

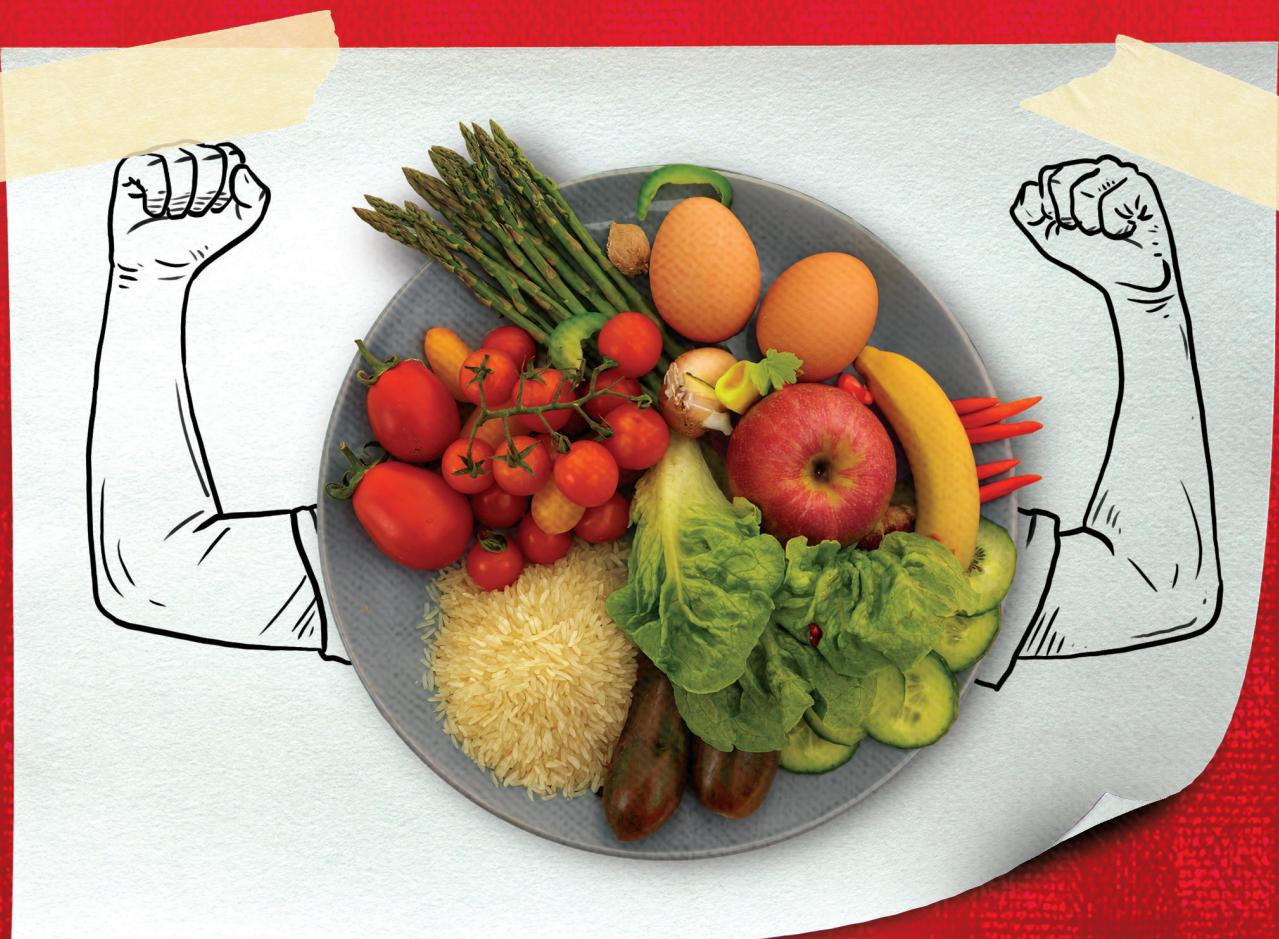
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A DOWN TO EARTH SUPPLEMENT FOR THE YOUNG AND CURIOUS

NUTRITION FOR POWER, PLAY, AND BOOST

Why food diversity matters, how we grow, and what birds and Christmas teach us about health, nature, and joyful living.



Nutrition is Food's Superpower



Anil Uppalapati

Discover why nutrition is more than just food—and how it shapes children's health, learning, and future.



I was born in a small village called Alakurapadu in Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh. Life there was slow and simple. Evenings smelled of wood-fired cooking, and most of the food we ate was grown right at home. Poultry and buffaloes were part of our family, and vegetables came fresh from the fields. I studied in government residential schools, where there were strict rules about diet and physical activities, like compulsory daily exercises and outdoor games. That is where I discovered two things: I loved learning new things and eating tasty food. And to me, 'good food' meant anything not made at home or in the hostel: fast food, packets of snacks, and fizzy drinks. They felt exciting and special.

After school, I went to Pondicherry University. Once in college, there were no limits to what I could eat. I stopped playing sports and kept eating all the things I liked. One morning, I woke up with a sharp pain in the right side of my body. The doctor told me that I had fatty liver Grade-I. Now, that was the first time I truly understood the word 'nutrition'. He explained that my body needed many kinds of food: fruits, vegetables, eggs, and plenty of regular exercise too. These were lacking in the food items I feasted on.

During my Gandhi Fellowship in Bihar, where I worked closely with government schools, I observed children being given iron and folic acid supplements, just like pregnant women, to overcome



deficiencies along with their mid-day meal.

My next big learning came during COVID-19. The world had paused and suddenly everyone was thinking about their health. I saw the people I knew struggle because of illnesses they already had. Those who depended mainly on medicines found it harder to recover compared to those who regularly ate diverse, nutritious foods. That was when I realized how many people did not understand that food and nutrition must go together.

Through my travels with the 52 Parindey Fellowship, I also saw how the way we grow, handle, and eat our food is changing and how these changes are shaping life on Earth.

In 2022, I joined WASSAN and began contributing towards nutrition-sensitive food systems. As I continue this journey, I learn something new every day about food, farming, and keeping our bodies healthy. And I hope children everywhere learn

these lessons much earlier than I did.

What is Nutrition?

- *Food* is what we eat — like rice, vegetables, fruits, and eggs.
- *Nutrition* is what our body gets from food — energy, strength, and the little helpers (vitamins and minerals) that make us healthy.
- Good nutrition = the right mix of food + enough physical activity.

Why is Nutrition Important?

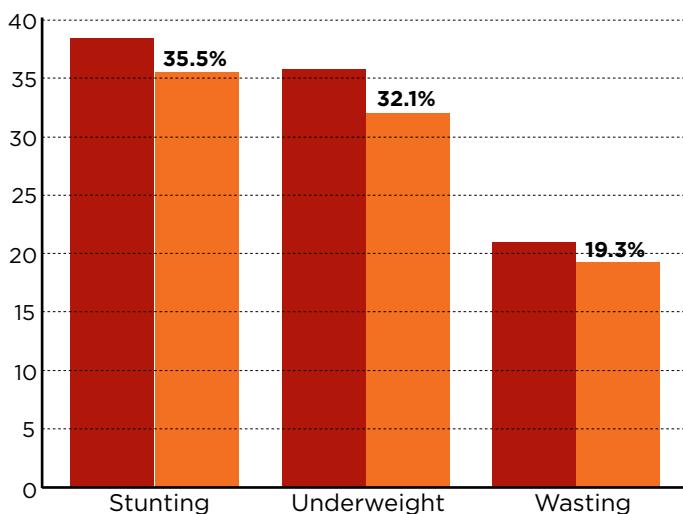
Nutrition affects our growth, like health, height, weight, etc. You might have noticed that many children in our country appear too skinny, too short, or too weak. To know how we can serve them right, it is important to measure their nutritional intake.

The Anganwadis use a system called Poshan Tracker to regularly measure children's height and weight in rural areas. This helps them spot malnutrition quickly so they



Malnutrition Trends in India (0-5 year old children)

■ 2015-16 ■ 2019-21 (in %age)



Source: NFHS-4 (2015-16) and NFHS-5 (2019-21)

can help these children early.

Real-Life Challenge: Enough food but not nutrition!

Even though a lot of children are measured, many still suffer from malnutrition. They don't get a *nutritious* diet — sometimes only a plate of food, not the *right kinds* of food.

Nutrition-sensitive food means including food that is important for their growth like

millets, veggies, eggs, so you guys can get what you really need!

Scene of Malnutrition in our Country

Look at the bar chart and understand what Stunting, Underweight, and Wasting are.

Stunting: Stunting means a child is too short for his/her age because he/she did not get

enough nutritious food for a long time. It affects how his/her brain grows and can make learning and staying healthy harder.

Underweight: Underweight means a child weighs less than they should for their age. This happens when they do not eat enough food or fall sick often. Such children feel weak and get tired easily.

Wasting: Wasting means a child is too thin for their height. It happens when a child suddenly does not get enough food or becomes very ill. Wasting is dangerous because it means the child's body is very weak.

These three parameters tell us about malnutrition, which remains a serious challenge in our country. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)—a large, nationwide health and nutrition survey—tracks population health trends in our country every few years. It is conducted by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

As per the latest NFHS-5 (based in 2019-21), among the 0-5 year old children, about 35.5 per cent are stunted, 32.1 per cent are underweight, and 19.3 per cent are wasted across India.

To give you a better idea, the 35.5 per cent of stunted children are over 3 crore in number (as per the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025* report). Meghalaya, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh report the highest stunting, while Puducherry, Sikkim and Andaman & Nicobar Islands perform the best. Recent *Poshan Tracker*

data (2025) shows that more than fifty per cent of the children are stunted in 63 districts of India with some tribal ones recording over 65 per cent.

Malnutrition is generally higher in rural and tribal areas. Boys show slightly higher wasting, while girls show marginally higher stunting. Despite government schemes like ICDS and Mid-Day Meals, chronic undernutrition persists. This highlights the need for food diversity, increased nutrition among mothers, sanitation, and community-driven steps.

The latest real-time (December 2025), Anganwadi data for 0-6 year old children from Poshan Tracker — highlight the continued burden of stunting (33.5%), underweight (14.4%), and wasting (~5.0%) in our country. Compared with the previous chart, you will note improvement over time across all three parameters. This is despite the fact that the Poshan Tracker includes older children (under-6), in whom undernutrition naturally accumulates. Note that NFHS includes data only for under-5 children.

When I began working on nutrition, I realized something very important: supplementary nutrition alone cannot solve malnutrition. It is like putting a band aid over a deep wound.

Many government schemes try their best to push Anganwadis to provide take-home rations; schools offer mid-day meals; and health workers give medicines, deworming tablets, and conduct growth checks. These



are all necessary, but they do not always reach the root causes of poor nutrition.

Children may eat one good meal at school, but if the food at home is not diverse—if there are no vegetables, fruits, pulses, eggs, or clean water—they remain weak. Medicines can treat illness, but only the right food can build strength that lasts a lifetime. I slowly understood that childhood nutrition shapes the future of every child: their brain growth, immunity, confidence, and even how well they learn in school.

This is why, at WASSAN, our work goes beyond giving food; it focuses on changing the way families choose, eat, and grow food. We work in 'Malnutrition-Free Gram Panchayats,' where communities take responsibility for what goes into their fields and what comes onto their plates. One of the strongest parts of this effort is our group of Posana Vanithas, local women trained as nutrition advocates. They

visit homes, teach cooking with local ingredients, and explain why diverse meals matter.

They also help farmers grow different foods: uncultivated greens, millets, *desi* rice, pulses, and chemical-free vegetables. Many of these women have even started small enterprises, selling these nutritious foods in local markets. In this way, nutrition becomes not just a programme, but a community movement growing in the fields, shared in the homes, and reflected in the health of every child.

So, will you make sure to eat all the different kinds of food next time?

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This article received inputs from Anubhuti Sharma, Senior Reporter-cum-Sub Editor, Young Environmentalist Programme, Centre for Science and Environment.

Cover Story

A Merry, Not Messy Christmas

How festive consumption, waste, and energy use impact the environment—and simple ways to celebrate a more sustainable Christmas

Christmas is the season of joy, togetherness, and giving. It truly represents “that time of the year” when consumption peaks and we are drawn into the festive spirit, tending to spend the most during this season. Christmas consumption plays a vital role in the economy, as we purchase gifts, decorations, and supplies in large quantities. While these traditions bring delight, they can also result in adverse effects, including environmental harm. The festive season sees a significant increase in resource consumption and waste; Christmas is no exception. The madness of buying everything from socks and ornaments for Christmas trees to holiday-themed apparel, gift hampers, and festive foods carries substantial environmental costs. Most items ultimately end up in landfills and oceans within



Sneha Sindhuja

months, unless we choose to reuse them in subsequent years. Beyond waste, the energy consumption during Christmas is immense. A significant contributor to this surge is the use of decorative lights on trees and homes, which can dramatically increase electricity usage, especially when left on for extended hours daily.

We can balance the magic of Christmas and sustainable practices that preserve traditions while contributing to a healthier planet. Many of us now embrace eco-friendly choices and adopt a “Minimalist Christmas” approach. Choosing sustainable gifts wrapped in reusable fabrics, or even newspapers, is a simple yet impactful way to reduce waste. Digital gifts, such as e-books, subscriptions, or charitable donations made in someone’s name, can be a mindful and meaningful present. Many businesses have taken the initiative to create an eco-conscious festive culture, and as consumers, we can join them by embracing greener consumption. Festive meals are an essential part of the celebration, but we must be sensible of the food waste we create. Choosing locally sourced, organic ingredients supports sustainable farming, reduces carbon footprint from transportation, and provides us with the true flavours of nature. While lighting and glitter are the heart and soul of the Christmas season, switching to energy-efficient LED Christmas lights can help.

Why sustainability matters during festive seasons? Adopting green practices reduces stress on the environment and embodies the true holiday spirit. A conscious approach encourages mindfulness, gratitude, and a focus on the essence of giving; love and care for each other and the planet. This season, let’s embrace a new way of celebrating. Let’s honour our planet alongside the festivities, leaving behind joy instead of waste.



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The Peacock's Changing World

From shy forest dwellers to confident neighbours, Indian peafowl are learning to live alongside people



Dr R Yamuna

In recent years, the Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) has begun turning up in some surprising places. If you live in South India, you may have seen one stroll calmly through a field, stand proudly inside a temple, or even wander past houses as if it owns the place. Once upon a time, these birds were shy and quick to disappear the moment humans appeared. Today, they seem far less worried. Some peacocks even spread their shimmering feathers in busy spots, as though an audience was always welcome.

Earlier, peafowl preferred open forests, scrubby lands, and the edges of farms. Their meals were simple—seeds, insects, and grains fallen in fields—and they kept a safe distance from people. But observations from areas around Coimbatore and nearby villages tell a new story. These birds often stay put even when people walk close by. During the breeding season, males have been seen dancing near roadsides and public places, tail feathers fanned out in all their glory. Imagine stopping on your way to school and seeing that!

Scientists call this change “habituation.” It means animals slowly stop fearing humans after many harmless encounters. You may have noticed something similar with crows, pigeons, or mynas that hop around without flinching. Peafowl are now joining this bold, city-smart group.

A Growing Peacock Family

Across India, peafowl numbers are rising. The *State of India's Birds* (2023) report says their populations are stable or increasing in most places. States like Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil



Nadu have seen especially sharp growth over the last twenty years.

Why is this happening?

- As India's national bird, peafowl are protected by law, which has reduced hunting.
- Fields and grain stores offer plenty of food, and predators are fewer near settlements.
- They are excellent adapters, living happily in farms, plantations, and scrublands shaped by humans.
- Open landscapes created after forest loss also suit them well.

When Success Brings Questions

More peafowl sounds like good news—and it is—but it also brings challenges. Farmers in some villages report damaged crops. Large groups of peafowl can affect other ground birds and small animals. Their growing presence near agricultural lands can sometimes lead to demands for population control measures.

All this reminds us of something important: when wildlife changes its behaviour, we need to pay attention. Watching, recording, and learning helps us make sure that people and peafowl can share space peacefully.

Seeing our national bird thrive is heartening. But caring for it also means understanding it—curious eyes open, just like the peacock's brilliant feathers.

(This article has been adapted for a child audience from the author's original research-focused version by Yashita Mishra.) The author is Assistant Professor of Zoology, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

Readers Writers



WORLD WAR

India has become the world's largest contributor to plastic pollution, accounting for nearly 20% of the total global plastic waste.