www.journalworlds.com
AGRI JOURNAL WORLD
VOL. 6 ISSUE 2 APRIL-JUNE, 2026

NUTRITIONAL YIELD GAP IN INDIAN STAPLE CROPS: ARE WE PRODUCING ENOUGH NUTRIENTS OR JUST CALORIES?

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ABSTRACT

India is among the world's largest producers of staple crops, yet micronutrient malnutrition or "hidden hunger" remains a major challenge. This highlights the nutritional yield gap, which assesses not only crop productivity but also the supply of essential nutrients such as protein, iron, zinc, and vitamins. Factors including soil nutrient depletion, variety selection, and post-harvest losses contribute to this gap. This article examines the concept of the nutritional yield gap in Indian staple crops and discusses strategies such as biofortification, agronomic fortification, and diversified cropping systems to improve food and nutrition security.

KEYWORDS: Biofortification, food security, hidden hunger, micronutrient deficiency, nutritional yield gap, staple crops

INTRODUCTION

India's agricultural sector has achieved remarkable milestones since the Green Revolution, transforming the nation from a food-deficit country to one of the world's top grain producers. However, a fundamental question has emerged in recent years: are these vast quantities of food also delivering the nutrients that billions of people need to live healthy, productive lives? Micronutrient malnutrition - or 'hidden hunger' - affects over two billion people globally, as documented by Muthayya et al. (2013), who mapped the global distribution of deficiencies including iron, zinc, and vitamin A.

In India, the situation is deeply concerning. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), about 57% of women of reproductive age and 67% of children under five years suffer from anaemia (NFHS-5, 2021). Zinc deficiency affects nearly 25% of the Indian population, and vitamin A deficiency remains a significant public health challenge in rural areas. The FAO report on global food security further underlines that despite gains in caloric availability, nutritional adequacy continues to lag behind in low- and middle-income countries, including India.

This situation reveals a critical gap - not just in food production, but in nutritional production. The concept of the ‘nutritional yield gap’ captures this disconnect between what our crops could deliver in terms of nutrients and what they actually do deliver to the plate. Bridging this gap requires a fundamental rethinking of how we measure, value, and manage agricultural productivity.

UNDERSTANDING THE NUTRITIONAL YIELD GAP

The traditional yield gap is defined as the difference between the potential yield of a crop (achievable under optimal conditions) and its actual farm-level yield. The nutritional yield gap extends this framework to nutrients - it is the difference between the potential nutrient output per hectare and the actual nutrient content delivered through harvested produce (Bouis and Saltzman, 2017).

For example, a wheat variety may yield 4 tonnes per hectare on a smallholder farm, while its potential yield under optimal management is 6 tonnes per hectare. But if the grain from the actual yield contains only 20 mg/kg of zinc compared to the potential of 40 mg/kg, the nutritional yield gap is enormous - both in quantity and quality dimensions (Velu et al., 2014). The dilution effect, where rapid biomass accumulation outpaces micronutrient uptake in high-yielding varieties, is a major contributor to this qualitative gap (White and Broadley, 2009).

The nutritional yield gap operates through two interconnected pathways:

- Quantitative gap: Lower total production means fewer nutrients available per capita.
- Qualitative gap: Even at potential yields, the nutrient density per unit of food may be insufficient due to variety choice, soil health, or agronomic practices.

Table 1: Estimated Nutritional Yield Gap in Major Indian Staple Crops

Crop	Nutrient	Potential (mg/kg)	Actual Farm Level (mg/kg)	Nutritional Yield Gap (%)	Primary Cause
Rice	Zinc	28-35	12-18	~50%	Soil Zn depletion, HYV varieties
Wheat	Iron	40-50	20-28	~45%	High-yielding but low Fe varieties
Maize	Protein	10-12%	6-8%	~35%	N deficiency, quality seed gap
Pulses (Lentil)	Protein	26-28%	20-22%	~22%	Poor agronomy, water stress
Sorghum	Iron	35-45	15-20	~55%	Neglect of traditional varieties
Pearl Millet	Zinc	35-45	22-28	~38%	Soil depletion, climate stress

Source: Compiled from HarvestPlus, ICRISAT, and ICAR data (2020-2024)

KEY DRIVERS OF THE NUTRITIONAL YIELD GAP

1. *Soil Nutrient Depletion*

Decades of intensive cropping without adequate replenishment of micronutrients have severely depleted Indian soils. About 49% of Indian soils are deficient in zinc, 33% in boron, and significant proportions are low in iron and manganese (Sharma et al., 2017). Since plants draw micronutrients directly from the soil, a nutrient-poor soil inevitably produces nutrient-poor grain, regardless of how high the yield appears on paper.

2. *Dominance of High-Yielding but Nutritionally Poor Varieties*

The Green Revolution prioritized yield quantity over quality. Many high-yielding varieties (HYVs) of rice and wheat, while producing more grain per hectare, contain lower concentrations of iron, zinc, and protein compared to traditional landraces. The ‘dilution effect’ - where rapid biomass accumulation outpaces nutrient uptake - is well documented in these varieties (White and Broadley, 2009). Velu et al. (2014) further confirmed that genetic variation for grain zinc and iron in modern wheat germplasm remains underexploited.

3. *Imbalanced Fertilization*

Indian farmers predominantly apply nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) fertilizers, often in imbalanced ratios, while micronutrient fertilization remains largely neglected. Prasad et al. (2014) demonstrated that excess nitrogen application can further dilute grain micronutrient concentrations through the dilution effect, while integrated micronutrient management significantly improves grain iron and zinc content in cereal crops.

4. *Post-Harvest Losses and Processing*

Even when nutrients are present in harvested grain, significant losses occur during storage, milling, and processing. Polishing of rice removes up to 90% of thiamine (Vitamin B1) and significant portions of iron and zinc present in the bran layers. Post-harvest losses of fruits and vegetables - which are critical micronutrient sources - exceed 30-40% in India due to poor cold chain infrastructure, compounding the nutritional yield gap before food even reaches consumers.

MEASURING THE NUTRITIONAL YIELD GAP

Quantifying the nutritional yield gap requires an interdisciplinary approach combining agronomy, nutrition science, and data analytics. The following steps are essential:

- Crop-specific nutrient benchmarking: Establishing reference values for nutrient concentrations in each crop under optimal conditions.

- Farm-level sampling: Systematic collection and analysis of grain/produce samples from representative farms across agro-ecological zones.
- Nutrient gap index (NGI): A composite index expressing actual vs. potential nutrient delivery per hectare per season.
- Dietary translation: Converting farm-level nutrient output to per capita daily nutrient availability to assess public health implications.

Table 2: Strategies to Bridge the Nutritional Yield Gap in Indian Agriculture

Strategy	Mechanism	Key Crops Targeted	Expected Benefit
Biofortification	Breeding for high nutrient density	Rice, Wheat, Maize, Lentil	20-60% increase in Fe/Zn
Agronomic fortification	Soil/foliar micronutrient application	All staple crops	15-40% increase in grain Zn/Fe
Traditional variety revival	Promoting nutritious landraces	Millets, Rice, Sorghum	Higher micronutrient density
Crop diversification	Including legumes and vegetables	Pulses, Vegetables	Improved dietary diversity
Reduced tillage + organic matter	Improving soil micronutrient availability	All crops	Better soil-plant nutrient transfer
Post-harvest fortification	Fortifying flour, rice, oil	Wheat, Rice, Oil crops	Population-level impact

BRIDGING THE NUTRITIONAL YIELD GAP: WAY FORWARD

BIOFORTIFICATION: BREEDING NUTRITION INTO SEEDS

Biofortification - the process of increasing the concentration of essential nutrients in staple crops through plant breeding, agronomic practices, or biotechnology - is among the most powerful tools for addressing the nutritional yield gap at scale. Bouis and Saltzman (2017) reviewed evidence from the HarvestPlus program (2003-2016) and conclusively demonstrated that biofortified crops can significantly reduce micronutrient deficiencies in resource-poor farming communities. Zinc-enriched wheat varieties (Zinc Shakthi), iron-enriched pearl millet, and high-zinc rice varieties are now being promoted in India, offering a sustainable, food-based solution that can reach even the most remote farming communities.

AGRONOMIC FORTIFICATION

Soil application and foliar sprays of zinc sulphate, ferrous sulphate, and other micronutrient formulations can significantly increase the nutrient density of harvested grain. Prasad et al. (2014) showed through extensive field trials that zinc sulphate application at 25 kg/ha increases grain zinc content by 20-35% while also improving crop yields in deficient soils. This integrated approach to soil and plant nutrition not only addresses the nutritional yield gap but delivers a direct productivity benefit to farmers.

MILLET REVIVAL AND CROP DIVERSIFICATION

Millets such as pearl millet (bajra), finger millet (ragi), and sorghum (jowar) are nutritionally superior to polished rice and refined wheat in terms of iron, zinc, calcium, and dietary fiber. White and Broadley (2009) highlighted that crop diversification, including integration of micronutrient-dense species into cropping systems, is one of the most effective long-term strategies for reducing dietary micronutrient gaps. India's recognition of 2023 as the International Year of Millets has renewed focus on these ancient grains, and integrating them into the public distribution system can create transformative nutritional impact.

CONCLUSION

India's agricultural success story, measured in tonnes of grain produced per hectare, masks a profound nutritional failure measured in nutrients delivered per person per day. The nutritional yield gap - the chasm between what our fields could nourish us with and what they actually do - is a critical but underappreciated challenge for food and nutrition security, as repeatedly underscored by global nutrition assessments. Addressing this gap demands a paradigm shift in how we define and measure agricultural productivity. Yield, measured purely in biomass, is no longer a sufficient metric. We must transition towards 'nutrient-sensitive agriculture' that simultaneously optimizes caloric output and micronutrient delivery. This requires coordinated action across plant breeding, soil management, agronomic practices, post-harvest systems, and food policy. The tools - biofortification, agronomic fortification, millet promotion, and crop diversification - already exist and have demonstrated efficacy. What is needed now is the political will, institutional support, and farmer awareness to deploy them at scale. Only then can India truly claim to be feeding its billion-plus population - not just in calories, but in the full spectrum of nutrients that sustain human health and dignity.

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How to cite:

Dodewar, P. G. (2026). Nutritional yield gap in Indian staple crops: Are we producing enough nutrients or just calories? Leaves and Dew Publication, New Delhi 110059. *Agri Journal World* 6 (2): 90-95.

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