

To battle malnourishment, start a mass awareness campaign

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has always maintained that “hunger is quiet violence”. [Proof of this comes in the latest Urban Hungama](#) Report, a survey on the nutrition status of children in the 10 most populous cities in India, carried out by the NGO, Naandi Foundation. The findings should be worrying to policymakers as urbanisation is growing and, with it, the problems of how best to cater to the interests of children.

The most alarming finding is that 22.3% of the children surveyed were stunted; 30.6% of the stunted children are in Delhi, the nation’s capital. The education of the mother has a bearing on the situation of the child. 35.3% of the children of mothers with five years of schooling or less were stunted. In the case of mothers who were more educated, the corresponding proportion was 16.7% .

When India began the National Family Health Survey, its stunting and wasting statistics (among children) were on a par with Thailand. Today, Thailand has all but overcome the problem; we have made only slow and uneven progress. What we lack is the proper data for planning and intervention. The need of the hour is a mass awareness campaign on the lines of the pulse polio one which produced excellent results. Since urban areas are considered better-off, the problem of stunting and wasting among children in these places has rarely been thought of as a serious problem. But it is. Even educated mothers, it was found, did not know the difference between giving their children food and giving them the right nutrition.

An undernourished child cannot easily be differentiated from a healthy one until she suffers from full blown malnutrition. So the problem remains unnoticed and neglected. If sub-Saharan Africa has fared better on malnutrition than India, it can only be put down to the fact that women’s voices there are stronger.

Unless the mother is involved in nutrition projects, progress will continue to be indifferent. At least in enlightened self-interest, governments both at the Centre and states should address this issue. We talk of the demographic dividend which we can reap but the economic consequences of stunting and wasting in children can be devastating. In a country which has surplus food grain and which guarantees the right to food for all, it is morally, politically and economically unacceptable that children are denied the right nutrition for entirely avoidable reasons.

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