India

The Hidden Consequences of the Nutrition Transition

In India, large numbers of people under thirty line up outside McDonald's to order the Chicken Maharaja Mac, India's beef-free version of the Big Mac.[159] Fast food and sodas are "all the rage now" in the country, according to Indian public health activist Shobha Shukla.[160] Ice cream is also becoming much more popular, with international brands like Baskin Robbins, Häagen Dazs, and Magnum already vending throughout India, alongside Indian brands.[161] Although many Indians do not eat beef for religious reasons, Muslims, Christians, and even some Hindus are eating more meat from cows and buffaloes.[162]

India's booming middle class—estimated to number between 50 million and 250 million, depending on what threshold is used and whether it is measured by income or wealth[163]—is driving demand for meat, eggs, and processed dairy products like ice cream (milk has long been a staple of most Indian diets). Despite India's long tradition of ethical vegetarianism, only about 30 percent of India's 1.3 billion people now call themselves vegetarian.[164] For many Indians, particularly in urban areas, owning a television, driving a car, wearing Western brand–name clothing, or eating meat are symbols

Chicken Maharaja Mac on sale at a McDonald's in India

of affluence, independence, and modernity. "We are quick, hygienic, clean, and are seen as part of global culture," Vikram Bakshi, managing director of McDonald's India, told Agence France-Presse.[165]

But being part of "global culture" carries enormous health risks. Heart disease is responsible for the majority of deaths in India,[166] and more than 60 million Indians have been diagnosed with diabetes.[167] That's nearly five percent of India's people, and this number is expected to rise—and quickly. Many other developing countries including South Africa,[168] Mexico,[169] and China[170] are facing a similar dilemma. As their middle classes grow and rural to urban migration accelerates, more people are shifting away from diets high in unprocessed starch, high-fiber vegetables, and plant proteins. Instead, they are adopting a Western-style way of eating, full of animal protein and fat, refined carbohydrates, and sugar.

India, like South Africa, is currently experiencing the double burden of malnutrition. In 2014, over 40 percent of Indian adults were considered underweight, while obesity rates have climbed steadily throughout the last 40 years.[171] Diabetes trends in India are "absolutely frightening," says Nikhil Tandon, professor of endocrinology at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences.[172] "Young people who are the drivers of the economy, who are the protectors of their family, are going to be lost," due to the fast-rising prevalence of diabetes, according to Prathap Reddy, a cardiologist and founder of a large network of private hospitals in India.[173]

In India, income is closely associated with malnutrition, researchers have found. Richer women who likely have access to a variety of foods tend to be overweight, while poorer women who cannot afford the most basic foods tend to be underweight.[174] And even as a growing number of Indians eat higher up the food chain, under-nutrition remains a stubborn problem. More than 40 percent of Indian children younger than five are malnourished.[175]
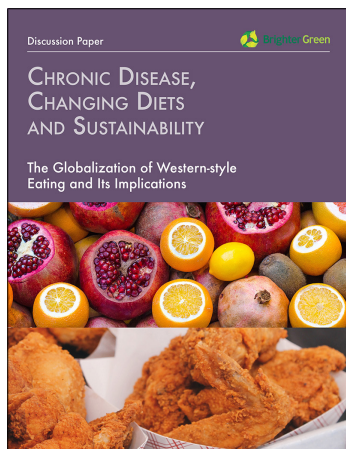
To combat high rates of diabetes and obesity, India is poised to take measures similar to those the Mexican government has put in place. The Indian health ministry

is working on a proposal that would tax sugar-sweetened beverages and junk food, as well as put in place regulations on advertising to children.[176] The state of Kerala in the south of the country has independently proposed a 14.5 percent "fat tax" on unhealthy foods served at fast-food chains (although the tax would not target local restaurants that serve fried or fatty foods).[177] Kerala is experiencing rising rates of overweight and obesity, ranking it second among Indian states.[178]

In addition to policy changes, ultimately, perceptions also need to change so that citizens of India and other countries see the Western-style diet for what it is: a recipe for obesity and chronic disease. The situation in India raises the question of whether the nutrition transition is an inevitable process, in India and the rest of the global South? Or, could food-insecure countries provide the calories their people need without gleaning them from saturated fats, sugar, and processed foods? ◆