

UPSC & STATE PCS CURRENT AFFAIRS · UJIYARI.COM**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

India's Nutrition Paradox — A System Built for Scarcity Now Facing Excess



28 March 2026

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

GS2 GS3

ALSO FROM THE CREATOR**BharatNotes**Free UPSC notes, MCQs, PYQ analysis. **100% Free.**bharatnotes.com →**ADVERTISE****Advertise with Ujiyari**

Reach thousands of UPSC aspirants daily.

epicbharat@gmail.com

India's Nutrition Paradox — A System Built for Scarcity Now Facing Excess

 The Indian Express

28 March 2026

GS2

GS3



The Indian Express

4 tags



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India simultaneously faces undernutrition and obesity. Should the PDS and ICDS be restructured to address the double burden of malnutrition?"

WHY IN NEWS

India's nutrition policy architecture — built in the **1960s-70s to combat famine and caloric deficiency** — is now confronting a radically different challenge: the **double burden of malnutrition (DBM)**, where **stunting and wasting coexist with rising obesity and non-communicable diseases** in the same population. The Indian Express editorial examines NFHS-5 data showing that **35.5% of children under five are stunted** while **24% of women and 22.9% of men are obese** — and argues that India's food safety net, centred on the PDS, is part of the problem.

THE DOUBLE BURDEN — WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

The **National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-2021)** revealed a paradox that defines India's nutrition challenge: undernutrition is declining but not fast enough, while overnutrition is rising rapidly.

Child Malnutrition — Improving but Inadequate

INDICATOR	NFHS-4 (2015-16)	NFHS-5 (2019-21)	CHANGE
Stunting (under 5)	38.4%	35.5%	-2.9 pp
Wasting (under 5)	21.0%	19.3%	-1.7 pp
Underweight (under 5)	35.8%	32.1%	-3.7 pp
Childhood obesity (under 5)	2.1%	3.4%	+1.3 pp
Anaemia in children (6-59 months)	58.6%	67.1%	+8.5 pp

Stunting has declined, but at the current pace, India will **miss the WHO Global Nutrition Target of reducing stunting to 21.7% by 2030**. Meanwhile, childhood obesity has risen by over **60%** in just five years — a trend the editorial calls “the silent epidemic within the epidemic.”

Adult Obesity — The Rapid Rise

INDICATOR	NFHS-4 (2015-16)	NFHS-5 (2019-21)	CHANGE
Overweight/obese women (15-49)	20.6%	24.0%	+3.4 pp
Overweight/obese men (15-49)	18.9%	22.9%	+4.0 pp
Maternal overweight/obesity	20.6%	33.2%	+12.6 pp

The **maternal obesity figure is particularly alarming** — jumping from 20.6% to 33.2%, it creates an intergenerational cycle where obese mothers are more likely to have both macrosomic (large) babies and nutritionally deprived children, depending on micronutrient intake.

The Household-Level Paradox

Research using NFHS-5 data has quantified the **double burden at the household level: 7.7% of Indian mother-child pairs** exhibit DBM (overweight mother + stunted/wasted/underweight child), and **5.1%** exhibit the triple burden of malnutrition (overweight mother + malnourished child + anaemic child).

The **overweight mother + stunted child** combination affects **4.2-5.5%** of households — a pattern characteristic of the **nutrition transition**, where processed, calorie-dense but nutrient-poor food replaces traditional diverse diets.

WHY INDIA’S FOOD SAFETY NET IS PART OF THE PROBLEM

India’s food security architecture was designed for a country facing famine. The **Public Distribution System (PDS)**, the **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)**, and the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme (PM POSHAN)** collectively represent the world’s largest food safety net, reaching over **800 million people** under the **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013**.

The Calorie Trap

The PDS distributes **rice and wheat** at subsidised prices — Rs 1-3/kg for priority households. This addresses **caloric poverty** effectively but does almost nothing for **protein, micronutrient, or dietary diversity** needs.

PDS ENTITLEMENT	QUANTITY	NUTRITIONAL PROFILE
Rice or wheat	5 kg/person/month (priority)	High carbohydrate, low protein, negligible micronutrients
Sugar	500g/household/month (some states)	Empty calories
Kerosene	Being phased out	N/A
Missing: pulses, millets, eggs, oils	Not included	Protein, iron, zinc, vitamin A sources

The editorial describes this as the “**Green Revolution hangover**” — India’s agricultural procurement, storage, and distribution systems remain oriented toward **rice and wheat surpluses** (the FCI holds **60-80 million tonnes of buffer stock** against a norm of 21 million tonnes), while pulses, millets, fruits, and vegetables receive minimal institutional support.

ICDS — Quantity Without Quality

The **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)** — renamed **Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0** — reaches approximately **8 crore children** and **2 crore pregnant/lactating women** through 13.9 lakh Anganwadi centres. But the editorial cites multiple CAG reports showing:

- **Supplementary nutrition** often consists of pre-packaged take-home rations that are calorie-dense but nutrient-poor
- **Growth monitoring** is irregular — many Anganwadi workers lack functional equipment
- **Nutrition counselling** reaches fewer than **30%** of beneficiaries in most states
- **Budget absorption** under POSHAN Abhiyaan has been below **60%** in several states

THE ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD EXPLOSION

While the PDS addresses (imperfectly) the undernutrition side, the **overnutrition crisis** is being driven by the explosive growth of **ultra-processed foods (UPFs)** in India.

The Market Scale

India’s UPF market has grown from **USD 0.9 billion in 2006 to nearly USD 38 billion** — the **fastest growth rate globally**. This includes packaged snacks, instant noodles, sugary beverages, ready-to-eat meals, and processed dairy products.

The growth is driven by: rising incomes, urbanisation, nuclear families with less time for cooking, aggressive marketing (particularly to children), and the **proliferation** of e-commerce food delivery platforms.

FSSAI's Regulatory Gap

The **Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)** — established under the **Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006** — has been working on **front-of-pack nutrition labelling (FOPNL)** since 2022 but has not yet implemented it.

In **2025**, the **Supreme Court directed FSSAI** to implement front-of-pack nutrition labels on all packaged food products, emphasising the need to **empower** consumers and tackle India's growing obesity and NCD burden. However, the food industry has resisted, arguing that mandatory warning labels would hurt the **USD 535 billion food processing sector**.

COUNTRY	FOPNL SYSTEM	STATUS
Chile	Black octagonal warnings ("High in sugar/salt/fat")	Mandatory since 2016
Mexico	Black octagonal warnings (modelled on Chile)	Mandatory since 2020
UK	Traffic light system (red/amber/green)	Voluntary since 2013
India	Under development (FSSAI)	Supreme Court-directed; timeline unclear
Australia/NZ	Health Star Rating (1-5 stars)	Voluntary since 2014

The editorial argues that India's delay in implementing FOPNL is **costing lives**: NCDs (diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer) already account for **~63% of all deaths in India** (WHO estimate), and the UPF-NCD link is well-established in epidemiological literature.

THE EAT RIGHT INDIA CAMPAIGN — AMBITION VS EXECUTION

FSSAI launched the **Eat Right India** campaign in 2018, aiming to promote safe, healthy, and sustainable food through three pillars:

- **Eat Safe** — food safety and hygiene (FSSAI licensing, inspections)
- **Eat Healthy** — dietary diversification, trans-fat reduction, salt/sugar reduction
- **Eat Sustainable** — reduce food waste, promote local and seasonal foods

What Has Worked

- **Trans-fat regulation**: India capped trans-fat content in oils and fats at **2% (from January 2022)** — one of the strictest standards globally, ahead of the **WHO target of eliminating industrially produced trans-fats by 2023**
- **Fortification**: FSSAI has mandated fortification of edible oil with Vitamin A and D, and rice with iron, folic acid, and Vitamin B12 — **distributed through PDS in pilot states**
- **Eat Right Station** and **Eat Right Campus** certifications have reached several hundred locations

What Has Not Worked

- **Front-of-pack labelling** remains unimplemented despite years of deliberation
- **Advertising restrictions** on UPFs targeting children are non-existent — India has no equivalent of the UK’s HFSS (high fat, sugar, salt) advertising ban
- **Diet diversity messaging** has not penetrated rural and semi-urban areas, where traditional diets are being replaced by UPFs faster than in metros (due to lower awareness)

BOTH SIDES OF THE ARGUMENT

Those Who Want Radical PDS Reform

- The PDS should include **pulses (dal), millets, eggs, and cooking oil** alongside rice and wheat — Tamil Nadu’s **egg distribution through ICDS and mid-day meals** has demonstrated measurable improvements in child nutrition
- **Nutrition-linked Minimum Support Price (MSP)** — offer price premiums for biofortified crops (high-zinc wheat, iron-rich pearl millet) to shift farmer incentives from volume to nutrition quality
- Replace **calorie-based entitlements** with “**minimum balanced diet**” standards — two thalis per day including cereals, pulses, vegetables, and dairy, customised by region
- **Cash transfers** (like Rythu Bandhu or PM-KISAN) may be more efficient than in-kind food distribution for nutrition outcomes

Those Who Argue for Incremental Change

- The PDS is the **world’s most successful anti-hunger programme** — 800 million people receiving subsidised grain is not a system to disrupt
- Adding pulses and eggs to PDS raises **procurement, storage, and logistics challenges** that the current FCI infrastructure cannot handle
- **Cultural and religious sensitivities** around egg distribution (as seen in Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka) make universal egg provision politically difficult
- **Fortification of existing staples** (rice, wheat, oil, salt) is a more practical route to micronutrient delivery than overhauling the entire PDS basket

WAY FORWARD

Immediate (1-2 years)

- **Implement FOPNL immediately** — adopt the Chile-style octagonal warning model, which is most effective for low-literacy populations

- **Ban UPF advertising during children’s programming** and on school premises — following the UK HFSS model
- **Expand egg distribution** through ICDS and PM POSHAN to all states — make it opt-in to address cultural concerns while ensuring availability

Medium-Term (3-5 years)

- **Add pulses and millets to PDS** — begin with **chana, tur, and ragi** using the existing NAFED procurement infrastructure
- **Introduce Nutrition-Linked MSP** — a 10-15% price premium for biofortified crop varieties to shift farmer incentives
- **Digitise ICDS growth monitoring** — equip all 13.9 lakh Anganwadi centres with digital anthropometric tools linked to a national nutrition dashboard

Long-Term (5-10 years)

- **Replace the “food security” paradigm with a “nutrition security” paradigm** — amend the NFSA to define entitlements in terms of nutritional adequacy, not just caloric sufficiency
- **Establish a National Nutrition Regulatory Authority** — a body with enforcement powers over food marketing, labelling, and school nutrition standards (currently split between FSSAI, MoHFW, and MoWCD)
- **Tax UPFs progressively** — implement a sugar/salt tax on ultra-processed products (as Mexico and the UK have done) and use revenues to fund nutrition programmes

UPSC RELEVANCE

NFHS-5 key indicators, NFSA 2013 provisions, PDS entitlements, FSSAI and Food Safety and Standards Act 2006, POSHAN Abhiyaan, Eat Right India, biofortification, ICDS/Anganwadi statistics.

MAINS GS-II:

Government policies for health and nutrition; ICDS and mid-day meal effectiveness; food security vs nutrition security.

MAINS GS-III:

Food processing industry; PDS reform; agricultural diversification; biofortification and Nutrition-Linked MSP.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

NFHS-5 (2019-2021) — KEY NUTRITION INDICATORS:

- Stunting (under 5): 35.5% (down from 38.4% in NFHS-4)
- Wasting (under 5): 19.3% (down from 21.0%)
- Underweight (under 5): 32.1% (down from 35.8%)
- Childhood obesity (under 5): 3.4% (up from 2.1%)
- Anaemia in children (6-59 months): 67.1% (up from 58.6%)
- Women overweight/obese: 24.0% (up from 20.6%)
- Men overweight/obese: 22.9% (up from 18.9%)
- Maternal overweight/obesity: 33.2% (up from 20.6%)

DOUBLE BURDEN OF MALNUTRITION (DBM):

- Prevalence in mother-child pairs: 7.7% (NFHS-5)
- Triple burden: 5.1% of mother-child pairs
- Overweight mother + stunted child: 4.2-5.5%
- Overweight mother + anaemic child: 7.8-12.1%

PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM (PDS):

- Beneficiaries: 800+ million under NFSA 2013
- Entitlement: 5 kg/person/month (priority households) at Rs 1-3/kg
- FCI buffer stock: 60-80 MMT (norm: 21.04 MMT)
- Items distributed: Rice, wheat, sugar (no pulses, eggs, or millets)

ICDS / SAKSHAM ANGANWADI AND POSHAN 2.0:

- Anganwadi centres: 13.9 lakh
- Children covered: ~8 crore
- Pregnant/lactating women covered: ~2 crore
- Services: Supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-ups, referral, nutrition counselling, pre-school education

ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS IN INDIA:

- Market size: USD 0.9 billion (2006) to ~USD 38 billion (2025)

Growth rate: Fastest globally

Food processing sector: USD 535 billion (2025-26 estimate)

NCDs account for ~63% of all deaths in India (WHO)

FSSAI AND FOOD REGULATION:

Established under: Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006

Trans-fat cap: 2% in oils and fats (from January 2022)

Front-of-pack labelling: Supreme Court-directed (2025); not yet implemented

Eat Right India: Launched 2018 (three pillars: Eat Safe, Eat Healthy, Eat Sustainable)

FORTIFICATION INITIATIVES:

Edible oil: Fortified with Vitamin A and D (mandatory)

Rice: Fortified with iron, folic acid, Vitamin B12 (pilot through PDS)

Salt: Double-fortified with iron and iodine (pilot)

Biofortified crops: High-zinc wheat, iron-rich pearl millet (developed by ICAR)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013: Covers 75% rural and 50% urban population

POSHAN Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission): Launched March 2018; targets: reduce stunting by 2% per year

WHO Global Nutrition Target: Reduce stunting to 21.7% by 2030 (India unlikely to meet at current pace)

Tamil Nadu egg model: State provides eggs through ICDS and mid-day meals — linked to improved child nutrition outcomes

Chile FOPNL impact: UPF purchases declined 25% after mandatory warning labels (2016)

Mexico sugar tax (2014): Reduced sugary drink consumption by 7.6% in first two years

Sources: [Indian Express](#), [NFHS-5](#), [FSSAI](#), [PRS India](#), [Business Standard](#)



CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/03/nutrition-scarcity-to-excess-india-health/>

ALSO FROM THE CREATOR

BharatNotes

Free UPSC study platform — subject-wise notes across all 4 GS papers, Prelims MCQs, Mains answer frameworks, PYQ analysis & progress tracking. **100% Free • No Login Required.**

[Start Preparing → bharatnotes.com](http://bharatnotes.com)

📌 OPPORTUNITY

Advertise with Ujiyari

Reach **thousands of serious UPSC & State PCS aspirants** daily through our PDFs, website, and social channels.

Ideal for: Coaching institutes • EdTech platforms • Book publishers • Exam prep apps

[✉ epicbharat@gmail.com](mailto:epicbharat@gmail.com)

Write to us for rates & media kit

Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs · ujiyari.com · bharatnotes.com