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# Navigating The Social Sector: Understanding The Shift Away From Essential Services In India

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***Abstract***
*This paper examines the recent shift in India's social sector away from essential services like healthcare, education, and social security, focusing on the role of market-driven solutions and privatization. Influenced by economic liberalization and fiscal constraints, this shift has altered the state's role in welfare provisioning, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. The study investigates policy decisions, fiscal federalism, and private sector involvement that have contributed to this trend, alongside its social and economic consequences. Using data from Union and State Budgets, policy reports, and real vs. nominal spending analysis, the paper highlights declining public investment in social services. The findings emphasize the need for a balanced approach to social policy, combining market efficiency with public welfare, to ensure inclusive growth. Urgent reforms are suggested to address regional disparities and sustain essential services, particularly for vulnerable populations dependent on public provisions for healthcare, education, and welfare.*

***Keywords:*** *Fiscal federalism, social sector expenditure, nominal allocation, inflation, real allocation*

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## I. Introduction

India is the fastest growing economy in the world and being largest and stable democracy having rightfully earned reputation of peacekeeper; it is also a rightful claimant of extended UNSC. It not only posed to be the fifth largest economy in the world surpassing France, but also one of the few nations which does have nuclear power. To bolster India's strength further, more than 50 percent of Indians are below 25 years and more than 65 percent are below age of 35 years.

The federal structure in India is divided among national, state and local governments, with states given autonomy for revenue generation and the allocation of public goods and services due to fiscal decentralization initiated by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts. The provision of public goods is inherently complex within this multi-tiered federal system. But evidence indicates significant inter-state disparities in human development and economic outcomes in India, in contrast to more developed federal systems like those in Canada, the USA, Australia, and the EU (Kelkar, 2019). The differences in fiscal performance among subnational levels in a multi-tiered country like India arise from various interconnected factors.

One crucial aspect in this context is the role of intergovernmental fund transfers, which are influenced by structural, political, economic, and social dynamics. Central transfers address both vertical and horizontal fiscal imbalances (Boadway and Shah, 2007). It is essential that intergovernmental transfers are determined by the fiscal health of each state, and the economic conditions of all regions should be regularly assessed to mitigate regional disparities. Although India implemented decentralization reforms in the 1990s mainly to enhance the quality of public service delivery (USAID, 2021), the federal structure in India is still complex, featuring significant political and administrative decentralization while maintaining a highly centralized fiscal framework (Aiyar & Kapur, 2019). Additionally, the country's limited infrastructure capacity poses a challenge to the effective provision of public services.

Spending on the social sector is essential as it tends to benefit the poor more than the rich and arguably enhances human capital, leading to direct growth and indirect spillover benefits for the entire economy. In the context of India, like many other developing countries, government expenditure on the social sector is crucial for three primary reasons. Firstly, the extent of deprivation in the country is too significant to be addressed solely by market forces; secondly, a higher proportion of poor households rely on government services compared to wealthier households; and lastly, it is necessary to achieve clearly defined outcomes in social sectors, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As per the Human Development Report – 2023, UNDP, India's Human Development Rank is 134 after Sri Lanka, China, Bhutan and Bangladesh, which are ranked 78, 75, 125 and 129 respectively.

The social sector in India covers various essential services vital for human development, such as healthcare, education, social security, and public welfare. Lately, there has been a noticeable move away from these critical services, which significantly impacts the nation's socio-economic structure. Although, twelfth and thirteenth finance commissions suggested for a modest increase of 1% and 1.5% respectively, the fourteenth finance commission recommended for considerable increase (by 10 percentage points from 32% to 42%.) in States' share of central taxes. This marked a significant shift, a substantial rise in untied devolution grants and a corresponding reduction in the tied grants provided as central assistance to state plans since 2015-16.

According to the Economic Survey, health spending in India grew from about 1.2% in the early 1990s to 1.9% of GDP in 2024. Large-scale initiatives like Ayushman Bharat (2018) and the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), introduced in 2005, have been essential in increasing access to healthcare. Despite these advancements, India continues to invest less than the WHO-recommended 5% of GDP, which has an effect on healthcare access and infrastructure, especially in neglected and rural areas. The government expenditure on education rose from roughly 3.3% in the 1990s to 4.6% of GDP in 2022-23. Although, introduction of flagship initiatives like the Right to Education Act (2009) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001) greatly increased investments in universalising education; still, India continues to lag behind the global standard of 6% of GDP suggested by the Kothari Commission, which has an impact on school infrastructure and quality, particularly in rural areas.

## II. Literature Review

Social sector spending plays a crucial role in a nation's development. Researchers are of the view that by social sector investments, the government may impact the well-being of the population and achieve various development objectives, including the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Numerous researchers in the past have explored whether this type of expenditure can drive sustainable economic and social progress. To cite, Guhan (1989) examined the principles and practices underlying the recommendations of the first finance commission of India. He discussed the normative framework adopted by the commission, which aimed at ensuring an equitable distribution of financial resources between the central and state governments. He highlighted the inherent biases or tilts in the allocation mechanisms that favoured certain states over others, leading to disparities in development. By analysing the historical context and the socio-economic implications of the commission's decisions, he provided insights into the complexities of achieving fiscal equity in India's diverse federal structure.

Kumar (2019) analysed the factors which gave rise to active federalism in India and the policy measures which are required to ensure sustainable economic growth and development of all the three tiers of Government. He mentioned that cooperative federalism must be fuelled by fiscal federalism to bring required transformation in the Indian economy for better. Varalakshmi and Yoganadham (2024) evaluated the impact of the Union Finance Commission's recommendations on state development, focusing on the balance between fostering economic growth and ensuring equitable development outcomes. They found that while the Commission's allocations have contributed to overall economic growth, there are persistent challenges related to inequitable resource distribution and disparities in development outcomes among states.

Ganesh and Rabbiraj (2023) delved into the complexities and imbalances inherent in India's fiscal federal structure, emphasizing the pivotal role played by finance commissions in managing intergovernmental fiscal relations. They examined the methodologies and criteria used by various finance commissions to determine the devolution of resources and expressed concerns about the potential erosion of state autonomy and the implications for fiscal decentralization, a cornerstone of India's federal structure. Singh et al. (2024) examined the impact of fiscal decentralization reforms on two central components of public service delivery outcomes, viz., health and education using feasible generalized least squares on a balanced panel of 18 non-special category states of India for the period 2002–2020. They found the positive impact of fiscal decentralization as a reformative intervention on public service delivery outcomes, highlighting the role of Indian polity and socioeconomic channels of accountability in shaping those outcomes.

To investigate the relationship between fiscal federalism and India's social policy, Aiyar and Kapur (2019) analysed the impact of fiscal decentralisation measures of the government at sub-national level. They noted that India's fiscal architecture for social policy continues to have a significant centralisation bias. Darshini and Gayithri (2024) examined the various forms of basic resource gap (BRG) and fiscal dependency in a long-term panel framework, comprising 14 major Indian states from 1981-82 to 2016-17. They observed that despite several incentive-based reform measures, the BRG persists with mounting fiscal challenges besides a decline in non-debt capital receipts across the Indian states.

Sahu et al. (2024), by using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data assessed the implications of the recommendations of fifteenth finance commission on various states. Their findings indicate a mixed picture reflecting that while some states got benefited from increased allocations and improved fiscal management, others have struggled due to structural challenges and political dynamics. Ahmad et al. (2024) provided a review of the interconnections between financial development, resource richness, eco-innovation, and sustainable development, underscored by the moderating role of geopolitical risk. Their study contributed to the broader discourse on sustainable development by highlighting the importance of integrated approaches that consider financial, environmental, and political dimensions.

The healthcare sector in India has faced significant challenges, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed existing weaknesses in the public health system, including inadequate infrastructure and workforce shortages (Rao et al., 2021). A study by Lahariya et al. (2022) highlights that despite increased government spending during the pandemic, there has been a reallocation of resources that may not sustain long-term improvements in public health services. Education in India has seen a notable decline in public investment, impacting the quality and accessibility of education for many children. According to Jha and Parvati (2023), the shift towards privatization of education has led to increased inequality, with disadvantaged groups bearing the brunt of reduced government support. This trend threatens to widen the socio-economic divide and undermine efforts to achieve universal education.

Social security programs, crucial for supporting vulnerable populations, have also experienced funding cuts and policy shifts. Sen and Ghosh (2023) argue that the reduced emphasis on social security is evident in the decreased budget allocations for schemes like the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). These changes have resulted in increased poverty and insecurity among marginalized communities. Public welfare services, including housing, sanitation, and public transport, have not kept pace with the growing needs of the population. Banerjee et al. (2022) point out that urbanization and rapid population growth have put immense pressure on existing infrastructure. The government's focus on large-scale infrastructure projects often overlooks the immediate needs of basic public welfare services, leading to a decline in living standards for many citizens.

The shift away from essential social services in India has profound policy implications. Experts advocate for a renewed focus on inclusive growth and equitable resource distribution. Recent report of NITI Aayog (2023) emphasizes the need for a balanced approach that prioritizes social sector spending alongside economic growth initiatives. It calls for increased transparency and accountability in public spending to ensure that funds are effectively used to enhance social services.

**Research motivation**

Social sector in India has traditionally been a cornerstone of national development, focusing on essential services such as healthcare, education, and social welfare. However, recent trends indicate a notable shift away from these critical areas, prompting a need for comprehensive analysis and understanding of the underlying factors and implications. Despite the significant body of literature on India's social sector, there exists a discernible gap in understanding the nuanced transition away from essential services and its impact on marginalized and vulnerable populations. Current studies often provide a broad overview but lack a focused examination of the specific drivers and consequences of this shift. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing targeted policy interventions that can realign the social sector with its foundational goals of equity and inclusivity. This research aims to fill this void by offering an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing this paradigm shift, thereby contributing to more informed and effective policymaking in the Indian social sector.

## III. Material And Methods

This study to analyse trends in India’s social sector spending from 2014-15 to 2024-25, focusing on healthcare and education. The required information is sourced from Reserve Bank of India (RBI), NITI Aayog, Finance Commissions, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and budget documents of union and state governments published by Ministry of Finance (MoF) and relevant state governments. The study considers both nominal and real allocations across key sectors, adjusted for inflation using the consumer price indices (CPI). Paired Sample t-test is used examine the significance of difference between nominal and real allocations in key schemes of Government of India (GoI).

## IV. Results And Discussion

This section focuses on the analysis of (i) the proportion of social sector spending in total expenditures, and (ii) nominal and real allocations for key social sector schemes concerned with education and health.

Social sector spending

The proportion of social sector spending in India has reached its lowest level in the last decade, reflecting a significant shift in government priorities (figure 1). This decline indicates reduced public investment in essential areas such as healthcare, education, and social welfare. The analysis of budget data reveals a consistent downward trend in the allocation of funds toward these services, exacerbated by an increasing reliance on private sector solutions. This shift has disproportionately impacted marginalized communities that depend heavily on state-provided services. The data underscores the growing disparity between economic growth and social welfare investment, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of inclusive development and equitable access to basic services across regions.

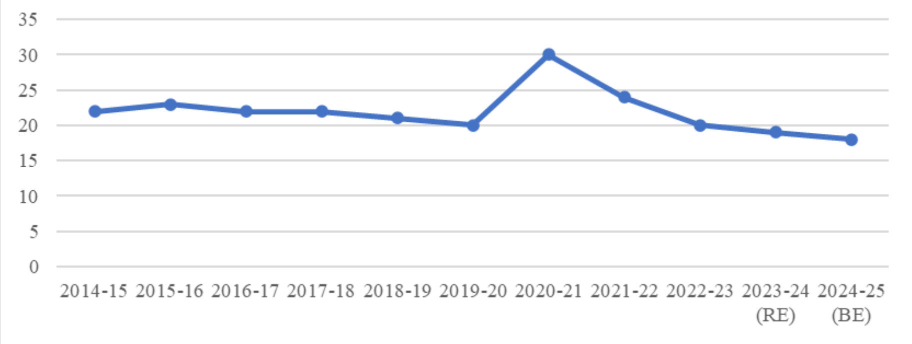



Figure 1: Proportion of social sector spending in total expenditures (%)

Source: Interim Budget (2024-25)

Figure 1 illustrates variations in the proportion of social sector spending as a percentage in total government budgeted expenditure over a period from 2014-15 to 2024-25. It indicates shifts in the priority given to social sector investments within the overall budget framework. From 2014-15 to 2017-18, the proportion of social sector spending remained relatively stable, oscillating between 22% and 23%. This period reflects a consistent allocation towards social sector initiatives, suggesting a steady approach towards social expenditure. However, in 2018-19 and 2019-20, a slight decline was observed, with the proportion dipping to 21% and 20%, respectively. This trend indicates a gradual reprioritization of social sector spending during these years.

A notable surge occurred in 2020-21, where social sector spending peaked at 30% of the total expenditures. This substantial increase aligns with the period of heightened fiscal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the government significantly expanded social sector allocations to address public health and welfare needs. Following this peak, the proportion declined to 24% in 2021-22, indicating a partial retraction of the expanded social sector budget. The trend of decreasing allocation continued into subsequent years, with proportions falling to 20% in 2022-23, 19% in the revised estimates for 2023-24, and a further decline projected in the 2024-25 budget estimates, reaching 18%. These reductions suggest a shift in fiscal priorities, potentially driven by post-pandemic normalization of expenditures or a reallocation towards other sectors.

Nominal and real allocations for key social sector schemes

The analysis of government scheme allocations for key social sector schemes over time is done in two ways, i.e., in nominal terms (measured in terms of the prevailing actual prices at the time), in real terms (adjusting the allocations for changes in prices). For analysing nominal and real allocations for key education and health schemes, viz., (i) Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), (ii) PM Poshan Shakti Nirman (Mid-Day Meal), (iii) National Health Mission (NHM), and (iv) Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 are considered. The study assumes no significant difference between the nominal and real allocations in these schemes.

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a comprehensive program that covers pre-school through class 12 in the field of education, was launched 2018 with the overarching objective of enhancing school efficacy as determined by equitable learning outcomes and equal educational opportunities. It combines three schemes: Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), Teacher Education (TE), and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Figure 2 shows the nominal and real allocations for Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan during a period from 2018-19 to 2024-25 (BE).

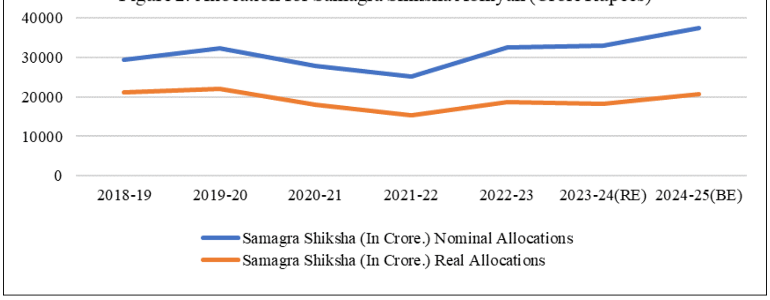



Figure 2: Allocation for Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (Crore Rupees)

Source: Interim Budget (2024-25)

The trend in Samagra Shiksha's funding shows that while the scheme's nominal budget allocations have increased from Rs. 29,389 crores in 2018-19 to Rs. 37,500 crores in 2024-25 (BE), the real value of these funds, adjusted for inflation, has not risen as much. For example, real allocations peaked at Rs. 22,136 crores in 2019-20 but dropped significantly to Rs. 17,925 crores in 2020-21 due to the impact of Covid19 pandemic. Although there has been some recovery in both nominal and real allocations in recent years, inflation continues to limit the actual purchasing power of the funds, indicating the need for higher inflation-adjusted increases to achieve meaningful improvements in education.

The null hypothesis of "no significant difference between the nominal and real allocations for Samagra Shiksha program" over the period under consideration is tested using paired sample 't' test.

The test results presented in table 1 indicate that the mean nominal allocation (Rs. 31,096.71 crores) is considerably higher than the mean real allocation (Rs. 19,111.29 crores) for the program during a period from 2018-19 to 2024-25. Although, Pearson's correlation (0.61) indicates a moderate positive relationship between the two allocation types across the years, the two tailed t-statistic (9.905) and a p-value (0.000061) is far below the conventional significance level of 0.05. Hence, null hypothesis is not true, meaning that there exists a significant difference between the nominal and real allocations for Samagra Shiksha program.

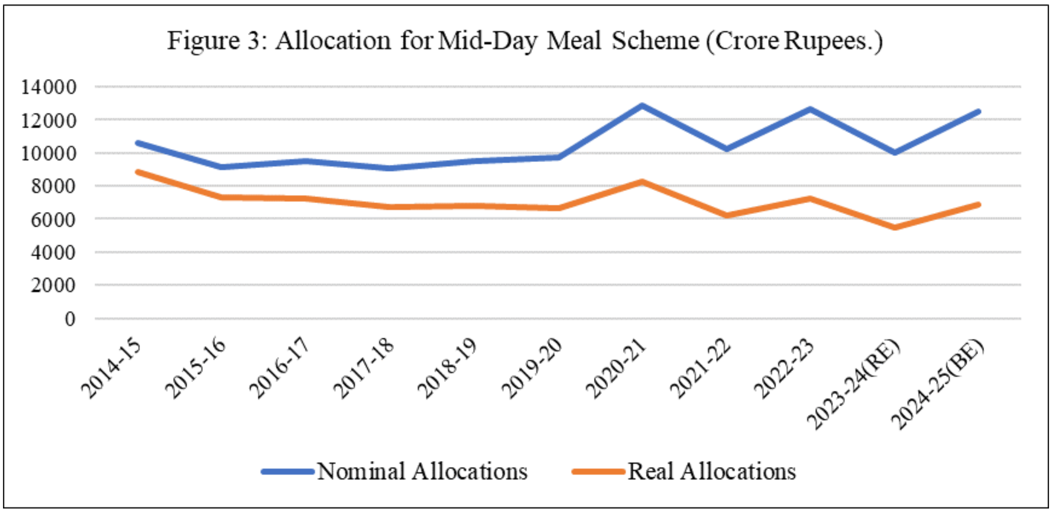
**Table 1: Paired two sample 't' test – Nominal and real allocations for Samagra Shiksha program**

Number of Pairs: 7

| Allocation | Mean | Pearson Correlation | 't' Stat. | Prob. | P(T<=t) two-tail | 't' Critical two-tail |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nominal | 31096.71 | 0.613 | 9.905 | 0.000061 | 6.16 | 2.44 |
| Real | 19111.28 | | | | | |

Source: Own calculations

PM Poshan Shakti Nirman (Mid-Day Meal) scheme is a government initiative to serve prepared lunches to students in all government elementary schools. Figure 3 shows the nominal and real allocations for mid-day meal scheme.




Source: Interim Budget (2024-25)

Figure 3 depicts the nominal and real allocations (in crore rupees) for mid-day meal scheme, also known as PM Poshan Shakti Nirman for a period from 2014-15 to 2024-25 (BE). It shows that while nominal allocations have generally shown an upward trend, increasing from Rs. 10,573 crores in 2014-15 to Rs. 12,467 crores in 2024-25, real allocations, adjusted for inflation, have not kept consistent pace. For instance, real allocations declined from Rs. 8,854 crores in 2014-15 to Rs. 6,855 crores in 2024-25, indicating a reduction in actual purchasing power over time. The significant gap between nominal and real allocations highlights the impact of inflation, particularly evident in 2020-21 when nominal allocations peaked at Rs. 12,878 crores, but real allocations reached only at Rs. 8,293 crores. The fluctuating real values suggest that while budgetary provisions have increased in nominal terms, the scheme's effective financial capacity to deliver nutritional benefits has been constrained, underscoring the need for inflation-adjusted funding to sustain and improve program outcomes.

The null hypothesis of "no significant difference between the nominal and real allocations for the mid-day meal scheme" over the period from 2014-15 to 2024-25 is tested using paired sample 't' test. The test results presented in table 2 indicate a significant difference between the nominal and real allocations for the scheme. The difference in mean nominal allocation (Rs. 10,523.18 crores) and mean real allocation (Rs. 7,071.64 crores) suggests that inflation has substantially reduced the effective funding. The two-tailed 't' statistic (8.01) and its associated probability (0.000012 < 0.05) clearly rejects the null hypothesis, indicating that the difference between nominal and real allocations is statistically significant.

**Table 2: Paired two sample 't' test – Nominal and real allocations for Mid-Day Meal scheme**

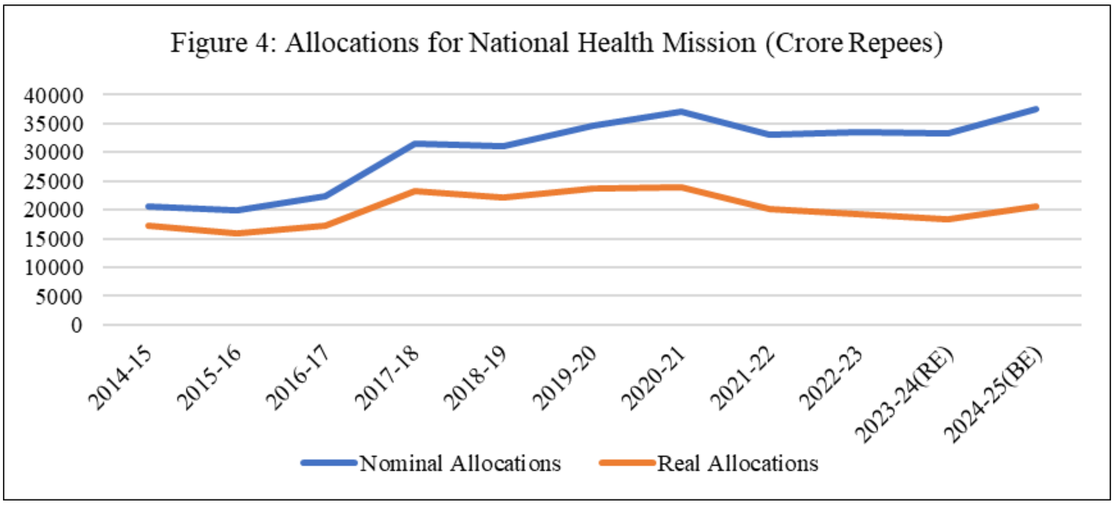
Number of Pairs: 11

| Allocation | Mean | Pearson Correlation | 't' Stat. | Prob. | P(T<=t) two-tail | 't' Critical two-tail |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nominal | 10523.18 | 0.34 | 8.01 | 0.000012 | 1.15 | 2.22 |
| Real | 7071.64 | | | | | |

Source: Own calculations

Pearson correlation (0.34) suggests a weak to moderate positive relationship between the nominal and real allocations, indicating some level of consistency in funding patterns despite the inflation adjustment.

National Health Mission (NHM), established by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India in 2013 aimed to address malnutrition epidemic of both rural and urban population of India. It absorbed two initiatives that previously existed on malnutrition. Figure 4 exhibits that while nominal allocations increased steadily from Rs. 20,499 crores in 2014-15 to Rs. 37,430 crores in 2024-25, the real allocations, adjusted for inflation, demonstrated slower growth and even a decline in recent years.




Source: Interim Budget (2024-25)

The widening gap between nominal and real allocations suggests that inflation is diminishing the actual financial impact of the increased nominal funding, highlighting potential concerns about the sufficiency of real health funding over time.

The test results (table 2) of null hypothesis, "no significant difference between the nominal and real allocations for National Health Mission" over the period from 2014-15 to 2024-25 indicate a significant difference between the nominal and real allocations for the scheme. The mean nominal allocation (Rs. 30,410.55 crores) is substantially higher than the mean real allocation (Rs. 20,169.73 crores), suggesting a significant impact of inflation on the effective funding.

**Table 3: Paired two sample 't' test – Nominal and real allocations for National Health Mission**

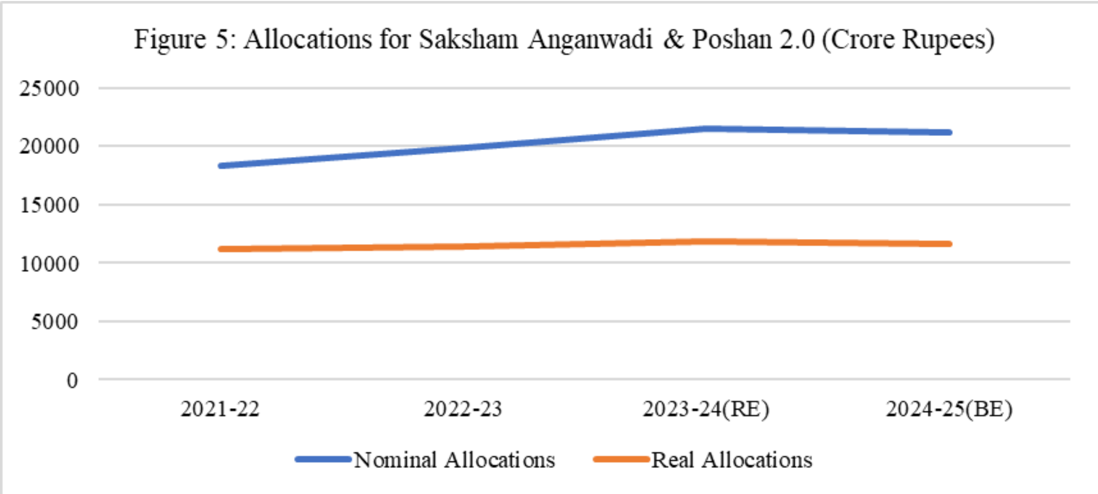
Number of Pairs: 11

| Allocation | Mean | Pearson Correlation | 't' Stat. | Prob. | P(T<=t) two-tail | 't' Critical two-tail |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nominal | 30,410.55 | 0.74 | 7.24 | 0.000028 | 2.77 | 2.22 |
| Real | 20,169.73 | | | | | |

Source: Own calculations

The two-tailed 't' statistic (7.24) and its associated probability (0.000028 < 0.05) clearly rejects the null hypothesis, confirming that the difference between nominal and real allocations is statistically significant. These findings imply that inflation has significantly eroded the real value of the program's funding over the years.

Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 scheme (Mission Poshan 2.0), introduced in February 2021 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, aims to address the problems associated with malnutrition in children, teenage girls, pregnant women, and nursing mothers by establishing a convergent eco-system to foster and create activities that support immunity, wellbeing, and health as well as by strategically changing the nutrition content and delivery.




Source: Interim Budget (2024-25)

The nominal allocations for the scheme (figure 5) during a period from 2021-22 to 2024-25 increased steadily from Rs. 18,382 crores in 2021-22 to Rs. 21,200 crores in 2024-25, indicating a rising financial commitment to the scheme. The real allocations, however, reflected inflation-adjusted values, exhibiting a slower growth rate, starting at Rs. 11,220 crores in 2021-22 and reaching at Rs. 11,656 crores only in 2024-25. The persistent gap between nominal and real allocations indicates that inflation is eroding the real value of funding.

The null hypothesis of "no significant difference between the nominal and real allocations for Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 scheme" over the period 2021-22 to 2024-25 is tested using paired sample 't' test.

**Table 4: Paired two sample 't' test – Nominal and real allocations for Mission Poshan 2.0 scheme**

Number of Pairs: 4

| Allocation | Mean | Pearson Correlation | 't' Stat. | Prob. | P(T<=t) two-tail | 't' Critical two-tail |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nominal | 20245.25 | 0.97 | 14.93 | 0.00032 | 0.00065 | 3.18 |
| Real | 11521.00 | | | | | |

Source: Own calculations

The test results presented in table 4 indicate that the mean nominal allocation (Rs. 20245.25 crores) is considerably higher than the mean real allocation (Rs. 11,521.00 crores) for the program during a period from 2021-22 to 2024-25. Although, Pearson's correlation (0.97) indicates a strong positive relationship between the two allocation types across the years, the two tailed t-statistic (14.93) and a p-value (0.00065) is far below the conventional significance level of 0.05. Hence, null hypothesis is not true, meaning that there exists a significant difference between the nominal and real allocations for Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 scheme.

## V. Conclusion

This paper highlights the concerning trend of declining public investment in essential social services in India, specifically healthcare, education, and social welfare. The analysis demonstrates that the shift towards market-driven solutions and privatization, determined by economic liberalization and fiscal constraints, has disproportionately affected marginalized communities reliant on state-provided services. The empirical data indicates a reduction in the proportion of social sector spending within overall budget allocations, signalling a potential retreat from inclusive growth.

The examination of nominal and real allocations for key social sector schemes reveals that, despite nominal increases in funding, inflation has eroded the actual purchasing power of these allocations, undermining the effectiveness of government efforts to enhance service delivery. This gap poses significant challenges in achieving sustainable development goals, as well as improving the human development index, where India lags behind among its regional counterparts.

The findings underscore the urgent need for a balanced approach to social policy that harmonizes market efficiency with public welfare objectives. So, it is imperative for policymakers to implement reforms that prioritize public investment in essential services and ensure equitable resource distribution across states. Strengthening fiscal federalism and enhancing transparency in public spending will be crucial in addressing regional disparities and sustaining essential services, particularly for vulnerable populations.

In nutshell, this study calls for renewed commitment to the social sector as a cornerstone of national development. By investing in essential services, India can foster a more inclusive and equitable society, laying the foundation for long-term economic growth that benefits all citizens. Future research should explore innovative strategies to optimize social sector funding and enhance the resilience of public services in the face of economic challenges and demographic shifts.

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