

Pourna Sengupta  
Rock Canyon High School  
Highlands Ranch, CO  
India, Factor 13: Demographics

## **The Urban Poor of India: Food Security Challenges and Prospective Solutions**

### **1. Introduction**

India is a bustling country of over 1.2 billion people (Population of India, 2014) that is facing severe challenges in food and nutrition. It is a country of extremes with a small population of highly affluent people and a large population that is poor and malnourished. A significant number of children who are born into poor households die before the age of five from malnutrition and preventable diseases such as diarrhea (Sharma, 2014; Hunger, Under-Nutrition, and Food Security). A large section of this population lives in urban slums in unimaginably appalling conditions. Many of them are unemployed, and those of the urban poor who work, do not earn subsistence wages (Jha, 2015). Some have construction jobs that pay less than the minimum wage with no guarantee of regular work; others pull rickshaws seven days a week with no set wages at all. On certain roads, when cars stop at lights, young children beg for money so that they can augment their family income and buy food. On footpaths near busy highways, toddlers can be seen taking a nap as their mothers cook a meal with half rotten vegetables and whatever available ingredients they can procure. Others run free and play but receive little to no education despite acts that have been put in place. On the other hand, children their age who belong to the middle or affluent class, have enough to eat, attend school, receiving an adequate education and hope to move up the economic ladder. Where do these growing numbers of families come from? What makes them food insecure and how can this insecurity be resolved?

### **2. Creation of the Urban Poor**

Most of the urban poor who live in slums come from rural areas. An increase in rural to urban migration occurs for various reasons including rural unemployment resulting in extremely fast growth in the urban slum populations throughout India (Kumari, 2014). While about 68% of India lives in villages, job opportunities in rural communities are limited and not varied (Percentage of Population, 2014). Large families all work in the fields, raising the cattle, selling produce, or taking care of the house. Apart from these tasks, there is not much more to do resulting in disguised unemployment as well as seasonal unemployment (Chand, 2015). Overall, these jobs do not garner enough money and resources to feed such a large family and some family members migrate to cities seeking other forms of employment. Closer to cities, there is also the issue of increasing urban sprawl that leads to farmlands being converted to other non-farm use. This leads to increasing displacement of marginal farmers and their families who then seek work in urban areas. These migrants have little to no education and their job prospects are limited with extremely poor pay (Jha, 2015). Overall these low earners and their families suffer from severe food insecurity with no apparent way out of this poverty. They remain uneducated through generations and live in extremely unsanitary and dangerous conditions. These families suffer continuously and little is being done to help them.

The average size of a poverty stricken urban family in India can be categorized into three: small being five members or less, medium ranging between six and seven members and large considered as eight or more members. In India, roughly 40% of urban slum families are large; 30% are small and the remaining

30% medium (Gupta, 1987). The average family composition of poverty stricken urban families also has three categories: 33% of adult men live with their wives and children, 30% with siblings, and the remaining 37% with their parents (Gupta, 1987). Irrespective of the composition or size nearly all these families suffer from food insecurity with inadequate diet being a consequence. Families face difficulties in procuring enough food for two meals a day year round. Their diets consist mainly of cereal grains due to the lack of fruits and vegetables as well as meat and fish products (Hunger, Under-Nutrition and Food Security). Their education levels are generally low to non-existent with very few of them going beyond primary school. The government is making efforts and has passed laws to make primary education compulsory but the implementation has serious challenges and shortfalls. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act “provides free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years.” (Right to Education, 2013). To add to the challenges in food and education is the challenge of healthcare. With 1.26 billion Indians and an alarmingly fast rate of increase in the population, healthcare is facing an extremely serious crisis. The government’s expenditure on health care is low (Health Expenditure, 2014) and the poor do not have adequate access to health care due to economic deprivation (Pokharel, Pande, and Nath).

### **3. Challenges for the Urban Poor**

Once the rural families have moved to the urban area, they must find a place to live. Most times, these families settle in slums that have no proper address, unhygienic conditions, and cramped space. Without a proper address, these families do not receive any governmental benefits, which are crucial for these poor families. Most do not have access to government food security measures resulting in extreme levels of food insecurity. Unhygienic conditions in the slums spread disease and pollute the air, water, and land. Undesignated lavatories spread diseases and human waste becomes a part of the land, mixing with water sources where children play and where homes are built. With little to no education, these families are unable to work in middle- or high-income jobs. They may work as rickshaw pullers or maids, and a decrease in availability of manufacturing and agricultural work, limits the remuneration from these jobs. Most of the jobs for the urban poor do not have set wages, and in some cases, child labor is an acceptable way of life.

As women are considered as the child bearers and home keepers, minimal to no education is provided to them. The general lack of education means that a woman may not have a job to provide income or may have a low paying job such as being a maid or cheap roadside food vendor. Those who are not able to find these types of jobs may become a dirt collector, beggar, or may resort to acts like prostitution. Women are expected to reproduce but in many cases in an urban slum population, they are malnourished. The Population Reference Bureau (PRB) published an article regarding the importance of the nutrition of women and adolescent girls. The PRB article provides a flow chart that is essentially a cycle of malnutrition beginning with the woman being malnourished. The cycle says that inadequate fetal nutrition causes babies with low birth weight. This causes the child to be stunted, reducing mental capacity and eventually growing into a stunted adolescent. If the child is female, the cycle repeats with pregnancy beginning with an already low weight and bereft of adequate nutrition (Ransom and Elder, 2003).

With increasing rural to urban migration, resources are becoming scarce for urban slum families. A limited amount of land is available resulting in scarcity of housing for the urban poor. In all big cities throughout India, people end up living in makeshift housing such as under bridges and flyovers.

#### **4. Potential Causes and Solutions to Reduce Urban Poverty**

Addressing urban poverty should follow a two-pronged approach that (a) reduces migration to urban centers and (b) improves the economic conditions for the urban poor. It is necessary to take this approach as continuous influx to cities results in severe pressure on the available services and makes it even more difficult for those who are already living on the margins. If the influx is gradually reduced the existing urban poor can benefit from targeted programs that improve their economic condition.

##### **4.1. Reducing Migration to Urban Centers**

As previously mentioned the lack of jobs in rural areas leads to the urban influx. With agriculture being the primary economic driver, specific attention needs to be paid to that sector to improve agricultural productivity. There are both human and natural barriers that stand in the way of improving agricultural productivity. Population growth, industrialization, and urbanization put pressure on land and water resources through pollution and extensive overuse of these resources, thereby affecting agricultural productivity. (Measuring Agricultural Productivity, 2014) The availability of water is a serious issue that impacts agricultural production. As an example, drought in Rajasthan has left the area parched for extended periods of time, affecting agricultural production immensely. Other occurrences of extreme weather, such as severe flooding, destroy crops and affect agricultural production (Environmental Sustainability Issues). Climate change and volatility is also seriously impacting crop yields as well as transport resulting in reduced employment in rural areas.

A good monsoon season results in good agricultural yield in India. A lack of, or excess rainfall results in either drought or flooding. Reducing the impact of variability in rainfall can play an important role in increasing crop yield from year to year. Some states such as Punjab have developed an excellent canal system that provides irrigation water to the farmers. On the other hand other arid states such as Rajasthan suffer from severe drought due to a lack of infrastructure that can provide irrigation water (Rathore, 2005). It is obvious that projects to bring water from rivers in North India to Rajasthan will improve the condition of the rural population. Such projects are capital intensive but can pay for themselves in the long run as higher rural income will reduce urban migration and poverty. The Narmada Canal Project (NCP) provides drinking water to around 2.1 million people through a canal that is connected to a dam in Gujarat. The water is given to Rajasthan and the canal flows near a village in Jalore. The farmers operate and maintain the irrigation system and the whole operation (Narmada Canal, 2012). This stands as an example of a successful project to deliver irrigation water to farmers on a sustainable basis.

Rural regions around the country generally lack good schools and colleges. This puts the rural population at a severe disadvantage when competing for higher wage jobs both in the government and private sector. It is therefore imperative that a sustained effort be made by various government agencies to bring quality education to rural locations. An article published by the India Education Review explains the importance of vocational education in India. The article says, “Vocational Education is presently offered at Grade 11, 12<sup>th</sup> – however students reaching this Grade aspire for higher education... About 6,800 schools enroll 400,000 students in vocational education schemes utilizing only 4% of the available student capacity in these schools.” The article also says, “Labour market requirement for skilled workers without general education skills is declining,” and therefore, the number of jobs is decreasing for those belonging to poorer sections of the population such as rural migrants looking for urban work (Mujumdar). To alleviate

this problem the government can enter into partnerships with non-governmental organizations to operate quality educational institutions that provide focus on job training. The Etasha Society is one non-governmental organization that can benefit the urban poor of India if the government works to provide education that is focused on vocational job training (Etasha Society, 2006).

The rapid migration into large urban areas throughout India from rural areas is caused mainly in search of job opportunities with higher pay. By reopening manufacturing companies in rural areas, rural workers will not have the incentive to move to urban areas resulting in an eventual decrease of rapid migration to large urban areas. This may also cause a possible rural to urban migration, decreasing the number of lower class families in urban areas. This can be achieved by the government through incentives that encourage the private sector to set up business in rural centers. The government also needs to provide continuous access to electricity and quality roads for transport of manufactured goods. Recently, quality toll-roads have been developed in various parts of India which is a step in the right-direction (Toll, 2015). Privatizing power-production and delivery will generally provide cheaper and more reliable power to the rural regions of India.

#### **4.2. Improving the condition for the urban poor**

The major barrier to employment and earning a living wage among the urban impoverished is poverty itself. Families belonging to the lower economic class do not have equal access to education (Siddiqui, 2014) or nutrition. As the amount of education received increases, higher paying job opportunities are available (Jha, 2015) which then pull a family out of poverty. While food markets are accessible, food prices serve as the major barrier to adequate nutrition for the poverty stricken families in urban India (Pons, 2011). These families live among and work for upper class residents who have drastically more money. The price of fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat is affordable to the upper class residents but may be largely unaffordable on a lower class families' income. They live off an unbalanced cereal based diet leading to poor nutrition. Farm to fork food prices are high to begin with and increasing rapidly for various reasons including transportation costs and spoilage, especially if farm to market distance is long. Poor storage and refrigeration means that a significant amount of food produced by farms is spoiled before it reaches the market, causing a decrease in the availability of a product. Reducing food prices and providing adequate nutrition to the poorer classes is extremely important as it enables better health for children which ultimately results in an increased learning ability.

As education is necessary for higher paying jobs policies providing education to all should be implemented effectively and a minimum number of years of education should be compulsorily provided. Both boys and girls should have an equal opportunity to get an education. By providing education for women, additional job opportunities will be available allowing them to increase family income resulting in adequate nutrition. As women tend to be treated as second-class in a traditional society, job based education and nutrition for women should become a primary focus of government.

To keep those in poverty from being malnourished, monthly rations at highly subsidized rates should be given to all. These rations distribution centers should be operated by the communities to reduce pilferage. These rations should include meat, vegetables, and fruits, as well as grains. Community kitchens should be run to provide families with lunch and dinner if needed. Such community kitchens should be developed with the goal of providing nutritive food that is affordable by all the urban poor. Such urban

kitchens can then provide both nutrition as well as an opportunity for both men and women to work and earn proper wages. Coupons can be provided for the food kitchens based on income so that each family can have wholesome nutritive food. Leftovers from the kitchen of restaurants can be used to feed the urban poor. Instead of food being wasted, it is put to use to battle hunger and provide a small amount of food security to suffering families.

The health and nutrition of small children should be ensured from before birth. Women should be educated as to how to care for children and themselves during pregnancy and after. Women should also be educated about contraception and family planning to help reduce the Natural Increase Rate that is currently rising at a high pace in India. Subsidized food shall be provided for children till they attend school. If the school they attend does not provide food, they should be given a lunch that provides adequate nutrition till their family can provide them with lunch. Yearly health checkups and vaccinations should be enforced. If not provided at school, they should be continued till the age of eighteen. With an improvement in demographics, it will be easier to provide education and healthcare, and implement food effective security measures. Therefore family planning is extremely important for India. In addition women should be provided adequate care during pregnancy to fight malnutrition. This keeps both the woman and the child healthy. Each school should have yearly vaccinations and checkups for all students. Each school should also provide two meals, breakfast and lunch, for adequate nutrition of students. There must be at least one school per neighborhood that is free.

Each and every student must attend school for a minimum number of years. To enforce this, scouts shall be sent out each year to check all households, making sure that all children, including girls receive a basic education.

The minimum wage is not met much of the time. By enforcing laws that punish those who do not provide minimum wage, families may be able to increase their income greatly. If the minimum wage is not met, one should be able to approach authorities and seek assistance. The work provider should be punished by law and receive a fine. A law should be passed to provide a minimum of 270 days of employment out of 365 (roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the year) at minimum wage or more.

In addition to the above, the urban poor should have access to proper housing and sanitation. Low cost housing should be a priority of the government with a review of the economic condition of the occupants being conducted every year. Clean toilets and drinking water is a must and should be available at little to no cost for the urban poor.

## **5. The Role of the Government and Organizations**

Urbanization can be effectively addressed in multiple ways. Reducing corruption such as bribery should be priority of the government. Matters of governance, such as infrastructure, are suffering due to an inept system containing much inefficiency (Xu, 2014). The improvement in the governance of India is being approached through solutions proposed and implemented by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Suggestions such as the “establishment of specialized courts” and “requiring approval by shareholders for divestment” are mentioned throughout the 2014 report on “Improving Corporate Governance in India. (Improving Corporate Governance, 2014).

In recent years, the Indian government has publicly announced plans to spend \$1 trillion in their Twelfth Five Year Plan to improve infrastructure. This will help governance and will provide jobs to those in rural areas, which in turn will result in rural development and a reduction in urban migration. (Teo, 2015) India's demand for energy is already very large and is only increasing at alarming rates. The domestic supply of energy cannot keep up with the increasing demands. Those living in an urban slum may not have access to electricity due to not having an address or sufficient money to afford a connection. By providing reliable and cheap energy through implementation of policies and measures suggested by the International Energy Agency (IEA), poverty stricken families will have the ability to spend more on food and less on energy (Ahn and Graczyk, 2012).

The RAGS Project works to reduce gender discrimination in India through the Indian Government. So far, the project has reduced gender discrimination in the garment sector in three cities (RAGS, 2013). Recently, the pace of economic growth has increased in India. With a growing number of women in the workforce, many being part of the urban poor, families have an increased income helping them work their way out of extreme poverty and malnutrition.

## **6. Conclusion**

The urban poor migrate from rural areas in search of jobs and better pay in hopes of a more promising future. The problems economic deprivation presents to these individuals and families are unimaginable to those residing in first world countries. Health care is inaccessible, malnutrition is extremely common, little to no housing is available and overall conditions are unsanitary. There is little to no primary education. As the number of urban poor increases, housing, water, and food become increasingly scarce. Workers receive less than the minimum wage and cannot provide their families with the essentials such as a wholesome diet, sanitary conditions and education for their children. Collaboration between the government, non-governmental organizations and industry can help reduce migration to urban centers by setting up manufacturing units and generating employment in rural areas. Projects pertaining to clean water, rural work and income, and adequate education can provide the rural poor with a better lifestyle. On the other hand the urban poor can benefit from healthcare, subsidized food and basic necessities and education for all. The government should provide adequate housing and sanitation as well as a set minimum wage. The government should also actively reduce corruption, improve infrastructure, provide cheap and reliable energy, and reduce gender discrimination throughout the country. Feeding a bustling country of 1.2 billion can be problematic but can be accomplished by meeting all dependent factors of food security. The role of the government is vital for the urban poor.

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