

# Legal Analysis of Population Growth, Resource Scarcity and Poverty

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper seeks to study the intertwined issue of India into a growing population, shrinking resources, chronic hunger and poverty in a socio-legal context. Since India has risen to become a leading global economical power, a lot of its people still remain in great poverty and hunger. In this paper, we are discussing the legal, economic and social policies which were adopted to solve such problems, comparing whether they worked properly under conditions of constitutional requirements and international commitments. This study identifies the paradox of the development path of India by analyzing the empirical record in the government and international organizations publications and offers the changes needed into the law and policies that might allow the country to reach inclusive growth as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

**Keywords:** Population growth, resource scarcity, poverty, hunger, legal policy, sustainable development, constitutional rights, India

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The uncontrolled population growth is one of the greatest challenges to the development path of India. As of 2024, with a population of approximately 1.44 billion<sup>1</sup>, which constitutes approximately 18% of the world population, India is facing the delicate dilemma of both managing the few resources it has readily available, the total landmass being only 2.5 percent of the overall surface area of the world planet, and at the same time contending with the problems of poverty, hunger, and inequality. Such a demographic pressure has insinuation long-reaching consequences to the legal infrastructure system of the country, financial policies and social well being programs.

The relationship between the growing population and scarcity or inadequacy in supplies was mathematically conceived by Thomas Robert Malthus in 1798 when he propounded the view that the rate at which the population is increasing is tending to be higher than the rate at which food supplies are being produced and that, unless population growth is put under control, soon the population will have no resources and people will suffer.<sup>2</sup> This analysis by Malthus has become topical in the Indian context because even now Indian population is increasing at an alarming rate putting a great strain on the available natural resources.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2024 Revision*, available at <https://population.un.org/wpp/> (last visited July 2, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: J. Johnson, 1798), ch. 1.

The topic of this research paper is the development paradox observed in India: although it records a remarkable economic growth in the last two decades and claims the title of the world's fastest-growing major economy, the nation still experiences prevalent poverty, hunger, and inequality. Under a close consideration of constitutional duties toward securing right to life, food security, and decent living conditions, the paper judges on the efficacy of legal and policy interventions that can be deployed to meet these challenges.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Theoretical Framework

Population growth and resource scarcity are theoretically based on the work of Malthus in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), which has provided the essential conflict between geometric population growth and arithmetic growth in food production.<sup>3</sup> Since then the theory has been elaborated, with economists in recent years placing far more emphasis on the importance of technology, institutional capacity, and policy actions in modifying the links between population and resources.

The capabilities approach of Amartya Sen can help in providing a practical framework of poverty which is not limited to being poor based on income only but involves human capabilities being expanded through investment in healthcare and education among others.<sup>4</sup> According to Sen, one of the significant elements of poverty alleviation strategies is reducing social inequality and access to basic services.

The drain theory advanced by Dadabhai Naoroji offers a historic basis of analyzing the economic issues of India as the economic surplus and resources of India were drained by the colonial process, further establishing bureaucratic and historic impediments to development.<sup>5</sup> This historic approach can also be used in interpreting the nature of resource dispositions and economic inequalities today.

### B. Legal and Constitutional Framework

The constitution of India has given a detailed provision on how to deal with the problem of poverty, hunger, and distribution of resources. Article 21 ensures that everyone has the right to life and personal liberty and this right has been interpreted by the Supreme Court to derive the right to food, shelter, and the right to live with dignity.<sup>6</sup> The Directive Principles of State Policy, especially Article 38, 39, and 47, impose on the state the duty to establish social order that facilitates welfare, and fosters equitable allocation of resources and improvement of the general standard of living.<sup>7</sup>

National Food Security Act of 2013 is a landmark legislation aimed at alleviating hunger and malnutrition and it legally entitles 75 percent of the total rural population and 50 percent of the urban population access subsidized foodgrains.<sup>8</sup> An important element under discussion in this analysis is the effectiveness of the current legislation in delivering its envisaged benefits.

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), pp. 87-110.

<sup>5</sup> Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1901).

<sup>6</sup> *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, (1978) 1 SCC 248; *Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi*, (1981) 1 SCC 608.

<sup>7</sup> INDIA CONST. arts. 38, 39, 47.

<sup>8</sup> The National Food Security Act, 2013, No. 20, Acts of Parliament, 2013 (India).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The proposed research is based on a mixed-methods approach that will integrate quantitative methods and demographic and economic data analysis with qualitative evaluation of the legal and policy actions. The research is based on several sources of data, such as:

1. Reports and statistics released by the Government including the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, NITI Aayog and Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution
2. International assessments from the United Nations, World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and UNICEF
3. Academic and think tank independently conducted research
4. Legal resources, including written legislations, constitutional texts and case laws

The analysis takes into account the longitudinal developments and the current indicators and this helps in assessing the effectiveness of intervention efforts to tackle the population growth, scarcity of resources, poverty, and hunger. Particular concern is laid on the evaluation of the gaps in implementation between formulation and its outcomes on the ground.

### 4. POPULATION AND RESOURCE CRUNCH IN INDIA

#### A. Historical Trends of Population Growth

The demographic trends of India have changed with time. Between 1871 and 1941 the average population growth rate of India was 0.60 percent slightly lower than the world rate of 0.69 percent.<sup>9</sup> A faster rate of 1 percent yearly growth was observed between 1921 and 1931, and after 1951, population growth rate reached almost 2 percent annually.<sup>10</sup> More recently, the rate has started to reduce from 2.5 percent in 1971-81 to approximately 1.2 percent in recent years.<sup>11</sup>

This process was uneven over geographical borders, with faster population growth in the places with low education rates and insufficient medical facilities.<sup>12</sup> Such a trend confirms regional inequality and makes it harder to introduce uniform policies.

#### B. Impact of Population Growth on Resources

The pressure on natural resources stimulated by the increase of the population is expressed in several dimensions. Coal, oil, and natural gases are rapidly being depleted due to the increasing demand of these energy sources, which have necessitated exploration and exploitation of alternate sources of energy.<sup>13</sup> Agricultural land per capita has depreciated seriously, posing severe security risks to food production as well as food security.<sup>14</sup>

Water resources are especially strained, with per capita availability of water dropping to about 1,486 cubic

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<sup>9</sup> Census of India, *Population Growth in India: 1901-2011* (New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, *Sample Registration System Statistical Report 2020* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Coal, Government of India, *Annual Report 2023-24* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government of India, *Agricultural Statistics at a Glance 2023* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023)

meters in 2021 compared to 5,177 cubic meters in 1951.<sup>15</sup> This rate categorizes India as a water-stressed country as determined by international standards and in the future, many regions are likely to face severe water scarcity.<sup>16</sup>

### C. Legal and Policy Responses

The way India has been managing its population has changed significantly since its independence. The National Population Policy of 2000 highlighted the importance of stabilizing population growth with emphasis on reproductive rights and individual choice.<sup>17</sup> The policy had the goal to achieve 2.1 total fertility rate by 2010, which had not been achieved in various states.<sup>18</sup>

Recent events point towards the fact that population problems are becoming an issue of concern at governmental levels once again. The issue of population growth has been addressed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his 2019 annual Independence Day speech, where he asked the states to devise mechanisms of control.<sup>19</sup> Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the constitution of a high-powered committee on the challenges of population growth and demographic changes in 2024.<sup>20</sup>

Even with these measures, India does not have comprehensive legislation on population control. In contrast to policies that existed in other countries, the Indian government has been mostly using incentive-based measures and family planning initiatives, both of which respect constitutional provisions concerning personal freedom and right to procreation.<sup>21</sup>

## 5. PARADOX OF POVERTY IN THE FACE OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

### A. Indicators of Economic Growth

In recent decades, India has enjoyed admirable economic growth and is considered one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world. Official forecasts have shown that GDP growth in India has been strong, positioning it among the world's largest economies.<sup>22</sup> India has also set ambitious goals of realizing a \$5 trillion economy, affirming its focus on infrastructure development, digital transformation and manufacturing growth.<sup>23</sup>

### B. Multi-dimensional Poverty Measurements

Poverty remains an issue despite economic growth. The latest NITI Aayog report estimates that about 24.82 crore Indians have emerged from multidimensional poverty over the last nine years, with the poverty

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<sup>15</sup> Central Water Commission, Government of India, *Water and Related Statistics* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, *National Population Policy 2000* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, "Prime Minister's Address to the Nation from the Red Fort on the 73rd Independence Day," Press Release, August 15, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Finance, Government of India, *Economic Survey 2023-24* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> <sup>21</sup> INDIA CONST. art. 21; *Suchita Srivastava v. Chandigarh Administration*, (2009) 9 SCC 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, *Economic Survey 2023-24* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2024).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

rate falling from 29.17 percent in 2013-14 to 11.28 percent (roughly 15.5 crore people) in 2022-23.<sup>24</sup> The greatest reduction in poverty was witnessed in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.<sup>25</sup> The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) uses the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) with dimensions including health, education, and living standards.<sup>26</sup> India has incorporated additional indicators, including maternal health and bank accounts, in the national implementation of MPI.<sup>27</sup> A household with a deprivation score of 33 percent or above is classified as multidimensionally poor.

A study by the State Bank of India (SBI) revealed that in 2022-23 the poverty rate in India was approximately 4.5-5%, according to the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey.<sup>28</sup> Rural poverty had dropped to 7.2% in 2022-23, compared to 25.7% in 2011-2012, while urban poverty also showed significant decline.<sup>29</sup>

### C. Regional Inequality

India experiences significant regional inequalities in economic development. GDP data for 2023-24 shows Maharashtra as the richest state while Bihar remains among the poorest.<sup>30</sup> These economic disparities can be attributed to historical disadvantages, quality of governance, infrastructure development, and human capital formation.

The fact that aggregate economic growth has not effectively reduced poverty is highlighted by the persistence of extreme poverty, especially in rural settings. UN reports indicate that over 80 percent of India's poor people live in rural areas, suggesting that economic development concentrated in urban centers is a major challenge.<sup>31</sup> This trend requires more decentralized development focused equally on rural India.

### D. Legal Framework on Poverty Alleviation

The Indian legal system for poverty alleviation includes constitutional provisions and judicial interpretations. The Supreme Court's expansive interpretation of Article 21 (right to life) has established that the state is obligated to provide basic necessities for dignified living.<sup>32</sup> This judicial recognition has been the cornerstone behind numerous poverty alleviation missions and welfare schemes.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005 promises 100

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<sup>24</sup>NITI Aayog, Government of India, *National Multidimensional Poverty Index: A Progress Review 2023* (New Delhi: NITI Aayog, 2023).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2023-24* (New York: UNDP, 2024).

<sup>27</sup> NITI Aayog, *supra* note 24.

<sup>28</sup> State Bank of India, *Ecowrap: Poverty in India - Analysis Based on HCES 2022-23* (Mumbai: SBI Economic Research Department, February 2024).

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, *State Domestic Product and Other Aggregates 2023-24* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2024).

<sup>31</sup> United Nations, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024* (Rome: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2024).

<sup>32</sup> *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*, (1985) 3 SCC 545.



days of work annually to rural households.<sup>33</sup> This was a substantial rights-based legislative effort to alter the relationship between citizens and the state regarding welfare provisions.

Financial inclusion through Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) was initiated in 2014 to benefit previously unbanked populations through access to bank accounts and formal financial services.<sup>34</sup> Government statistics indicate that over 48 crore bank accounts have been opened under this scheme, leading to substantial improvement in financial inclusion.<sup>35</sup>

## 6. FOOD SECURITY AND HUNGER

### A. Global Hunger Index Performance

India's ranking in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) reveals challenges in addressing food insecurity and malnutrition. The 2024 report shows India ranked 105 out of 127 countries with a score of 27.3, placing it in the 'serious' category.<sup>36</sup> India ranks lower than neighbors including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, questioning the effectiveness of food security programs despite economic advantages.

The GHI assessment is based on four key indicators: undernourishment (13.7% of the population), child stunting (35.5% of children under five), child wasting (18.7% of children under five), and child mortality (2.9% before age five).<sup>37</sup> This reveals the multidimensional nature of hunger and its disproportionate effect on vulnerable groups, particularly children.

### B. Malnutrition and Food Insecurity

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that approximately 190-200 million people in India are undernourished, among the highest globally.<sup>38</sup> The report further reveals that more than half of India's population (approximately 735 million people) cannot afford a nutritious diet, highlighting the gap between caloric adequacy and nutritional quality.<sup>39</sup>

Malnutrition affects demographic groups differently. According to the National Family Health Survey-5, significant proportions of Indian children under five are malnourished, with rates being highest among tribal and Dalit communities, where malnutrition rates reach approximately 40-44 percent.<sup>40</sup> This indicates deeper social inequalities and access disparities that perpetuate intergenerational poverty and malnutrition.

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<sup>33</sup> The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, No. 42, Acts of Parliament, 2005 (India).

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Finance, Government of India, "Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana: Progress Report," available at <https://www.pmjdy.gov.in/account-statistics> (last visited July 2, 2025).

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe, *Global Hunger Index 2024: The Challenge of Gender Justice in Advancing Zero Hunger* (Bonn/Dublin: Welthungerhilfe/Concern Worldwide, 2024).

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024* (Rome: FAO, 2024).

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-21: India* (Mumbai: International Institute for Population Sciences, 2022).

### **C. Legal Foundation of Food Security**

The National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013 created a legislative framework for addressing hunger and food insecurity by providing subsidized foodgrains to eligible beneficiaries.<sup>41</sup> Under this act, approximately 800 million beneficiaries receive 5 kg of subsidized grains monthly, making it one of the world's largest food security schemes.<sup>42</sup>

The right to food as a legal right has been established through judicial interpretation. In *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court identified the right to food as a constituent part of the fundamental right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution.<sup>43</sup> This case led to the creation of several food security initiatives and paved the way for NFSA implementation.

However, implementation challenges persist despite the legal framework and resource allocation. Poor targeting, corruption, and leakages in food security programs prevent efficient delivery to the most vulnerable groups.<sup>44</sup> The gap between policy formulation and actual implementation remains a critical flaw in India's food security governance.

## **7. ROOT FACTORS AND STRUCTURAL CAUSES**

### **A. Historical and Colonial Legacy**

Modern problems faced by India regarding resource allocation and economic growth must be viewed against historical context. The drain theory proposed by Dadabhai Naoroji identified how colonial economic policies systematically extracted wealth from India, creating structural barriers to economic development that influence current patterns.<sup>45</sup> This exploitation created resource distribution patterns and economic dependencies that persist today.

Colonial policies also shaped India's agricultural systems, land ownership patterns, and industrial sector development, creating long-term structural imbalances.<sup>46</sup> Agricultural sector vulnerabilities due to colonial priorities rather than food security concerns continue to affect the country's food systems.

### **B. Socioeconomic Factors**

Social inequalities, particularly those related to caste system and ethnic groups, marginalize certain communities from accessing education, employment, and economic opportunities.<sup>47</sup> These disparities perpetuate poverty forms and limit upward mobility even during positive economic growth.

Economic dependence on raw material exports, a colonial legacy, exposes the Indian economy to external fluctuations and reduced commodity prices internationally.<sup>48</sup> This economic structure limits local value

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<sup>41</sup> The National Food Security Act, 2013, *supra* note 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, (2001) 7 SCC 1.

<sup>44</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General of India, *Performance Audit Report on National Food Security Act* (New Delhi: CAG, 2023).

<sup>45</sup> Naoroji, *supra* note 5.

<sup>46</sup> Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1966).

<sup>47</sup> Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman (eds.), *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

addition and restricts employment generation potential.

### C. Demographic and Governance Variables

High population growth strains resource availability and public service provision, especially in education, health, and infrastructure.<sup>49</sup> This consequently increases unemployment and restricts service access, promoting poverty and inequality.

Governance issues including corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and implementation gaps impede poverty alleviation and food security initiatives.<sup>50</sup> Misallocation of funds intended for welfare programs significantly hinders inclusive development outcomes.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

### A. Constitutional and Legal Reforms

1. **Strengthen Implementation Mechanisms:** Develop robust mechanisms ensuring proper implementation of existing legal provisions on food security, employment guarantees, and poverty eradication.<sup>51</sup>
2. **Enhance Judicial Remedies:** Increase availability of judicial remedies for social economic rights violations, particularly right to food, education, and healthcare in marginalized communities.<sup>52</sup>
3. **Decentralize Governance:** Strengthen local governance institutions and ensure meaningful community participation in policy-making and implementation, consistent with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments.<sup>53</sup>

### B. Economic and Social Policy Reforms

1. **Inclusive Growth Strategies:** Develop targeted interventions for regions and sectors not benefiting from economic growth, particularly rural areas with persistent high poverty levels.<sup>54</sup>
2. **Strengthen Social Protection:** Expand and integrate social protection systems providing comprehensive safety nets addressing life-cycle vulnerabilities and economic shocks.<sup>55</sup>
3. **Comprehensive Population Policy:** Develop balanced population policy addressing demographic concerns while respecting reproductive rights, focusing on education, healthcare access, and women's empowerment as fertility reduction factors.<sup>56</sup>

### C. Institutional and Governance Reforms

**Transparency and Accountability:** Implement strong transparency mechanisms including social audits,

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<sup>49</sup> Planning Commission, Government of India, *Report of the Working Group on Population Projections* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Transparency International India, *India Corruption Survey 2023* (New Delhi: Transparency International India, 2023).

<sup>51</sup> Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>53</sup> Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, *Annual Report 2023-24* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2024).

<sup>54</sup> Drèze and Sen, *supra* note 51.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, *supra* note 17.



citizen oversight, and right to information in all welfare schemes and government service delivery.<sup>57</sup>

1. **Evidence-Based Policy Making:** Enhance data collection, analysis, and utilization capabilities enabling evidence-based policy-making and implementation monitoring, addressing current weaknesses in poverty measurement and program evaluation.<sup>58</sup>
2. **Collaborative Governance:** Create multi-stakeholder platforms facilitating interaction between government agencies, civil society, private sector, and affected populations in addressing complex development challenges.<sup>59</sup>

## 9. CONCLUSION

India's development paradox—economic growth alongside persistent poverty, hunger, and resource scarcity—reflects complex interactions of historical legacies, structural inequalities, and governance implementation challenges. This paper's analysis demonstrates these developments' intricate nature and economic growth's inadequacy as the sole pathway to inclusive development.

The legal framework established through constitutional provisions, legislation, and judicial decisions provides a solid foundation for addressing these challenges. However, significant implementation gaps persist, undermining legal guarantees and program objectives. Addressing these gaps requires not only increased investment but fundamental changes in governance structures, institutional capacities, and policy approaches.

Achieving inclusive development and fulfilling international commitments, including Sustainable Development Goals, requires comprehensive methodology addressing both immediate social challenges and structural problems. This strategy should integrate population management, resource governance, poverty alleviation, and food security as coherent policy objectives prioritizing human capabilities and sustainable development.

As India aspires to realize its vision of becoming a developed nation, addressing these challenges through innovative legal and policy frameworks will be essential to translate economic growth into improved quality of life for all citizens, especially those still excluded from development processes.

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<sup>57</sup> Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, *Guidelines for Social Audit* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023).

<sup>58</sup> NITI Aayog, *Strategy for New India @ 75* (New Delhi: NITI Aayog, 2018).

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*