

Food Insecurity among Sahariya Tribes: An Analysis of Socio-Economic Determinants, Role of PDS and Nutritional Outcomes

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Abstract: *The Sahariya tribe, recognised as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), primarily inhabits the forest fringes and isolated terrains of the Central Indian plateau, with a critical concentration in the Baran district of Rajasthan (specifically within the Shahbad and Kishanganj blocks). Characterised by generational poverty, low literacy, extensive landlessness, and a lack of irrigated land, this indigenous community suffers from severe, chronic food insecurity. This conference paper analyses the socio-economic determinants that drive food insecurity among the Sahariyas and evaluates their corresponding nutritional and health outcomes. Drawing on institutional data, ethnographic surveys, and field narratives, this study explores the structural dependency of the Sahariyas on state-mediated welfare programs—chiefly the Public Distribution System (PDS). The analysis reveals that while the PDS serves as an indispensable economic cushion and a primary lifeline against acute starvation, its execution is severely hampered by technological, administrative, logistical, and systemic barriers. These include Aadhaar-based biometric authentication (ABBA) failures, geographic isolation, stock irregularities, lack of scheme awareness, and a rigid, mono-cereal focus that neglects broader dietary diversity. Consequently, child malnutrition remains high (with 41% of children under five underweight), and maternal anaemia affects 56% of adult women. This paper details these multi-dimensional challenges, presents localised field evidence and case studies, and outlines structural recommendations to transform the current food distribution model into a more sensitive, decentralised, inclusive, and legally accountable system for tribal welfare.*

Keywords: Sahariya PVTG, Food Insecurity, Socio-Economic Determinants, Public Distribution System (PDS), Biometric Exclusion, Nutritional Underperformance

I. INTRODUCTION

Food security encompasses not only macroeconomic grain availability but also the guaranteed physical, social, and economic access to safe and nutritious food that fulfils the dietary requirements of all segments of society. In India, despite substantial expansions in food grain production and legislative safeguards like the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013, marginal and indigenous groups continue to experience severe systemic disadvantages. Among these underrepresented populations, the Sahariya tribals, classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), stand out as one of the most structurally marginalised and vulnerable communities. The Sahariya people live primarily in the forest ecosystems and rugged terrains of Rajasthan's Baran district—with dense clusters in the blocks of Shahbad and Kishanganj—as well as adjacent contiguous pockets of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Historically self-sufficient forest dwellers who relied on hunting, foraging, and shifting cultivation, the Sahariyas have experienced systematic displacement from their traditional ancestral resource bases over the past several decades. State-enforced forest



preservation policies, commercial logging, and land alienation have decoupled the tribe from its historical subsistence modes without successfully integrating them into the modern agrarian or industrial labor market.

Currently, the Sahariyas find themselves trapped in an unequal socio-economic system characterised by widespread landlessness, high illiteracy, and irregular, low-wage manual labor. As a result, the community suffers from chronic food insecurity, persistent hunger, and severe anthropometric failure. To survive, the Sahariyas depend heavily on the state's welfare infrastructure, particularly the Public Distribution System (PDS), which functions through localised Fair Price Shops (FPS). At the national level, the PDS represents one of the largest safety nets globally, covering approximately 75% of the rural population and 50% of urban households under the NFSA. Within the boundaries of Rajasthan, over 4.46 crore individuals are registered across various PDS sub-categories, such as Priority Households (PHH) and the *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* (AAY).

For the Sahariya tribe, who make up nearly 30% of the tribal population in Baran district, the PDS is not merely a supplemental safety net; it is a critical institutional mechanism for day-to-day survival. Empirical findings from the 68th Round of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), tribal welfare assessments, and independent civil rights evaluations indicate that over 80% of Sahariya households depend entirely on subsidized grains for their daily meals. However, this structural dependency highlights a deep developmental paradox: while state interventions prevent mass starvation, administrative failures and a narrow policy focus often limit long-term nutritional improvements. This paper examines the socio-economic factors driving food insecurity among the Sahariyas, assesses the operational performance of the PDS on the ground, and provides policy recommendations for structural reform.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study details the systematic methodology used to evaluate the relationship between food insecurity and the Public Distribution System (PDS) among the Sahariya tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

Study Area and Sample Design

The research is conducted in the **Shahbad and Kishanganj blocks of Baran district, Rajasthan**, where the Sahariya population is heavily concentrated. These regions are characterised by dense forest cover, scattered hamlets (*Sahrana*), low literacy rates, and high economic vulnerability. Employing a **mixed-methods descriptive and exploratory research design**, data is collected from a sample size of **200 to 250 households** selected via stratified random sampling to ensure thorough geographic and socio-economic representation.

Data Collection and Analysis Framework

The study combines primary and secondary data sources. Primary insights are gathered through:

Structured household **interview schedules** administered to adult members.

Direct **observation** of living conditions, food storage, and fair price shop operations.

Secondary data includes census information and policy documents. Quantitative data is processed using descriptive and inferential statistics (averages, percentages, cross-tabulations), while qualitative data undergoes descriptive interpretation.

Advanced Evaluation Tools

To provide deep structural insights, the methodology incorporates two specialised frameworks:

GIS Mapping: Used to analyse spatial accessibility and visually map the physical distance between isolated tribal settlements and local fair price shops.

Food Security Index (FSI): A composite indicator calculated using the standardised.

Limitations

Key study limitations include geographical isolation, low respondent literacy, and seasonal household migration. However, these are mitigated by verbal translation into local languages and rigorous data cross-verification.



III. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF SAHARIYA TRIBALS

The community's vulnerability is defined by several intersecting factors: land alienation, low literacy rates, limited healthcare access, and historical social exclusion.

3.1 Demographics and Land Alienation

The Sahariyas comprise roughly 5.6% of the overall population of Baran district, yet they account for nearly one-third of its total tribal population. Their contemporary geographic distribution is restricted to poor rural hamlets (often termed *Saharianas*) located on the margins of multi-caste villages, lacking basic public infrastructure such as all-weather roads, reliable electricity, clean water, and adequate sanitation facilities. Land represents the primary productive asset in rural economies, yet landlessness is widespread among Sahariya households. Data from the ActionAid India Baran Block Survey (2021) reveals that 62% of Sahariya households are completely landless. The remaining 24% who own land are classified as marginal farmers holding plots of 0.5 hectares or less. These lands are typically rocky, uncultivable, and located on sloped or degraded terrains that lack irrigation. As a result, agricultural production is highly vulnerable to irregular monsoon rainfall. Only 9% of Sahariya households report agriculture as a reliable primary source of income. Instead, 74% rely on casual, seasonal wage labor—including agricultural labor on fields owned by dominant castes, stone quarrying, and manual construction work. Additionally, 41% of households supplement their livelihoods by collecting minor, non timber forest produce (NTFP), though this activity is constrained by strict forestry regulations and ecological degradation.

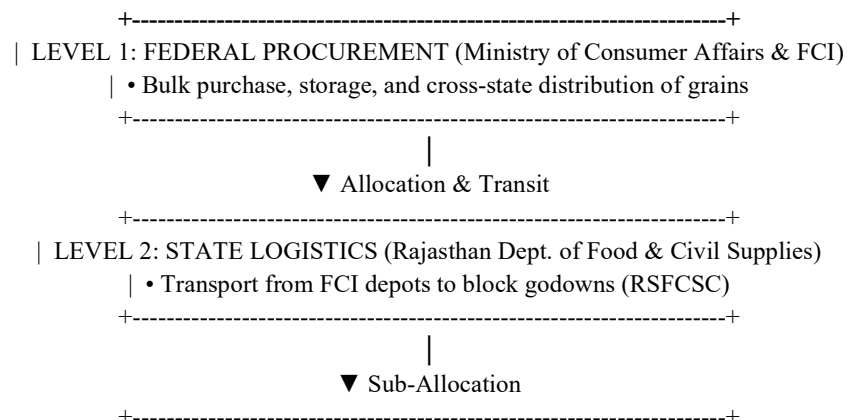
3.2 Literacy and Educational Disparities

Education is a critical pathway for securing non-agrarian employment and navigating state welfare systems. However, educational metrics within the Sahariya community show significant disparities. According to the District Information System for Education (DISE, 2022), the formal literacy rate among Sahariyas in Baran stands at 36% for males and just 19% for females. School dropout rates remain high due to persistent household poverty, the necessity of child labor to supplement family income, and the physical distance of primary and secondary schools from tribal hamlets. This low literacy limits the community's capacity to verify wage agreements, apply for credit, or assert legal entitlements under the NFSA, reinforcing cycles of generational poverty.

3.3 Health Status and Anthropometric Failure

The chronic food insecurity of the Sahariya tribe directly shapes their health and nutritional status. A joint research report by the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) and the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA, Baran Chapter, 2021) indicates that 41% of Sahariya children under the age of five are severely underweight according to WHO criteria.

IV. ROLE OF PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM (PDS)



| LEVEL 3: DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION (Baran District Supply Officer)

| • Localised monitoring, card categorisation, and licensing

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▼ Retail Delivery

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| LEVEL 4: FAIR PRICE SHOPS (ePOS Enabled Retail Dealers)

| • Final biometric verification & final consumer disbursement

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A 2022 survey by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) indicated that 83% of Sahariya families across the Shahbad and Kishanganj blocks identified the PDS as their primary food source. Furthermore, data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS-II) shows that tribal households in Rajasthan are 37% more likely to rely on the PDS than non-tribal groups, with the Sahariyas exhibiting the highest levels of structural dependency. To quantify this reliance, data compiled by ActionAid India in the Rajasthan Tribal Welfare Report (2021) shows that across the two main blocks, a large majority of families depend exclusively on PDS food allocations:

Table 4.1: PDS Coverage and Food Dependence among Sahariyas in Baran District

Block	Total Sahariya Families	Families with Ration Cards	Exclusively Dependent on PDS (%)
Shahbad	13,200	10,650	74%
Kishanganj	10,400	8,190	71%
Total / Average	23,600	18,840	72.5%

Source: ActionAid India, Rajasthan Tribal Welfare Report, 2021

This data highlights two critical aspects of the PDS in tribal regions: first, it confirms that the system is central to household food access; second, it shows an ongoing gap between the total number of families and those holding functional ration cards. This gap leaves a significant portion of the population without regular access to food benefits.

V. SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND NUTRITIONAL IMPACT ANALYSIS

The PDS plays a double role in the Sahariya community: it serves as an immediate economic stabiliser while presenting complex challenges for long-term development, dietary health, and household dynamics.

5.1 Economic Cushion and Consumption Stabilisation

The primary benefit of the PDS is its role as an economic safety net during the pre-monsoon lean season (May to June). During this period, local agricultural work is scarce, and household food stocks from the previous harvest are often depleted. The availability of 35 kilograms of wheat at ₹2/kg through AAY cards helps prevent extended periods of food shortage and reduces severe coping mechanisms, such as asset sales or high-interest loans from local lenders.

Table 5.1.1: Monthly Household Food Consumption and Financial Balances With and Without PDS

Item	Average Quantity Consumed With PDS	Estimated Consumption Without PDS	Monthly Household Financial Savings (INR)
Wheat	30–35 kg	10–12 kg	₹300 – ₹400 saved
Rice	2–4 kg (Optional)	<1 kg	₹100 – ₹150 saved
Sugar / Salt	1 kg each	Irregular	₹50 – ₹70 saved



Kerosene LPG	/	2–5 liters (Kerosene)	Unavailable / Expensive	₹100+ saved
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Source: Compiled from field interviews and PUCL Rajasthan Report (2022)

The financial savings generated by subsidised food programs allow families to redirect their limited cash income toward other essential needs, such as healthcare expenses, clothing, and basic school supplies for children.

5.2 Dietary Simplification and Nutritional Underperformance

While the PDS successfully delivers basic calories, it has not altered overall nutritional outcomes. A key issue is the mono-cereal focus of the distribution model, which provides wheat and rice but excludes protein- and micronutrient-rich foods like pulses, oilseeds, millets, and dairy products. Historically, the Sahariya diet included various uncultivated forest resources, wild fruits, roots, tubers, and local coarse millets. The consistent availability of subsidised wheat has shifted consumption habits toward a simpler, more monotonous diet. This change has accelerated the loss of traditional ecological knowledge among younger generations, as documented by the Udaipur Tribal Research Institute. A study by the Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR, 2018) showed that despite regular access to PDS rations, 68% of Sahariya children under five remained underweight and 42% were stunted. This confirms that calorie-heavy grains alone cannot resolve the community's broader challenge of micronutrient deficiencies and hidden hunger.

5.3 Labor Dynamics and Generational Poverty Traps

The long-term effects of chronic welfare reliance on tribal labor participation present complex social challenges. Field assessments by ActionAid India and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS, 2022) indicate that in 38% of surveyed households, adult males experienced long periods of underemployment or preferred short-term seasonal migration over steady, labor-intensive work in non-agricultural sectors.

This trend reflects a broader "food dependency syndrome," similar to patterns observed among other vulnerable tribes like the Baiga and Birhor in Central India. Because basic food grains are largely guaranteed by the state, some households remain focused on immediate survival rather than long-term economic planning or participation in local development initiatives, such as self-help groups (SHGs) sponsored by NABARD. Consequently, generational poverty persists; data from the India Human Development Survey indicates that only 4.6% of Sahariya youth (ages 18–25) are engaged in formal skill-based employment or higher education.

THE TRIPLE BURDEN ON WOMEN

1. CHRONIC NUTRITIONAL NEGLECT

- 56% to 60% clinical anaemia rates due to patriarchal intra-household sorting
- Women consistently consume residual food portions last and least

2. DOMESTIC LABOR EXCLUSION

- Long hours spent walking, waiting in lines, and processing heavy grain shipments
- Directly reduces available time for formal education or agricultural wage work

3. INTERGENERATIONAL MALNUTRITION TRANSMISSION

- High maternal Body Mass Index (BMI) failure leading to low birth weight infants
- Drives high childhood wasting and paediatric anthropometric failure



VI. OPERATIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS TO ACCESS

The effectiveness of the PDS in Sahariya communities is limited by several operational, technical, and structural barriers on the ground.

6.1 Geographic Isolation and Transport Costs

Many Sahariya hamlets, such as Sundarpura, Kishanpura, and Nayagaon, are physically isolated from main village centres and panchayat headquarters. These communities often lack paved roads and reliable public transportation. In many cases, families must travel 10 to 15 kilometres to reach the nearest Fair Price Shop. A field survey by Pratham Rajasthan (2022) indicated that 48% of Sahariya families had to make at least two trips to the ration shop each month—the first to confirm inventory delivery and the second to collect their allocations. This travel burden creates significant time and economic costs that disproportionately affect elderly individuals, pregnant women, and child-headed households.

6.2 Technical Biometric Authentication Failures

The introduction of electronic Point of Sale (ePOS) systems and mandatory Aadhaar-based biometric authentication (ABBA) has created unexpected avenues of exclusion. In many tribal areas, biometric authentication rates face regular disruptions due to unstable cellular network connectivity and weak solar power during the monsoon season. Furthermore, decades of intensive manual labor and stone quarrying often wear down the fingerprints of adult workers, causing high biometric mismatch rates. Field audits by the Right to Food Campaign (2022) found that between 15% and 18% of eligible beneficiaries were turned away from receiving their monthly rations due to digital identity misreadings or technical glitches.

6.3 Local Corruption and Inventory Diversion

Despite digital monitoring efforts, local corruption and grain diversion remain persistent challenges. A field audit by the Centre for Equity Studies (2017) across tribal areas in Rajasthan estimated that 18% to 22% of targeted grains failed to reach intended beneficiaries due to local diversion. Common issues include under-weighting rations, falsifying records, maintaining "ghost beneficiaries" under the names of deceased individuals, and demanding unauthorised fees (locally termed *chutki*) from illiterate families.

6.4 Information Asymmetry and Language Barriers

Welfare delivery is further complicated by language barriers and low literacy rates. Official PDS notices, SMS alerts, and grievance portals are managed in standard Hindi or English, which are often inaccessible to the largely illiterate Sahariya population who speak local dialects like Hadoti. Consequently, 53% of households remain unaware of their exact entitlement categories or monthly rights under the law. This information asymmetry reduces the community's ability to challenge local distribution irregularities or demand full accountability from shop owners.

Table 6.5: Key Operational Challenges Identified in PDS Delivery across Baran District

Type of Challenge	Percentage of Households Affected	Primary Documentation Source
Distance from FPS (>5 km)	42%	PUCL Rajasthan Field Study, 2022
Stock-out Incidents	27% (<i>twice or more per year</i>)	Centre for Equity Studies (CES), 2021
Biometric Failure Rates	15% – 18% <i>of beneficiaries</i>	Right to Food Campaign Audit, 2022 DOCX
Unauthorized Deductions / Fees	34% <i>of surveyed families</i>	MKSS Social Audit Records, 2023



Lack of Scheme Awareness	53% of tribal respondents	Pratham Rajasthan Assessment, 2022 DOCX
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VII. THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Addressing these operational challenges requires coordination between state regulatory changes and monitoring initiatives led by civil society organisations.

[DISTRICT SUPPLY OFFICE & STATE GOVERNMENT]

- Deploys e-PDS, voucher exemptions, and ICDS allocations



Shared Accountability Dashboard

[CIVIL SOCIETY / GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS]

- Executes social audits, legal camps, and local monitoring

7.1 State-Level Regulatory Interventions

The Department of Food and Civil Supplies in Rajasthan has introduced targeted measures to reduce technology-driven exclusion. In areas experiencing persistent cellular network failures, the state authorized an offline, voucher-based identification system to allow families to claim their food benefits without mandatory biometric scans. Additionally, the state integrated grain allocations from the PDS with nutrition initiatives like the *Mukhya Mantri Poshan Yojana* and localized Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Through local *Anganwadi* centers, pregnant and lactating women receive Take-Home Rations (THR) and fortified supplements to counter high maternal anaemia rates.

7.2 Grassroots Civil Society Interventions

Non-governmental organizations serve as critical intermediaries for improving transparency, expanding legal literacy, and holding local distributors accountable on the ground:

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS): This grassroots organisation has led public social audits across Baran district. Their monitoring efforts have helped uncover inventory diversion schemes, leading to the cancellation of fraudulent distribution licenses in villages like Gopalpura and Palaita.

Prayas (Jaipur): Operating in tribal areas since the late 1990s, Prayas has assisted families with ration card registrations and organised community kitchens during severe droughts. Their advocacy contributed to the inclusion of over 3,000 marginalised Sahariya families under the AAY safety net in 2021.

ActionAid India: ActionAid has worked with local panchayats to establish women-led PDS monitoring committees. These committees train local women to verify distribution receipts, inspect weights, and file formal administrative complaints. This localised oversight has helped improve service delivery across 22 Fair Price Shops.

VIII. POLICY ANALYSIS OF GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL AND STRUCTURAL GAPS

The persistent operational challenges within tribal areas reveal a major gap between the legislative intent of the NFSA and its physical implementation on the ground. While the law mandates the establishment of block-level vigilance committees and state grievance portals, these mechanisms remain underutilised in Sahariya communities due to low awareness and bureaucratic barriers.

Administrative records from the food department provide insight into the volume and disposal rates of public complaints filed statewide.



Table 8.1: Status of Public Grievances Related to Food Distribution (Operational Year 2024)

Particulars / Grievance Category	Documented Metric Values
Pending Public Grievances (as of December 31, 2023)	189 cases
Additional Public Complaints Received During the Year	11,131 cases
Total Active Grievances Managed (through March 31, 2024)	11,320 cases
Total Public Complaints Resolved and Disposed Of	11,232 cases
Remaining Pending Complaints (as of March 31, 2024)	88 cases
Overall Percentage of Grievance Disposal	99%

Source: Department of Food and Civil Supplies Progress Dataset, 2024

While macro-level state metrics indicate a 99% grievance resolution rate, field evidence from remote tribal communities shows that very few local complaints are captured by these tracking systems.

IX. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY PROPOSALS

To address systemic food insecurity and make public distribution programs more effective for the Sahariya population, this paper proposes several structural and administrative reforms. Implementing Alternative Identification and "No-Denial" Safeguards

To address high biometric authentication failure rates : the state must transition away from an exclusive reliance on fingerprint-based ePOS systems:

Alternative Biometric Options: Fair Price Shops operating in tribal areas should be equipped with iris scanners and mobile-linked One-Time Password (OTP) verification systems to supplement fingerprint scans.

Mandatory "No-Denial" Protocols: The state should establish clear administrative rules ensuring that no beneficiary is denied their food allocation due to technical connectivity errors or biometric mismatches. In such cases, distributors should use manual card verification and physical sign-offs, with records maintained for subsequent social audits.

Decentralising Delivery via Mobile Distribution Units : To reduce travel times and high transport costs for isolated households, the state should deploy mobile distribution systems:

Mobile PDS Units: The state should operate specialised all-terrain distribution vans to deliver monthly food rations directly to remote *Saharianas*, particularly during the monsoon season when local paths become impassable.

Digital Inventory Tracking: These mobile units should utilise Android tracking software linked directly to the FCI and state food portals to provide real-time visibility into inventory levels.

Diversifying the Food Basket to Improve Nutrition

To transform the PDS from a basic caloric safety net into a nutrition-sensitive program, the types of food distributed must be diversified:

Inclusion of Millets and Pulses: In alignment with global nutritional frameworks supported by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), the state should include local coarse millets (*Bajra, Kodo*) and protein-rich pulses into the monthly PDS basket.

Fortified Food Components: Subsidised cooking oils, iodised salt, and iron-fortified flour should be regularly distributed through AAY and PHH channels to directly combat high maternal anaemia and child wasting rates.



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| **DECENTRALISED RIGHTS-BASED FRAMEWORK** |
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|------------------------------|--|
| 1. TECHNOLOGY INSULATION | • Deploy Iris scans, OTPs, and offline manual bypasses |
| 2. COMMODITY DIVERSIFICATION | • Introduce regional millets, pulses, and fortified oils |
| 3. RE-ROUTING LOGISTICS | • Operate all-terrain mobile vans to tribal hamlets |
| 4. FEMALE ENFRANCHISEMENT | • Transfer retail store management to women's SHGs |
| 5. AUDIT TRANSFERENCE | • Execute quarterly community-led social audits |
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Shifting Management to Women-Led Cooperatives

To address local corruption and empower women within the community, the management of Fair Price Shops should be decentralised:

SHG Management Licenses: The state should prioritise transferring retail distribution licenses from private vendors to established Self-Help Groups (SHGs) led by Sahariya women.

Capacity Building Support: The district administration should provide targeted literacy training, financial seed capital, and digital ledger support to enable women-led cooperatives to manage local inventories independently. This structural shift can improve distribution reliability, reduce corruption, and support economic empowerment within the tribe.

X. CONCLUSION

The high level of food insecurity observed among the Sahariya tribals of Baran district is not an inevitable consequence of geographical isolation, but a structural challenge driven by historical displacement, resource alienation, and administrative implementation gaps. While legislative frameworks like the National Food Security Act of 2013 provide a clear statutory basis for food protection, their operational effectiveness is regularly limited on the ground by technical errors, local corruption, and an inflexible, grain-heavy approach. Resolving chronic hunger and intergenerational anthropometric failure within this Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group requires moving beyond simple calorie distribution toward a rights-based framework. By implementing flexible identification protocols, diversifying food baskets with nutrient-dense commodities, deploying mobile distribution units, and empowering women-led cooperatives, the state can build a more resilient food safety net. Only through targeted, culturally sensitive, and structurally accountable reforms can the public distribution system ensure health equity and secure the basic right to food security for India's most vulnerable indigenous communities.

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