

"NOBODY'S LEFT BEHIND."

Women Led Nutrition Governance

THE HUNGER PROJECT INDIA

What is nutrition? Why does it matter?

In 2024, The Hunger Project, India, embarked on a programme titled "Enhancing Nutrition Outcomes," engaging with the most vulnerable and marginalised households and a range of institutional mechanisms at the panchayat level. The project enabled space within which the two conversed, and explored pathways to build resilience, improve availability, access, and choice of nutritious foods, especially in the backdrop of climate change. It attempted to showcase the multidimensional aspect of enhancing nutrition in rural communities.

A distinct element of the project was to strengthen the role of panchayats in various nutrition-related services. Given THP's long experience working with rural governance systems, we needed a multifaceted design and strategy. Without making panchayats engaged and responsive to the community's needs, the latter's voices will remain unheard.

Part two of the photo essay series illustrates elected representatives' all-embracing leadership as they push for better nutrition governance across villages in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan. Read part I here.

Our efforts started with elected panchayat members, who are crucial to linking their constituents with welfare schemes like the PDS (public distribution system), the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (which assures 100 days of paid work to the rural poor), and several pension schemes. Such safety nets are vital to the food security of marginalised communities.

In Karnataka and Rajasthan, where THP has an established presence in the work areas, conversation with elected leaders revealed a deep commitment to the institutional delivery of nutrition and food security.





Top: Monitoring mid-day meals in a school in Karnataka;
Bottom: Outside a Public Distribution Centre in Rajasthan.

42-year-old Balki Devi, puts her five years' experience as a sarpanch, or panchayat president, to good use in her panchayat in Rajasthan. She monitors PDS ration shops and anganwadis. Inspired by THP's model of health camps, she has used panchayat funds to organise a camp for the Garasiya families of two villages. She has used funds allocated to the Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC) to repair an anganwadi building and add a kitchen garden. Balki has also helped 70 people get seeds from the horticulture department to sow in their new kitchen gardens. She checks in regularly on these gardens, set up in 150 households. "We realise this is a productive way to grow our own food and get affordable nutrition in these times of inflation," says Balki.





28-year-old Madhu, also a sarpanch in Rajasthan, has focused her attention on maternal health. She has ensured pregnant women and new mothers get anganwadi services, from supplementary nutrition through take-home rations to the immunisation of children and health checkups. Twenty- ve pregnant women have been linked to the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, a government scheme for maternity benefits. "Motivating them to come to anganwadis is a tedious task, largely because of distances and the burdens of housework," says Madhu. "But we have to keep at it so they can make the most of these services."

In Karnataka, 39-year-old Kenchamma, vice-president of her panchayat, prioritised the health and nutritional needs of women and marginalised communities. A Dalit leader, she is currently working on an application to upgrade the local health sub-centre. The primary health centre, 8 kms away, is hard to access. Recently, she said, she also organised a meeting between the panchayat development officer, the local health inspector, the community health officer (CHO) and ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers to discuss health concerns in the panchayat. This was done with the help of SUGRAMA, a federation of elected women representatives.

In Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, THP branched into new panchayat areas. The accounts of sarpanches like Kamleshwari Naik and Dayanidhi Batra, both from Odisha, illustrate the change that is possible if the panchayat is engaged effectively. After attending THP meetings, both say they have started thinking differently about their position, and how it can be used to improve nutritional outcomes.

Kamleshwari, who belongs to the Bhatra tribe, is now in her second tenure as a sarpanch but there is a lot that feels new to her. “For the first time, I am fully grasping the scope of my role, the power I hold,” she says. “In comparison, the first tenure seems like a haze.” She now pays regular visits to monitor anganwadis and PDS shops. She has also linked single women who head households to a family benefit scheme which grants Rs 20,000 to below-poverty-line families who have lost their primary breadwinner. “Financial assistance goes a long way in determining what kind of diet they can afford,” says Kamleshwari. She also feels more confident confronting functionaries if they are not doing their job properly.

It was not always this way. Earlier, Kamleshwari says, she often went unheeded, in spite of being a sarpanch, because she is an Adivasi. She recounts the story of an upper-caste anganwadi worker who ignored government rules and refused to serve eggs to children under her care. When Kamleshwari brought it up, the woman simply dismissed her. The denial to serve eggs during mid-day meals speaks to the existing notion of caste-based purity thus undermining children's access to nutrition, especially the most marginalised and vulnerable for whom eggs provide access to cheap protein. Now that Kamleshwari is more aware of her powers, she warned the woman of consequences to her behaviour.




Left: Kenchamma, Vice President, Karnataka; Right: Kamleshwari Naik, Sarpanch, Odisha

Vandana Diwedi, a ward member in Madhya Pradesh, also has a dawning sense of her responsibilities. “We are realising that we are the primary mediators between the community and panchayat services,” she says. She takes raising awareness about various concerns and monitoring systems very seriously. So far, she has identified eight malnourished children in her ward and referred them to nutrition rehabilitation centres, government-funded care units for severely malnourished children under five. As part of the mothers’ committee in her panchayat, she reached out to women, sensitising them to healthy practices during pregnancy and after childbirth.





40-year-old Dayanidhi is invested in strengthening links between the horticulture department and households. He says he has also used panchayat funds to buy seeds for kitchen gardens for 40 poor households across six villages.



Equipped with tools and information, elected representatives are better placed to address nutrition and food security. Their actions may seem nascent, in the context of this intervention, but they bridge critical gaps between citizens and their rights and entitlements. We still hear of challenges faced by Dalit and Adivasi representatives as they navigate the hostile terrain of caste and patriarchy. “But we are slowly learning to make full use of this office, to do the job right,” says Deepika Vandana, a Dalit ward member in Madhya Pradesh.

In Balki Devi’s confidence and Madhu’s patient resolve, in Kenchamma’s intentional leadership and Kamleshwari’s eagerness, we see elected leaders do the pivotal work of raising awareness. Time and again, we hear them say they must ensure “nobody is left behind.”

Successful linkages to various government schemes and provisions have ensured some safeguards against the exclusion of the most vulnerable. We saw previously excluded members of village communities take ownership and participate in their collective well-being as they find solutions in the face of glaring disparities.

Across states, this was the common consensus: “We are learning by doing.”

Text by Surbhi Mahajan. Photos by Anurag Banerjee (Karnataka & Odisha), Menty Jamir (Rajasthan), Nipun Prabhakar (Madhya Pradesh). Supported by Citibank. Originally published on April 24, 2025.