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Author	Pallav Patankar
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## From anganwadis to apps: How nutrition could decide India's \$30-trillion future

This article is authored by [Pallav Patankar](#), Vice President, Digital Bharat Collaborative.



India's future economic strength depends not just on infrastructure and industry, but on nourishment delivered to mothers, children, and families at the last mile.

In the late 1960s, India faced a food security crisis. Bold ideas and collective effort gave birth to the Green Revolution, a turning point that, in feeding the nation, transformed its destiny. Today, we stand at a similar threshold.

Our nation's trajectory is being shaped not just in its parliaments or boardrooms, but in its kitchens, anganwadis, and maternity wards. A nourished child learns better, a nourished adolescent dreams bigger, and a nourished mother builds healthier generations. Nutrition, then, is a fundamental question of India's human capital.

If we are to become a \$30 trillion economy by 2047, nutrition must be seen as an economic and governance priority.

### The current picture: The silent emergency

Malnutrition in India remains a silent emergency shaping lives in unseen ways. While severe disorders like Kwashiorkor and Marasmus have declined through better food security and public health, hidden micronutrient deficiencies persist- vitamin D, iron, folate, iodine, and zinc shortages continue to impair cognition, immunity, and growth. NFHS-5 reveals that one in three children under five is stunted, and nearly 57 per cent of women are anaemic.

Behind these numbers lie interrupted futures- a girl unable to focus in school for lack of iron, or a pregnant woman in a remote village struggling for nourishment, risking her own and her child's health.

Yet, progress is emerging. ICDS, POSHAN Abhiyaan, and Anaemia Mukt Bharat embody India's resolve to tackle malnutrition at scale. States like Maharashtra and Odisha show what's possible-

community-led nutrition drives reducing stunting, and mid-day meals ensuring children learn with fuller stomachs and brighter minds.

### **Closing the policy-to-plate gap**

The progress we celebrate is real, but the true test of our commitment lies at the last mile. Does a pregnant woman in a remote village actually receive her iron tablets, a hot cooked meal, or timely counselling? For real transformation, these implementation gaps must close.

In states like Jharkhand, multidimensional poverty traps families in cycles of poor nutrition, low productivity, and intergenerational poverty. In Bihar, where 40 per cent of children are stunted, and Assam, where 66 per cent of women are anaemic, the challenge is no longer just hunger but the quality and diversity of food that define health and opportunity.

Here, targeted local innovation can change outcomes. In Assam, *Xushrukha* - a National Health Mission pilot with Kamrup district authorities and Piramal Foundation- addresses maternal mortality by focusing on nutrition. By identifying high-risk pregnancies, it ensures women receive supplements, counselling, and follow-ups. Through the *Utpreerona* app, 694 ASHA workers now track women in real time, enabling timely care.

Here, technology becomes an equalizer- translating data into dignity, and turning digital health into something deeply human: an ASHA worker ensuring every mother receives the nutrition and care she deserves.

### **Technology as an equalizer**

Digital tools hold immense promise in transforming how nutrition services reach the last mile. The Poshan Tracker offers real-time data that enables faster, more tailored interventions, while Electronic Health Records (EHRs) can track endemic deficiencies, identify vulnerable groups, and link nutrition data with long-term health outcomes. Even simple digital nudges - like SMS reminders for expectant mothers to take iron tablets or attend check-ups- can significantly improve adherence and outcomes.

At the community level, Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSNDs), powered by digital tools, can close the loop between health, nutrition, and education. By tracking growth, immunisation, and counselling digitally, VHSNDs can strengthen the nutrition cycle, improve learning and productivity, and lay the foundation for eradicating malnutrition.

Yet, technology's real strength lies in how it empowers people. Anganwadi workers can personalize care, ANMs can counsel families with confidence, and youth fellows using digital platforms can amplify awareness- turning technology into a bridge, a catalyst, and a collective voice for change.

### **Towards a nutrition revolution: What India can build together**

If nutrition is to anchor India's future, it must move beyond a single ministry or dashboard to become a shared national mission woven into how families eat, communities care, governments plan, and civil society mobilises.

First, nutrition must move to the heart of our national imagination. Beyond GDP, imagine a 'Nutrition Index' reviewed quarterly by the Prime Minister, owned jointly by ministries of health, education, agriculture, and finance, with shared accountability.

Second, nutrition thrives when communities lead. Policies guide, but change endures when families and local leaders act as sarpanch promoting dietary diversity, self-help groups running kitchen gardens, or panchayats competing on nutrition outcomes.

Third, innovation bridges vision and impact. District-level funds can pilot fortified foods, digital tools for frontline workers, and behaviour-change campaigns, while civil society and academia track what works and communities refine it.

True transformation will come when government and citizens walk together- with shared conviction to nourish India's future.

### **The road ahead: From nutrition to nationhood**

Nutrition is perhaps India's most powerful lever to unlock its demographic dividend. As per the World Bank, every dollar invested in nutrition can yield up to \$23 in returns through better health, productivity, and lifelong earnings. Yet, the true value of nutrition goes beyond economics. It is about dignity, opportunity, and the unlocking of human potential at scale.

Just as the freedom struggle was people-led, India's nutrition revolution, too, must draw strength from its people. A nourished India is not just healthier; it is more confident, more resilient, and more capable of claiming its rightful place in the world.