



# Feeding Millions, Straining Systems: Rethinking India's Mid-Day Meal Programme

Sheen Thankalayam

Department of Media Studies CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Bangalore - 560029, India.

**Abstract-** India's one of the crucial and conspicuous schemes for improving schoolchildren's nutrition is PM POSHAN, a revised version of the previous Mid-Day Meal Programme. This initiative results in a significant increase in the number of school attendees. Along with the studies, the students' physical health and nutrition are given importance. This scheme turns out to be the world's largest school-feeding endeavour as it ensures equity among the students from various backgrounds across diverse regions. Educational access has also been amplified due to this. However, implementing this infrastructure requires additional refinement. Because of the mediocre execution, several challenges, including financial crises, labour welfare issues, and uneven decentralisation, have arisen. The successful installation of the scheme in a few states does not deny the fact that several other states still struggle with the same issues due to the uneven supply and unsystematic monitoring. Most often, the women workers are assigned these labours for insufficient wages. Their toils are not even recognised or made invisible, which underscores the feminisation of welfare. During the pandemic era, the vulnerabilities of this scheme have been exposed more as the infrastructure lacks any persistent precautionary strategies. Since the schools act as the primary nutrition providers, the pandemic interrupted the systemic flow of the project. The aim of this study is to dissect the progressive features of the PM POSHAN, coupled with the shortcomings of the infrastructure. Research thus focuses on aspects of nutritional status, social equality and equity, and employees' recognition to enhance the child welfare development program of the country.

**Keywords-** Mid-Day Meal Programme, PM POSHAN, School Nutrition, Gendered Labour, Policy Implementation, India.

## I. Introduction

Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) has been widely acknowledged as the world's largest school-feeding initiative with an incredible strength of 11.8 crore students. The initiation of this scheme happened in the 1995 National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE), under the label Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMs). The outset begins to deal with two interconnected problems, such as starvation and student attrition. The scheme has spread widely in government and aided schools across all 28 states and 8 union territories of India. The programme has achieved remarkable growth in the number of enrolments, the nutrition level of children and the welfare status of every state. Amidst this astonishing headway, setbacks regarding sustainability and ethical consistency are still prevailing.

The aims and motives of the PM POSHAN are indeed highly crucial for the enrichment of children in their academic, physical and financial sides, still the foundation of this infrastructure is not molded properly. In several cases, the scheme fails to provide



sufficient meals every day to quench the thirst of the kids. For a healthy meal for a primary school child, the estimated rate of the scheme is between ₹8 and ₹10. This amount is highly insufficient for providing a balanced and nutritious meal, especially in states where the starvation rate is higher. For instance, in northern and north-eastern states, the scheme frequently breaks down in supplying a quality, balanced diet or even a meal. Since the aspired outcome does not balance with the estimated budget, the scheme tends to imbibe the local making shift. The setback in the implementation of the programme eventually affects the expected outcome of the scheme across the country. Though certain southern states, including Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, tackle the issues with the state fund measures, states like Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh fail to cope with the fragile implementation. These states are plagued by unhygienic food, providing low-quality and contaminated meals with irregular supplies.

The subsidiary tasks, even though informal, begin to engulf the real responsibilities of a teacher throughout the academic year. Teachers find difficulties in balancing both pedagogy and logistics, and such complications have been reported from the states, namely Assam, Himachal Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. To prevent irregular supply, certain schools deploy personal resources, including borrowing from local sellers. These malfunctions have also been reported from various parts of the country. All these results in the over workload for the teachers who struggle hard to accomplish the school's mission of quality education, along with quality feeding. The POSHAN programme should give enough attention to address these complications while implementing the scheme.

Establishment of a standardised menu and nutrition diet pattern across the country invites lots of conflicts due to the existence of various food cultures and traditions within the country. This homogeneous diet plan will also invite organisational and logistical issues. One of the best examples of this can be stated from the case of the introduction of eggs. As the scheme comes forward with egg as the nutrient-rich food item, communities that do not consume eggs begin to express their agitation. It outbursts into political and religious turmoil, particularly in the states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The homogenisation fails to consider the local diets, and this becomes a major challenge in the states of Odisha and Jharkhand. Negligence towards their local food culture leads to the underconsumption or even waste of the allotted menu. The policy of centralisation tends to exclude the changing seasons and food variations in terms of their regional differences. It also overlooks the local distribution feasibility. Exclusion of the heterogeneous food traditions eventually affects the nutritional and cultural motives of the scheme.

The advent of the 2019 COVID pandemic unveils the fragility of the scheme regarding the school-based welfare measure. The scheme slipped into the assistance of dry rations or cash transfers because of the shutdown of schools. During the pandemic days, the weak backups of the scheme collapsed in providing nutrition for the children. Since there is a break for the supplement process, the income of the labourers behind this process also gets affected. Numerous children lost their chances, especially from Maharashtra, due to the lack of adequate documentation on the migrant families. Though the schools have reopened after the pandemic era, the distribution methods lack genuineness, and the proceedings have become more bureaucratic. The various roles of



the schools have been revealed after this pandemic; schools have been acting not only as a source of education, but also as a site of physical and psychological care and as a caterer of nutritious meals. Though PM POSHAN is supposed to take up these responsibilities, it often fails to propagate these duties with a standardised quality. Most of the schools do not take the initiative to adopt a new, updated implementation, but continue with the older, fragile models.

The scheme of facilitating mid-day meals is not only concerned with the nourishment of the children, but also ensuring their social space with equity and nobility. This indeed impacts the national advancement and democratic reformation. The fulfilment of this scheme requires an upgrade from the visions of nutritional justice and institutional sustainability. A thorough reformatting of the existing frameworks is needed for this: the budget should be increased according to the real costs of the cooking essentials; the price fluctuations in different regions should be considered; fair wages should be provided to the people who are working on this; social security and dignity should be guaranteed to the cooks and helpers; boundaries between teaching and mid-day meal related duties should be made visible; programme co-ordinators should ensure the perimeters of this scheme with respect to the teaching responsibilities; menu plan should be prepared with respect to the regional variations, seasonal changes, food cultures, and nutritional needs of the locality; audits should be done to assure that the meals are prepared and provided under hygienic environments; and thorough implementation evaluation should be done continuously and systematically.

Superficial and tokenistic welfare exercises, along with negligence towards the labourers, will barrier the fortification of the future generation of the country. PM POSHAN, as being celebrated as the world's largest and the country's most visible welfare initiative, should emerge from the position of mere glorification. For the better fulfilment of this welfare programme, PM POSHAN adequately needs a redesign with its infrastructure, including sufficient funding and regular supplies. This re-framing will aid the scheme to feed the students with quality food with dignity.

## Reference

1. Press Information Bureau. (2025). Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN). Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2120666&reg=48&lang=2>
2. Mid Day Meal Scheme. (n.d.). National programme of mid day meal. Government of Tamil Nadu. [https://middaymeal.tn.gov.in/Pages/national\\_programme](https://middaymeal.tn.gov.in/Pages/national_programme)
3. Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty. (n.d.). India: Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) (erstwhile Mid-Day Meal Scheme). <https://globalallianceagainsthungerandpoverty.org/country-example/india-pradhan-mantri-poshan-shakti-nirman-pm-poshan-erstwhile-mid-day-meal-scheme>
4. Pal, A., Ananda, K. R., Kumar, S., Gupta, S. K., & Sharma, A. (2024). The impact of mid-day meal scheme on the nutritional and educational status among rural school children in Bihar, India. *European Journal of Nutrition & Food Safety*, 16(8), 149-155. <https://doi.org/10.9734/EJNFS/2024/v16i81503>



5. Education for All in India. (2025). A critical review of Mid-Day Meal Scheme (PM-POSHAN) using UDISE+ 2024-25 data. <https://educationforallinindia.com/a-critical-review-of-mid-day-meal-scheme-pm-poshan-using-udise-2024-25-data>
6. Observer Research Foundation. (2025). A recipe for reform: Strengthening food safety in PM POSHAN. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/a-recipe-for-reform-strengthening-food-safety-in-pm-poshan>
7. Saini, V., & Sharma, D. D. (2024). PM Poshan Shakti Nirman Scheme: Constraints and suggestion for its effective implementation. *International Journal of Current Science*, 14(3), 540–544.
8. Express News Service. (2025, October 24). Give fruits to vegetarian students unwilling to have eggs in MDM: Govt directs schools. *The New Indian Express*. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/bhubaneswar/2025/Oct/24/give-fruits-to-vegetarian-students-unwilling-to-have-eggs-in-mdm-govt-directs-schools>
9. Paltasingh, T., & Bhue, P. (2022). Efficacy of mid-day meal scheme in India: Challenges and policy concerns. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 68(4), 610–623. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00195561221103613>