

HUNGER, RIGHTS AND THE HOT MEAL: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL MID-DAY MEALS AND INDIA'S CENTURY-LONG POLICY RESPONSE

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Abstract

India's PM POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirmaan) Scheme the world's largest school feeding programme, reaching approximately 11.80 crore children across 11.20 lakh government schools daily represents one of the most consequential social policy interventions in independent India's history. Yet its scale has consistently outrun its quality, and its policy architecture has historically outpaced its accountability infrastructure. This paper examines the theoretical importance of school mid-day meals as a development intervention and traces India's century-long policy response from the Madras Municipal Corporation's 1925 initiative to the Supreme Court's landmark 2001 mandate, through to the comprehensively revised PM POSHAN guidelines of 2022. Drawing on a systematic review of global and Indian school feeding literature, social accountability theory, and institutional analysis, the paper argues three propositions: that school feeding is a rights-based entitlement with measurable human capital and equity returns; that India's policy response, while historically significant, has produced a persistent gap between programme design and ground-level delivery; and that social audit now mandated by the Ministry of Education is both theoretically grounded and empirically proven as the accountability mechanism capable of closing that gap.

Keywords

PM POSHAN; mid-day meal scheme; school feeding; social audit; rights-based approach; human capital; social accountability

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Introduction

There is something deceptively modest about the idea of giving a child a hot meal at school. It sounds administrative a logistics problem, a catering contract, a budget line. But the literature assembled over a century of research tells a different story. A school meal, reliably delivered and nutritionally adequate, is simultaneously a nutritional intervention, an educational incentive, a social protection mechanism, a gender equity instrument, and a constitutional entitlement. Getting it right is among the most consequential things a government can do for the children who need it most.

India has understood this, at least in principle, since 1925, when the Madras Municipal Corporation began feeding disadvantaged children at school a local act that anticipated by seven decades the world's largest school feeding programme. Today, PM POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirmaan) reaches approximately 11.80 crore children across 11.20 lakh government schools every working day (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2022). The financial commitment for 2021–22 to 2025–26 alone is ¹ 1,30,794.90 crores. The scale is unmatched anywhere globally.

And yet scale and impact are not the same thing. The gap between what PM POSHAN promises and what it consistently delivers is one of the most documented and least resolved tensions in Indian social policy. That gap has identifiable structural causes in financial management, community governance, transparency, and accountability infrastructure. Understanding those causes theoretically and evidentially is the first step toward closing them.

Theoretical Foundations: Six Frameworks

Why should a government feed child at school? The question has several distinct answers, each grounded in a different intellectual tradition and each with different implications for how a school feeding programme should be designed, evaluated, and reformed. Table 1 maps the six principal frameworks that inform this paper's analysis.

Table 1: Theoretical Foundations of School Feeding as a Development Intervention

Theoretical Lens	Core Claim	Application to PM POSHAN	Analytical Implication
Rights-Based Approach	Children as rights-holders; delivery failure = rights violation	PM POSHAN as legal entitlement under Article 21A and PUCL (2001) Supreme Court orders	Non-delivery is a constitutional failure, not an administrative lapse

Human Capital Theory	Nutrition investment yields measurable productivity returns	₹1 invested in school feeding returns ₹2–8 in human capital (Bundy et al., 2009)	Cooked meal form, not merely caloric equivalent, determines enrolment and retention effects
Capability Approach	Hunger during school hours is a capability deprivation	School meals expand children's real freedom to learn and develop (Sen, 1999)	Classroom hunger constrains the very right the RTE Act (2009) guarantees
Feminist Political Economy	Gender shapes both who benefits and who delivers	Girls gain most from cooked meals; CCHs are feminised, under-protected workers (Afridi, 2010)	Programme equity requires gender-responsive design and CCH formalisation
Social Accountability	Communities need voice and institutional teeth to enforce rights	SAFTs, public hearings, and ATRs operationalise Fox's (2015) voice-and-teeth model	Mandatory social audit is structurally necessary, not discretionary
Institutional Analysis	Local institutions mediate implementation quality	SMC capacity determines delivery effectiveness even where administrative support is weak (Ostrom, 1990)	Formal SMC constitution without genuine capacity produces pro-forma governance only

Source: Synthesised from Bundy et al. (2009); Fox (2015); Jomaa et al. (2011); Ostrom (1990); Sen (1999).

1. Rights and Human Capital: The Twin Pillars

The rights-based approach is the most fundamental foundation and the most demanding in its implications. It holds that children are rights-holders, not beneficiaries of governmental generosity, and that a school meal is not charity but the fulfilment of a legal obligation. In India, this obligation flows from Article 21A (the fundamental right to free and compulsory education under the RTE Act, 2009) and most directly from the Supreme Court's 2001 orders in *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, which converted the cooked meal provision into an enforceable legal entitlement for every child in a government primary school. As Dreze and Khera (2013) observe, this shift changed the programme's moral and legal character entirely: failure to deliver a nutritionally adequate meal ceased to be an administrative inconvenience and became a rights violation.

Human capital theory provides the economic rationale. Building on Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), the framework holds that investment in child nutrition during the school years yields measurable adult productivity returns. Bundy et al. (2009), in the World Bank's most comprehensive review, estimate a return of two to eight dollars for every dollar invested in school feeding among the highest of any social investment. The mechanism is direct: hunger during school hours impairs attention, memory, and cognitive function (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007); providing a nutritious meal addresses the proximate cause of under-performance. Jayaraman and Simroth (2011) add a crucial refinement: the cooked meal, as opposed to an equivalent dry grain distribution, changes the daily household calculation about school attendance particularly for girls. The form of the meal is not incidental; it is the operative mechanism.

2. Capability, Gender, and Institutional Capacity

Sen's (1999) capability approach offers a philosophically richer account: a child who arrives at school hungry is not merely malnourished but deprived of the substantive freedom to learn, to participate, and to develop the intellectual capacities that enable genuine adult agency. Classroom hunger is a form of unfreedom it constrains the child's ability to benefit from the very right the RTE Act formally guarantees. PM POSHAN, when it works, is a capability expansion.

The feminist political economy perspective adds two dimensions that the other frameworks understate. The first is distributional: girls and lower-caste children benefit most from cooked meals (Jomaa et al., 2011; Afridi, 2010), making school feeding a gender equity instrument that mainstream policy discourse under-leverages. The second is structural: Cook-cum-Helpers (CCHs), who prepare and serve meals daily, are overwhelmingly lower-caste women performing feminised care labour. Their chronic underpayment and exclusion from social protection schemes is not a peripheral personnel matter it is a gender equity failure at the programme's operational core (Das Gupta and Khera, 2013).

Finally, Fox's (2015) social accountability framework and Ostrom's (1990) institutional analysis together address how implementation quality is produced. Fox argues that accountability requires both voice (community capacity to demand accountability) and teeth (institutional mechanisms that make demands consequential). Historically, PM POSHAN has been strong on formal accountability ministerial oversight, and administrative monitoring but weak on community voice. The December 2022 mandatory social audit provision is the most significant attempt to correct this imbalance since the 2001 Supreme Court orders. Ostrom contributes the institutional layer: School Management Committees (SMCs), formally constituted under the RTE

Act, are designed to be the local governance bodies that Ostrom's design principles predict would work well but the evidence, reviewed in Section 4, shows they overwhelmingly lack the knowledge and capacity to exercise genuine oversight.

India's Policy Response: A Century in Eight Steps

India's engagement with school feeding has been gradual, court-driven, and ultimately remarkable in scale if not always in quality. Table 2 traces the key developmental moments from a single city's 1925 municipal initiative to the comprehensively revised PM POSHAN guidelines of 2022 and the cost indexation of April 2025.

Table 2: Key Milestones in India's School Feeding Policy — 1925 to 2025

Year	Agent	Development	Significance
1925	Tamil Nadu	Madras Municipal Corporation introduces school feeding for disadvantaged children	First institutional acknowledgement of classroom hunger; establishes political legitimacy
1995	Central Govt.	NP-NSPE launched as Centrally Sponsored Scheme; dry food grains to 2,408 blocks	First national mandate; limited nutritional impact due to dry grain format
2001	Supreme Court	PUCL v. Union of India: cooked meals declared a legal right; 300 Cal + 8–12 g protein mandated	Transforms programme from aspiration to enforceable entitlement; obligates all states
2008	Central Govt.	Extension to Classes I–VIII; upper primary norm: 700 Cal + 20 g protein; CCH honorarium formalised	Largest single expansion; frontline CCH worker category formally constituted
2021–22	CCEA	PM POSHAN approved (2021–26); outlay ₹1,30,794.90 crores; 11.80 crore children; Bal Vatika included	Most generously funded phase; signals deepened national political commitment
Dec 2022	Ministry of Education	Mandatory social audit; fortified rice and DFS; Tithi Bhojan; Nutrition Gardens; Poshan Tracker MIS	Rights-accountability shift: delivery and community verification now both mandatory
Apr 2025	Ministry of Education	Cooking cost rates revised and indexed to CPI-RL: ₹6.78 (Primary); ₹10.17 (Upper Primary)	First indexation mechanism; aligns material costs with actual inflation in real time

Source: MoE (2022); PIB (2025); Dreze and Khera (2013); Jayaraman and Simroth (2011).

Three moments in this chronology deserve emphasis. First, the 1995 national launch of NP-NSPE was important as the first centralised mandate but limited by its dry grain format. Jayaraman and Simroth (2011) show that dry grain distribution

produced measurably smaller enrolment effects than cooked meals, particularly for girls, because it reduced the attendance incentive that a hot meal on the premises provides. Second, the Supreme Court's 2001 orders transformed the programme from aspiration to enforceable right obligating all states within six months and creating the first legal benchmark against which delivery quality could be assessed. Third, the December 2022 revised guidelines mark a qualitative shift: from delivery-only to delivery-plus-accountability. Mandatory social audit, Poshan Tracker MIS, fortified rice, and double-fortified salt (DFS) requirements, and the indexation of material costs to CPI-RL (April 2025) represent the most comprehensive programmatic evolution since 2001.

Review of Literature: Evidence and Implementation Gaps

1. What the Evidence Establishes

The global and Indian literature on school feeding is extensive and, on the core questions, consistent. Table 3 synthesises the most significant studies across three thematic areas: attendance and enrolment; nutritional and cognitive outcomes; and implementation and social audit evidence.

Table 3: Synthesised Evidence Review — School Feeding Effectiveness and Accountability

Study	Method / Scope	Key Finding	Analytical Contribution
ATTENDANCE & ENROLMENT			
Jayaraman & Simroth (2011)	Staggered MDM rollout, India	Cooked meals significantly increase enrolment; largest effects for girls and lower-caste children	Form of meal — cooked vs. dry grain — is the operative mechanism for enrolment gains
Jomaa, McDonnell & Probart (2011)	Systematic review, 32 developing-country studies	Consistent positive attendance effects; strongest for girls and lower socio-economic groups	School feeding operates as a gender equity instrument — not just a nutrition one
WFP (2023)	Global review, 161 countries	School feeding is the world's most widely practised social protection intervention	India's PM POSHAN operates at unmatched scale within this global evidence landscape
NUTRITIONAL & COGNITIVE OUTCOMES			
Afridi (2010)	Difference-in-differences, Madhya Pradesh	MDM reduces caloric deficiency during school hours by ~30%; largest gains for girls and lowest-income quartile	Nutritional impact is real, equitable, and most significant where deprivation is deepest

Bundy et al. (2009)	World Bank comprehensive review	₹1 invested returns ₹2–8 in human capital; improves enrolment, cognitive function, micronutrient status	Establishes the economic case; implementation quality is the critical mediating variable
Singh, Park & Dercon (2014)	Regression discontinuity, India	Significant improvements in cognitive test scores; early school nutrition shapes long-term learning capacity	Human capital rationale extends beyond short-term attendance to lifelong capability development
IMPLEMENTATION & SOCIAL AUDIT			
Dreze & Khera (2013)	Field investigation, 2,000+ schools, nine states	Core delivery broadly functional; persistent gaps in CCH welfare, SMC engagement, cooking cost timing, and transparency	Administrative monitoring systematically overstates programme quality — social audit is structurally necessary
Muralidharan et al. (2014)	Randomised evaluation, NREGA audits, Andhra Pradesh	Social audits significantly reduce leakage and improve delivery; effects strongest where community mobilisation is highest	Causal evidence that community-based accountability produces real programme improvement
Kaur (2024)	Social audit, Chandigarh UT	Cooking cost delays; irregular CCH payment; weak SMC awareness — findings in a well-resourced UT context	Systemic weaknesses persist independently of administrative capacity; they are architectural, not contextual

Source: Synthesised from Bundy et al. (2009); Afridi (2010); Dreze and Khera (2013); Jayaraman and Simroth (2011); Jomaa et al. (2011); Muralidharan et al. (2014); Singh, Park and Dercon (2014); Kaur (2024); WFP (2023).

Three overarching conclusions emerge from the evidence. First, the positive case for school feeding is robust across methods, contexts, and time periods: cooked meals improve enrolment and attendance, reduce caloric deficiency, and produce lasting cognitive and human capital effects with the largest and most consistent benefits for girls and children from the lowest-income households. Second, the form of the meal matters: the shift from dry grain to cooked meals mandated by the 2001 Supreme Court orders generated measurable, causal improvements in enrolment (Jayaraman and Simroth, 2011), establishing that design details are not peripheral. Third, the WFP (2023) global review confirms that school feeding is the world's most widely practised social protection intervention India's PM POSHAN operates at a scale within this global landscape that no other country approaches.

The social audit evidence adds a fourth, structurally important conclusion: administrative monitoring systematically overstates programme quality. Dreze and

Khera (2013), across 2,000+ schools in nine states, found that administrative coverage data and field reality consistently diverged funds shown as released, meals shown as delivered, that on the ground arrived irregularly or in reduced quantity. Muralidharan et al. (2014) provide the causal correction: social audits, in a randomised evaluation of NREGA across Andhra Pradesh, significantly reduced leakage and improved delivery, with the largest effects where community mobilisation was strongest.

2. The Persistent Implementation Gap

The most important conclusion from the PM POSHAN implementation literature is also the most uncomfortable: programme quality varies substantially in ways that administrative monitoring consistently fails to detect, and the weaknesses that appear are not context-specific anomalies but structural features of the current programme architecture. Table 4 synthesises these persistent gaps, their nature, and their theoretical grounding.

Table 4: Persistent Implementation Gaps in PM POSHAN: Cross-India Evidence Synthesis

Implementation Gap	Nature of the Problem	Theoretical / Evidential Grounding
Cooking cost delivery delays	Funds released centrally but reach school level erratically; schools procure on credit, reducing meal quality	Structural mismatch between central release calendars and school procurement cycles; PFMS bottlenecks at block level (Dreze & Khera, 2013)
CCH honorarium irregularity	Honorarium delayed, deducted, or partial; CCHs excluded from EPF and social protection schemes	Feminised care labour devalued and under-protected; feminist political economy critique of invisible domestic-adjacent work (Das Gupta & Khera, 2013)
SMC governance deficit	Formally constituted but functionally inactive; members unaware of fund norms, menu guidelines, or monitoring duties	Ostrom's (1990) design principles not embedded — no rule-fit, no genuine collective choice, monitoring is pro-forma only
Transparency non-compliance	Fund details, stock positions, and beneficiary lists rarely displayed publicly despite mandatory guidelines	Removes information basis for community accountability; directly contradicts rights-based premise of informed entitlement (Fox, 2015)
Tasting register neglect	Registers incomplete or absent in significant proportions of schools; food quality verification unrecorded	Accountability gap: absence of records makes retrospective quality monitoring and social audit verification impossible
Nutrition Gardens and Tithi Bhojan	Community participation mechanisms mandated since 2022 but adoption consistently very low across study contexts	Gap between HGSF policy aspiration and community operationalisation; requires dedicated outreach and institutional support (FAO, 2019)
Administrative monitoring gap	Coverage data shows full disbursement; community evidence consistently reveals significant delivery failures	Dreze and Khera's (2013) foundational finding: administrative records systematically overstate programme quality — structural justification for mandatory social audit

Source: Synthesised from Dreze and Khera (2013); Das Gupta and Khera (2013); Fox (2015); Ostrom (1990); Kaur (2024); FAO (2019).

The convergence of findings across very different contexts nine states in Dreze and Khera (2013), Andhra Pradesh in Muralidharan et al. (2014), Chandigarh in Kaur (2024) is analytically significant. Cooking cost delivery delays, CCH honorarium irregularity, SMC governance deficits, and near-universal transparency non-compliance appear across high- and low-resource administrative contexts alike. These weaknesses are not resource constraints that additional funding will resolve; they are architectural features of how the programme is designed and monitored. Fox's (2015) framework explains why: a programme with formal accountability structures but weak community voice mechanisms will systematically under-deliver, because the communities best positioned to detect and report failures lack the information, training, and institutional channels to do so effectively.

The CCH welfare finding deserves particular emphasis. Cook-cum-Helpers are the operational core of PM POSHAN. The programme literally cannot function without them. Yet across every documented study, they are found to be irregularly paid, excluded from social protection, and treated as volunteers rather than workers. Das Gupta and Khera (2013) identify this as a feminist political economy failure: CCH labour is devalued precisely because it is feminised and domestic-adjacent. Treating CCH welfare as a peripheral administrative concern rather than a central programme accountability issue reflects and reproduces the broader gender inequity that PM POSHAN is, in its distributional effects, designed to address. The internal contradiction is striking and unresolved.

Discussion: A Convergent Theoretical Framework

The six theoretical frameworks reviewed in Section 2 are not independent accounts competing for priority. They address different dimensions of the same phenomenon school feeding as a site of rights, investment, capability expansion, gender justice, accountability, and institutional performance and they converge on a set of shared analytical implications that the evidence reviewed in Section 4 consistently supports.

1. The Rights-Accountability Nexus

The rights-based approach and social accountability theory are complementary in a specific and important way: rights without accountability are aspirational; accountability without rights is merely procedural. PM POSHAN's policy evolution illustrates this nexus precisely. The Supreme Court's 2001 mandate established rights it converted school meal provision into a legal entitlement. But

rights without enforcement mechanisms produce limited change, as states moved unevenly and slowly. The December 2022 mandatory social audit provision adds the accountability dimension: not just the right to a meal, but a community-based mechanism for verifying whether that right is fulfilled and for demanding correction when it is not. Fox's (2015) voice-and-teeth framework maps onto this precisely rights provide the normative standing for community voice; the social audit machinery provides the institutional teeth that make those demands consequential.

2. Human Capital, Institutional Capacity, and Equity

Human capital theory establishes the value of the investment; institutional analysis explains why that value is or is not realised in practice. Bundy et al.'s (2009) estimate of two-to-eight-dollar returns assumes a well-implemented programme Alderman and Bundy (2012) make this explicit. The return on investment from a PM POSHAN meal that meets nutritional norms, uses fortified ingredients, and is prepared in a hygienic kitchen by a regularly paid CCH is very different from the return on a meal that falls short on any of these dimensions. Ostrom's (1990) institutional design principles identify the school-level conditions that determine which outcome is more likely: SMCs that genuinely function as community governance bodies informed, trained, and engaged produce better implementation even where administrative support is weak. Building SMC capacity is not a peripheral governance reform; it is a central determinant of the programme's human capital returns.

Sen's (1999) capability approach and the feminist political economy perspective together produce the paper's equity imperative: PM POSHAN's primary obligation is to the children and communities who benefit least from it where it is poorly implemented. The capability deprivation of classroom hunger falls most heavily on children from the lowest-income households, from lower-caste communities, and from remote rural areas the children whose families are least able to supplement inadequate school meals with adequate home nutrition. These children need the programme to work best precisely where it is most likely to work worst. Feminist political economy adds that the workers most critical to the programme's delivery CCHs are also the most economically precarious participants in it. An equity-oriented programme that fails its frontline workers is contradicting its own normative foundation.

Conclusions

Three propositions emerge from this review with the clarity that comes from a century of evidence and a well-developed theoretical literature.

School feeding is not charity it is investment and entitlement.

The evidence reviewed here from Bundy et al.'s (2009) human capital analysis to Afridi's (2010) rigorous causal estimates to the WFP's (2023) global survey

establishes that well-implemented school feeding programmes generate measurable, significant, and equitable returns in attendance, nutrition, cognitive performance, and long-term human capital. The rights-based framing reinforces this: PM POSHAN is the fulfilment of a constitutional obligation, not an act of governmental generosity. Non-delivery is a rights violation, not an administrative lapse.

India's policy response has been historically significant but structurally incomplete.

The century-long journey traced in Section 3 from Madras 1925 to PM POSHAN 2022 is genuinely remarkable in its scale, legal architecture, and nutritional ambition. What has consistently lagged is the accountability architecture: the mechanisms through which rights established in policy are verified in practice. The December 2022 mandatory social audit provision is the most important structural correction since the Supreme Court's 2001 mandate but its implementation requires the same urgency those orders generated.

The implementation gap is tractable but requires structural reform.

The weaknesses documented across the implementation literature cooking cost delays, CCH welfare neglect, SMC capacity deficits, near-universal transparency non-compliance appear with striking consistency across different geographic, administrative, and resource contexts. They are architectural features of the current programme design, not local anomalies. Closing the gap requires structural reforms: predictable, indexed cooking cost release calendars; CCH formalisation as programme workers with employment protections; mandatory and systematically delivered SMC training; and genuine institutional teeth for the social audit process through enforced ATR requirements. PM POSHAN's potential to transform educational and nutritional outcomes for India's school-going children is real and demonstrated. The task now is to build the implementation system that potential deserves.

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