



Cover Page



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REDUCING MALNOURISHMENT THROUGH INCOME FROM MGNREGS

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Abstract: At present India is said to be third largest economy in the world in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Maharashtra is most developed state in India. However, prevalence of under nutrition is unacceptably high in Maharashtra, particularly among the tribal children. In 2005, child malnutrition claimed as many as 718 lives in one single district, namely Palghar. Even after a decade of double-digit economic growth, in 2016, more than 600 children died due to under-nutrition in the same district. The state then announced a slew of measures to address child malnutrition in tribal dominated areas. MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME (MGNREGS) can be used to generate employment for each adult member in tribal belt for 365 days. Minimum wages earned through such employment guarantee will increase expenditure on food and nutrition thus reducing death due to malnourishment.

Keywords: MGNREGS – Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, EGS – Employment Guarantee Scheme of Maharashtra State, PDS – Public Distribution System, GDP – Gross Domestic Product (National Income), PPP – Purchasing Power Parity, SAM - Severely Malnourished, MAM – Mildly Malnourished, VCDCs - Village Child Development Centers.

Introduction

Mumbai is financial capital of India. Maharashtra State is the most developed state. India is third largest economy in the world in terms of PPP GDP. Despite most developed state, we found that just 100 kms away from Mumbai city, tribal children in Palghar district are dying every year due to malnourishment. Other tribal belts in Maharashtra and India must have worse situation compared to Palghar district. Researchers and media can easily approach Palghar district compared to other tribal belts. Hence, many government schemes are available in Palghar district compared to other tribal belts in Maharashtra and India. However, death due to malnourishment has not stopped yet in tribal belts of Maharashtra.

CONSTITUTION of India and Malnourishment: The Right to Food is inherent to a life with dignity, and Article 21 of the Constitution of India which guarantees a fundamental right to life and personal liberty should be read with Articles 39 (a) and 47 to understand the nature of the obligations of the State to ensure the effective realization of this right. Article 39 (a) of the Constitution, enunciated as one of the Directive Principles, fundamental in the governance of the country, requires the State to direct its policies towards securing that all its citizens have the right to an adequate means of livelihood, while Article 47 spells out the duty of the State to raise the level of nutrition and standard of living of its people as a primary responsibility. The Constitution thus makes the Right to Food a guaranteed Fundamental Right which is enforceable by virtue of the constitutional remedy provided under Article 32 of the Constitution.

It is the duty of government to protect the fundamental rights of tribal by providing employment and sufficient income to come out from poverty and malnourishment. Tribal in India do not have sufficient assets, their land in forest is declared as government property. Few tribes have marginal non-irrigated agricultural land holdings. Most of the tribal are illiterate or less literate. Their habitations in forest land make them isolated from industry and service sectors. Hence, tribes suffer from absolute poverty, malnourishment and their children die due to malnourishment. The best available solution is to increase their purchasing power by providing sufficient income through employment guarantees under EGS of state & MGNREGS of central government. Illiterate tribal do not know about demanding work by filling Form No. 4 & 5. Hence, the government should understand that there is always deemed demand for work in tribal belts and they should make manual work provisions like plantation, building small ponds, check dams, rural & forest roads etc. Both male and female tribals should be employed. They should be given an Aadhar card, bank, or post office account number. Their wages should be credited directly to their post office or nearest bank. Tribal men should be guided for not consuming liquor and chewing tobacco. Palghar district in Maharashtra state can be taken as a pilot district to study the role MGNREGS to reduce tribal poverty, malnourishment, and children's death due to malnourishment.

Case Study of Palghar District: Following literature regarding case study of Palghar district provides proof of no income and no employment to tribal population in India: Palghar district's population is 15.47 lakhs, out of which 37% are Scheduled Tribes (STs). Six of the eight talukas are tribal majority, including Warli, Thakur, Malhar Kolis, Konkana, and Kathkaris. Despite several government schemes, it is reported that at over 300 deaths per 1,000 children under the age of five years, Palghar's children mortality rate is higher



Cover Page



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than the national (50) and state average (28)^[i]. Rupali, Ashok Taral's 15 months old baby, does not stop crying. Weighing 5.4 kgs, she is Severely Malnourished (SAM) with visible bones and eyes popping out. She often falls ill and has blisters on her body. She has been in the SAM category for the last four months, her father said. Rupesh, Rupali's twin brother, was also in the SAM category four months ago but now is in the Mildly Malnourished (MAM) category. Ashok, 25, a Kathkari tribal, cultivates rice and finger millet on their one-acre land in Taralwadi in Jawhar taluka of Palghar in Maharashtra. Ashok and his wife also must work as labourers as the farm income is not sufficient to feed the family of four. "Babies over one year should be ideally above 8 kg. Maharashtra government runs the Village Child Development Centers (VCDCs) scheme for kids under SAM and MAM category. Anganwadis, child care centers, run by the central government, provide nutritious meals six times a day to the SAM and MAM babies. Kids can become healthy within a month or two if the scheme is implemented properly," said Sita Ghatal, director, Bal Sanjivani Chhavani, a private center run by Shramjivi Sanghatana that works for the eradication of malnutrition in Palghar. Hardly 90 km from Mumbai, also known as the financial capital of India, Palghar has witnessed an increase in children falling in the SAM and MAM categories since the lockdown began in March 2020. Deaths due to under-nourishment have also gone up, as per figures provided by the Integrated Child Development Scheme, Zila Parishad, Palghar. The number of malnourished cases has been going down since 2016 steadily though. "From April to September this year, during the lockdown period, 166 children under age five have died. The number of deaths was 156 last year. Dr. Dayanand Suryawanshi, District Health Officer (DHO), Zila Parishad (ZP) Palghar said that "the reason for the deaths is not necessarily malnourishment."

As per the 2019 Tata Institute of Social Science^[ii] study, "47% of mothers were illiterate and every second mother married before 18 years of age. 95% of them were found to be living in Kuccha (25%) and Semi-pucca houses (70%). Further, almost 40% of the households did not have a toilet. 9 out of 10 families used wood as fuel for cooking. More than half of the households reported using well-water (54%), which is considered as an unimproved source of water according to WASH guidelines."

Another study, 'Socio-economic study of tribal households in Palghar District' by Rajendra Patange^[iii], published in 2017, underlines the acute poverty levels among the tribals in the region. It stated, "Though 54% of the tribals are farmers, their lands are not very fertile and without irrigation. They work as labourers either at farms or at other places. Their per capita income is Rs 14,217. They do not have enough income to educate children. Landless tribals (over 40%) also face the constant problem of unemployment. Their consumption of calories (2263 cal) is much lesser than the required (2688)."

According to Hemendra Patil^[iiii], who sought information on it through an RTI application, "Every year 300-400 kids die due to malnutrition. The number of death of kids is 512, 485 and 600 for the year 2013-14, 14-15 and 15-16 respectively. The number of malnourished kids is not less. Palghar has a severe number of malnourished kids – 1,465, which means that they need immediate treatment. Moderately malnourished kids' number is 5,864. Thus, the district has overall 7,230 malnourished kids and blocks Makhoda, Vada, Vikramgad and Jawhar are the worst affected". It was the National Human Rights Commission^[iv] (NHRC) that took suo motu cognizance of the media reports and on September 22, issued a notice to the state government seeking a report on the malnutrition deaths. The NHRC also observed that such a vast number of deaths of children in a year amounted to a violation of the right to life and health of the victims. Vivek Pandit, the head of Shramjivi Sanghatana – a voluntary organization that works on the issue of malnutrition in Palghar – said, "there is no dearth of welfare or healthcare schemes, but their implementation is the issue. Tribals who are affected by poverty and illiteracy are not aware of the government welfare and healthcare schemes." Pandu Malak, the sarpanch of Shirson Pada, Makhoda block, said, "Schemes are marred by one or other issue. For example, Rs 25 is allocated per person per meal for pregnant and milking women under Dr. Abdul Kalam Amrut Ahar Scheme. It is impossible to have nutritious food for Rs 25. Anganwadi workers who implement the scheme are reimbursed the amount and that too after six-seven months. Not surprisingly, the scheme is a failure." Vivek Pandit added that "each family is supposed to get 35 kg of grain through public distribution system. But many PDS shops remain closed or give only 15-20 kg of grain. Many tribals do not have ration cards." Pandit, offering an explanation to the root cause of the matter, said, "These are not malnourishment deaths. These are starvation deaths. **People do not have purchasing capacity; they have no money to buy food or admit their children to schools. Kids are not malnourished; their entire families are malnourished.**" "Malnourishment is a symptom of a disease. **The real problem is a lack of employment opportunities.** Only land and forest can avail livelihood opportunities here in Konkan area as no industry or service industries are developed. The terrain is hilly and rainwater goes to the Arabian Sea. No irrigation projects have been designed and built in the last 60 years. The government needs to develop land and forest to provide a livelihood. They could have availed employment through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act." Collector Bangar acknowledged the fact that the lack of opportunities is the major issue. "We have begun skill development programs for youth. They will be given jobs once they complete the programs. We are also providing help to women through self-help groups by assisting them financially to buy sewing machines and so on. Garment industries will commission them orders of stitching. This way we are trying to avail ourselves of employment opportunities." "Due to non-availability of water, farmers cannot harvest twice



Cover Page



DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2022/11.05.40>

in a year. Hence, we have dug more than 300 lakes across the district. This will help farmers to harvest twice a year controlling on migration. Palghar is now selected for Jalyukta Shivar scheme and next year the work will be continued.”

Patil revealed that “12 out of 13 posts of Children Development Project Officers who address malnutrition in all eight blocks of the district are vacant. There is not a single pediatrician and gynecologist in the primary health centers across the district. Patients must be taken to Nashik or Thane, the adjoining districts, in an emergency. Laxman, from the Thakur tribe, cultivated rice, urad, and finger millet on their 12 acres of land in Piparpada along with his parents, four brothers and their wives. Like most tribals in the region, they produce only for consumption. All four brothers work as construction labourers for a few months at Kalyan, Bhiwandi and Palghar, around 50-100 km away from home.

FAILURE OF INTEGRATED CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICE^[vi] (ICDS)

The ICDS section of the Women and Child Development Department are responsible for providing supplementary nutrition and healthcare to young children. Anganwadis provide nutritious food that includes cooked food, milk, and fruits. Currently, 15 kgs of the pack including rice, wheat, pulses, salt among other things are given as Take-Home Ration (THR) for two months due to the lockdown. Despite that, the number of children with malnourishment and undernourishment are increasing. There has not been any study to check whether the nutritional scenario has improved since then in Palghar. “All the tribals in Palghar work as laborers and they lost their livelihoods due to the lockdown. They have been unable to feed families due to a lack of income for over eight months now. “This is one of the major reasons for increased cases of malnourishment and deaths of kids,” said Prachi Hatiwalekar^[vii] from All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA). She added, “Besides, tribals are scared to go to the government hospitals and primary health centers due to fear of COVID-19. Lack of treatment for fever or other illnesses is pushing kids into the malnourished category and causing deaths. They are also superstitious and do not allow ASHA workers to enter the houses to check kids, again due to fear of COVID-19.” “Increased deaths cannot be linked only with lockdown or the pandemic. Illiteracy, extreme poverty, lack of livelihood options, lack of accessible healthcare, and poor health of mothers are major reasons of undernourishment. 59% of children were stunted. The overall prevalence of wasting and underweight was 20% and 53% respectively. The dietary recall data revealed 83% of the children had consumed food belonging to only 3 groups. Further, the most common food eaten by the children was rice and dal (pulses). Only 13% of the children achieved a minimum level of diet diversity. This level of poor nutrition security in Maharashtra disproportionately affects the poorest segment of the population in the state. Scheduled Tribes (ST) are one of the most disadvantaged social groups in Maharashtra, who suffer from perpetual food insecurity^[viii]. As per the 2011 Census^[ix], 10.5 million tribal people are living in Maharashtra^[x]. Loss of traditional forest dependent livelihood, unemployment, and migration to cities such as Mumbai, Thane, Nashik, and Gujarat to work as daily wage earners often employed in unskilled, exploitative jobs reduces the chances of the tribal households being able to crawl out of destitution. The global comparison of malnutrition shows that the prevalence of under-nutrition in Maharashtra is worse than some of the world’s poorest countries such as Bangladesh (33% underweight), Afghanistan (25% underweight) or Mozambique (15%)^[xi].

Despite several nutrition programmes, the extent of under-nutrition has remained extremely high in the children living in tribal rural areas of Palghar district, Maharashtra. One of the possible reasons for having persistently elevated level of under-nutrition among tribal children is the decline in the budgetary allocation on ICDS in recent years^[xii]. Our analysis of the state’s budget also reveals that the nutrition expenditure as a percentage of the state budget has drastically declined from 1.68% in 2012–13 to 0.94% in 2018–19.

Role of MGNREGS in Reducing Poverty and Malnourishment: In India, employment provision has been used extensively as a tool for protecting entitlements for centuries. Since the fourth century B.C., when Kautilya, the ancient Indian political economist, wrote his Arthashastra, India’s rulers and governments have emphasized public relief works, particularly during famine. Employment in public works later became the main element of strategies for famine prevention in India and it has proved effective (World Bank 1990)^[vi]. After India’s independence in 1947, there were many central government-sponsored schemes, beginning with the Rural Manpower Program in 1960. The most important program at the state level is the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS), which was introduced in 1972. The Maharashtra EGS is one of the most researched and discussed programs in the country and in the world. The EGS is one attempt to enlarge the scope of employment to alleviate poverty in the state. The EGS has reduced the intensity of poverty and increased the food security of many households in Maharashtra. The Indian Parliament passed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act on 23rd August 2005----“An Act to provide for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every fiscal year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work”. It came into force on February 2, 2006 in 200 backward districts. The remaining districts were included under the Act with effect from April 1st, 2008. Currently, the Act is under implementation in 644 districts of the country with substantial rural population. On 2nd October 2009, an amendment was made in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, to change the nomenclature of the Act from NREGA to MGNREGA. The World Development Report 2014 credits the



Cover Page



DOI: <http://ijmer.in/doi./2022/11.05.40>

government's flagship rural employment program for not just unleashing a "revolution in rural India" but establishing a model of inclusive development^[vi]. NCAER study of 2015 showed that the Act helped in lowering poverty by almost 32 per cent between 2004-05 to 2011-12 and prevented almost 14 million people from falling into poverty. This report also shows that around 45 % of female MGNREGS workers were benefited with more income compared to no work in 2004-05 which they have used for betterment of family, children's education, health, and better food.

Suggestions for Reducing Malnourishment in Tribal Belt of Maharashtra & other states

1. Provide 365 days employment to each adult person of tribal household from 100 days of employment guarantee through MGNREGS and remaining 265 days from EGS of Maharashtra.
2. Demand for work should be deemed to be made even though actually not made by tribals.
3. The state declared minimum wages should be provided to each adult household.
4. Priority to tribal women worker should be given.
5. Each tribal should get an Aadhar card, MGNREGS card, Ration card, Bank or Post office account number.
6. State government should explore new work under MGNREGS apart from plantation, farm pond, small check dams, rural roads, forest survey, conservation of forest, house construction, school building construction, health center building construction, drinking water facility, sanitation facility, toilet construction, education, and skill development etc.
7. Daily wages should be credited to a beneficiary account. Tribal should be trained in bank account handling, mobile payment etc.
8. Self Help Group and provision of micro finance should be done.
9. Affordable food grain market, meat market and vegetable market should be developed apart from compulsory PDS ration shops.
10. Independent researchers, media and government authorities should monitor the schemes.
11. Tribal male should be discouraged from consuming liquor and chewing tobacco.

Conclusion: From various reports and survey's done by government bodies and private researcher shows that MGNREGS has helped to reduce rural poverty and economically empowered women, SCs (Scheduled Caste), STs (Scheduled Tribes), OBCs (Other Backward Caste) and Economically Weaker Sections (EWSs). It is also found that if the scheme is implemented sincerely, then rural and tribal poverty can be removed and malnourishment and death of children due to malnourishment can be permanently eliminated.

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Cover Page



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