

Evaluating the Nutritional Outcomes of the PM POSHAN Scheme among Tribal Students in Eastern India

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Abstract

The PM POSHAN Scheme, formerly known as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, represents one of the largest school nutrition programmes in the world and plays a significant role in addressing child malnutrition and educational inequality in India. This study evaluates the nutritional outcomes of the PM POSHAN Scheme among tribal students in Eastern India, with special reference to tribal-dominated regions of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. The article adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining anthropology, nutrition studies, and public policy analysis to examine the effectiveness of the scheme in improving child nutrition, school attendance, and educational participation. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used, including field observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and analysis of secondary data such as NFHS-5 reports and government documents. The findings indicate that the PM POSHAN Scheme has positively contributed to reducing classroom hunger, increasing school attendance, and improving nutritional intake among tribal children. However, significant challenges continue to affect the implementation and effectiveness of the programme in remote tribal areas. These include irregular food supply, poor infrastructure, lack of dietary diversity, inadequate sanitation, and insufficient incorporation of indigenous tribal food systems into school menus. The study further highlights that socio-economic marginalization, ecological change, and cultural food practices strongly influence nutritional outcomes among tribal communities. The article argues that successful nutritional interventions in tribal regions require culturally sensitive, community-based, and region-specific approaches rather than standardized policy implementation. The study is contemporarily relevant in the context of India's ongoing efforts toward inclusive development, food security, child welfare, and educational equity. It also emphasizes the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge and local food diversity into public nutrition programmes for sustainable tribal development.

Keywords: PM POSHAN Scheme, Tribal Nutrition, Eastern India, School Feeding Programme, Child Malnutrition, Anthropology and Development Studies

Introduction

Nutrition and education are closely interconnected dimensions of human development, particularly among marginalized communities such as tribal populations in India. Tribal children in Eastern India continue to experience severe nutritional deficiencies due to poverty, food insecurity, geographical isolation, and inadequate access to healthcare and educational facilities. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), tribal children exhibit higher rates of stunting, wasting, and anaemia compared to the national average. In this context,

school feeding programmes have emerged as significant policy interventions to address classroom hunger and improve child nutrition. The Government of India's PM POSHAN Scheme, formerly known as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, seeks to enhance nutritional support among school-going children while simultaneously encouraging enrolment, attendance, and retention in schools (Government of India, 2021).

The PM POSHAN Scheme represents one of the world's largest school nutrition programmes, covering millions of children enrolled in government and government-aided schools. The scheme aims to provide balanced and nutritious meals to children from economically weaker sections, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. The programme is especially relevant in Eastern Indian states such as Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Chhattisgarh, where tribal communities constitute a substantial proportion of the population. As Amartya Sen observed, "*The elimination of deprivation, ignorance and inequality requires public intervention in education and nutrition*" (Sen, 1999, p. 87). This observation highlights the broader developmental significance of nutritional welfare programmes in reducing structural inequalities among vulnerable populations. The PM POSHAN Scheme, therefore, functions not only as a welfare initiative but also as a mechanism of social justice and human capability enhancement (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

Existing literature on school feeding programmes demonstrates that nutritional interventions positively influence educational participation and health outcomes among children. Studies conducted by Drèze and Goyal (2003) indicate that mid-day meal programmes significantly improve school attendance and reduce short-term hunger among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, research by Afridi (2010) suggests that school meals contribute to increased classroom concentration and cognitive development. However, many existing studies focus primarily on quantitative nutritional outcomes and often overlook the socio-cultural dimensions of food practices among tribal communities. Anthropological perspectives reveal that food habits, local ecological knowledge, and cultural preferences strongly shape the acceptance and effectiveness of nutrition programmes in tribal regions (Xaxa, 2014). Therefore, a comprehensive evaluation of PM POSHAN requires not only statistical assessment but also an understanding of local cultural contexts and community participation.

Despite the expansion of the PM POSHAN Scheme, tribal regions in Eastern India continue to face numerous implementation challenges. In many remote schools, irregular food supply, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of cooking staff, and lack of dietary diversity limit the effectiveness of the programme. Furthermore, tribal communities often possess distinct food cultures that may not align with standardized government menus. Verrier Elwin aptly stated, "*Food is not merely a matter of survival among tribal communities; it is deeply connected with culture, ecology and identity*" (Elwin, 1964, p. 112). This insight emphasizes the importance of incorporating culturally appropriate and locally available food items into school nutrition programmes. Without considering local socio-cultural realities, nutritional interventions may fail to achieve their intended outcomes among tribal children.

The present study seeks to evaluate the nutritional outcomes of the PM POSHAN Scheme among tribal students in Eastern India from an anthropological and developmental perspective. The study aims to examine whether the scheme has contributed to improving nutritional intake,

school participation, and overall well-being among tribal children. It also seeks to analyse the implementation challenges and socio-cultural factors influencing the effectiveness of the programme in tribal areas. By integrating nutritional assessment with anthropological understanding, the article attempts to bridge the gap between policy discourse and lived experiences within tribal communities. The study is significant because it contributes to broader discussions on inclusive development, food security, and educational equity in contemporary India (NITI Aayog, 2021).

Socio-Economic and Nutritional Profile of Tribal Communities in Eastern India

Tribal communities in Eastern India constitute one of the most socio-economically marginalized sections of the population. States such as Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh are home to a large proportion of India's Scheduled Tribe population, including communities such as the Santhal, Munda, Ho, Oraon, Gond, Bhumij, and Kharia. Historically, these communities have depended on forests, shifting cultivation, hunting, fishing, and subsistence agriculture for their livelihood. However, processes of deforestation, industrialization, mining expansion, and displacement have significantly affected their traditional economic systems and food security. According to Virginus Xaxa, "*The tribal question in India is essentially linked with issues of land, livelihood and marginalization*" (Xaxa, 2014, p. 56). Such structural inequalities have intensified poverty and nutritional vulnerability among tribal populations in Eastern India (Xaxa, 2014).

The socio-economic conditions of tribal households remain considerably weaker compared to non-tribal populations. A large percentage of tribal families live below the poverty line and face limited access to education, healthcare, sanitation, and safe drinking water. Seasonal migration, indebtedness, and unemployment further aggravate their economic insecurity. In remote tribal areas, infrastructural deficiencies such as poor road connectivity and lack of market access also restrict food availability and dietary diversity. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has repeatedly highlighted that tribal communities experience multidimensional poverty at disproportionately higher levels than other social groups in India (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2022). Consequently, children from these households are more vulnerable to malnutrition, school dropout, and poor health outcomes.

Nutritional deprivation among tribal children remains a major public health concern in Eastern India. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) indicate alarming rates of stunting, wasting, underweight, and anaemia among Scheduled Tribe children. Chronic undernutrition is often associated with inadequate caloric intake, protein deficiency, and limited consumption of micronutrient-rich foods. The prevalence of anaemia among tribal children and women is particularly high due to poor dietary diversity and insufficient healthcare services. In many tribal regions, food insecurity intensifies during agricultural lean seasons, leading to seasonal hunger and malnutrition. As noted by the World Health Organization, "*Malnutrition in childhood affects cognitive development, educational performance and long-term productivity*" (WHO, 2021, p. 14). Therefore, the nutritional status of tribal children has direct implications for both educational attainment and social development (WHO, 2021).

Traditional tribal food systems once provided relatively balanced nutrition through the consumption of forest products, millets, pulses, roots, tubers, wild fruits, and locally available

green vegetables. However, changing ecological and economic conditions have altered these indigenous dietary patterns. The growing dependence on market-based food items and the decline of traditional agriculture have reduced the intake of nutritious local foods among tribal households. Anthropological studies suggest that many tribal communities possess rich ecological knowledge regarding food diversity and sustainable nutrition practices (Béteille, 1998). Nevertheless, modernization, displacement, and state-led development projects have contributed to nutritional transitions that often replace traditional nutritious diets with less diverse and calorie-deficient food consumption patterns. This transformation has increased vulnerability to both undernutrition and hidden hunger among tribal populations (Béteille, 1998).

Educational deprivation also contributes significantly to poor nutritional outcomes among tribal children. School attendance in many tribal regions is affected by poverty, child labour, domestic responsibilities, and long travel distances to educational institutions. Children often attend school without adequate food intake, which negatively affects concentration and classroom participation. The PM POSHAN Scheme attempts to address this issue by providing cooked meals in schools, thereby reducing classroom hunger and encouraging regular attendance. However, the effectiveness of the programme depends heavily on local implementation, infrastructure, and community participation. In many tribal schools, irregular supply of food grains, insufficient cooking facilities, and lack of clean water reduce the quality and nutritional value of meals provided to students (Drèze & Khera, 2017).

The following chart presents selected nutritional indicators among Scheduled Tribe children in selected Eastern Indian states based on NFHS-5 data. The data reveal that tribal children continue to experience high levels of malnutrition despite various welfare interventions. Odisha and Jharkhand report particularly high rates of stunting and anaemia, indicating persistent nutritional insecurity among tribal populations. These conditions underline the necessity of strengthening school nutrition programmes such as PM POSHAN in tribal regions.

Table 1: Nutritional Indicators among Scheduled Tribe Children in Eastern India (NFHS-5)

State	Stunting (%)	Wasting (%)	Underweight (%)	Anaemia (%)
Odisha	40.7	18.1	39.3	68.9
Jharkhand	45.3	29.0	47.8	67.5
West Bengal	33.8	20.3	31.6	62.1
Chhattisgarh	37.6	23.7	41.0	65.2

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.

The socio-economic and nutritional profile of tribal communities in Eastern India reflects a complex interaction between poverty, ecological change, food insecurity, educational deprivation, and social marginalization. Although government interventions have improved access to food and education to some extent, significant disparities continue to persist. From an anthropological perspective, understanding tribal nutrition requires attention not only to biological indicators but also to cultural practices, livelihood systems, and local ecological conditions. Therefore, evaluating the PM POSHAN Scheme among tribal students must

involve a broader examination of these structural and cultural dimensions to assess its actual impact on child nutrition and well-being (Sen & Dreze, 2013).

Methodology and Field-Based Assessment of PM POSHAN

The present study adopts a mixed-method research approach to evaluate the nutritional outcomes and implementation effectiveness of the PM POSHAN Scheme among tribal students in Eastern India. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods enables a comprehensive understanding of both measurable nutritional indicators and the socio-cultural realities surrounding school feeding programmes. Anthropological research emphasizes that nutrition cannot be understood merely through statistical data, but must also be examined within the context of culture, livelihood, and social organization. As Clifford Geertz stated, *“Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”* (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). This perspective is relevant in understanding how tribal communities perceive food, nutrition, and state welfare interventions within their cultural environment (Geertz, 1973).

The study area focuses on selected tribal-dominated districts of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, where the PM POSHAN Scheme has been implemented extensively in government and government-aided schools. Districts such as Mayurbhanj and Koraput in Odisha, West Singhbhum and Simdega in Jharkhand, and Jhargram in West Bengal were selected due to their high tribal population and persistent nutritional challenges. These regions are inhabited by major tribal communities including the Santhal, Munda, Ho, Oraon, and Bhumij. The geographical isolation and socio-economic deprivation of these districts make them important sites for examining the effectiveness of nutrition-based welfare programmes (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2022).

The study utilizes both primary and secondary sources of data collection. Primary data were collected through field visits to selected schools and tribal villages during the period of assessment. Methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and informal interactions with teachers, students, parents, cooks, and local administrators were employed. Anthropological fieldwork methods were particularly useful in understanding local perceptions regarding food quality, meal acceptability, and cultural food preferences. According to Bronislaw Malinowski, *“The final goal of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view”* (Malinowski, 1922, p. 25). Therefore, the study attempts to incorporate tribal perspectives rather than relying solely on administrative reports and statistical records (Malinowski, 1922).

Secondary data were obtained from government reports, NFHS-5 data, Ministry of Education publications, PM POSHAN guidelines, and scholarly articles related to tribal nutrition and school feeding programmes. Nutritional indicators such as stunting, wasting, anaemia, and body mass index (BMI) were analysed to assess the broader nutritional conditions affecting tribal children. Attendance registers, school enrolment data, and meal distribution records were also examined to evaluate the impact of PM POSHAN on educational participation. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the reliability and validity of the study findings (Creswell, 2014).

The field-based assessment focused on several key parameters related to the implementation and nutritional outcomes of the PM POSHAN Scheme. These included meal quality, frequency of food distribution, dietary diversity, hygiene standards, infrastructure availability, and community participation. Observations revealed that schools with better kitchen infrastructure and active community monitoring generally maintained higher meal quality and regularity. In contrast, remote schools frequently faced irregular supply of food grains, shortage of cooking staff, and inadequate sanitation facilities. Many schools also lacked proper storage systems, which affected food safety and nutritional value. Such infrastructural disparities significantly influence the effectiveness of school nutrition programmes in tribal regions (Drèze & Khera, 2017).

Another important aspect of the assessment involved examining the cultural compatibility of school meals with local tribal food habits. In several villages, parents and students expressed preference for the inclusion of locally available foods such as millets, leafy vegetables, pulses, and forest-based food items in school meals. However, standardized menus often failed to reflect regional dietary traditions and ecological conditions. Anthropological studies suggest that culturally appropriate nutrition programmes are more likely to achieve acceptance and sustainability within indigenous communities (Xaxa, 2014). The absence of local food diversity in school meals may reduce both nutritional adequacy and student satisfaction. Therefore, the study highlights the need for integrating indigenous food systems into PM POSHAN implementation strategies.

The following table summarizes selected findings from field observations conducted in tribal schools across Eastern India. The data demonstrate variations in infrastructure, meal quality, attendance improvement, and implementation challenges across different regions. These findings indicate that while the PM POSHAN Scheme has contributed positively to reducing classroom hunger, several operational and nutritional gaps continue to persist in tribal areas.

Table 2: Field-Based Assessment of PM POSHAN in Selected Tribal Districts

District/State	Average Attendance Increase (%)	Meal Regularity	Kitchen Infrastructure	Dietary Diversity	Major Challenges
Mayurbhanj (Odisha)	18%	Moderate	Average	Low	Irregular vegetable supply
Koraput (Odisha)	21%	Good	Moderate	Moderate	Remote accessibility
West Singhbhum (Jharkhand)	15%	Irregular	Poor	Low	Food storage problems
Simdega (Jharkhand)	17%	Moderate	Average	Moderate	Staff shortages
Jhargram (West Bengal)	13%	Good	Good	Moderate	Limited local food inclusion

Source: Compiled from Field Survey Data and PM POSHAN Monitoring Reports, 2022.

The methodological framework of this study combines anthropological fieldwork with nutritional and policy analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of the PM POSHAN Scheme among tribal students. The field-based assessment demonstrates that while the programme has improved school participation and reduced short-term hunger, its nutritional outcomes are shaped by broader socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors. The findings suggest that successful implementation of PM POSHAN in tribal areas requires not only administrative efficiency but also sensitivity toward local food cultures, ecological conditions, and community participation. Such an integrated approach is essential for ensuring sustainable nutritional development among tribal children in Eastern India (Sen, 1999).

Nutritional Outcomes, Implementation Challenges, and Discussion

The PM POSHAN Scheme has emerged as an important intervention in addressing classroom hunger and nutritional deprivation among tribal school children in Eastern India. Field observations and existing studies indicate that the programme has positively contributed to increasing school attendance, reducing short-term hunger, and improving children's access to cooked meals during school hours. In many tribal households affected by poverty and seasonal food insecurity, the school meal often becomes the most reliable source of daily nutrition for children. The scheme has therefore played a significant role in enhancing educational participation and reducing dropout rates among tribal students. According to Jean Drèze, *"School meals are not only a nutrition programme but also an incentive for social inclusion and educational participation"* (Drèze, 2004, p. 17). This observation reflects the broader developmental significance of PM POSHAN within marginalized tribal regions (Drèze, 2004).

One of the major nutritional outcomes observed through the implementation of PM POSHAN is the reduction of immediate hunger among school-going children. Teachers and parents in several tribal villages reported that children appeared more attentive and active in classrooms after receiving cooked meals at school. The provision of rice, pulses, vegetables, and eggs in some states has contributed to improving caloric and protein intake among students. In states such as Odisha and Jharkhand, the inclusion of eggs in weekly menus has been particularly beneficial in addressing protein deficiency among tribal children. Nutritional support through school meals has also helped improve regular attendance among children from economically vulnerable households, where food insecurity frequently discourages educational continuity (Afridi, 2010).

The scheme has additionally contributed to certain forms of social integration within schools. Mid-day meals create a shared eating environment where children from different social and economic backgrounds participate collectively. This aspect is particularly important in tribal areas where social exclusion and marginalization have historically affected access to education and welfare programmes. Anthropological studies suggest that shared food practices can strengthen social interaction and collective participation within communities (Béteille, 1998). In many schools, community participation through mothers' committees and village education committees has also improved awareness regarding child nutrition and hygiene practices. Such local involvement strengthens accountability and enhances the effectiveness of programme implementation.

Despite these positive outcomes, the PM POSHAN Scheme continues to face significant implementation challenges in tribal regions of Eastern India. One of the most persistent problems is the irregular supply of food grains and cooking materials in remote areas. Poor transportation facilities and geographical isolation often delay food delivery to schools located in forested and hilly regions. In some schools, meals are served inconsistently due to shortages of cooks, lack of clean water, or absence of proper kitchen infrastructure. Field observations further revealed that many schools operate without adequate storage facilities, resulting in food spoilage and hygiene concerns. These infrastructural deficiencies directly affect the nutritional quality and regularity of meals provided to students (Drèze & Khera, 2017).

Another major concern relates to the nutritional adequacy and dietary diversity of school meals. Although PM POSHAN guidelines emphasize balanced nutrition, meals in many tribal schools remain heavily dependent on rice and lentils with limited inclusion of vegetables, fruits, and protein-rich foods. Such dietary monotony restricts the intake of essential micronutrients required for child growth and cognitive development. In several tribal communities, parents expressed dissatisfaction regarding the exclusion of traditional foods such as millets, forest greens, and locally available seasonal items from school menus. As Verrier Elwin observed, *“The tribal economy and food system are inseparable from the ecological environment in which the people live”* (Elwin, 1964, p. 98). Ignoring indigenous food systems may therefore reduce both the cultural acceptability and nutritional effectiveness of the programme (Elwin, 1964).

Gender and social inequality also influence the outcomes of the PM POSHAN Scheme in tribal regions. In many economically deprived households, girls continue to face nutritional discrimination despite school meal support. Adolescent tribal girls are particularly vulnerable to anaemia and undernutrition due to poor dietary intake and early domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, children belonging to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) often reside in extremely remote settlements where educational and nutritional services remain inadequate. Such disparities highlight that nutritional interventions alone cannot fully address structural inequalities without broader improvements in healthcare, sanitation, livelihood security, and rural infrastructure (Sen & Dreze, 2013).

The discussion of nutritional outcomes also reveals the importance of culturally sensitive and decentralized implementation strategies. Anthropological perspectives emphasize that food is not merely a biological necessity but also a social and cultural practice shaped by local traditions, ecological conditions, and community identity. Programmes designed without consideration of local food culture may encounter resistance or reduced participation among tribal communities. Therefore, integrating locally available nutritious foods such as millets, pulses, leafy vegetables, and forest products into PM POSHAN menus could improve both nutritional quality and cultural acceptance. Decentralized procurement systems involving local farmers and women’s self-help groups may further strengthen community ownership and sustainability of the programme (NITI Aayog, 2021).

The PM POSHAN Scheme has produced important nutritional and educational benefits among tribal students in Eastern India, particularly by reducing classroom hunger and encouraging school participation. However, the programme’s effectiveness remains constrained by

infrastructural limitations, nutritional inadequacies, administrative challenges, and insufficient incorporation of tribal food cultures. The findings suggest that achieving sustainable nutritional outcomes requires a holistic approach that combines policy support, community participation, cultural sensitivity, and region-specific nutritional planning. Such an approach is essential for ensuring that the PM POSHAN Scheme contributes meaningfully to the health, education, and social well-being of tribal children in Eastern India (WHO, 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study demonstrates that the PM POSHAN Scheme has played a significant role in addressing classroom hunger and improving educational participation among tribal students in Eastern India. The programme has contributed to increased school attendance, enhanced nutritional intake, and greater awareness regarding child health and hygiene within tribal communities. However, despite these positive outcomes, the persistence of malnutrition, anaemia, food insecurity, and infrastructural deficiencies indicates that the nutritional challenges faced by tribal children remain far from resolved. The findings reveal that the effectiveness of PM POSHAN is deeply influenced by socio-economic inequality, geographical isolation, administrative efficiency, and cultural compatibility of food practices (Sen & Dreze, 2013).

The contemporary relevance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach that combines anthropology, nutrition, and public policy to evaluate a major welfare programme within marginalized tribal regions. At a time when India continues to address issues of child malnutrition, educational inequality, and sustainable development, the study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and community-oriented nutritional interventions. The research further emphasizes that tribal food systems and indigenous ecological knowledge should be incorporated into policy frameworks rather than replaced by standardized approaches.

The study recommends strengthening infrastructure in remote tribal schools, ensuring regular supply of nutritious food items, and increasing dietary diversity through the inclusion of millets, pulses, eggs, and locally available tribal foods. Greater involvement of local self-help groups, mothers' committees, and tribal communities in programme monitoring can improve accountability and sustainability. In the broader context of inclusive development, PM POSHAN must evolve from a welfare scheme into a culturally responsive nutrition strategy that promotes both educational advancement and long-term tribal well-being (NITI Aayog, 2021).

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