

# STILL NO RELIEF FOR THE MALNOURISHED

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

File photo of Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan along with TV artist Mukesh Khanna interacting with a child at the launch of the State Government's 'Project Shaktiman, a special scheme to check malnutrition among children in tribal areas, in Kesla tribal block of Hoshangabad district. | Photo Credit: A.M. Faruqui

Ever since a confidential report by the Madhya Pradesh Accountant-General came to light, about "large scale fraud/misappropriation etc. in the identification of beneficiaries, production, transportation, distribution and quality control of THR [Take Home Ration]", the government has been facing severe criticism from the Opposition and activists.

Last month, ahead of the [translocation of eight cheetahs from Namibia to Kuno National Park](#), the Congress demanded to know the rationale behind making the translocation a mega event when about "21,000 children were malnourished and another 5,000 severely malnourished in Sheopur," which also takes the "lead in the nutritious food scam". Kuno is spread across Sheopur and Morena districts.

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In fact, on September 17, when Project Cheetah was launched, BJP MP Pragya Thakur herself said that in the settlements she has adopted, children do not have resources for education and their parents do not have any source of livelihood. Some of these parents turn to illegal liquor trade as a consequence. And if they are arrested, their families sell the little girls to get money for their release.

The Women and Child Development Department in M.P. is under the direct supervision of Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. Mr. Chouhan defended his government saying the latest audit report is not final. His party claimed that the State was under Congress rule when the scam took place. However, many continue to point fingers at Mr. Chouhan as he is the longest-serving BJP Chief Minister in terms of total time spent in office and M.P. continues to lag on most indicators.

The audit report says M.P. had the worst infant mortality rate and the third-worst maternal mortality ratio in 2017-19 despite the provision of THR under the supplementary nutrition programme. The National Family Health Survey-5 or NFHS-5 (2019-20) also shows that the infant mortality rate in M.P. was 41.3, above the national average of 35.2. Similarly, 72.7% of children aged between six and 59 months were anaemic, above the national average of 67.1%. Earlier this year, the government said that of the 65.02 lakh children in the State who were aged 0-5 years, 10.32 lakh were malnourished and 6.3 lakh were severely malnourished.

The THR comprises food grains and other items provided to address the nutritional requirements of 49.58 lakh beneficiaries — children (0.5–3 years), pregnant and lactating mothers, and out-of-school adolescent girls (11-14 years). The report said ration was being drawn in the names of 36.08 lakh out-of-school adolescent girls. As they were dropouts, these girls were deprived of mid-day meals. While THR is discontinued after the age of 14 for girls dropping out of school, nutritional challenges remain for them. When they become mothers, the situation worsens and the next generation also faces the carry-over effects.

The audit report points to corruption as the cause of this malaise, but activists say the rot runs deep. Every now and then, anecdotal evidence emerges on the poor condition of Anganwadis

and irregularities in mid-day meal distribution. On September 14, Mineral Resources Minister Brajendra Pratap Singh wrote a letter to School Education Minister Inder Singh Parmar alleging non-distribution of mid-day meals in 100 schools in his constituency of Ajaygarh in Panna for the past six months.

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Experts say there is a denial of malnutrition being a major concern despite M.P. being among the worst performers since NFHS-1 (1992-93). According to them, the State tries to manage the problem by simply supplying food instead of examining the fact that malnutrition occurs as a complex interplay of various factors including gender, caste, lack of sanitation, poor maternal health, early marriages, and lack of access to land and other resources.

From a policy standpoint, centralisation and standardisation of nutrition programmes also restrict the adoption of locally available food in a large and diverse State. Nutrition-centric micro-planning allows for tweaks and better resource management in the form of linking agriculture and horticulture. Activists say monitoring can be made easier by getting communities involved. Centralisation also provides opportunities for pilferage during the transportation or monitoring processes, they add.

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