

From shared meals to shared futures: Fixing our food for India's youth

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India faces a “triple burden” of malnutrition – undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and obesity – with a key driver being ultra-processed foods that are affordable, convenient, and aggressively marketed. Discussing the shift in the country’s food environment and the role of digital marketing, Arora and Desilets highlight the importance of equipping adolescents and youth with knowledge and tools to become champions of reviving traditional, nourishing diets.

Food in India has always been more than just sustenance – it is memory, identity, family, and culture, shared on a *charpai* in a village courtyard, a noisy school canteen table, or a bustling family kitchen. Yet what lands on these shared plates is changing, and not always for the better. Today, as the country grapples with a growing triple burden of malnutrition among children and adolescents, this issue has never been more urgent.

The paradox of plenty

Across the country, children and adolescents face a troubling triple burden of malnutrition: undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and rising overweight-obesity. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 shows that nearly one-third of children under five are stunted, while overweight and obesity are increasing among the 15-19 years age group. Nearly half of adolescent girls are anaemic. These are not just numbers but millions of futures constrained when nutrition matters most.

Food environments in flux

One key driver of this triple burden of malnutrition is the shift in our food environments – the physical, economic, and social surroundings that influence what we eat. Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) – high in fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) – are now everywhere and contributing to the rising burden of the non-communicable diseases. They are affordable, convenient, and aggressively marketed. The numbers tell the story: In India, people are eating more ultra-processed foods every year. According to [Euromonitor International 2019](#), the overall per capita sales of processed foods in India nearly doubled from US\$ 31.3 in 2012 to US\$ 57.7 in 2018. Further, according to a WHO (World Health Organization) India report published in [August 2023](#), the retail value of ultra-processed food and beverages grew exponentially from US\$ 0.9 billion in 2006 to over US\$ 37.9 billion in 2019 and India’s processed food market alone was worth around US\$ 33.8 billion in 2021 and is expected to more than double by 2032. These products are steadily pushing aside our traditional, nutrient-rich meals, not just in homes and schools, but even in professional spaces and health conferences.

And then there is marketing in the digital world, with its personalised and targeted approaches, making unhealthy food almost unavoidable. UNICEF's (United Nations Children's Fund) global U-Report poll of 2024 among adolescents and young adults aged 13-24 years across 171 countries, showed that more than two-thirds are exposed to food marketing.

Thus, the scale of marketing exposure is staggering. Children and adolescents are immersed in a constant stream of unhealthy food marketing, from television and billboards to the screens in their hands. According to research conducted by the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), in India alone, children watch television for 2-3 hours a day on weekdays, often more on weekends, exposing them to HFSS food advertisements across broadcast media, digital platforms, and public billboards.

The impact of this sharp shift to the digital space – which is often disguised as entertainment – is extremely tangible. The findings of a U-Report survey of 143,878 adolescents, conducted in India under the Let's Fix Our Food (LFOF) Initiative in 2022, found that 68% are influenced by food advertisements when making eating choices. Yet, when they look for alternatives, healthy foods are harder to find. For 31% of adolescents, the higher cost of nutritious foods is a direct barrier and unfortunately not easily accessible or available. Earlier evidence has shown that time constrains (Sivaramakrishnan and Kamath 2012, Jabs and Devine 2006) the ability to consistently prepare home-cooked, meals and increases reliance on convenience foods, take-away meals, or packaged products that are typically higher in sodium and saturated fat. The result is stark: unhealthy food is not just present in their lives but has actually become the default choice.

This shift is not only about nutrients but about heritage. India's culinary traditions celebrate local, seasonal diversity – from iron-rich *ragi mudde* of Karnataka to probiotic bamboo shoots of the Northeast. These foods were built on balance, biodiversity, and cultural identity. But globalised diets are eroding these traditions. When a festival sweet is replaced by a packaged dessert, we lose not just nutrition but also tradition.

What can we do?

Solutions exist and this packet-to-palette culture has to change. Countries from Chile to France and the Scandinavian region show that clear Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labelling (FOPNL) helps families make healthier choices and pushes industry to reformulate. [India must implement](#) mandatory, impactful FOPNL and restrict marketing of HFSS foods to children across television, digital, and outdoor platforms. School food policies should ban HFSS foods in and around campuses, strengthen the PM-POSHAN mid-day meal scheme with local produce, and expand tools like the UNICEF-developed Nutrition Environment Assessment Toolkit for Schools (NEAT-S). Under LFOF, the NEAT-S is being pilot-tested in

North Indian schools to identify actions that make healthier options visible and appealing. Urban planning must also prioritise fresh produce through community markets, mobile vendors, and urban farming.

Youth power

At the same time, it is important to note that driving these changes will require active participation from young people themselves along with their families. The LFOF initiative, jointly led by ICMR-NIN (Indian Council of Medical Research – National Institute of Nutrition), PHFI, UNICEF, and 12 consortium partners, echoes this approach and has shown that youth are not passive consumers but powerful agents of change. When equipped with the right knowledge and tools, adolescents can influence school food environments, family food habits, mobilise peers, and engage directly with decision-makers and further challenge the food industry's marketing machine and champion the revival of traditional, nourishing diets.

A call to action

Efforts to improve nutrition ought to go beyond awareness and inspire sustained, year-round action. Nutrition should be integrated into education, agriculture, trade, and urban planning. Schools should champion healthy eating rather than promote unhealthy products, and young people must continue advocating for healthier food environments, both online and offline. The choices we make today on our plates will shape the health and future of the next generation.

The views expressed in this post are solely those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of the I4I Editorial Board.

Further Reading

- Sivaramakrishnan, Malathi and Vidya Kamath (2012), "A typical working-day breakfast among children, adolescents and adults belonging to the middle and upper socio-economic classes in Mumbai, India - challenges and implications for dietary change", *Public Health Nutr.*, 15(11): 2040-6. Available [here](#).
- Jabs, Jennfier, Carol M Devine (2006), "Time scarcity and food choices: an overview", *Appetite*, 47(2): 196-204. Available [here](#).