

EDITORIAL

Strengthen fight for forest conservation

The recent years have witnessed increasing concerns regarding the depletion of water bodies, drying of springs, degradation of catchment areas, and the loss of traditional green cover in many regions. Forest fires during summer months have emerged as a recurring threat, destroying valuable vegetation and wildlife habitats while releasing significant amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. As the world observes World Rainforest Day on June 22, the focus naturally turns to the great tropical rainforests of the Amazon, Congo, and Southeast Asia. Yet for the people of Jammu and Kashmir, this global observance offers an equally important opportunity to reflect on the status of our own forests, which form the ecological backbone of the Union Territory and sustain millions of lives across northern India. Although Jammu and Kashmir is not home to tropical rainforests in the conventional sense, it possesses some of the most valuable forest ecosystems in the country. Stretching from the subtropical forests of Jammu to the temperate coniferous forests of Kashmir and the alpine ecosystems of the higher Himalayas, these forests perform functions that are indispensable to environmental stability, water security, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. The forests of Jammu and Kashmir are much more than scenic landscapes. They are the source of countless rivers, streams, and springs that sustain agriculture, horticulture, hydropower generation, and drinking water supplies. They protect fragile mountain slopes from erosion, landslides, and flash floods. They provide habitat to a rich variety of wildlife, including several endangered and rare species. Most importantly, they serve as natural carbon sinks at a time when climate change is emerging as one of the greatest challenges facing humanity. As World Rainforest Day reminds the world about the importance of forests, Jammu and Kashmir can take pride in the fact that a significant portion of its geographical area remains under forest cover. Various afforestation drives, conservation programmes, and community-based initiatives undertaken over the years have helped preserve large tracts of green landscapes. The increasing public awareness regarding environmental conservation is also encouraging. However, celebration must not lead to complacency. The reality is that Jammu and Kashmir's forests continue to face mounting pressures from urban expansion, illegal encroachments, unregulated developmental activities, forest fires, excessive extraction of natural resources, and the growing impacts of climate change. Rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, shrinking glaciers, and erratic weather events are already affecting the ecological balance of the Himalayan region.

DISCLAIMER

"Jammu Bulletin" does not take responsibility for the contents of the advertisements (Display/ Classified) carried in this newspaper. The paper does not endorse the same. Readers are requested to verify the contents on their own before acting there upon.

Edited, Printed, Published and owned by
Ankush Mahajan
Published at Plot No. 4A, 1st Floor, Sector-3,
Surya Chowk, Channi Himmat Jammu (J&K)
Printed at JK Printing and Publications,
Sunjwan, Jammu (Tawi).
E-mail: jammubulletin@gmail.com
All disputes are subjected to the exclusive
jurisdiction of competent courts and forums
in Jammu only.

India's food safety crisis: Time for bold, systemic reform

BY
SUBHASH
CHANDRA
AGRAWAL

Ensuring that every child receives a safe meal, every consumer gets what the label promises, and every food business is held accountable is not merely a matter of public health; it is essential for restoring trust in the nation's food system and securing its future.

India's food supply chain is sending out distress signals that can no longer be ignored. From children falling ill after mid-day school meals to honey samples failing international purity tests, the warning signs point to one conclusion: India needs a structural overhaul of how it produces, certifies, and serves food - not piecemeal fixes.

The Mid-Day Meal Problem

Reports of insects, lizards, frogs, and rodents turning up in school lunches, alongside complaints about poor-quality rice and pulses, have become a recurring and troubling feature of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. A practical fix worth serious consideration is shifting toward packaged, preferably baked, food for school meals. This would sidestep many hygiene risks tied to on-site cooking and would also accommodate children whose families avoid specific ingredients like onion and garlic for cultural or religious reasons. Notably, a

group of Members of Parliament once pushed for exactly this - sourcing packaged biscuits from established manufacturers vetted by the Mumbai-based Biscuit Manufacturers' Welfare Association, to replace freshly cooked meals altogether.

There's also a funding angle here. Large food manufacturers could be incentivised to sponsor the programme in exchange for brand visibility, while corporates could route their mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility spending into supplying packaged meals - a win for children's health and a way to ease the financial burden on the state.

IRCTC: An Underused Asset

The Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation already has the infrastructure and expertise to produce packaged food at scale. Expanding its footprint to every district - including baked goods - could serve two purposes simultaneously: supplying safer meals to both schoolchildren and train passengers (where complaints about freshly cooked food are equally frequent), and creating a public-sector competitor that keeps private food companies honest on quality and pricing.

Such expansion need not strain public finances. Long-term, tax-free bonds could fund the initial buildout, and - in a more ambitious version - these bonds could even be structured to encourage disclosure of undeclared wealth. Beyond food safety, the ripple effect on employment could be significant: district-level IRCTC units would create rural jobs and poten-

tially slow the steady migration of youth toward overcrowded cities.

FSSAI is Moving, But Needs to Go Further

Credit is due to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India for mandating hygiene-rating displays at eateries. But ratings that focus only on dining-area aesthetics miss the point - kitchens and storage areas, where rodent infestations and unsanitary conditions are most common, deserve equal scrutiny.

FSSAI's move to regulate the repeated frying and reuse of cooking oil - a known health hazard - is similarly welcome. The next logical steps would be mandating RO water purifiers in all eateries, however small, with visible signage confirming installation, and requiring separate kitchen equipment for vegetarian and non-vegetarian food preparation, with that separation clearly displayed for customers who care about it.

The Honey and Sugar Problem

In April 2021, the Supreme Court sought government responses to reports that imported adulterated sugar syrups were being blended into honey - including in well-known brands - in ways that slip past FSSAI's existing tests. A study by the Centre for Science and Environment found that only a handful of dozens of honey samples tested passed the internationally recognised NMR spectroscopy standard. Given that diabetics often consume honey precisely because it's considered a safer sweetener, this is a serious public health con-

cern. FSSAI should adopt NMR spectroscopy as the standard testing protocol before granting sale approvals.

On sugar, India's diabetes burden is staggering - estimates put the number of diabetics in the country at over 100 million, with well over 100 million more in the prediabetic range as of 2025-2026. One way to nudge consumption patterns would be mandating brown sugar for commercial and medicinal use in place of refined white sugar. Market signals already point this way - confectioners in places like Delhi's Chandni Chowk have begun introducing diabetic-friendly sweets - and if demand for brown sugar grows, manufacturers are likely to shift production voluntarily.

Stopping Dual Pricing and Adulteration

Branded bottled water and soft drink companies routinely charge more for identical products sold in airports, cinemas, and luxury hotels compared to open-market prices. This practice deserves to be curbed, and expanding IRCTC's Rail Neer bottling plants across the country offers a public-sector alternative that could help normalise pricing.

Adulteration of ghee and butter - including the use of cheaper oils and animal fats mislabeled as "pure" - remains widespread, particularly at roadside eateries. The episode involving allegedly adulterated ghee in temple prasad offerings at Tirumala Tirupati was a wake-up call. Manufacturers of desi ghee should be required to register their brand and sourcing details

with FSSAI, and that information should be displayed prominently at the point of sale so consumers can make informed choices.

Separately, several states have moved to require food outlets to display the names of operators and staff, mandate masks, gloves, and CCTV installation, following incidents of deliberate food contamination. Encouraging consistent adoption of such basic accountability and surveillance measures across all states - regardless of political alignment - would strengthen consumer trust everywhere.

Cutting Waste, Encouraging Choice

Food wastage at large social gatherings, particularly weddings, is a persistent and visible problem in a country where rising vegetable and grocery prices already strain household budgets. Curbing elaborate buffet spreads at such functions - even restricting service to beverages alone - could meaningfully reduce waste and make these events more affordable for ordinary families. On the question of dietary preference, India's vegetarian culinary tradition is internationally respected, and there's a case for the government promoting a "World Vegetarian Day" on October 1st with the same enthusiasm it has shown for International Yoga Day. Separately, mandating distinct kitchens and cooking equipment for vegetarian and non-vegetarian food at restaurants - clearly signposted - would let vegetarian customers make informed choices, likely growing that customer base for businesses that

adopt it.

Milk, Brands, and Public Pride

Reports of synthetic milk and counterfeit paneer or khoya continue to surface from unregulated production units. In cities where reliable branded alternatives - Amul, Mother Dairy, and regional players like Verka, Saras, Sudha, and Nandini - are already widely available, restricting sales to certified branded milk and milk products would meaningfully reduce health risks.

On a more positive note, Amul's ranking at 15th among the world's 100 most valuable food brands (per the Brand Finance Food and Drink 2021 report), alongside Britannia at 54th, is a genuine point of pride for India's cooperative model. This success deserves further state support - subsidised land, easier approvals - to encourage more Indian companies, public and private, to compete globally. At the same time, it's fair to ask why public-sector giants like IRCTC and Mother Dairy, despite years of public investment, haven't achieved similar global brand recognition - and what structural changes might change that. On the question of dietary preference, India's vegetarian culinary tradition is internationally respected, and there's a case for the government promoting a "World Vegetarian Day" on October 1st with the same enthusiasm it has shown for International Yoga Day.

Writer is Guinness World Record Holder for writing most letters and RTI Consultant; Views presented are personal.

India's fiscal social contract at crossroads-revenue, welfare and reform

BY
PROF ANURADHA
PS

Fiscal policy must not be a ledger of receipts and expenditures alone; it must reflect fairness, resilience, and reciprocity between citizens and the state

India is at a crossroads in its economic journey. While the nation aspires to become a \$5-trillion economy, the sustainability of this growth rests on a delicate arrangement: the fiscal social contract. Citizens pay tax in the hope of receiving real benefits in terms of public services, welfare and security throughout their lives.

However, growing disparities between revenue collection and the delivery of social protection mean that many taxpayers, particularly those in the informal sector, derive only limited benefits from their contributions. The most pressing question is whether India can reform its fiscal architecture so that taxes translate into meaningful social protection, equitable results, and economic

resilience or whether the social contract will disintegrate under fiscal and social pressures.

Rising Revenues, Persistent Gaps

Revenue mobilisation in India has grown over the last decade, though structural gaps remain. Recent evaluations indicate that the aggregate tax-to-GDP ratio (the sum of the central and State collections) is around 19.6%, bringing India closer to its emerging-market peers, even though it remains lower compared to advanced economies, where the ratios go beyond 30% of GDP.

At a more granular level, India's tax-to-GDP ratio stood at 12% in 2025-26, with direct taxes amounting to 7.1% and indirect taxes to 4.9%. The effectiveness of revenue mobilisation, given the prominence of indirect taxes such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST), has also raised questions about distributional equity because indirect taxes are based on consumption rather than income. Net tax receipts of the Centre increased to Rs 30.36 lakh crore in FY25, and the fiscal deficit stood at 4.8% of GDP.

Early FY26 data indicate that the target deficit ratio is 4.4% of GDP, and net collections remain somewhat volatile.

Taxation without Benefits

Analysts observe that India collects approximately 12% of GDP in tax revenues, significantly lower than well-developed welfare states (eg, most European countries collect 30-40%). This illustrates the state's limited capacity.

Further, the implication of a small tax base is that a small percentage of taxpayers contribute disproportionately to the direct tax burden, while only a minority of households in the upper income groups contribute to a majority of income tax receipts. This structural constraint is exacerbated when governments are forced by fiscal stress to focus on debt servicing and subsidies rather than on transformative social protection.

Social Protection: Gains and Limits

According to recent International Labour Organization (ILO) statistics, social protection coverage in India increased from 19% of the population in 2015 to more than 64.3% by 2025, covering over 940 million beneficiaries. This expansion reflects the consolidation of programmes such as Ayushman Bharat, Atal Pension Yojana and digital welfare platforms, including the e-Shram portal for informal-sector work-

ers.

A stronger fiscal social contract - where citizens pay fair taxes and receive meaningful welfare - builds trust, legitimacy and sustainable growth.

The ILO World Social Protection Report 2024-26 indicates that overall social protection coverage could be higher when in-kind benefits, such as food security and housing support, and state-level programmes are taken into account, potentially covering more than 57% or even up to two-thirds of the population. Nevertheless, these figures indicate continuing deficiencies, particularly in the area of unemployment protection and official benefits based on employment, which are key pillars of a comprehensive welfare state.

Social Protection Scorecard

The World Bank semi-annual regional prognosis, the South Asia Development Update (SADU 2025), indicates that South Asian countries, including India, are characterised by low tax collections in comparison to potential and limited fiscal space that leaves governments vulnerable to external shocks and undermines their fiscal robustness.

By assisting govern-

welfare spending, to target welfare services to specific groups of beneficiaries, to minimise duplication across governments and to establish shock-responsive welfare systems to provide efficient and prompt welfare support when crises strike, SADU 2025 and the Social Protection Scorecard contribute to improving citizen welfare. They allow India to go beyond safety nets and towards self-reliance. But they have no direct effect on tax inequity - tax reform must take place separately in the fiscal arena (replacing indirect with direct taxes). The Scorecard serves as an indirect reinforcement of the fiscal social contract, as more adequate and rights-based welfare strengthens political accountability for equitable taxation and restores reciprocity between the citizens and the state.

Strengthening the Contract

To enhance fiscal equity, welfare and reform, India must:

- Expand the tax base: Promote formalisation and enhance direct tax collection to enhance progressivity and fairness.
- Rationalise indirect taxes: Maintain the efficiency of the GST system and address the regressive impact of GST, which falls disproportionately on lower-income house-

holds.

- Make welfare equal revenue: To prevent fiscal deficits from crowding out essential investments, make sure that growth in social protection is supported by predictable revenue streams.

- Enhance Fiscal Frameworks: Support the principles of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, which facilitates fiscal discipline.

- Increase Transparency and Accountability: Strengthen the connection between taxpayers and the benefits they receive, including education, healthcare and retirement security.

Fiscal policy must not be a ledger of receipts and expenditures alone; it must reflect fairness, resilience, and reciprocity between citizens and the state. A strengthened fiscal social contract - where taxation is equitable, social protection is meaningful, and resilience is embedded in policy - is not just sound economics. It is the foundation of trust, democratic legitimacy, and sustainable growth for a young, aspirational India poised for the future.

(The author is Professor, Department of Commerce, CHRIST [Deemed to be University])