

Upgrade to an Adobe Creative Suite 5 Premium Suite from US\$599

Advertisement



editorials

Parental guidance

Abhijit Banerjee
May 04, 2010

First Published: 21:55 IST(4/5/2010)
Last Updated: 23:22 IST(4/5/2010)

email print 5 Comments Like 0 tweet share more...

A couple of years ago a colleague came into my office with what he thought was a definite typographic error: "It says that India won only three medals in the Olympics; that cannot be right — there is a billion people in India." I had to break it to him that this was actually the most medals India ever won in a single Olympic game.



particular, is the only country of over 100 million people that has never won an Olympic medal. The next largest such country is Nepal.

There's clearly a pattern here. South Asia is what statisticians call an outlier, something that just doesn't fit. It'd seem logical, especially, in these days of Indian Premier League scandals, to blame cricket — may be cricket is absorbing all the sporting talent we have.

There are, of course, many other things that we have in common — Bollywood, bhangra, biryani — but the natural place to look first is nutrition. The usual measure of how well a child has been fed through her childhood years is her height compared to the international standard height for that age.

Roughly half the children under five are stunted, which means that they're so much below the norm that there is serious cause for concern about their current and future health. A quarter are severely stunted, representing extreme nutritional deprivation.

What makes these facts more remarkable is that the stunting and wasting rates in sub-Saharan Africa, undoubtedly the poorest chunk of the world, are only about half of that in India. And these are the national average numbers: The NFHS divides the entire population in to five wealth categories, from the poorest to the richest.

Nutrition seems to be another instance of South Asian exceptionalism. We do worse in the Olympics than countries far poorer than us, and our children are much less well-fed. I'd guess that these two facts are connected.

But underfed children are obviously not just about Olympic medals. They are the workforce of the future,

Current Upcoming Recent
Final, Tri-Series in Sri Lanka, 2010
Match begins at 14:30 IST (09:00 GMT)
SL IND Scorecard

Upgrade to an Adobe Creative Suite 5 Premium Suite from US\$599

Advertisement

most viewed stories photos

- Soha Ali Khan in MMS scandal
Kat sheds tears over break-up mess
India's Miss Universe contestant criticised
Google's Gmail moves towards free phone calls
IPL players' auction fixed, claims TV channel

must read



World: Pea-sized frogs found in Borneo island

- Rest of Asia: A 100 km traffic jam in China
Europe: Exoplanet could be smallest ever found: experts
Jaipur: Biologist booked for cat attack pictures
World: Watch out for smallest full moon
Europe: Green last rites: Aquamation
Europe: Whiskey makes a car greener

we are Family
Releasing Thursday, sept 2nd

Advertisement

the brawn but the brains as well — there is compelling evidence that childhood nutrition is connected to brain development. It's clear that some drastic action is called for and the current conversation about the 'Right to Food' clearly has something to do with this. But it is also clear that the 'right', which at some abstracted moral sense I entirely endorse, mostly misses the point. If the poor in sub-Saharan Africa can feed their children, the middle of the Indian wealth distribution, who are far richer, can do it too. In the end, nutrition isn't primarily about money (though, obviously, for some people it is), but about bad water and poor sanitation and the diseases that come with it, which leach nutrients from the child's body and most importantly, about the diets that parents choose for their children — diets that may not have enough calories and certainly don't have enough proteins and micronutrients. Food, it seems, is not enough of a priority.

The Right to Food movement wants to solve this problem by offering people grains and, most importantly, pulses — probably one key missing piece of the diet — at heavily subsidised prices through the Public Distribution System (PDS). This may not be a bad idea if people actually eat the food. But given that they don't think it's a priority, why would they? In the old days of universal PDS, middle-class families would sell their subsidised grains to the poor. Now the poor will sell their subsidised dal to the middle-classes. And all that is if the food ever gets to them — as it is more than half of the stuff that gets into the hands of the PDS system gets 'lost' along the way — my guess is that entrusting it with large amounts of highly-subsidised dal won't help.

Our children cannot get the food, which is so obviously their right, till their parents make properly feeding them a priority. I will confess that I do not know how to make that happen. But what is clear is that it cannot be legislated in Delhi.

*Abhijit Banerjee is Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics and Director, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, MIT*

*The views expressed by the author are personal*

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.

more from this section

- The bends in our rivers
- Cut out the shortcuts
- The Chimerica chimera

more»

email print 5 Comments Like 0 tweet share more...

comment

Note: By posting your comments here you agree to the terms and conditions of www.hindustantimes.com

Add New Comment

Optional: Login below.

Type your comment here.

Post as ...

Showing 5 comments

Sort by Newest first Subscribe by email Subscribe by RSS

Lawrence Haddad 3 months ago

There are a number of points to discuss in the piece by Professor Banerjee.

1. Is food the most important determinant of undernutrition in South Asia? Actually, no. According to peer-reviewed studies I have been involved in, the main driver is the low status of women. Women's low status drives choices about water, sanitation, health, and food. The status of women is something that is amenable to public policy. Policy can affect legislation around equal benefits and working conditions, a greater equality of economic opportunities and equal political representation in a range of decision making.

What's HOT

- Thievery of the winds
- Tenders related to CWG
- Look for brides

Follow International News tweets with us now! NEWS

Drudge\_Report CRIST: I would've voted for Obamacare (wait, I mean http://drudge.tw/bhOoef 8 minutes ago

CNN RT @amFIX: Convention center: Then and now. Watch: http://on.cnn.com/bm0PWY 14 minutes ago

Dawn\_com US aid chief says threatened in Pakistan http://bit.ly/9707jS 16 minutes ago

ABC NEWS ABC Today in "what year is this again?" ... A Mississippi middle school bars non-white students from running for president. http://bit.ly/cHZ3Hv 21 minutes ago

ABC ABC Teen Hospital Mix-Up Victim Speaks



Join the conversation

top stories

- Delhi hits back after Beijing's snub to General
- Can't stop talking with Pakistan: PM
- No visa-on-arrival in Lanka
- Congress does balancing act on "saffron" terror remark
- Indian medal hopes dashed as Saina Nehwal falls

2. Prof Banerjee's arguments on the ineffectiveness of policy per se are countered by the wide variety of undernutrition rates within India. The states that have been most successful in combatting undernutrition (Kerala, AP, Tamil Nadu) are those where their political leaders --and citizens-- have made it a priority.

3. Evidence from South East Asia shows how policy can make a difference. A recent paper on from Vietnam shows how the incredible success in reducing undernutrition in that country over a 10 year period starting in the mid 90s was 50% attributable to Vietnam's rapid economic growth and 50% to the strategic investments made in the health system by the Vietnamese Government.

At the national level neither India's rapid economic growth nor its current policies seem to be reducing undernutrition. But this is not inevitable. This is not a curse. This is something that policy and leadership can change.

Professor Lawrence Haddad  
Institute of Development Studies  
UK

Like Reply

**yashashwi** 3 months ago

Middle class Indians tend to have a predominantly carbohydrate based diet. Idli, Dosa, Rice (white and fried), Roti and Naan loaded with ghee are eaten more with less of vegetables and pulses. Indians need to improve protein intake. Only then we will be able to compete at international level. Fish, poultry, and meat consumption has to rise. Instead the middle class children are being exposed to more of fatty foods, pasta, pizza and processed cereals. Open spaces for play are shrinking in urban areas where those who can afford proper nutrition mainly reside. Middle class and affluent Indian school children attend school during part of the day and then attend coaching classes in the evenings to prepare for earning high scores in SSC/HSC board exams. Due to inefficient learning practices and overindulgence in couch based entertainment during leisure time, fitness takes a backseat. Acculturation of the society is needed for a country to be fit where average waist to hip ratio of middle aged men will fall below one. Children pick eating habits from their elders. Sugar and Dairy fat consumption has to be curtailed. A food consumption revolution is needed for India to dream of winning medals at International competitions.

(Edited by author 3 months ago)

Like Reply

**Msdevere** 1 month ago *in reply to yashashwi*

Good comment, but it is not necessary to eat animal flesh in order to get all the required protein and other nutrients! Please do not say such things. One can be healthier on a vegetarian diet than on a carnivorous one, with the added benefit that it is environment friendly.

1 person liked this. Like Reply

**rkmalhotra** 3 months ago

Well said! Right to food should also mean Right food ,so that the work force of future doesn't grow with bow legs and shrunk thighs.As pointed out in the article,half of the subsidised grains and Dals dry up enroute to the PDS and since the Dals are sold at very subsidised rates ,the consumers may sell the same to the MIG consumers and eam some extra bucks.It is tail-spin of sorts and defies any fail-safe solution.

Like Reply

**ck** 3 months ago

I am confused about the height factor in this article. The heights of tribe called the Dinkas in Southern Sudan equal the most "advanced" countries in the world, yet the tribe has suffered terrible war for years. So what is the equation here?

Like Reply

blog comments powered by DISQUS

Ads by Google  
[Sponsor A Child www.partnersintl.org](http://www.partnersintl.org) Just \$25/month Child Sponsorship Can Change a Child's Life Forever  
[Child Sponsorship www.WorldVision.org](http://www.WorldVision.org) You Can Help Change Everything For a Child in Need. Sponsor now.

Advertisement

Click here for :



---

[news](#) | [views](#) | [business](#) | [cricket](#) | [entertainment](#) | [lifestyle](#) | [travel](#) | [photos](#) | [video](#) | [blogs](#) | [events](#) | [weather](#) | [epaper](#) | [classifieds](#) | [ht syndication](#) | [delhi jobs](#) | [browse jobs](#) | [back to top](#)

[about us](#) | [contact us](#) | [work with us](#) | [privacy policy](#) | [disclaimer](#) | [sitemap](#) | [print ad rates](#)  
Copyright © 2010 HT Media Limited. All Rights Reserved.

---