

# A jan aandolan for nutrition

Poshan Abhiyaan promises to revive traditional food systems across the country while addressing malnutrition

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SMRITI Z IRANI

THE PAST CENTURY has seen impressive growth in agricultural productivity in India and across the world, fuelled by systemic and scientific improvements in farming practices — the Green Revolution, and globalisation and industrialisation of the food sector. Ironically, this growth has not eliminated malnutrition, which continues to remain a challenge with serious social and economic costs.

Malnutrition among children, in particular, has long-lasting and critical effects on our nation's progress and future. For example, in the 1990s, it was found that 46 per cent of the children in India were stunted due to malnutrition and today, they form the country's workforce, designing and directing the nation's economy and health. The World Bank reports that the annual cost of malnutrition in India is at least \$10 billion and is driven by loss of productivity, illness and death. Analyses have shown that in order to achieve zero hunger in India by 2030, India will have to liberate nearly 50,000 people from hunger every day.

The awareness of the extent of malnutrition despite agricultural growth has led to a need to converge agriculture and nutrition. While the two areas share a common foundation, "food", which reinforces the intimate relationship between them, there has in reality been a significant disconnect in recent times, due to the demands on quantity rather than quality, driven by exponential population growth and needs.

Missions to tackle nutrition from farm to table involve multiple stakeholders, with the government at one end and individuals who can influence consumption patterns at the other end of the agri-nutrition chain. Such missions must necessarily consider the looping relationships along the food supply chain, to strengthen the linkages between agriculture and nutrition.

Building on existing strengths and capitalising on unexplored possibilities, the Government of India has embarked on an unprecedented initiative, the POSHAN Abhiyaan (the Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition) since 2018 to tackle malnutrition, through a multi-sectoral results-based framework. The mission, set up under the aegis of the Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD), aims at targeted reduction of stunting, undernutrition, anaemia and low-birth-weight babies in India.

The novelty of the Poshan Abhiyaan is twofold — at the agricultural level, it aims to amalgamate knowledge of regional food systems and at the consumer level, to foster social and behavioural changes among individuals, especially parents. The mission also seeks to improve linkages between communities and health systems, thus paving the way for a mass movement to promote a transformative change, referred to as the jan aandolan.

However, food and crop diversity need to be linked with agro-ecological patterns like soil, groundwater, etc. We need to know what was traditionally grown across the country, what were the nutrition and micro-nutrient content, how can we move away from monocropping and increase crop diversity to increase diet diversity.

Without understanding social, behavioural and cultural practices, we cannot promote healthy dietary practices and reinforce healthy dietary behaviours both at individual and community levels keeping in mind wide regional variations.



C R Sasikumar

As part of the Poshan Abhiyaan, the WCD, in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is developing India's first Poshan Atlas, to create a repository of diverse crops across 127 agro-climatic zones of the country that would be accessible to policy-makers, administrators, experts and communities to help meet nutritional outcomes.

Named Bharatiya Poshan Krishi Kosh, the initiative is particularly relevant in this age of globalisation because the advent of modern food systems has resulted in a loss of knowledge on and consumption of traditional and local nutrient-rich foods in favour of less nutritious industrialised and processed food products. For example, the replacement of nutrient-dense millets, suited for cultivation under the water-strapped conditions of the country, by other grains has been a result of globalisation; increased awareness about the suitability of millets from both the nutrient standpoint and agricultural logistics is catalysing the slow restoration of these super grains in recent times.

The information gained through the Atlas will be disseminated at the district level for implementation through cooperative tasks among all the stakeholders — farmers, food supply intermediaries and consumers. The Poshan Culture Atlas will create a repository of traditional foods/crops and cultural practices associated with them, such as seasonal folk songs, theatre and art forms. These tools will be employed to disseminate food and nutrition-related information among the people, thus forging closer ties between the agricultural and nutrition sectors.

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This ambitious project would see government, academia, the scientific community, private sector and cultural groups join hands and take a major step towards finding local, workable solutions to be implemented at community levels. In partnership with the Gates Foundation, Harvard University's TH Chan Centre of Public Health, ministries of agriculture, rural development, skill development, department of civil supplies, state governments, ICAR, Niti Aayog, National Institute of Nutrition, Deendayal Research Institute and many others will join hands to undertake this project, the first in any country, to ensure coming generations have access to traditional knowledge that can be used for workable solutions to address problems of nutrition.

The Poshan Atlas project will go a long way to address this gap and propel parents and communities to rethink on what to feed and what to consume. Awareness and knowledge about our crop diversity and regional variations in nutritious food will provide a nudge for behaviour change across the country propelling demand which, in turn, will provide opportunities to farmers and agro-processing units to address consumer needs.

Let us all join hands to build a New India where our food and crop diversity can be revived and our traditional knowledge leveraged for tackling undernutrition and malnutrition.

The writer is Union Minister for Textiles and Women & Child Development