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NFHS-6 and the Nutrition Paradox: Stunting Falls, Feeding Practices Lag

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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NFHS-6 and the Nutrition Paradox: Stunting Falls, Feeding Practices Lag

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WHY IN NEWS

The sixth National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6, 2023-24) was released on May 30, 2026. It records clear gains in stunting reduction, institutional deliveries and immunisation, yet reveals a stubborn lag in infant feeding practices, a combination that has been called the “nutrition paradox (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/paradox/>).

The nodal agency for the survey is the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai.

THE HEADLINE FINDINGS

| INDICATOR | NFHS-6 (2023-24) |
|---|-------------------------|
| Under-five stunting | 29.3% (down from 35.5%) |
| Severe wasting (under-five) | 5.2% |
| Institutional births | 90% |
| Full immunisation (12 to 23 months) | 87% |
| Newborns breastfed within first hour | ~50% |
| Children 6 to 23 months on an adequate diet | 15% |

Understanding the Indicators

- **Stunting** is low height-for-age, a marker of chronic, long-term undernutrition.
- **Wasting** is low weight-for-height, a marker of acute undernutrition.

The fall in stunting from 35.5% to 29.3% is a genuine public-health gain, reflecting better maternal and child health coverage. Institutional births at 90% and full immunisation at 87% show that the health-system delivery backbone has strengthened.

THE PARADOX: INPUTS WITHOUT PRACTICES

The contradiction lies in feeding behaviour. Despite 90% institutional births, only about half of newborns are breastfed within the first hour, and only 15% of children aged 6 to 23 months receive a minimum adequate diet.

This is paradoxical because the structural prerequisites are in place. Mothers are reaching hospitals, children are being immunised, but the behavioural and dietary practices that convert health-system contact into nutrition outcomes are lagging. Early initiation of breastfeeding within the first hour delivers colostrum, the antibody-rich first milk, and an adequate diet in the 6-to-23-month window is critical for cognitive and physical development.

THE POLICY FRAME

POSHAN Abhiyaan and the First 1,000 Days

POSHAN Abhiyaan (the National Nutrition Mission, launched in 2018) targets stunting, wasting, anaemia and low birth weight through a **convergence** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/convergence/>) model across health, women-and-child-development and sanitation. Its conceptual core is the “first 1,000 days” from conception to a child’s second birthday, the window in which nutrition has the most lasting impact on growth and cognition.

SDG Linkage

The findings map directly onto Sustainable Development (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/sustainable-development/>) Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), specifically the target to end all forms of malnutrition by 2030.

ANALYSIS: THE BEHAVIOUR-CHANGE GAP

NFHS-6 reframes India’s nutrition challenge. The first-generation problem was access: getting mothers to facilities and children vaccinated. That battle is being won. The second-generation problem is behaviour and diet quality, which cannot be solved by infrastructure alone. The 15% adequate-diet figure points to a counselling and dietary-diversity gap, not a hospital-bed gap. The way forward therefore shifts from building delivery capacity to intensive, frontline behaviour-change communication through **Anganwadi** (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/anganwadi/>) and ASHA workers.

WAY FORWARD

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- **Frontline counselling:** Strengthen Anganwadi and ASHA-led counselling on early breastfeeding and complementary feeding.
- **Dietary diversity:** Promote affordable, locally available diverse foods for the 6-to-23-month group.
- **Convergence on practice:** Reorient POSHAN Abhiyaan metrics from coverage indicators towards feeding-practice outcomes.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: NFHS-6 key indicators; IIPS Mumbai; stunting vs wasting; POSHAN Abhiyaan (2018); first 1,000 days; SDG-2.

Mains (GS2): “Despite gains in maternal and child health coverage, India’s nutrition outcomes are constrained by poor feeding practices.” Discuss in the light of NFHS-6 findings and suggest measures.

FACTS CORNER

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NFHS-6: 2023-24 round, released May 30, 2026; nodal agency IIPS Mumbai.

Stunting: Down to 29.3% (from 35.5%); low height-for-age, chronic undernutrition.

Wasting: Severe wasting 5.2%; low weight-for-height, acute undernutrition.

Feeding gap: Only ~50% breastfed within first hour; only 15% of 6-to-23-month-olds on an adequate diet.

POSHAN Abhiyaan: Launched 2018; “first 1,000 days” concept; linked to SDG-2.

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com>), *Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com>)

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[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/daily/2026/06/19/nfhs-6-nutrition-paradox-stunting-feeding/>

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