

# Food Accessibility of Unorganized Workers in India

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**Abstract:** *Food accessibility, when achieved ideally then, will reflect on an individual's corresponding nutrition and health status. The NFHS-5 revealed increased incidences of malnutrition in the form of under nutrition, over nutrition, and specific deficiencies. Thus, food accessibility for the Indian population is not sufficient. Unorganized workers, the largest working Indian population, were already devoid of social security from the employment perspective thrashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic, Russia-Ukraine conflicts, market stagnation, inadequate recovery of the labor market, and inflation resulted in insufficient food accessibility by unorganized workers. Higher inflation rates, along with the insufficient increase in corresponding income due to job loss or a slower pace of job recovery, might seriously hamper household living costs. The higher cost of living, in turn, disturbed food accessibility, which got reflected through the GHI 2022, where India was classified at a serious hunger level. GOI is trying to protect the food accessibility of this population by providing free food grains under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana. The subsidy can be a solution to food accessibility in the short term. There is also the threat of increased climate change-induced hunger and reduced agricultural yields by 2030 in India. Therefore, structural reforms are needed as the sustainable solution for optimum food accessibility and food security for unorganized workers and the Indian population from the public health and health from the individual level.*

**Keywords:** Unorganised Workers, Food Accessibility, Nutrition, Hunger, Inclusive Development

## 1. Introduction

Food travels a lot from the farm to reach the plate of individuals, in which numerous interlinked factors play their roles. Nutrition is a vital component for living beings. Having optimal quantity and quality of food is essential to maintain a desirable nutritional and health status for humans & all flora and fauna. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is ongoing and the most significant challenge to the present, technology-driven modern world. Maintaining an optimum health level is a concern for humanity to keep the momentum of growth and development. Maintaining an ideal nutritional status at the individual level is the prerequisite for achieving healthy, socio-economically developed lives (FAO, 2004). Access to food is the primary step toward food security.

From an employment perspective in India, a large working force devoid of social security is categorized as unorganized workers. Over India, they can be traced in both formal and informal economies. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2019-2020 unveiled that out of the total Indian working population, 88.93 percent were unorganized workers, which accounts for 476.4 million people. The lack of minimum standards of living and livelihoods includes but is not limited to lack or absence of fixed and payable holidays, absence or lack of maternity holidays and benefits, absence of optimal hygiene, ventilation, safe drinking water, and toilet facilities in homes and workplaces, lack of access to regular earnings, deviations from optimal food, nutrition, health, and accident coverage (Ministry of Finance, 2022; Sengupta et al., 2007).

### Objectives

Getting food at the optimum level, both in terms of quality and quantity, are not only primary requirements to obtain

ideal nutritional and health status at the individual level but also collectively can significantly impact socio-economic development. The study aimed to find the food accessibility by the Indian unorganized workers not only because they constitute a large portion of the labor force but also due to their socio-economic disadvantages. The study's first objective was to determine the contemporary situation of food accessibility for unorganized Indian workers. To elucidate the factors affecting food accessibility of the reviewed population is the second objective.

### Methods

Secondary data was used for the study. The author used reliable sources of information from authentic websites such as NSO, WHO, ILO, and FAO on the subject pertinent to the study. The other sources included journal articles, books, reports, and papers. The time frame for the search was 2000 to 2023.

## 2. Literature Review

### The concept of food accessibility

When a person has the power to obtain food for a balanced and nutritious diet to maintain ideal nutrition and health status, it can be wise to say that the person has the right amount of food accessibility. There are numerous factors, often interlinked, which can influence the food accessibility process. Food availability and price, income, budgetary allowances, dietary habits, practice, and stigma, seasonal variations, personal choices, and preferences, family choices and preferences, family size, health conditions, availability of shops and markets, cooking time, fuel price, educational attainment are some of the factors that directly or indirectly have an impact of food accessibility when judged holistically.

Therefore, before deepening the unorganized workers' food accessibility, it is good to observe the Indians' health status quickly.

In the representative document of pan-India, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 (2019-21), the total share of overweight and severely wasted children under five years of age increased to 1.3 and 0.2 percent, respectively, from the previous NFHS-4 (2015-16) to the NFHS-5. The increase in the total share of overweight/obese males and females was 4 and 3.4 percent, respectively. Data from NFHS-5 showed increased incidences of anemia in all age groups of the Indian population when compared with NFHS-4 data. Anemia is India's tremendous public health challenge (MoHFW, 2021).

India ranked 107 out of 121 countries on the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2022; scoring 29.1 with a corresponding serious hunger level. Undernourishment, characterized by chronic dietary energy deficiency, is one of the indicators of GHI. In 2019-21, 16.3 percent of Indians remained undernourished compared to 14.6 percent in 2018-20. 22.43 Indians remained undernourished in 2019-21 (GHI, 2022).

The NFHS-5 and GHI 2022 showed an increased negative public health burden and sub-optimal food accessibility.

### **The conditions of Indian unorganized workers in the contemporary period**

COVID-19 is a catastrophic event in human civilization that is not only limited to significant numbers of mortality and morbidity but also affects the whole socio-economic growth and development system. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) data, in India, a total of 44, 990, 278 confirmed cases were found, with more than five lakh thirty thousand mortality by 29th May 2023 (WHO, 2023). The effects of COVID-19 on unorganized Indian workers are summarized in this section. The job market scenario in post-COVID-19 is not reached the pre-pandemic level. Unorganized workers, especially the unskilled, semi-skilled, migrant, and youth, received the highest thrash from COVID-19 (ILO, 2021; Samaan et al., 2023; Sharmila, 2020). As inter-border and intra-border market mobility got stagnant due to the urge to curb the disease spread across the globe, the labor market also got a downward trend (ILO, 2021; Samaan et al., 2023). To manage the income loss, the unorganized workers depended on savings, selling valuables, or borrowing from others, often the informal sources in India (ILO, 2021; Sharmila, 2020). As the savings were not high for most workers, borrowings from informal sources were the most adaptive action. The higher interest rate levied by the informal Source of burrowing may further put this section into trouble in the future.

Provisional Estimated (PE) Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at Constant Price (Base Year 2011-12) or the real GDP in the year 2022-23 is Rs.160.06 lakh crore and exhibited a 7.2 percent growth rate. The GDP at the Current Price, or nominal GDP, is estimated at Rs.272.41 lakh crore with a 16.1 percent growth rate. The First Revised estimate of real GDP for the year 2021-22 was Rs.149.26 lakh crore, and Rs.234.71 lakh crore in 2021-22 for nominal GDP (NSO, 2023c). However, it may appear that the Indian economy is

doing well, but inequalities in income, goods, and services distribution may not be reflected through this. As per the minimum wages fixed by the Government of India (GOI), from April 2023 onwards, the daily wages for unskilled agriculture labor in India shall be Rs.470/-, Rs.429/-, and Rs.424/- for the urban to less developed rural areas respectively (CLC, 2023). As per the annual report of the PLFS, July 2021-June 2022, all India's average wage earnings was Rs.366/- per day from casual labor work by industry of work as per National Industry Classification (NIC)-2008. A previously published article elucidated that the surveys done by PLFS and the CPHS (Consumer Pyramids Household Survey) revealed that half of the Indian workforce earns below the recommended National Minimum Wage (Jha & Basole, 2023; NSO, 2023a).

### **Inflation in India**

The Reserve Bank of India, the Indian central bank, assumed that overcoming the damages caused by COVID-19 would take longer, extending to 2034-35 (DEPR, 2022). The Russia-Ukraine conflicts further increased the prices of fuels, food, and fertilizer. Due to the supply chain disturbances caused by the prohibition of transportation, quarantine, and lockdowns to decrease the severity of several waves of COVID-19, lower socio-economic activities in this period. All the factors together resulted in higher rates of inflation. Not only the Indian economy but all other economies worldwide have witnessed inflation (IMF, 2023; Ministry of Finance, 2022, 2023; Samaan et al., 2023).

The consumer price index (CPI) and the wholesale price index (WPI) are India's two measures of inflation. CPI and the corresponding consumer food price index (CFPI) are used as indicators of retail inflation. The CPI and CFPI contemplate the price changes at which consumers purchase the goods/services. For April 2023 (Provisional), the CPI (General) and CFPI on the Base Year 2012=100, the inflation rates are 4.70 percent and 3.84 percent, respectively (7.79 percent CPI and 8.31 percent CFPI for April 2022, respectively). The inflation rates are for the combined category. The final inflation rates for the combined CPI and CFPI in March 2023 were 5.66 percent and 4.79 percent, respectively (NSO, 2023b). The food commodities which had higher inflation rates in the combined group were cereals and cereal products (13.67 percent), milk and milk products (8.85 percent), fruits (2.09 percent), spices (17.43 percent), eggs (3.10 percent), pulses and its derivatives (5.28 percent), and prepared meals, snacks, sweets (6.97 percent). Cereal and cereal products, fruits, and spices were found to have higher inflation rates in the rural group than the urban ones. All other food commodities with higher inflation rates belonged to the urban group. Meat and fish, oils and fats, & vegetables had deflation rates in all three groups, namely rural, urban, and combined (NSO, 2023b).

The final WPI 'All Commodities' (Base Year: 2011-2012=100) inflation rate was 3.85 percent for February 2023. The Provisional annual inflation rate on pan India WPI was (-) 0.92 percent for April 2023 (over April 2022). For March 2023, the (Provisional) inflation rate was 1.34 percent. The decrease in the rates of food articles, fuel, food products, textiles, wood and products, paper and products, chemicals and products, rubber and plastic products, & basic

metals mainly contributed to the deflation in WPI for April 2023. Although the reduction in inflation rates of many 'Food Articles,' paddy, milk, and pulses exhibited a higher inflation trend (DPIIT, 2023).

#### **Budgetary Allowances for food commodities in India**

According to the last available data obtained by the Level & Pattern of Consumer Expenditure 2011-12, NSS 68th Round, July 2011-June 2012, the budgetary allowances for food were 53 percent and 42.6 percent of the total household consumption by average rural and urban population respectively. Except for fruits and processed food, the expenditures of all other food groups were higher for rural dwellers than their urban counterparts. The percentage of budgetary allowances for non-food items was higher in urban households. In rural areas, families with the lowest Monthly Per Capita Consumer Expenditure (MPCE) decile had the highest share (About 19 percent) of cereals and their products. The highest MPCE decile rural group had only 5-6 percent of the claim in cereals. For urban households, the lowest and highest decile of MPCE had 15 percent and 3 percent share for grains and its products. The percentage of milk and milk products was 8 percent and 7 percent in rural and urban households (NSSO, 2014).

#### **Food Security Provided Under National Food Security Act (NFSA)-2013**

Several schemes are functional to ensure food accessibility in India under the NFSA-2013. The schemes are the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid-Day Meal (MDM), and Maternity Benefit. Another new integrated scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana (PMGKAY), was launched by the GOI on 1st January 2023 for one year to protect the vulnerable population against the negative consequences of the ongoing pandemic from the food security perspective. More than 80 crore beneficiaries from the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) and Primary Household (PHH) can receive free food grains. The estimate is more than ₹ 2 lakh crore on food security by GOI in the coming time (Ministry of Finance, 2023; The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, 2023).

### **3. Discussion**

The NFHS-5 revealed the incidence of India's increased negative public health burden compared to the NFHS-4. Severe wasting is when a person becomes susceptible to nutritional deficiencies and repeated disease occurrences. When abnormal and excessive fat accumulates in the body, that is known as overweight and obesity. Anemia is a clinical condition when red blood cells (RBC) are reduced in the blood. Iron deficiency anemia (IDA) might be caused due to lack of dietary supply of protein, B vitamins, and vitamin C. Spectrum of malnutrition comprises under nutrition, over nutrition, and specific deficiencies were present as well as increased, as revealed by the NFHS-5 (2019-21) when compared with the NFHS-4 (2015-16) (K Park, 2019; MoHFW, 2021). Therefore, food accessibility was not only sub-optimal for unorganized workers but also for the whole Indian population.

From the (Provisional) WPI, CPI, and CFPI inflation rate for April 2023, it was evident that the inflation rate was reduced in India (DPIIT, 2023; NSO, 2023b). As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasted in the World Economic Outlook Update 2023, a lower CPI was noticed in April 2023 compared to April 2022 in India (IMF, 2023). The widely consumed food groups like cereals, & milk, and milk products had higher inflation rates across WPI, CPI, and CFPI. According to the CPI, the rural group had higher cereal inflation rates than the urban counterpart. Pulses are another food product with higher inflation rates across WPI and CPI classifications. The inflation rates of eggs and fruits were low in WPI; still, these food products had higher inflation rates in CPI. In the retail market, people spend more money buying eggs and fruits. In the WPI, the 'Fuel & Power' showed a decreased inflation rate, but in the CPI, the 'Fuel and Light' had a higher (5.52 percent) inflation rate for April 2023 compared with April 2022. Fuel groups have influences on the price dynamic of food commodities. The retail price hikes in other groups of goods and services may influence people's overall buying capacity. This may again act as a negative factor in food accessibility. At the same time, food insecurity at the household or individual level increases the risk of developing various forms of malnutrition. It is evident from the above discussion that the cereals and their product had a higher budgetary share. Socio-economic status was found to influence food accessibility. In the rural and urban sectors, the lower segment of households in terms of MPCE, especially the marginalized, semi-skilled, or unskilled and vulnerable section of the population, predominantly found among the informal working people, will suffer more from the price hike of cereal and cereal products. The accessibility of milk and milk products, pulses, spices, prepared meals, snacks, sweets, fruits, and eggs also may be interrupted due to the price hike (DPIIT, 2023; NSO, 2023b, 2023a; NSSO, 2014).

According to the April 2023 WPI (Provisional), a few 'Food Articles' from the 'Primary Articles' group showed deflation trends, and the 'Food Products' from the 'Manufactured Products' group also showed a decrease rate. Along with the 'Food Products,' other 'Manufactured Products' like textiles, wood products, basic metals, paper and products, chemicals and products, rubber, and plastic products also exhibited deflation trends (DPIIT, 2023). This indicates that Indian food manufacturers are performing poorly and are losing pricing power. Deflation is not necessarily easing the pockets of the ordinary person by decreasing the retail prices of products and interest rates. But also may indicate reduced business activities and revenues, wage reduction, or job loss. Unorganized workers are already facing problems in the job market, which affects earning capacity and the standard of living (ILO, 2021; Samaan et al., 2023; Sharmila, 2020). These conditions can again make them vulnerable to a vicious cycle of poverty and negatively impact their food accessibility.

The adverse effects of COVID-19 on the Indian economy, Russia-Ukraine conflicts, increased fuel, food, and fertilizer prices, lower market mobility, and decreased inter-border and intra-border activities influenced inflation. The underperformance of the labor market with lower wages

than fixed rates, job loss, or a slower pace of job recovery further complicated the situation. Higher inflation rates and insufficient increases in corresponding income might seriously hamper household living costs. The higher cost of living, in turn, disturbed food accessibility which got reflected through the GHI 2022, where India was classified as having a serious hunger level. The government understood that food security needs to be protected for the sake of the vulnerable population and introduced PMGKAY. The beneficiaries of PMGKAY are from AAY and PHH, and a large section of them are informal labor (GHI, 2022; ILO, 2021; Ministry of Finance, 2023; Samaan et al., 2023; Sharmila, 2020; The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, 2023).

#### 4. Conclusion

To maintain optimum health status, the role of food is critical. Food security will, in turn, translate into nutritional security. Access to food is the primary step towards food security.

Higher inflation rates and insufficient increase in corresponding income due to job loss or a slower pace of job recovery might seriously hamper household living costs. The higher cost of living, in turn, disturbed food accessibility which got reflected through the GHI 2022, where India was classified as having a serious hunger level. The second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2: Zero Hunger) calls to 'end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture' by 2030 (UN, n. d.). SDG 2 is getting hindrances to achieving the target due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia-Ukraine conflicts, market stagnation, inflation, and inadequate recovery from employment and earning perspectives of unorganized workers. The government understood that food security needs to be protected for the sake of the vulnerable population. The beneficiaries of PMGKAY are from AAY and PHH, and a large section of them are informal laborers. A subsidy can be a solution to food accessibility in the short term. Sustainable solution for food accessibility and food security needs structural reforms. There are increased threats from climate change-induced hunger and lack of agricultural yields in India by 2030 (IFPRI, 2022). The lack of data on hunger in India reflects the negligence from the administrative and policy formulation levels to preserve the NFSA-13 components sustainably.

In a nutshell, food accessibility by the Indian unorganized workers got hampered in the contemporary period. Proper policy formulation while keeping in mind all the dynamics of food accessibility not only by the unorganized workers but for the whole Indian population demand in-depth studies of ground situations related to hunger, food accessibility, and food security.

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