

Health and Nutrition Programmes in India

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Abstract

Malnutrition and unequal access to healthcare affect millions of people in India, especially children, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women. This article explores major government initiatives such as ICDS, POSHAN Abhiyaan, Mission Poshan 2.0, PM POSHAN, the National Health Mission, PMSSY and Ayushman Bharat. Together, these programmes move beyond food support alone. They combine nutrition, maternal and child healthcare, immunisation, growth monitoring, early education, disease prevention and financial protection. A strong focus is also placed on technology-based monitoring, coordination between departments and community participation. The programmes have helped expand anganwadi services, health and wellness centres, affordable medicines and access to cashless hospital treatment. However, regional inequalities, weak infrastructure and gaps in implementation still limit their impact. Overall, the article shows that sustained funding, better coordination, reliable monitoring and stronger frontline services are essential for reducing malnutrition and improving public health.

Introduction

Malnutrition remains a critical public health challenge in India, profoundly impacting the physical growth, cognitive development and overall productivity of its population, particularly women and children. Despite significant economic growth, disparities in nutritional intake persist, making nutrition security a top national priority linked to the Sustainable Development Goals. Recognizing that undernutrition is a multi-dimensional issue requiring simultaneous action on food security, health services and sanitation, the Government of India has implemented a comprehensive, lifecycle-based approach to nutrition. These programmes aim to reduce the prevalence of stunting, wasting, underweight and anaemia, especially within the first 1,000 days of life from conception to two years of age. These initiatives leverage technology, such as the Poshan Tracker and promote community ownership to ensure that nutritious food and health support reach the last mile.

Health and Nutrition Programmes

1. Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS, 1975)

ICDS is a major Indian government program launched to improve the health, nutrition and development of children under 6, pregnant women and lactating mothers. It provides six key services, including supplementary nutrition, health check-ups and pre-school education, primarily through

Anganwadi centers. Goal is to reduce child mortality, morbidity, malnutrition and school dropouts.

Objectives:

- i. Improve the nutritional and health status of children (0–6 years) and pregnant and lactating women.
- ii. Lay the foundation for proper psychological, physical and social development of the child.
- iii. Reduce the incidence of mortality, morbidity, malnutrition and school dropout.
- iv. Enhance the capability of mothers to look after their own and their children's health and nutritional needs through health and nutrition education.

Beneficiaries:

- a. Children aged 0 - 6 years.
- b. Pregnant women and lactating mothers.
- c. Adolescent girls.

Benefits:

- i. Supplementary Nutrition
- ii. Health Check-ups and Growth Monitoring
- iii. Immunization
- iv. Referral Services
- v. Pre-school Education
- vi. Nutrition and Health Education

2. Poshan Abhiyaan, 2018

Earlier name: National Nutrition Mission (NNM)

POSHAN Abhiyan was launched in 2018, in the district of Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan. The goal is to tackle malnutrition across the age groups from children to adolescent girls, pregnant women and lactating mothers via a holistic, life cycle approach. POSHAN Abhiyan aims to transform nutrition delivery by strengthening existing systems (especially ICDS), promoting convergence across sectors, leveraging technology and building community mobilization (Jan Andolan) around nutrition. Operated under Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Health interventions are implemented via Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, its umbrella National Health Mission e.g., maternal care, immunization, anemia control, growth monitoring. Other stakeholders: State/UT governments, local governance, frontline workers, community groups, etc.

Vision: Prevent and reduce childhood stunting, undernutrition, wasting, anemia and low birth weight; ensure optimal maternal, infant and child nutrition; strengthen

nutrition service delivery; and foster community awareness and engagement.

Objectives:

- i. To reduce the level of undernutrition and also enhance the nutritional status of children
- ii. To improve the nutritional outcomes of adolescents, children, pregnant women and lactating mothers.
- iii. Encourage nutrition awareness and healthy eating habits for sustainable health and well-being.
- iv. Providing incentives for Anganwadi Workers to use IT-based tools.

Beneficiaries of the programme

- Young children (0–6 years)
- Infants and children (6–59 months)
- Pregnant and lactating women
- Adolescent girls

Subscheme under Poshan Abhiyaan, 2018:**2.1. Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM Poshan):**

Earlier name: National Programme for Mid-Day Meal in Schools

To address two of the pressing problems for the majority of children in India, viz. hunger and education by improving the nutritional status of eligible children in Government schools as well as encouraging poor children, belonging to disadvantaged sections, to attend school more regularly.

3. Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY, 2006)

PMSSY is a central government scheme aims to address the shortage of affordable tertiary healthcare in the country's backward states. The scheme provides quality medical education and specialized healthcare facilities by establishing new institutions and upgrading government medical colleges. Operated by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Objectives:

- i. Correcting the imbalances in the availability of affordable healthcare facilities in the different parts of the country in general.
- ii. Augmenting facilities for quality medical education in the under-served states in particular and upgrading existing medical institutions so more seats, better infrastructure and updated facilities become available across the country.

Beneficiaries:

- i. People living in underserved or poorly served areas needing tertiary or specialized treatment.
- ii. Medical/paramedical students and health professionals.

Benefits:

- Populations in underserved or remote regions gain access to tertiary and specialty healthcare, reducing their need to travel long distances to metros for critical treatment.
- Medical students and aspiring health professionals get increased opportunities.
- Enhanced capacity for medical research and specialization in a larger number of institutions.

4. National Health Policy, 2017

The National Health Policy was introduced to strengthen the government's role in health system development, covering investments, healthcare services, disease prevention, health promotion, human resources, technology access, financial protection, regulation and health assurance. It is a forward-looking framework for transforming India's healthcare system. By emphasizing Universal Health Coverage, preventive health and equitable access, it seeks to ensure that every citizen can live a healthy and productive life. It is a roadmap for improving healthcare, reducing inequality and ensuring affordable services for all. It focuses on universal access so no family suffers due to high medical costs.

Objectives:

- i. Universal Health Coverage
- ii. Strengthening Public Health System
- iii. Private Sector Alignment
- iv. Reduction of Disease Burden
- v. Strengthening Healthcare Infrastructure

Benefits:

- i. Universal Healthcare Access
- ii. Improved Health Outcomes
- iii. Better Quality of Care
- iv. Financial Protection
- v. Focus on Prevention

Major Health Programmes under NHP:

4.1. National Health Mission (NHM): This is the main program that carries out the goals of the National Health Policy. It includes both the National Rural Health Mission and the National Urban Health Mission.

Objectives:

- Universal access to equitable, affordable and quality health care services for all individuals.
- Develop a skilled workforce of healthcare professionals and community health workers to address the healthcare needs.
- To promote preventive healthcare measures, i.e., immunization, maternal and child health services and

disease control programs to reduce the burden of preventable illnesses.

- Reduce child and maternal mortality.
- To give a major impetus to health infrastructure facilities
- To prevent and control communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Beneficiaries:

- Rural population (by National Rural Health Mission) and urban poor (by National Urban Health Mission).
- Pregnant and lactating women and children.

Benefits:

- Primary health care and preventive services
- Comprehensive health services
- Strengthening health infrastructure and human resources
- Community outreach, decentralisation and local governance

4.2. Ayushman Bharat

This is a key initiative to achieve universal health coverage. It includes two parts:

a. Ayushman Bharat - Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana: A health insurance scheme with coverage up to ₹5 lakh/ family/ year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization.

b. Health and Wellness Centers: By transforming existing subcenters and primary health centres into health and wellness centers.

Ayushman Bharat was launched in 2018, as part of a major drive to provide Universal Health Coverage. The scheme was designed to move beyond fragmented health service delivery; instead it offers a continuum of care from primary health services to secondary and tertiary hospitalisation under a unified framework. Ayushman Bharat blends preventive, promotive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative care, thereby aiming to address all major levels of health needs under one umbrella. The scheme is overseen by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The implementing body for the insurance/hospitalisation component is the National Health Authority. At the state level, State Health Agencies partner for implementation; both central and state governments share the financial responsibility.

Vision: Provide equitable access to quality healthcare for all, especially for poor, vulnerable and marginalized populations to fulfill the objective of Universal Health Coverage.

Objectives of the programme

- Provide health cover of up to ₹ 5,00,000 per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation.

- Deliver accessible primary health care via Health and Wellness Centres, including maternal & child health, non-communicable diseases, diagnostics and free essential drugs.

- Reduce out of pocket expenditure on health for poor and vulnerable families.

Expand reach of quality health services to underserved and rural areas.

4.3. National Digital Health Mission: Establishes a digital ecosystem with unique health IDs for citizens, facilitating efficient service delivery.

4.4. Jan Aushadhi Scheme: Provides affordable generic medicines through Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Janaushadhi Kendras.

4.5. Mission Indradhanush: Provide full immunization to children and pregnant women against vaccine-preventable diseases.

4.6. National Program for Prevention and Control of NCDs: Focuses on awareness, early detection and treatment of lifestyle diseases.

4.7. National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke: A program to address the growing burden of non-communicable diseases.

4.8. National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme: A program aimed at eliminating tuberculosis from India.

4.9. National Programme for Control of Blindness: Focuses on preventing and controlling blindness.

4.10. National AIDS Control Programme: A national effort to control and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS

Conclusion

The various health and nutrition programmes in India ranging from the foundational ICDS to the PM POSHAN have played a significant role in improving nutrition indicators nationwide. These programmes target vulnerable groups children, adolescent girls and pregnant women to reduce anemia and malnutrition, shifting the focus from simple food distribution to holistic health and empowerment. The recent transition to Mission Poshan 2.0 and the emphasis on Jan Andolan have strengthened the convergence of health services with nutrition, technology enabled monitoring and community engagement. Ultimately, these nutrition-sensitive and nutrition specific interventions are critical, not just for improving public health but for building human capital necessary for national development and a healthier future.

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