grams of protein to 12 crore children in over 9.5 lakh primary schools. It doesn’t always happen.

Nutrition supplementation schemes like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Mid-Day Meal Scheme can make a great difference, as is evident from data from districts where they have been implemented well. “The National Institute of Nutrition in Hyderabad analysed the implementation of the UNICEF-supported ICDS programme in four districts of West Bengal and found there was a 10 per cent general improvement in the nutritional status of women and children in three years,” says in UNICEF’s Schultink. Given the Supreme Court’s proactive interventions (see box), the next survey should hopefully show better results.

-- By Sanchita Sharma