

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

Strengthening India's Food and Nutrition Systems: From Policy Vision to Ground-Level Impact

Abhishek Jain

India's Public Distribution System (PDS) is the backbone of its food security architecture. Established in the 1940s and formalised through the National Food Security Act (2013), the PDS provides subsidised cereals to over 800 million citizens each month through a network of nearly 500,000 Fair Price Shops (FPS). It is the largest social protection programme of its kind anywhere in the world. For decades, the PDS ensured calorie sufficiency, yet its design – focused mainly on rice and wheat – left limited space for nutrition diversification or climate resilience.

In the last decade, the Indian government has sought to transform this system from a calorie-distribution mechanism into a cornerstone of nutrition security. Reforms have aimed to improve transparency, ensure portability for migrant populations, and diversify food baskets to include fortified staples and traditional grains such as millets. This vast agenda involves central ministries, state governments, private millers, technology partners, and development partners – all working together to make the system more equitable and efficient.

It is within this evolving context that Abhishek Jain, Commonwealth Shared Scholarship Alumnus, has made his contribution. Having studied international development at the University of Bath in 2017-18, he returned to India with an analytical mindset and a practical sense of how evidence-based policy can drive social change.

Between 2019 and 2025, Abhishek's work has spanned policy design, field evaluation, and national-level planning.



Procurement centre for wheat and paddy.

His projects have supported India's efforts to digitise welfare delivery, fortify staples with essential nutrients, and promote dietary diversity through the inclusion of millets. His contributions have affected not only how food is distributed in India, but how the state conceptualises nutrition itself.



Abhishek Jain, a Commonwealth Shared Scholar who completed his MSc in International Development at the University of Bath in 2018, is a social protection and development policy specialist focused on food security, nutrition, and systems transformation. After returning to India, his work with MicroSave Consulting (MSC) and the Department of Food and Public Distribution, Government of India (DFPD) has contributed to major national initiatives that are strengthening transparency, improving nutritional outcomes, and transforming the world's largest food-based safety net – the Public Distribution System (PDS).

Building a Vision for India's Food and Nutrition Systems

In 2022, Abhishek joined the Department of Food and Public Distribution, Government of India as a Technical Consultant through MicroSave Consulting. The DFPD sits at the centre of India's food-security apparatus, responsible for managing foodgrain procurement, storage, and distribution, and for maintaining coordination with the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and state food departments.

Abhishek supported the Ministry to articulate a coherent strategy for the coming decade. Working closely with senior officials, he contributed to the development of the Department's Five-Year Action Plan (2024–29) and its immediate 100-Day Priority Agenda, both designed to align operational reforms with India's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals.



Abhishek in a two-day brainstorming camp of the Department of Food and Public Distribution, Government of India, 27–28 April 2023.

The process involved analysing policy gaps, reviewing schemes across multiple states, and integrating cross-cutting themes — technology, transparency, nutrition, and fiscal sustainability — into a single roadmap. The resulting documents became reference points for long-term planning within the Ministry and informed budgetary priorities for subsequent years.

'In India, we have the world's largest food security programme, where the Government of India provides in-kind foodgrains to over 800 million beneficiaries. The quantum is that huge, if I have to talk about the impact.'

Abhishek coordinated across divisions and engaged regularly with state departments to ensure the plans were grounded in operational feasibility. His systems-based approach helped DFPD adopt a more data-driven and outcome-oriented perspective. The strategic framework now guides efforts to modernise storage infrastructure, enhance digital monitoring, and diversify foodgrain supply chains.

Strengthening Nutrition Through Fortified Rice

Rice is a dietary staple for more than 60 per cent of India's population, yet ordinary milled rice lacks iron, folic acid, and vitamin B12 — micronutrients essential for growth and cognitive development. Recognising the widespread problem of hidden hunger, the Government of India announced in 2021 that all rice distributed through government welfare schemes would be fortified by 2024.



Sample of Fortified Rice Kernels (FRK) from a 2022 field visit in Andhra Pradesh.

Between 2022 and 2025, Abhishek played a pivotal role in operationalising this ambitious goal. As part of a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded project, he led research and advisory work to strengthen rice-fortification supply chains in the states of Bihar, Punjab, and Andhra Pradesh. His team conducted diagnostic studies on the production and blending of fortified rice kernels (FRK), analysed market capacities, and identified systemic bottlenecks that hindered large-scale adoption.

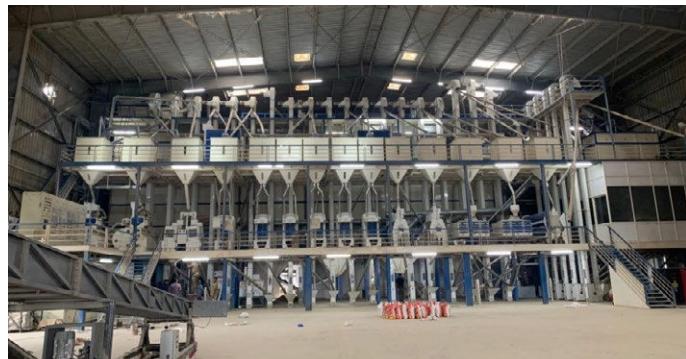
The project produced a set of actionable recommendations on digital tracking, quality control, and incentive structures for millers. These were later integrated into DFPD's national fortification framework.

In parallel, Abhishek led a Nutrition International-funded feasibility study in Uttar Pradesh, assessing both the economic and political-economy dimensions of fortification.



Fortified Rice Kernel (FRK) manufacturing unit in Andhra Pradesh, visited in 2022.

By 2024, fortified rice had been mainstreamed across the Public Distribution System, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and the PM-POSHAN school-meal programme. Together, these channels reach hundreds of millions of people, many of them women and children in low-income households. Abhishek's work helped ensure that fortification was not merely a policy mandate, but a functional, quality-assured system capable of delivering tangible nutritional benefits.



A rice milling unit where paddy is milled into rice.

Diversifying Diets With Millets

While fortification addresses micronutrient deficiencies, India also recognises the need for greater dietary diversity. After the United Nations declared 2023 the International Year of Millets, the Government of India launched a series of initiatives to promote millets — locally grown, climate-resilient grains rich in fibre, calcium, and protein — through both markets and welfare programmes.

Abhishek led evaluation studies on the inclusion of millets within the PDS, focusing on procurement feasibility, consumer acceptability, and the readiness of state supply chains. His team conducted fieldwork across major millet-producing states and analysed data on procurement prices, storage requirements, and recipient preferences.

The evidence produced by Abhishek and his colleagues supported DFPD's diversification strategy, encouraging states to source millets locally and integrate them gradually into monthly entitlements. This shift not only reduced the ecological burden of water-intensive rice cultivation but also revitalised local farming economies. Millet inclusion is a rare win-win — it benefits farmers, protects the environment, and makes public nutrition programmes more balanced.

His recommendations were later incorporated into the Department's Five-Year Plan, forming part of a broader transition towards sustainable food systems that combine nutrition, equity, and climate awareness.

Transforming Fair Price Shops Into Nutrition Hubs

At the retail end of the PDS, Fair Price Shops (FPSs) are the interface between government policy and citizens' everyday

experience. Traditionally, these outlets distributed a narrow basket of subsidised staples, often without adequate information on nutrition. In 2024, DFPD began piloting a new concept: transforming FPSs into 'nutrition hubs' offering a wider range of foods and health information.

Abhishek led the feasibility assessment and pilot implementation of this idea in several states. The initiative involved training around 100 FPS dealers to diversify their stock and to communicate basic nutrition messages to customers.

The pilot results were encouraging. Within three months, participating shops recorded a 15 per cent increase in sales transactions and improved customer engagement. The model demonstrated that public distribution outlets could also act as community-level platforms for awareness and small-scale entrepreneurship. The concept has since been included in DFPD's strategic roadmap and is being considered for scale-up across multiple states.

Enhancing Delivery and Portability Through Technology

Before his engagement with DFPD, Abhishek worked as an Analyst at MicroSave Consulting between 2019 and 2021, focusing on digital transformation in social protection systems. One of his key assignments was evaluating the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme, a reform that allows participants to access subsidised food from any FPS in the country, regardless of their registered state.

The ONORC reform has been a lifeline for India's 300 million internal migrants, enabling them to claim entitlements even when they move for work. Abhishek's evaluation studies assessed the scheme's functionality across multiple Union Territories, including Delhi, where portability transactions were expanding rapidly.

His findings provided crucial evidence that ONORC was reducing exclusion errors and enhancing the resilience of the food-security system, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when mobility restrictions disrupted livelihoods.

'We bring rigour to the policies and programmes through insights from the field. We become the eyes and ears to the government officials, meeting various stakeholders and understanding challenges in the implementation. That is the role that we play and our findings help to strengthen the policies.'

Abhishek also contributed to evaluations of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) programmes, analysing payment systems and recipient experiences. These early experiences shaped his later approach to integrating technology into nutrition delivery, blending empathy with systems thinking.

Building Capacity and Partnerships

Throughout his career, Abhishek has emphasised that reform succeeds only when people understand and own it. Beyond research and policy design, he has invested heavily in capacity building at both national and state levels.

He has convened workshops for state food departments, millers, and FPS dealers to explain fortification standards, storage protocols, and the business potential of diversified products. He also helped organise high-profile policy events such as the State Food Ministers Conference and the National Seminar on Rice Fortification, bringing together government officials, donor agencies, and private-sector stakeholders.

These efforts have strengthened coordination among multiple actors and fostered a shared vision for a nutrition-secure India. Participants from several states subsequently adopted new practices, from improved blending techniques to digital stock monitoring, demonstrating tangible follow-through from training to implementation.

Transformative Outcomes for Communities

The cumulative impact of Abhishek's post-scholarship work is visible across India's food-security landscape. His contributions have helped shift the policy narrative from quantity to quality — from ensuring food availability to ensuring nutritional adequacy.

At the community level, these reforms have translated into more nutritious food reaching vulnerable households, better information for consumers, and stronger accountability in service delivery. The fortified-rice programme alone now serves millions of children and women of reproductive age, helping reduce anaemia and other micronutrient deficiencies.

Abhishek's work has also influenced how the government conceptualises the role of technology. Digital monitoring systems introduced through his research and contribution have improved transparency and allowed real-time quality control across states.

For a country as large and diverse as India, systems reform is the only sustainable route to social impact. When the system works better, everyone benefits — especially those who depend on it the most.

Internationally, India's approach to food fortification and digital portability is now being studied by other countries as a model for integrated nutrition governance. Abhishek's research publications and policy briefs have contributed to this cross-country learning by documenting lessons and disseminating evidence through global development networks.

Abhishek reflects that the most significant change in his community as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship has been his contribution to reforms which have translated into more nutritious food reaching vulnerable households.

'I think the food security programme has been very impactful because of the large number of people it is impacting, 800 million. I think that is one of the programmes that has the largest impact in terms of numbers, and also the financial implication in terms of the subsidy that the government is giving. And of course, because food security is one of the most critical things for more decent living.'

Individual Transformation and Learning

The transformation Abhishek has driven externally is mirrored by his personal growth since receiving the Commonwealth Shared Scholarship.

During his studies at the University of Bath, he developed a rigorous understanding of policy analysis, evaluation methods, and social-justice frameworks. The interdisciplinary approach of his MSc in International Development allowed him to see connections between economics, governance, and human wellbeing — insights he would later apply to complex government programmes.

'I believe, through the scholarship, the opportunities and the learnings I got, shaped my career. I think it gave me a better exposure, and the learning that I had at Bath, the connections that I made. So, I think it has an impact on what I'm doing.'

Exposure to international perspectives broadened his understanding of global development challenges and the importance of collaboration across sectors and borders. The Commonwealth Scholarship, he notes, gave him both the intellectual foundation and the professional credibility to work directly with senior government officials and multilateral partners.

'It was one of the most beautiful memories. And I tell everyone, the experiences and exposure that I got due to the Commonwealth, it wouldn't have been possible otherwise. When I left from India to study and come to the UK, I had one thing clear, that when I go there, I want to experience and learn as much as I can. And I think I did a lot, and that was only through the Commonwealth Scholarship.'

Personally, the experience also deepened his commitment to equity and inclusion. Engaging with classmates from across the Commonwealth reinforced his belief that effective governance must be rooted in empathy and evidence alike.

'I think the network and friendships that we built and carried them forward into meaningful work, I think that was a good learning experience for us.'

Abhishek reflects that as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship, the most significant change to him has been the exposure and professional networks he was able to build.

'In 2018, we had the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London. I applied and was accepted. I was part of the Commonwealth Youth Forum. I was there meeting delegates and participated in various discussions. Some of these activities wouldn't have been possible otherwise. Academically you will learn a lot of things, but when I look back, I cherish these memories and experiences.'

As India continues to reimagine its food and nutrition systems, professionals like Abhishek represent the bridge between policy vision and on-the-ground transformation. His journey shows how education, when coupled with purpose, can move nations closer to ending hunger, improving health, and ensuring that development truly leaves no one behind.

More about Abhishek Jain:

Relevant documents and projects:

[India's Public Distribution System \(PDS\)](#)

[Department of Food and Public Distribution \(DFPD\)](#)

[MicroSave Consulting \(MSC\)](#)

[One Nation One Card \(ONORC\)](#)

[Integrated Child Development Services \(ICDS\)](#)

Policy papers and blogs:

[From ration shops to nutrition hubs: A nutritional revolution in the making](#)

[Millets: The nutritional powerhouse for a sustainable India.](#)

[Portability transactions of the Public Distribution System under One Nation One Ration Card: Why is portability working so well for Delhi?](#)

[A review of the effectiveness of India's Direct Benefit Transfer system during COVID-19: Lessons for India and the world](#)

[MGNREGA: The delay in wage payments – Part I](#)

[MGNREGA: The delay in wage payments – Part II](#)

[Addressing the weak link in COVID-19 relief: How improving strategic communications can boost the impact of social protection programs](#)

[One Nation One Ration Card: 5 ways to really help PDS beneficiaries](#)

[Nutritional inefficiency of India's public distribution system: A missed opportunity of food fortification?](#)

Lessons and Looking Ahead

From 2019 to 2025, Abhishek Jain has contributed to some of India's most consequential nutrition and food-security reforms. His work demonstrates how scholarship-supported education can translate into national-scale impact when combined with commitment and collaboration.

The initiatives he helped design and implement — from fortified rice to millet diversification and FPS transformation — now form part of India's long-term strategy to build a healthier, more resilient population. Each of these reforms touches millions of lives, improves transparency, and strengthens public trust in governance.

Today, as an Assistant Manager (Technology Enablement in Financial Services) with KPMG India, Abhishek continues to apply his expertise to digital-governance and digital transformation projects. His focus remains on building systems that are both efficient and humane. Whether in a ministry office or a village ration shop, his goal is the same — to make public services work better for the people they serve.

His story exemplifies the mission of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission: empowering individuals to use their education for collective progress. The skills and insights Abhishek gained through his MSc at the University of Bath have become instruments of tangible change, contributing to national policy reform and improved human development outcomes.

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