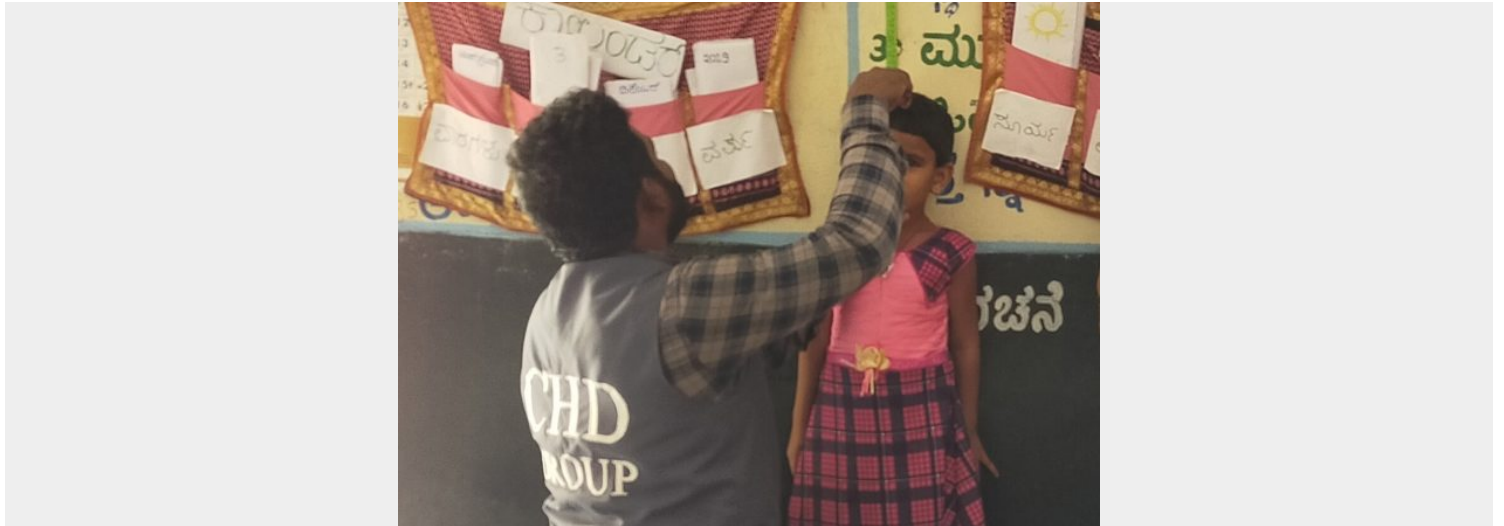


PERSONAL PRACTICES, PUBLIC CONSEQUENCES: INDIA'S NUTRITIONAL WAR

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"It is appropriate to remember that India's richness lies both in the soul and the soil and whose intention for enhancing healthcare is a quest since Independence. Nourishing India's under fives will fill the stomach and the soul thereby creating a victory of the spirit."

How do we know when the child slips off from being healthy to then being malnourished? We are not educated and there are five children at home. Should we look after the children, look after the farm, earn for a living or listen to the doctor's advice and get the child admitted to a hospital's Nutritional Rehabilitation Center (NRCs)? These are questions raised by Seetha, a 71-year-old grandmother taking care of the child who was compelled to be admitted to the NRC along with the mother in one of the NRC I visited recently.

What the family consumes, how much a male child gets and how much a female child gets, who eats what and when, are cultural practices that remain deep rooted in the India of 2018. Much of these decisions are taken by family elders who remain enlightened in a limited world they can call their own. When a child suffers from respiratory illness, the family customises the treatment, during diarrhoeal episodes the mother often stops breastfeeding and even stops formula feeds, if the child does not eat and continues to cry, every neighbour has an advice to give. Nutrition is not a by-word but a way of life. The silver thread on which the child's survival and futures thrive. Yet painfully, notwithstanding different schemes, nutrition is still a losing battle being fought, though few victories are evident and serve as an inspiration.

I do not want to look at child health and nutrition from the lens of weight, height and nutrition alone. I would like to look at this as rights and justice issue towards building an egalitarian society, I would like to look at this as a human face beyond those statistical numbers. I would like to look at this as an important personal practice which has impending public consequences which if not handled neatly can be detrimental to the country.

If you want to understand what I am trying to tell you, visit a Nutritional Rehabilitation Center and speak to the mothers of the children, visit a McDonalds/KFC outlet and identify slum children around the areas who develop bellies emerging out of empty calories, take a walk around India's premiere health sciences institutes and you will find India's most authentic children in need of help.

According to UNICEF India, one third of the world's children who are wasted live in India and 3 out of every 10 stunted children are in India. The circumstances that surround each child would be different, however the national aspiration remains common, public health warriors have a common goal, and these are the same very children who will be the next India and will continue to define it through and through.

To beat this and achieve nutritional victories, India will have to choose committed grass-root level workers and institutions that will have the strategic ability to navigate those difficult waters. Faith based convergence to bring about behaviour change among mothers and rural households will bring in sizeable amount of change. The health department at district levels will have to be staffed with more public health professionals in the absence of a Ministry of Public Health which can otherwise address challenges. Corporate Social Responsibility, which is undertaken by visionary corporate bodies, ought to look at social responsibility minus publicity if there are serious intentions to give back to society and also see change before their eyes. I remain hopeful that India's children will surely win, but it may have to be a generational work with all stakeholders joining hands and political will reaching for the skies.

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