



Ration, Relief and Rural Life: An Ethnographic Study of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana in Rural Uttar Pradesh



Anju Lata*, Anshu Singh, Jyoti Yadav, Nidhi Singh, Kanchan

Abstract: *The Government of India's comprehensive approach to strengthening healthcare infrastructure and addressing related challenges is reflected in various initiatives and policies. Poverty and hunger are widespread issues in India, and tackling such complex problems poses a significant challenge for the government. However, the government has, from time to time, enacted different policies to address these deep-rooted problems. This research paper will conduct a sociological analysis of one such government policy, the "Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana", examining its impact on rural populations, its effects on rural society and development, and whether it truly benefits rural populations. The scheme was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the virus spread across the country and the government imposed a 'lockdown' to contain its impact. The Government of India announced a nationwide lockdown on March 25, 2020. The lockdown created several issues for the public, particularly the rural population, who relied on small incomes, were hit hard, and now faced a new round of hardships. Therefore, the Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi launched this scheme in April 2020, under which the destitute, daily-wage labourers, and the poor receive free food grains. In this scheme, 800 million people received free food grains. This scheme has evolved and has become more than a policy measure; it is a lifeline for this vulnerable part of society.*

Keywords: Policy, Society, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, Development, Rural Area

Nomenclature:

PMGKAY: Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana
FCI: Food Corporation of India
SOPOM: Schemes For Oilseeds, Pulses, Palm Oil, and Maize
PDS: Public Distribution System
APL: Above Poverty Line
BPL: Below Poverty Line

Manuscript received on 02 October 2026 | Revised Manuscript received on 07 October 2026 | Manuscript Accepted on 15 October 2026 | Manuscript published on 30 October 2026.

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I. INTRODUCTION

India is the world's most populous country. The United Nations estimates India's population at about 1.45 billion (145 crore) in 2024 and projects it will rise to about 1.69 billion by 2054 [1]. This means that there are no noticeable trends of decreasing population growth right now. A major undertaking by the Government of India is to provide free food grains to a nation of this size. This is about the "Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana" (PMGKAY). The scheme was introduced nationwide in April 2020, not just in a single state. In this case, 800 million (80 crore) individuals in India, including the poor, needy, unemployed, and daily wage earners, receive 5 kg of free food grains (wheat or rice) each month [2]. Alongside the job crisis [3], food security became a significant worry for low-income and migrant households during the COVID-19 pandemic [4]. In this context, food-support initiatives like PMGKAY aimed to provide disadvantaged households with extra food grains during the emergency [2]. PMGKAY's primary objective was to address issues arising from COVID-19 and the overall lockdown, but it has now become a lifeline for people. This is why it continues to run smoothly and uninterruptedly. Implementing this scheme was a huge challenge, as it was a novel, global-scale initiative that provided free food grains to vulnerable sections of society on an unprecedented scale. One question comes to mind: where did this grain come from? In India, the Food Corporation of India (FCI) stores grains. Grain stocks in FCI warehouses stood at 461.82 lakh metric tonnes as of October 2023. This consisted of 221.67 lakh metric tonnes of rice and 239.95 lakh metric tonnes of wheat.

Government data says the monthly grain requirement for free rations under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana is 39.87 lakh metric tonnes. The demand is for 32.86 lakh metric tonnes of rice and more than 7 lakh metric tonnes of wheat.

So, with existing stocks as of October 2023, the government can provide the remaining grain to poor people for another 11 and a half months for free.

The government introduced the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under this scheme, each eligible person received 5 kg of grain per month [2]. The program has continued over the years; originally set to expire in December 2023, it was extended for five more years from 1 January 2024 [5]. The scheme covers about 81.35 crore people [5]. Under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana programme, the poor receive 5 kg of grain each month at no cost. Earlier, those under the National Food Security Act's Antyodaya



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Anna Yojana received 35kg of grain per month, with a nominal fee [2].

The government also made the grain under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana free of cost starting in January 2023. The scheme now also provides 35 kilograms of grain free of charge [2].

Each person covered under the scheme gets 5 kg of wheat or rice free every month; a four-member family therefore receives 20 kg of grain free of charge. Besides, under Antyodaya Anna Yojana, each family, regardless of size, is entitled to receive 35 kg of grain free of cost every month [2]. During the COVID-19 phase of the scheme (Phases I–VII), the scheme allocated about 1,118 lakh metric tonnes of food grains free of cost over 28 months [2], with a planned financial outlay of about ₹3.91 lakh crore [6]. Government cash and in-kind assistance under various social protection schemes were timely, but they require expansion in both coverage and outreach [7].

A. Other Food Security Programs and Initiatives

From being a food importer, India has become a net food exporter. Various food security programmes and initiatives have increased food grain production so much that it grew from 50 million tonnes in 1950-51 to around 250 million tonnes in 2014-15 [8]. The government launched several initiatives to double farmers' income by 2022, focusing in 2016 on removing constraints to increased agricultural productivity in rural areas. These include the National Food Security Mission; Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY); integrated schemes for oilseeds, pulses, palm oil, and maize (SOPOM); Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana; e-NAM; and the target of increasing gross irrigated area from 90mha to 103mha by 2017. The government has also made commendable efforts to address malnutrition, including the Mid-Day Meal in schools, the Anganwadi system providing rations to pregnant and lactating mothers, and subsidised food grains for those below the poverty line through the Public Distribution System.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

India is known as a welfare state because it has adopted the principles of social justice and institutional empowerment of disadvantaged groups. But these aren't new approaches to inclusive growth or welfare populism. Welfare populism has a long history, from the left-leaning Indira Gandhi to the right-leaning Modi. However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, true populist welfarism emerged. In the modern world, right-wing populism incorporates recent technologies, faith, and spirituality, but without substantive plans and policies, these popular policies will not be permanent. Populist rhetoric is one thing, but strategic welfarism is another, and the latter defines Modi's populism. Since 2014, the BJP has used its "new welfarism", meaning services that provide material provisions like cash transfers, electricity, LPG, housing, and water, explicitly attached to the concept of "welfare" [9]. Why don't those who can sustain themselves speak up on matters such as education, employment and healthcare, rather than get freebies? Thus, understanding how and why these policies become popular political projects is key [9]. India ranked 111th out of 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index

2023, placing food security for millions of families on the government agenda [10]. 'Bharat Rice' is an initiative aimed at reducing food inflation and improving food security. This is expected to reduce the cost of living and pressure the ruling party to adopt the rice policy, since it can be seen as buying rice at lower prices. The 'Bharat Rice' initiative and its execution will have significant implications for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls and will play a dual role both in solving the economic problem and the political agenda [11]. The Government of India has decided to supply free food grains to around 814 million beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), in addition to the food-grain subsidy under the National Food Security Act, for five years from January 1, 2024 [5]. Rural agrarian distress also shaped the 2024 general election outcome: the ruling party won 126 predominantly rural constituencies in 2024, compared with 201 in 2019 [12].

The lockdown period disrupted food supplies and worsened food and nutrition insecurity in India, especially for low-income rural households [4, 13]. But unequal distribution was already a concern before the pandemic and became even more pronounced in the last two years. As of March 2020, there was no plan for a lockdown or complete shutdown, and India announced one for the first time. Food arrivals in wholesale markets dropped by 69% in the three weeks following the lockdown, and wholesale prices rose by 8% [14]. Inter-state travel restrictions and labour shortages posed significant obstacles to the food supply chain [14]. At that time, rural people suffered greatly from high prices and supply shortages. During the lockdown, the Public Distribution System (PDS) addressed village food shortages by providing supplies. This included feeding the poor subsidised food grains through a rationing system the Government of India started in 1960. The National Food Security Act, 2013, shifted this system from "welfare-based" to "rights-based" [4]. The PDS is managed in collaboration with the central government and state government / Union Territories. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) procures, stores, transports, and distributes food grains to the states. Its duties include checking family eligibility, issuing ration cards, and implementing PDS. The PDS supplies poor people with essential commodities such as food grains (rice, wheat), sugar, edible oil, kerosene, and fuel. Families are classified as Above Poverty Line (APL) or Below Poverty Line (BPL) based on their poverty status. Since its inception, the PDS has successfully provided food relief to the poor, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This program has helped maintain food security during epidemics such as COVID-19. It has also improved the poor's standard of living and social status [15]. Although India's social safety programmes have reduced poverty, they have limitations. The COVID-19 pandemic undermined these gains and inflicted considerable harm on migrant workers and individuals in the informal economy [16]. Poverty nevertheless remains a persistent challenge for the welfare state, and women-centred welfare schemes have been proposed as one way of tackling it [17].





III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper uses qualitative research and draws on both primary and secondary data. My research approach is ethnographic, and I have taken an 'emic' (insider) perspective. Ethnography studies human behaviour in everyday activities. This approach involves living among people, observing gestures and interactions, and interpreting the resulting data. This approach aims to reduce error because the researcher is part of the group, making the data less likely to be distorted. This is easier because the researcher spends considerable time within the community. Emic perspective – meaning gathering information from community members. Data Collection Methods – Primary Data Collection: For this study, I used Direct Observation and Interviewing. The interview was an informal one. Secondary Data Collection: I used newspapers, research papers, and news reports. The present study used convenience sampling; the sample size was 50 individuals. I employed a non-probability sampling method, convenience sampling, in which available and accessible units were selected. For this reason, it is also known as self-selected sampling. This study was conducted in Avarna village, Mau district, Uttar Pradesh.

IV. RESEARCH ANALYSIS

This research paper is framed through sociological theory using George Homans' Exchange Theory. First, discuss how Exchange Theory works and the situations in which Homans used it. Consumerism better supports consumers' well-being and happiness, and it is less painful for them. Individuals naturally seek actions that benefit them most. The tendency to maximise the benefit from exchange is not just a personal characteristic; anthropologists have noted that exchange is a common way to obtain happiness, even in tribal societies. Modern social exchange theory is built on concepts from utilitarianism, psychology, and anthropology. George Casper Homans is a prominent social exchange theorist today. Homans' work draws on exchange behaviourism and posits a mutually beneficial relationship between the individual and society [18]. In his 1950 book, *The Human Group* [19], he stressed the importance of individual actions within a group and further developed exchange theory. In his 1961 book, *Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms* [20], he fully developed the theory.

Social Exchange Theory propositions [20]:

- A. Success Proposition – People do what works for them.
- B. Stimulus Proposition – If in the past a certain stimulus was followed by a reward, the person will probably repeat the stimulus.
- C. Value Proposition – If a behaviour produces a high-value reward, the person will be likely to repeat that behaviour.
- D. Deprivation-Satiation Proposition – As someone continues to obtain a reward from an activity, the value of the reward slowly decreases.
- E. Aggression-Approval Proposition – When a person engages in an activity with a view to getting a reward but does not get the reward, he or she feels frustrated. She may use aggression to obtain the reward.

Notably, however, Homans does not use the term "exchange behaviour" in the above propositions. He says

social interaction is an exchange interaction; it's not merely an exchange. This paper's analysis is based on Homans' three aforementioned propositions. For this study, we chose 50 people, including women and men. The PMGKAY scheme has significant social and political effects on their lives, beyond the economic aspects that emerged during individual interviews. The scheme meets people's food grain needs and helps them buy their daily necessities. The proceeds from selling the grain enable people to pay for medicines, cooking oil, salt, and children's school fees. But they also admit that the government does its own good by distributing free grain; the government wants votes, and the people want grain. This shows that the scheme aligns with Homans' exchange theory. The government uses it for its electoral success, so the scheme, which started only during the COVID-19 period, is still running today (2025). The 'value proposition' suggests that if someone gets significant value from an activity, they will return to it; the government is doing just that.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A. PMGKAY is Not Simply a Binary Condition

An interesting phenomenon in the Avarna data is the inclusion/exclusion of beneficiaries.

Some respondents said their names were deleted from the ration list or were missing. Several respondents tried repeatedly to have their names restored but were unsuccessful.

For instance, in Data 88-90, respondents aged 30 years said they received rations during the lockdown but later found their names had been erased. They said they repeatedly tried to regain access. The local dealer told them they couldn't do it from the dealer's end. They then asked the researcher to restore their names, as the scheme had helped them previously.

Likewise, respondents in Data 63–64 said their names were deleted despite multiple attempts to restore them. They found PMGKAY very resourceful and asked to be put back on the list.

This pattern shows that formal inclusion and actual access do not align.

A person may be:

included: receiving rations; excluded: not being fed (but still trying); uncertain about future access.

Therefore, access should be seen as a process and not a state.

B. Reported Quantity Shortfall: "2 kg Cut"

One frequent problem was the amount respondents expected to be deducted from their income.

This was seen multiple times throughout the data. Respondents indicated they were not receiving as much as they thought they deserved.

However, the ethnographic data show an important contradiction.

Not all the respondents who claimed a deduction opted out of the scheme.

Thus, the elderly women in Data 77-78 said that they got 2 kg less but also that the scheme was very beneficial. One lady explained that in the previous

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year, when agricultural production was low, the household ration helped the household meet its food needs. This creates an analytical difference:

When quantity is a problem, don't totally reject the scheme.

It was not a requirement that respondents had to feel any of the following, but they could feel all of them:

"The amount is not as much as anticipated"

and

"This scheme remains very useful."

This finding shows why a simple yes/no question does not adequately measure beneficiary satisfaction.

C. Adequacy and Duration of Foodgrain Support

People's perceptions of the ration's duration varied significantly.

Some respondents reported that the ration covered household expenditures for about 15 days. Some said it lasted less time, such as 8-10 days or one week.

Several youth respondents raised concerns about the volume, for example:

What is 5kg?

Others called the ration "muthi bhar anaj" and felt it did not make much difference in their lives.

Meanwhile, other respondents rated the same food support as very beneficial.

Thus, adequacy seems to refer to a relationship, not an absolute standard. The perceived usefulness of a fixed amount varies across households based on household size, income, agricultural production, vulnerability, and age.

D. Foodgrain as Indirect Economic Support

One key message from the data is: "Foodgrain is not always foodgrain."

Many respondents described how foodgrain could reduce household expenditure or, if needed, be sold or bartered for necessities.

The respondents reported using and selling grain to get:

- grocery items;
- salt;
- oil;
- household goods;
- children's school-related expenses.

Respondents in Data 42-43 reported that they sold grain on occasion to make money for children's school fees. Those in Data 81-83 also reported that they could sell grain, if needed, to buy salt, oil, and other household items.

This suggests that PMGKAY may serve as an indirect economic resource.

The family can use the grain at home, saving money that would otherwise go toward food. The other important resource can be created from grain instead.

Thus:

Foodgrain support → less food spending → household spending more flexible.

This is a key aspect that administrative distribution statistics can overlook.

E. Foodgrain as a Fallback in Agricultural Shortfall

The data also reveal the association between PMGKAY and agricultural insecurity.

A 70-year-old male respondent stated that when agriculture was unavailable, the ration was useful. He strongly supported continuing the scheme.

Two 16-year-old girls explained that the ration also helped the household cope when there was no food grain in the field.

Other respondents in this category also mentioned poor agricultural production.

This implies that PMGKAY can serve as an alternative food source for rural households during times of agricultural uncertainty.

This finding matters because rural food security may depend on more than cash income. The availability of agricultural output for household use may vary with crop conditions, labour availability, and the season.

F. Generally, Food Quality Was Perceived Positively

Many respondents gave positive comments on foodgrain quality rather than quantity.

Descriptions used by the respondents included:

- "Very good";
- "Clean";
- "Fit for eating";
- "No dirt."

Respondents across age groups reported this.

So, the Avarna data showed no consistent criticism of food quality. Other concerns were more focused on quantity and access, however.

This separation is of analytic value:

Quality → positive perception (generally)

Quantity → repeated criticism

G. Pragmatic Acceptance of Free Food Support

Some young respondents said they would be little different if the scheme were abolished. Meanwhile, they said that because the ration was free, they continued to collect it.

This pattern appeared multiple times among the younger girls.

Their reasoning can be expressed as:

Free (available) = can be collected.

but:

Paid → would not purchase it.

This is a "let's face the facts" attitude, not a heavy dependency.

However, it should not be read as an indicator of these homes' economic stability. The data reflect their understanding of the scheme, not an objective assessment of household poverty.

H. Entitlement, Need and the Question of "Who Should Receive?"

Another major issue concerns perceptions of who is entitled to the ration.

Those who complained said people who "need" the ration are getting it, while those who, in their view, do not "need" it are getting it too.

In Data 63-64 and 66-87, respondents indicated that





foodgrain was also flowing to households they felt were not very poor.

A different take came from an 85-year-old ex-village Pradhan (village head), who looked to be well provisioned for households in terms of material needs. He said that when he was asked why he keeps getting ration, he said:

“Free ka hai to kyon na le?”

He also mentioned that everyone needs it, including his family.

These two views expose a critical sociological question: what “need” means to beneficiaries and administrators is not necessarily the same.

One person may define need as economic vulnerability.

Again, need can refer to the right to an available benefit.

This study is not meant to determine whether a given household was officially eligible or ineligible. Respondents’ assertions of inappropriate inclusion are thus not proof of administrative failures, but rather subjective observations of targeting.

I. Elderly Women and Food Insecurity

Elderly women relied most heavily on PMGKAY.

Women aged approximately 65 to over 80 considered this scheme crucial. They reported strained relationships with their daughters-in-law or sons and said they were unsure whether family members would provide regular meals.

One elderly woman said that, regarding rations, she was unsure whether her daughter-in-law would feed her if her own ration supply failed to arrive.

Two women over 80 said that without government food assistance, they had hardly anyone they could rely on to provide food for people in their situation.

For one elderly woman, the prospect of having to beg without food was her greatest fear.

These statements reflect the respondents’ experiences rather than statistical data on the extent of food needs among the elderly.

However, they demonstrate that for some elderly women, PMGKAY is not merely a welfare benefit but a vital source of food security.

Thus, the ration's significance depends on the prevailing state of insecurity.

The experiences of elderly women also reveal that food security is not solely an economic issue.

An individual might live in a multi-member household yet remain uncertain about receiving the daily meals they need.

Thus:

Being a household member $\neq$ a guarantee of food security.

The stories of elderly women indicate that intergenerational relationships, dependence on sons and daughters-in-law, and domestic conflicts can influence an elderly person’s sense of food security.

This adds a sociological dimension to the study. At times, amidst domestic instability and unsupportive relationships, food and drink can offer a measure of stability.

J. Moments of Silence, Hesitation, and Limited Disclosure as Ethnographic Data

Not everyone answered the questions fully.

Some individuals refused to answer, laughed, walked away, or claimed they knew nothing about the rations.

For instance, two young girls remarked:

“Didi, what do we know about what happens to the grain? We are simply told to go and collect it, so we come.”

They then greeted the researcher and left.

Another woman initially said her family received rations but then fell silent.

In the data, a woman worried her husband might get angry if she spoke.

These interactions show that ethnographic data can come from more than direct verbal responses. Silence, hesitation, laughter, evasion, and withdrawal can also reveal social realities during data collection.

However, researchers should not automatically attribute such behaviours to fear, oppression, or a lack of information; they can carry multiple meanings.

VI. DISCUSSION

This study’s results contribute to the broader conversation about food security and social protection in India in several ways.

First, the results support the argument that food assistance can help improve household food security. Previous quantitative work across 2,599 rural households in eastern India found that government transfers under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) relief package reduced moderate food insecurity by 2.4% and severe food insecurity by about 0.92% [21]. The Avarna ethnography adds to this by revealing how beneficiaries see this support in their day-to-day lives.

Secondly, the results validate the significance of the beneficiary perspective. In-depth interviews with 105 beneficiaries in Tamil Nadu showed that perceptions of the public distribution system changed after the pandemic and are shaped by the regional economic and sociocultural context [22]. The Avarna data also indicate that members of the same group hold different views on the same programme.

Third, the study shows a gap between administrative success and lived access.

Official government information reports extensive coverage and high reported full entitlement during PMGKAY implementation [2, 5]. However, respondents in Avarna reported name deletion, problems restoring names, quantity deductions, and uncertainty about who is responsible for addressing administrative issues.

The findings should not be interpreted as opposing the administration’s statistics. Instead, they illustrate the different levels of analysis for programme performance and lived experience of the aggregate.

Fourth, the study finds that PMGKAY's effects differ significantly across vulnerability groups.

Youth respondents frequently assessed the scheme in terms of jobs and future earnings. Working-age respondents frequently mentioned the ration as a way to cut household budgets. It was an asset for agricultural families during years of poor production. The elderly women called it “food security,” “dependence prevention.”

Thus, no single answer can capture PMGKAY's usefulness.

A more sociologically relevant question would be:



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For whom, in what context and how?

This study shows that the answer varies by household.

VII. CONCLUSION

In this ethnographic account of PMGKAY in Avarna village, administrative coverage and distribution statistics alone do not capture how food assistance is implemented and what it means.

Across the 100 respondent narratives, PMGKAY plays several roles in the lives of rural households. For some, it is a vital source of food and livelihood. For some, it is a small gain that doesn't significantly change their life situation. In some cases, youth value work and self-employment more than food assistance. If agricultural production is insufficient, households can use the ration as a fallback. Some older women, especially those who feel they have less family support, see PMGKAY as a crucial way to prevent hunger.

Meanwhile, implementation issues are identified. Respondents repeatedly mentioned problems with beneficiary name exclusion, restoring access, and reported deductions in foodgrain quantity. These experiences show that formal rights do not necessarily translate into equal real access.

The study thus concludes that PMGKAY should be understood as both a social experience and a food-security intervention. It is not only the presence of the entitlement that matters, but also beneficiaries' ability to access it, the amount they actually receive, what they do with it, and the vulnerability of their household situation.

The overall result: food assistance value is differentiated by vulnerability. A small amount that wouldn't be an issue for a child could mean a lot to an older woman with little or no family support. Likewise, a small welfare payment can be economically significant for a household experiencing crop failure or irregular income.

Meanwhile, younger respondents expressed aspirations, indicating that food assistance is not an alternative to livelihood opportunities. While PMGKAY may provide immediate consumption security, employment and independent income are linked to longer-term economic aspirations.

The results show that food-based social protection and livelihood interventions are not mutually exclusive. Food assistance can mitigate immediate economic insecurity, while employment and livelihood support can address longer-term vulnerability. Intensify rural industrialisation to create enough employment opportunities for unorganised labour in rural areas and reduce migration.

A. Policy Implications

Based on ethnographic findings, the following policy implications are drawn:

i. Improve Complaint Processes for Beneficiaries' List

The mechanism for checking the status of beneficiaries who report that their names have been deleted should be clear, accessible, and allow restoration.

ii. Ensure Greater Transparency of Foodgrain Distribution

The amount to which he or she is entitled should be easily verifiable, as should the amount actually received.

iii. Recognise Elderly Vulnerability

Elderly people with less family support should receive special attention for food security interventions.

iv. Link Food Security to Livelihood Opportunities

Given that several young respondents want to start working, food assistance should be supported by employment and livelihood programmes.

v. Consider Household Diversity

Uniform food entitlement may affect different households differently. Elderly, land-poor, agricultural, and economically vulnerable households may need financial and/or non-financial support.

vi. Strengthen Local Accountability

Clearly state the responsibilities and roles of ration dealers, so beneficiaries know where to go for assistance when administrative problems arise.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

Some of the cited references are older and are noted explicitly as [18] and [20]. However, these works remain significant for the current study, as they are pioneering in their fields.

After aggregating input from all authors, I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

- **Conflicts of Interest/ Competing Interests:** Based on my understanding, this article has no conflicts of interest.
- **Funding Support:** This article has not been sponsored or funded by any organisation or agency.
- **Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate:** Yes, securing ethical approval and consent from all participating individuals is essential. The Ethical Approval and Consent are as Follows. The study followed established ethical principles for academic research. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, voluntary participation and the protection of participation rights, were maintained throughout the research process.
- **Data Access Statement and Material Availability:** The data and materials for this article are publicly accessible.
- **Author's Contributions:** The authorship of this article is contributed equally to all participating individuals.

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