

## **REVIEW ARTICLE**

### **Revisiting POSHAN Abhiyan with special Emphasis on Stunting**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment (POSHAN) Abhiyaan or National Nutrition Mission was launched by the Government of India on March 8, 2018 in the Jhunjhunia District of Rajasthan. POSHAN Abhiyan is India's flagship programme to improve nutritional outcomes by convergence, targeted approach and use of appropriate technology. To strengthen nutritional content, delivery, outreach, and outcomes, Government has merged the Supplementary Nutrition Programme and Poshan Abhiyan to launch Mission POSHAN 2.0. As India formulates POSHAN Abhiyaan 2.0, the use of the stunting metric to measure the effect of current interventions needs to be reconsidered. It has been emphasized that the stunting metric, due to its sensitivity to maternal height, cannot accurately assess the extent of the current under-nutrition burden. Among the target indicators identified in POSHAN Abhiyaan, stunting is least indicative of current nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive conditions.

#### **Introduction**

India currently faces a huge burden of malnutrition. Despite having many health programs that target this issue of malnutrition, the progress is rather unsatisfactory. This sluggish pace of reduction in malnutrition still continues to baffle policy makers and researchers.<sup>1</sup> As per the latest National Family Health Survey-V 2019-2020 data, 35.5% of children under the age of five years were found to be stunted and 19.3% were found to be wasted. The nutritional status of the adults also depicted 18.7% of the women and 16.2% of men having body mass index below normal (<18.5 kg/m<sup>3</sup>).<sup>2</sup>

The Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment (POSHAN ) Abhiyaan or National Nutrition Mission was launched by the Government of India on March 8, 2018 in the Jhunjhunia District of Rajasthan. The Abhiyaan had the main targets of reducing stunting, undernutrition, anemia (among young children, women and adolescent girls) and reduction in low birth weight by 2%, 2%, 3% and 2% per annum respectively by 2021. POSHAN Abhiyan is India's flagship programme to improve nutritional outcomes by convergence, targeted approach and use of appropriate technology.<sup>3</sup>

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### **Current Scenario**

A published research in Lancet in 2019 said that about 68% of the deaths of children under the age of five in India can be attributed to child and maternal malnutrition.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that instead of addressing one disease at a time, if malnutrition is tackled as a whole, it will keep the children much safer. The Global Nutrition Report 2020 states that India is among 88 countries that are likely to miss global nutrition targets by 2025.<sup>5</sup> India ranks 101 on the Global Hunger Index.<sup>6</sup> Over half of our children under five years were found to be either stunted (too short for their age) or wasted (too thin for their age) or both, reckoned by the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey, released in 2019.<sup>7</sup> The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that 194.4 million people in India (about 14.5% of the total population) are undernourished.<sup>8</sup>

Covid-19 has posed serious threats to children and their health and nutritional rights. According to recent estimates, even in the best possible scenario and accounting for changes in the provision of essential health and nutrition services due to COVID-19, India could have around additional 60,000 child deaths.<sup>9</sup> Research also shows malnourished children are less likely to go to school and more likely to drop out.<sup>10</sup>

### **Strategies under POSHAN Abhiyan and Recent Updates**

The POSHAN Abhiyan was launched to reduce the burden of malnutrition in a phased manner, following the life cycle approach, in a synergized way. The Mission would ensure mechanisms for timely service delivery and a robust monitoring as well as intervention infrastructure. Target of Mission was to bring down stunting of the children in the age group of 0-6 years from 38.4% to 25% by the year 2022.<sup>11</sup>

A number of components have been defined as part of the Mission such Information Computers Technology Enabled Real Time Monitoring of Schemes (ICT-RTM). The ICDS-CAS has two components, namely the mobile application which is made available to the field functionaries preloaded on mobile phones and a six-tier monitoring dashboard for desktops. This application is aimed to augment system strengthening in Anganwadi Service Delivery and looks at improving the nutrition outcomes through effective monitoring and timely intervention.<sup>12</sup>

The next strategy was community mobilization & behavioral change communication involving Community Based Events (CBE) for Critical milestones in the 1000 days period, IEC and advocacy to support nutrition behavior change and Jan Andolan. Organizing community based traditional events to promote and support behaviour change to improve maternal and child nutrition is one of the methods to increase awareness and set in change. These include inviting women during the first/second trimester of Pregnancy, “Annaprashan Diwas”, “Celebrating Coming of Age-getting ready for preschool at AWC”, “Awareness message to public on Health and Nutrition” and “Suposhan Diwas.”<sup>13</sup>

The National Nutrition Mission (NNM) envisages establishing a system where programme functionaries especially at field level, will become more effective by learning to plan and execute each task correctly and consistently through methodical, ongoing capacity building, called ‘incremental learning approach (ILA)’. Such a system will use opportunities in the form of existing supervisory interactions at different levels, through which practical, guided learning may be accomplished.<sup>14</sup>

IEC activities play a very important and strategic role in the area of public health. A successful IEC plan would help in refuting myths and misunderstandings prevalent in the society and will lead to a demand for the various health services being provided, thus bringing about a behavioural change among individuals and the community at large. The Mission focuses on converting the agenda of improving nutrition into a Jan Andolan through involvement of Panchayati Raj Institutions/ Villages Organizations/ SHGs etc. and ensuring wide public participation.<sup>15</sup>

To strengthen nutritional content, delivery, outreach, and outcomes, Government has merged the Supplementary Nutrition Programme and Poshan Abhiyan to launch Mission POSHAN 2.0. The Ministry of Women and Child Development has taken many initiatives to ensure safety and well-being of children. Ministry of Women and Child Development strives to ensure well-nourished and happy children growing in a safe and secure environment and empower women by providing them with an environment which is accessible, affordable, reliable and free from all forms of discrimination and violence.<sup>16</sup>

Recently, the Ministry for Women and Child Development inaugurated Poshan 2.0 and urged all Aspirational Districts to establish a Poshan Vatika (Nutrition Garden) during the Nutrition Month (Poshan Mah) from 1<sup>st</sup> September. For effective implementation of various schemes and programmes of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, all major schemes of the Ministry have been classified under 3 umbrella schemes viz. Mission Poshan 2.0, Mission Vatsalya and Mission Shakti. A month-long celebration of the POSHAN Abhiyan mission places special attention on Severe Acute Malnourished (SAM) children.<sup>17</sup>

### Stunting as a Parameter

Stunting prevalence is the proportion of children younger than 5 years who are too short for their age, according to the 2006 WHO growth standard, constructed from the Multi Growth Reference Study (MGRS).<sup>18</sup> Using the MGRS standard, around 38% of children in India are stunted. This metric is also used by countries to monitor the effect of current policies that are in place to reduce the child under nutrition burden. In India's flagship nutrition program, POSHAN Abhiyaan, launched in 2017, stunting is one of the monitoring and evaluation metrics, as are underweight, low birth weight, and anaemia.<sup>19</sup> As India formulates POSHAN Abhiyaan 2.0, the use of the stunting metric to measure the effect of current interventions needs to be reconsidered. Child height has a strong intergenerational component: children born to shorter mothers, on average, are shorter. Among the two dozen correlates that have been shown to be associated with the risk of stunting in childhood, maternal height is the strongest. The attained height of the mother, determined both by her own genetics and past nutrition-sensitive insults she might have endured, is then passed down to her children.<sup>20</sup>

### Recommendations

It has been emphasized that the stunting metric, due to its sensitivity to maternal height, cannot accurately assess the extent of the current under nutrition burden. Among the target indicators identified in POSHAN Abhiyaan, stunting is least indicative of current nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive conditions. But on the contrary, monitoring for stunting is easier and can be done at the home level. Grass Root Workers like ASHAs and ANMs can be deployed and a metric for height estimation of children can be marked on the walls of houses where there are children less than 5 years of age. The mothers can thus monitor and keep a record of the child's height even when growth monitoring is hampered due to certain conditions like COVID-19.

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