

Poverty and Children's Right to Food and Nutrition: A Study of Child Beggars in India's Punjab State

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ABSTRACT:

The study is an attempt to examine the status of the right to food and nutrition of the child beggars in India's Punjab state. The study has been conducted while applying the qualitative research methods and techniques including the formal interviews, focussed group discussions and the non-participatory observations. The study reveals the dismal picture of the access of the child beggars to the right to food and nutrition. As per the findings of the study, most of the child beggars do not get prescribed number of meals per day. Child beggars get food insufficient to the level of their hunger as well as requirement for their physical and mental growth. In most of the cases, the food made available to the child beggars is unhygienic. It obviously hinders the physical and mental growth of the children belonging to the tender age groups.

Key words: Children, Rights, Food, Nutrition, Physical growth, Mental Development.

INTRODUCTION:

Food is the imperative necessity for human life. Food is not only required by humans for their physical survival but is equally required for the attaining and maintaining the physical as well as mental growth. Moreover, the term food does not relate only to the satisfaction of the appetite. The meaning and scope of the term food is much broad and comprehensive. Access to food also refers to sufficient food, hygienic food and food with nutrition value. The scientific discoveries have proven that malnutrition or lack of nutrition in the food results into several kinds of diseases among humans including the life-threatening ailments (Chirwa 2009). Therefore, the right to food has been recognised as a primary human rights under the international law. Moreover, the right to food is not merely a materialistic fulfilment. It is very much related not only to the life but also the dignity of humans. During the recent era, the human rights approach has comprehended to include in itself the right to food and nutrition (Shue 1980). Among countries at the domestic levels, right to food and nutrition has become the primary objective of the governmental policy-making. The international framework has explicitly recognised that the problems of hunger and malnutrition are to be recognised as violations of human rights and the people suffering due to these issues are to be treated as the victims of the violation of human rights (Eide 1992). More significantly, for children the access to a food with adequate nutrition value is very important. The children, who have no access to sufficient or adequate food and who get food with no or least nutrition value, are not able to develop physically and intellectually (Alston 1992). The children belonging to the poverty-ridden families such as indigenous people, workers, beggars etc

usually do not have access to the sufficient food. If the parents are somehow able to arrange sufficient food, the children of these families still suffer due to the issue malnutrition. As per the established general perception, the issues of food insufficiency, hunger, starvation and malnutrition are perceived as represented by the developing countries (Kent 1993). However, quite strangely, the concerns relating to these issues are raised by the experts in the developed nations as well. Even the richer countries of the world are not able to make concrete and productive arrangements to guarantee that all children belonging to their territories have consistent access to the right to healthy food and adequate nutrition (Cook & Brown 1996).

RECOGNITION TO THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL:

The concepts of human rights, women's rights, gender rights are discussed at the level of social movements, political policy-making and academic discourses more frequently and prominently. The discussion of the age-specific minorities is comparatively more recent and hence, more superficial. While examining the western literature with respect to the rights-specific approach, it appears that concept of child-care, childhood and child rights is not much older (Therborn, 1992). The researchers working in the field of child rights agree that the concept of child rights with special reference to the comprehensive rights of children and multiple duties of the parents, guardians and other related emerged during the era of Enlightenment and Christianity (Flora, 1987). There are other scholars who believe that in the whole Europe the term 'childhood' was not formally acknowledged prior to the period of the French Revolution. The mass incidents of the suffering and maltreatment of children in Europe during the First World War gave birth to a very meaningful discussion at the international level which resulted into a movement advocating an international resolutions and agreements for the protection of children. It further resulted into the remarkable initiative by the League of Nations which adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (the so-called 'Geneva Declaration'). In the Geneva Declaration, there were specific arrangements with the purpose of the promotion and protection of the rights of children. The Declaration specifically mentioned that 'that adequate food should be provided to a hungry child and a sick child should be given the adequate medical treatment (League of Nations, 1924). During the World War II, the sufferings of the children increased much more in comparison to the World War I. The United Nations was formed in 1945 with the aims and objectives of preventing further wars between nations and making concrete efforts for the protection of human rights of all people irrespective of their region, race, religion, gender, and age etc.

The United Nations (UN) has specifically acknowledged the right of children to the adequate and nutritious food. The Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC), a milestone initiative of the UN with respect to the rights of children adopted in 1989, has recognised the right to adequate food and nutrition of the children. As per the Article 24 of the Convention, 'the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health' should be maintained. Especially, the paragraph 2-c of same article requires the states 'to combat disease and malnutrition..., through the provision of adequate nutritious foods'. Further,

Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Child recognizes 'the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. The Convention explicitly elucidates that no child is able to access the other rights listed in the Convention if the right to adequate and nutritious food is not made accessible (CRC 1989).

Besides that, there are other nodal agencies of the UN, including UNESCO and ILO, which have time to time taken productive measures in the forms of declarations and conventions for the purpose of the protection of the right to food and nutrition of children. In the year 1969 the Declaration on Social Progress and Development was adopted. It specifically included the 'elimination of hunger and starvation and the guarantee of the right to adequate nutrition' among its primary goals. It is noteworthy here that the term 'nutrition' is not explicitly mentioned as a part of human right in most of the conventions and declarations. For a long time, lack of food was recognised as synonyms of malnutrition and there was no recognition to the term, under-nutrition or malnutrition.

The most significant step taken at the international level to provide an international framework of the right to food and nutrition for the countries to adopt at the level of the domestic policy-making has been the establishment of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS). The committee was formed in 2017 under the United Nations Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (GSF). More importantly, in the year 2021, the CFS adopted the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (VGFSyN). The Guidelines broadly concentrate on the right to food and nutritious diet of those who are affected by or vulnerable to the problems of poverty, hunger and malnutrition, particularly including homeless people, indigenous People, workers, and women and street children. It is a matter of disappointment that the countries have not taken much needed sincere steps for the realisation of the guidelines CFS 2017).

REALISATION TO THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION IN INDIA:

India is the homeland of the 20 percent of world's homeless or street children. In rural India today, 23 crore people are under-nourished. Every third Indian in the age-group 15-49 years is feeble-bodied. The situation is so grim that today every fourth malnourished global citizen is an Indian. In India, 50 percent of children fall victim to malnutrition. As per the date, every second Indian child is underweight. Three out of four children in India are anaemic. Every second newly born has reduced learning capacity due to iodine deficiency (Deol 2011).

Right to food has been recognised by the Constitution of India. Article 47 (under the title of Directive Principles of State Policy) reveals it as "duty of the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living and to improve public health." Though, right to food and nutrition has been acknowledged in the Directive Principles, it has not been able to safeguard the right to food of Indian citizens due to the non-justiciable and merely idealist nomenclature of the Directive Principles of the State Policy. An explicit manifestation and realisation of the

right to food has been defined in the Article 21 of the Indian Constitution in the chapter of Fundamental Rights by the Supreme Court of India through its various verdicts. The Supreme Court of India has unequivocally revealed while delivering judgements into various related cases that right to life should not be restricted merely to the survival of a person, rather it should be understood as the right to resourceful life and the right to live with human dignity. The court of verdict has further interpreted that the term life includes the access to adequate food, potable water, health and medical care as well.

The Supreme Court of India, while delivering the judgement in the renowned case of Peoples Union for Civil Liberties versus Union of India, interpreted that the right to food is to be acknowledged as a fundamental right of all citizens. The Court further instructed that the issue of the scarcity of food in India should be tackled to curb the problem of hunger in the country. The Supreme Court further directed that the Integrated Child Development Scheme should be nourished to provide the access of the supplementary food to children between the ages of 0 and 6 as well as the pregnant women. The Supreme Court further instructed that the states at their own levels should make efforts for the adequate functioning and delivery of the Public Distribution System. The Court further observed that the adequate realisation of food-for-work programs was sturdily required in the country. The Court also passed the directions to improve the process of the delivery of a Midday Meal Scheme in the schools.

India has made noticeable efforts to curb the problem of hunger and food scarcity. The Public Distribution System (PDS) has been launched to provide food items to the poverty-ridden families at the subsidised rates. Further, the Targeted Distribution System (TPDS) has been introduced in the year 1997. Under the Annapurna Scheme (1998) 10kgs of free food grain are delivered to the families facing extreme poverty. The Antyodaya Anna Yojana (2000) was implemented to provide the access of food to the poorest of poor. The noticeable step towards the right to food of children was the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS 1975) which was introduced for children under the age of six years (including the pregnant and lactating women). With respect to the recognition of the right to food of Children, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS 1995) has been implemented in all primary schools. Under this scheme, the children are provided free food in the schools.

Despite the constitutional recognition and the legal safeguards for the realisation of the right to food and nutrition in India, millions of people in the country face the scarcity of food (Cook and Martin 1995). Noticeably, more than thirty percent population of in India (which comprises of approximately 400 million persons) have been living below the poverty line. They do face the crisis of earning or arranging their daily meals. Moreover, the country, which is home of twenty percent of world's street children, the actual situation of the realisation of food and nutrition for millions of children can be very-well imagined. Countless number of children in India are indulged into the practice of beggary either as familial profession or the last resort to earn the livelihood, besides several other complex reasons. These child beggars wandering from one place to the other and praying the passerby for any alms are always found in miserable conditions whenever someone observes their physical

appearance. They appear as physically very weak, lethargic and gloomy. The present study is an attempt to examine the status of the right to food and nutrition at the level of child beggars in the state of Punjab. The study primarily answers the research question whether child beggars get appropriate meals daily which contains adequate amount of nutrition.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES:

Research Design:

For the purpose of making a universal and representative sample, it was decided to select three million-plus cities of India's Punjab state (as per the Census 2011). These three cities were selected on the bases of the level of urbanization, transportation, correspondence to the railways along with the roadways connectivity, and size of populations. Among these three cities, Amritsar was selected as it comprises of religious character; Jalandhar was selected due to its remittance economy and Ludhiana was chosen for its dynamic demographic profile which contains a noticeable number of migrated population. Moreover, Amritsar represents the highest tourist footfall in the state. The city of Jalandhar comprises of most dense diasporic population. Ludhiana receives and bears largest number of intra-state as well as inter-state migrants.

Unfortunately, there is no authentic data maintained by any of the concerned governmental authorities about the population of the beggars in the state of Punjab, including the child beggars. Information was solicited through the Right to Information Act from the nodal authorities. However, RTI had been filed to the nodal authorities but no conducive information was received in the response. Hence, it was decided to conduct a precise study by selecting a purposeful sample size to arrive at conclusive results.

Prior to the field survey, a pilot survey was conducted in case of each city. On the bases of the observations received from the pilot survey, five places with most thick and vibrant existence of child beggars were identified. Further, five each child beggars males and females were chosen from each selected site. It comprised of total number of ten child beggars from each site. The accumulative number of child beggars from one city therefore comprised of 50 child beggars. Over all, total 150 child beggars were selected from three cities.

The most obvious challenge part of the study was applying the appropriate methodology and obtaining the most precise results. The methods of unscheduled interviews of the selected child beggars along with focused group discussions with them and their family members as well as the shopkeepers, vendors and neighbours were taken into consideration. Primarily, the study is observational in nature. After the process of selecting the places for the field study and identifying child beggars, the timings of their arrival and departure at the places of begging were carefully noted. Afterwards, the selected child beggars were observed through the technique of non-participatory observation. The queries obtained through the day-to-day observations were noted down, and were adequately completed during every night when the process of observations was completed.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY:

The findings discussed below are part of a very comprehensive study conducted while focussing on the status of the child beggars. This part deals with the queries obtained from the child beggars with regard to the accessibility of food to them.

SOURCE AND PLACE OF FOOD:

The findings based on the empirical observations reveal that a significant majority of the child beggars, i.e. 59 percent, eat the food cooked at their homes by the family members, in most of the cases, the mothers. Although, a noticeable number of child beggars (34 percent) do not have any other option but to beg their meals from the eateries, including small restaurants, tea stalls, vendors selling street food. The research divulges that there are very less number of child beggars (6 percent as per the findings of the study) who buy their food from small eateries. More worryingly, 01 per cent child beggars (however only two beggars selected in the field survey) were observed as eating the stale and dingy food thrown by the eaters or the vendors as waste.

Table 1: Source of Food

Source of Food	Percentage
Home-Made Food	59
Food from Begging	34
Food by Paying	06
Eating Waste Food	01
Total	100

It has been found during the field survey that most of the child beggars lived with their parents in the hutments established in the slums or the rental accommodations in the marginalised areas of the cities. In majority number of cases, the child beggars were found as begging along with or under the supervision of their parents or family members. Therefore, it was observed that the child beggars living with their parents mostly took two meals (breakfast and dinner) at their homes. After taking breakfast, they would reach to their place of begging. Most of the child beggars were not found as taking lunch. Among those who would take lunch, most of them were dependent on the food received from vendors as alms or purchased while paying in cash. After ending their day, the child beggars would take dinners at their homes. Perceptibly, the homeless child beggars, 34 percent as per the findings of the study, depended upon the food begged from various sources, such as small restaurants, tea stalls or hawkers selling street food. In significant number of cases, child beggars were observed as getting food from *Langars* (free kitchen at religious places). The most unfortunate part of the findings is the trend among child beggars eating the food wastage thrown out by the food-vendors. In the country which boasts itself as the sixth largest economy of the world, even if

a single child is compelled by the circumstances of deprivation and marginalisation to eat the stale and dirty food waste thrown by the eaters or the vendors, these scenes portray a gloomy picture about the socio-economic development of the society.

Degree of the Availability of Food:

Another significant query of the study was to get the information about the number of meals within day taken by child beggars. To obtain the precise and verifiable information, the question was asked from the selected respondents that how many meals they consumed per day. The responses of the respondents were accumulated. These statements were further verified while observing the each subject for whole day. The findings elucidated that 38 per cent child beggars were taking three meals a day. Interestingly, 56 per cent child beggars were observed as taking two meals per day. An alarming fact which emerged out of the survey was that 6 percent child beggars were observed as taking only one meal a day.

Table 2: Number of Meals in a day

Number of Meals (per day)	Percentage
Thrice a day	38
Twice a day	56
Once a day	06
Total	100

The findings of the study explicitly reveal that 62 percent of the child beggars are not able to get adequate number of meals per day. As per the universally accepted norm with regard to the number of meals to be consumed by a child per day, every child up to the age of 9 years should at least take four meals per day. Further, every child up to age group of 16 years should at least take three meals a day. As per the findings of the study, there are 6 percent child beggars who take only a single diet per day. From the perspective of the rights food and nutrition, these trends can be perceived as the gross violations of human rights. This is the primary cause of the imbalanced physical health, undergrowth and mental weakness of child beggars. Another noteworthy observation is that among those 38 per cent child beggars found as taking at least three meals a day, significant majority among them were found as belonging to the age up to 7-8 years. They were found as begging in the companies of their mothers, elder sisters or other matured guardian. That was the reason they were able to get three meals per day. Otherwise, in case of rest of the child beggars, food was probably secondary for them and their primary appetite seemed as begging.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The study reveals very dismal picture of the realisation of the right to food and nutrition of the child beggars. Most of the child beggars live with their parents. Most of them are indulged into begging in the company or supervision of the parents of other guardians.

Nevertheless, almost every child beggar is deprived of the access to the adequate meals of a balanced food with nutrition value. Most of the child beggars do not have any proper source of food. There are child beggars, who get their breakfast and dinner from their homes, but there is no defined source of their lunch and hence most of them are compelled to take either two or a single meal a day. There are an ample number of child beggars who live with their parents. However, they do not get any breakfast. For lunch, they mostly rely on the community food (Langer in Punjabi and Hindi Languages) offered by philanthropic group or a religious shrine. There is another unfortunate category of homeless child beggars who do not have any prescribed source of food. The satisfaction of their hunger completely depends on the mercy of the passerby, the vendors selling food or the organisers of the religious shrines. Among them, there are children who do not have any other option but to eat the dingy food thrown out by the vendors or the eaters as waste. These trends, though quite not as much of, make the notion of humanity questionable in society. Moreover, those child beggars who have access to two or three meals a day mostly eat a sub-standardised or poor quality food. There is dearth of seasonal vegetables and fruits in their routine diet. The source of protein diet including, eggs, non-vegetarian food, milk and milk products is absent in their daily meals. As a result, the child beggars not able to get property quantity and well as quality of food. Firstly, they are not able to get prescribed number of meals per day. Secondly, they most of the times get insufficient quantity of food a particular serving. Thirdly, the level of cleanliness and hygiene is highly compromised generally at the level of cooking and particularly at the level of serving and eating the food. Fourthly, the required nutrition, such as vitamins and minerals are mostly absent in their routine diet. In case of child beggars, food seems to be merely a material to temporarily satisfy the suddenly occurred physical hunger. Obviously, the factors of poverty, deprivation and neglect are the primary causes of the miserable status of the right to food of the child beggars. It definitely effects the physical and mental growth of these children which results into the physical weaker and mentally imbalanced population in society.

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