



Public Distribution System and the Decline of Traditional Agricultural Practices: A Case Study of Mendhar, Poonch

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Article Info

P-ISSN: 3051-3502

E-ISSN: 3051-3510

Volume: 07

Issue: 02

Received: 05-05-2026

Accepted: 04-06-2026

Published: 03-07-2026

Page No: 31-40

Abstract

The Public Distribution System (PDS) has formed an integral part of the food security approach of India for decades, but its negative impact on reducing incentives of local agricultural production in hill and border areas has been relatively under-explored. This study examines the link between dependence on the PDS and farm agriculture in Mendhar, a border sub-district of Poonch, Jammu & Kashmir, by employing primary survey data from 55 farming households in the vicinity of roughly 30 villages; field interviews; and direct field observation. The results revealed that 76 percent of households polled suffered reductions in agricultural production in the last 5 years and 53 percent of surveyed households agree that PDS has diminished their desire to produce their own food, with factors such as high input costs and poor irrigation reported at least as regularly as PDS dependence as direct causes of decline. It also notices a pronounced generational change, with a majority of young people who preferred PDS to farming. The study recommends therefore to integrate PDS entitlements with more targeted agricultural support like input subsidies, irrigation, and training instead of treating food security and agricultural revival as a competing set of policy goals, based on these findings.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMERE.2026.7.2.31-40>

Keywords: public distribution system (PDS), food security, agricultural production, border areas, smallholder farmers, rural livelihoods, Mendhar, Jammu and Kashmir, sustainable agriculture

1. Introduction

Food security has been a central component of India's development policy, and the Public Distribution System (PDS) one of the largest and longest-standing delivery mechanisms. The Public Distribution System (PDS) introduced in the post-independence years, supplemented by the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) in 1997 and later reinforced by the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013, was designed to protect vulnerable populations against hunger and price shocks through supplying essential grains, which were mainly wheat, rice and sugar, at heavily subsidized rates via a network of Fair Price Shops. PDS has been lauded in recent years for combating acute hunger, shielding households from inflation in food prices and acting as a safety net during periods of drought, conflict or economic turmoil.

Meanwhile, an increasing body of research has begun to pose a more unsettling question: what does steady, widespread access to subsidized food do to the incentive to grow that food locally? In agrarian economies, where farming has been the livelihood and the way of life, the guaranteed availability of cheap grain can quietly alter household choices, reducing the value of both the labor and capital and the risk of farming compared to just picking up a ration. This tension between food security and agricultural self-reliance is not particular to any part of India it's played out with particular intensity in more isolated, hilly and border regions where farming is already stymied by difficult terrain, limited irrigation and poor market access.

Mendhar, a sub-district in the border region of Poonch, Jammu & Kashmir, is one such area. Historically an agrarian economy where farming has been the main livelihood for generations, Mendhar combines the structural difficulties common to hill agriculture erratic rainfall, fragmented and rain-fed landholdings, limited mechanization, and weak market linkages with a high, and rising, dependence on PDS rations. Over the past two decades, local observation and anecdotal reports suggest a noticeable decline in agricultural activity: fields once cultivated season after season now lie fallow, and the younger generation, in particular, appears to be drifting away from farming towards government jobs, daily wage labor, or migration, with subsidized rations quietly reducing the urgency of growing one's own food.

One such area is Mendhar, a sub-district of the border region of Poonch in Jammu & Kashmir. The Mendhar economy has been traditionally agrarian with farming being the main source of livelihood for generations. The structural constraints of hill agriculture erratic rainfall, fragmented and rain-fed landholdings, limited mechanization and weak market linkages are compounded by a high and growing dependence on PDS rations. Local observations and anecdotal evidence over the last twenty years or so point to a significant decline in agricultural activity; fields once cultivated year after year are now lying fallow and the younger generation in particular seems to be turning away from farming and towards government employment, daily wage work, or migration, with subsidized rations quietly reducing the need to grow one's own food.

Whether this observed decline is genuinely driven by PDS dependency, or whether it reflects a broader set of pressures rising input costs, inadequate irrigation, poor crop prices, and changing aspirations among the youth is an empirical question that has not, to date, been examined systematically for Mendhar specifically. Much of the existing literature on PDS and agricultural behaviour draws on evidence from the plains states of India (Bihar, Odisha, Maharashtra), and very little fieldwork has focused on a border, hill-agriculture context like Poonch. This study attempts to close that gap by combining field survey data from 55 farming households with a review of existing scholarship, government reports, and local testimonies, disentangling PDS dependency from the other structural constraints facing farmers in the region, and translating that understanding into policy recommendations that could help balance food security with sustainable agricultural development.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The study is based on four main aims: to investigate PDS' impact on agricultural practices in Mendhar; to explore whether PDS-induced farmers' dependence has socio-economic effects on reduced farming productivity; to analyse the performance of current government policies on agricultural decline; and to propose policy recommendations supporting farmers to be farming dependent without sacrificing food security.

1.2. Contributions of this Study

This study makes the following contributions:

- Provides one of the first primary-data, survey-based assessments of the relationship between PDS dependency and agricultural decline specifically in Mendhar, Poonch a border, hill-agriculture context that is under-represented in the existing PDS literature.

- Quantifies, rather than merely asserts, the relative weight of PDS dependence against other commonly cited causes of agricultural decline (input costs, irrigation, market prices, labor shortage), based on responses from 55 farming households across roughly 30 villages in Mendhar tehsil.
- Offers a demographically transparent dataset including age, gender, education, and village-level spread of respondents allowing the findings on youth attitudes towards farming to be read as first-hand evidence from young respondents themselves, rather than second-hand impressions from older household heads.
- Unlike prior PDS studies that tend to treat food security and agricultural revival as competing policy goals, this study is among the first to translate field-level evidence from a hill-agriculture setting into concrete, prioritized recommendations that integrate PDS with agricultural incentives.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The literature concerning PDS in India and its effects on agricultural behaviour is reviewed in Section 2. The method followed in the study the study area, sampling, and data collection is presented in Section 3. Results are presented in Section 4 and therefore socio-economic implications and policy relevance are discussed. Finally, Section 5 presents key findings and policy recommendations, followed by the references and survey questionnaire.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Public Distribution System in India

PDS was introduced in India for the purpose of food price stabilization and ensuring food grains for the poor who cannot afford them. The Targeted PDS (TPDS) involves subsidized rice, wheat, and sugar to BPL families through local Fair Price Shops. The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 much increased this coverage by giving entitlement to subsidized grain to roughly 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population under a legal grant (Government of India, 2013) ^[7]. And while PDS is widely credited with helping countries combat hunger, critics have long noted that it also produces market distortions and undermines incentives for rural farmers in the places it acts in a tension that lies at the heart of the present study.

2.2. PDS and Agricultural Behaviour: Empirical Evidence

Across multiple contexts in India, the association between PDS and agricultural practices has been thoroughly explored. Many scholars, economists, and policymakers have studied how food security programs shape farming behavior, rural economies, and long-term sustainability. Dreze & Sen (2013) ^[1] stated that PDS has been a very successful factor that reduced hunger and malnutrition, particularly in rural India, and expanded coverage to guarantee subsidized grains to a larger population through NFSA (2013). But Khera (2011) ^[2] emphasizes that PDS improves food security but does not significantly elevate agricultural productivity; indeed, in some cases where there are easily available, inexpensive grains it may discourage local farming Chandrasekhar & Ghosh (2015) ^[3] show that small farmers in states such as Bihar and Odisha reduced the production of staple crops owing to the dependency on PDS. In rural Maharashtra, Swaminathan & Rawal (2018) ^[4] found that

households with access to PDS were significantly less likely to grow their own food resulting in more fallow land. Krishnamurthy (2016)^[5] identified that PDS-supplied grains often undercut local market prices, which rendered producers less profitable when they had to compete on subsidized rates. More connected to the context of this study, Bhat & Rather (2020)^[6] observed that in Jammu & Kashmir, the PDS disrupted the local grain markets of districts such as Rajouri and Poonch, where farmers struggled to sell their crop at competitive prices.

Collectively, this literature points to two things that are meaningful to the current study. First, the benefits of PDS to food-security are seldom argued against; the debate is about its second-order influence on production incentives. Second, the vast majority of the empirical support for the decline of PDS-based agriculture is from plains states that have very different agro-climatic conditions than Mendhar's hill terrain. The contribution of the present study is to examine whether the same pattern holds, and to what extent, in a border hill-agriculture setting where farming was already limited well before PDS became widespread.

3. Materials and Methods

The current research adopts qualitative and quantitative

research methodology, examining the association of PDS dependency with agricultural decline in Mendhar. Mendhar's economy is agrarian; the main crops, maize, wheat, pulses and vegetables, grown with traditional rain-fed techniques of agriculture together with little mechanization. Farming in this region has always had structural challenges beyond PDS hilly terrain and erratic rainfall, absence of institutionalized irrigation facilities and the absence of access to modern farming methods and inputs, and it is against this already-constrained backdrop that the potential additional effect of PDS dependency needed to be examined.

The primary data for the study were collected from 55 farming households of about 30 villages of Mendhar tehsil through a structured questionnaire on the household demographic details, the farming background and detailed responses on agricultural decline and PDS usage patterns. This was complemented with detailed interviews of farmers, PDS dealers, local authorities and agricultural experts to provide qualitative context to the survey responses, and with direct field observations of land-use patterns, abandoned farmlands and local market trends to independently verify the extent of the changes being reported by respondents (Figure 1).

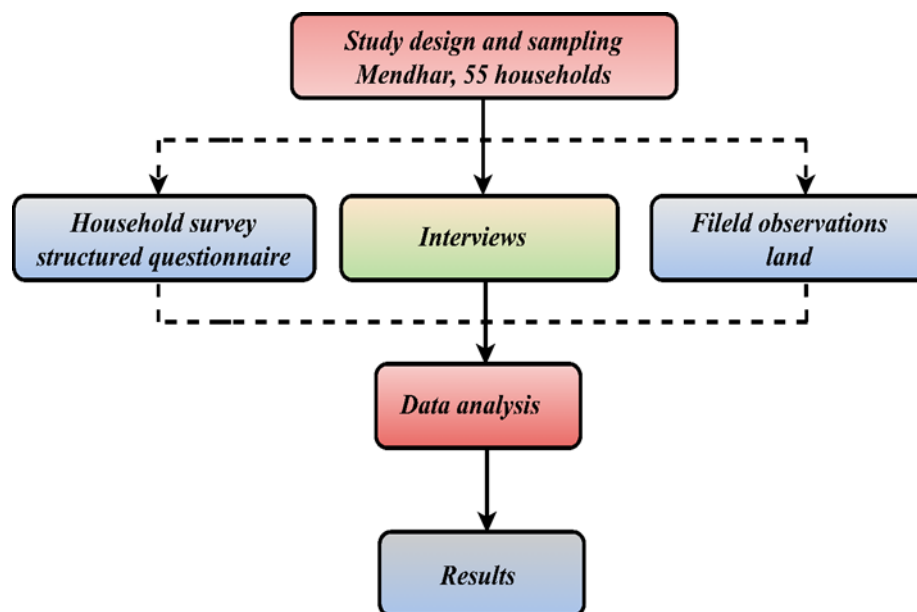


Fig 1: Methodology flow of the study

4. Results

This section summarizes results from the field survey that was conducted on 55 farming families in Mendhar and discusses their implications based on the qualitative data collected during the fieldwork. The findings include the respondent profile, farming experience, reasons for the decline of agriculture, use patterns of PDS and what the respondents would classify as the effect of PDS on farming decisions, before discussing the larger socio-economic implications and how effective the responses by the government have been in addressing this issue.

4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sample is also very skewed toward younger respondents: among 55 respondents, 47 (85.5%) are in the 18-30 age

group, with 14.5% split between 31-45, 46-60 and 60+, respectively. In gender, 47 (85.5% of respondents) were males, and 8 (14.5%) were females. Educational attainment levels were also high: 40 people (72.7%) were graduates or above, 9 (16.4%) completed higher secondary education and 6 (10.9%) had secondary, primary or no formal education. The respondents were spread over many villages in Mendhar tehsil, with the largest single groups in the Gursai/Ghani District Poonch cluster (9 respondents, 16.4%) and Bhatidhar (8, 14.5%), Salwan (4), Ari (2), and Kallar Mohra (2) also represented, alongside roughly 30 respondents (55%) drawn individually from about 28 other villages, indicating that it was a widely dispersed rural sample, not fixed on one area as shown in Figures 1–4.

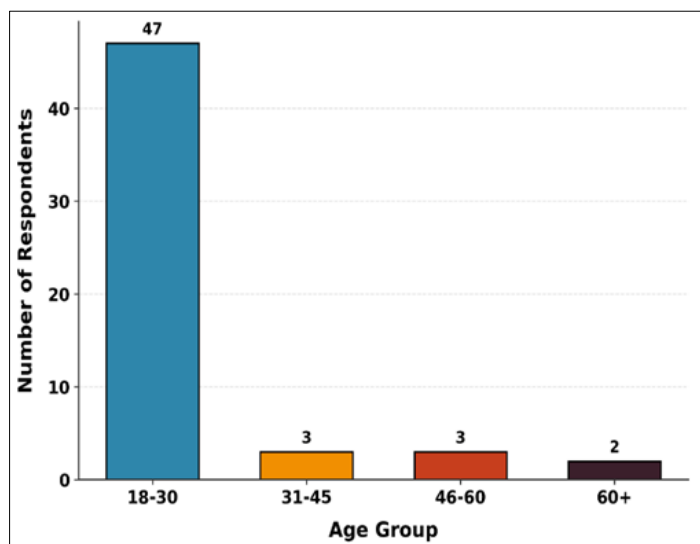


Fig 2: Age distribution of respondents (n = 55)

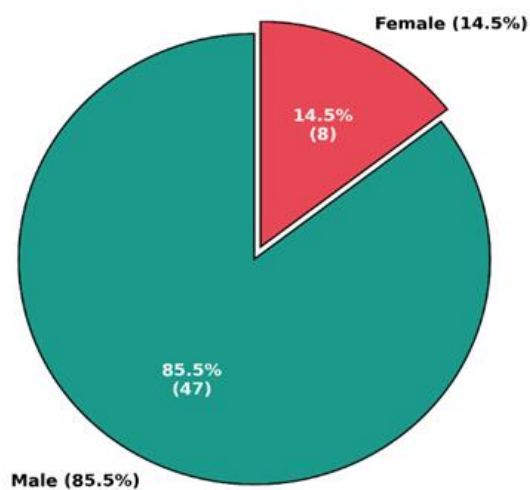


Fig 3: Gender distribution of respondents (n = 55)

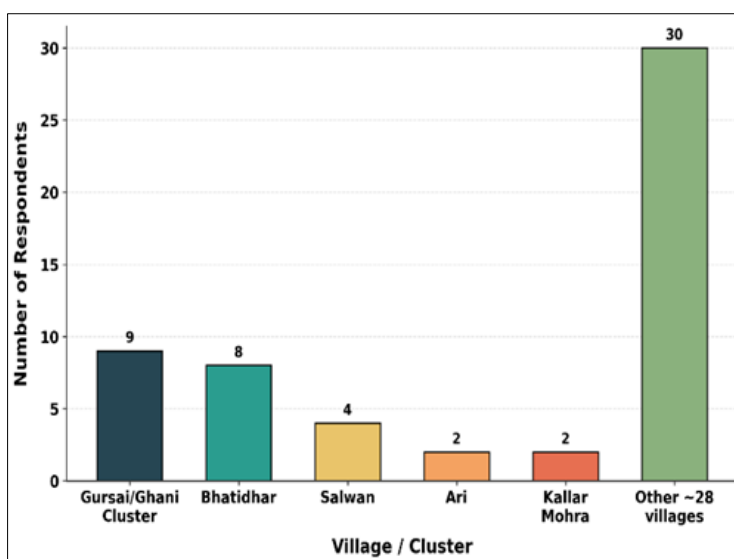


Fig 4: Education level of respondents (n = 55)

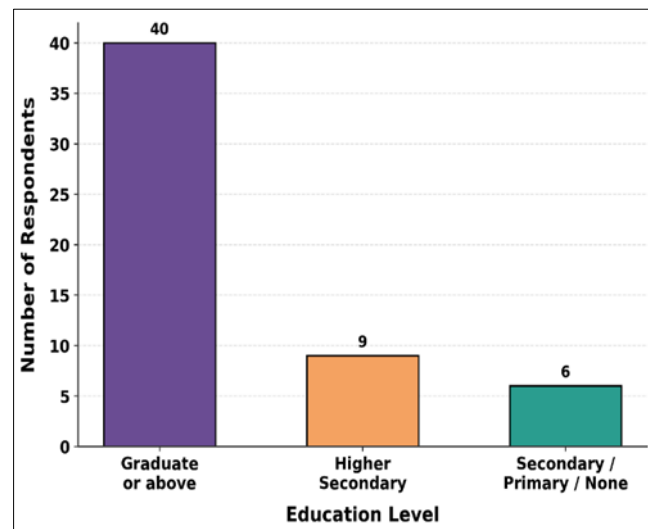


Fig 5: Village-wise distribution of respondents (n = 55)

This demographic bias is an important interpretive perspective for the remaining outcomes: because the sample is dominated by young, relatively educated, male respondents, results regarding “youth preference for PDS over farming” (Section 4.6) are more drawn from youth than second-hand, as in reports from the elders who run households: this can be seen as making that particular result more immediate and trustworthy, but at the same time, it also seems to limit how generalizable the findings can be broadly drawn to elders or female farmers located in the community

4.2. Farming Background and Income

Of the 55 surveyed households, 48 (87.3%) reported owning

farmland, while 7 (12.7%) did not. Household size was most concentrated in the 4–6-member range (69.1%), followed by 7+ members (16.4%) and 1-3 members (14.5%). Maize (43.6%) and wheat (32.7%) were the main crops, followed by other crops (12.7%) and vegetables (9.1%). Farming remained the single largest reported source of primary income (34.5%), followed by government jobs (23.6%), daily wage labor (21.8%), other occupations (12.7%), private jobs, and business, indicating that while farming is still the leading livelihood, non-farm income sources collectively outnumber it, as shown in Figure 5.

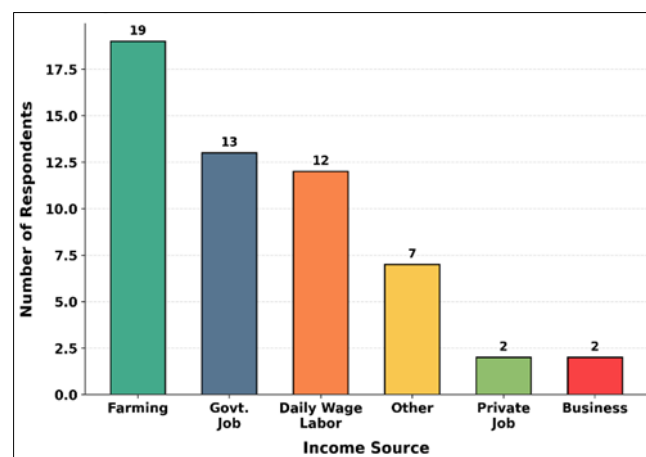


Fig 6: Primary source of household income (n = 55)

4.3. Decline in Agricultural Production

A vast majority of respondents (42 of 55, 76%) reported that their agricultural production has declined over the past five years. A total of 7 (13%) households did not report a decrease, and 6 (11%) reported no change. This is an observation supported by field notes and interviews of increasing fallow land across Mendhar: Many farmers now rely on PDS rations rather than growing their own crops, and cultivation has become progressively less economically viable relative to simply collecting a ration, a pattern local respondent and PDS dealers stated – a generational change rather than a sudden one, as shown in Figure 6.

Among households reporting decline, the most cited reasons were the high cost of seeds and fertilizers (16 responses) and dependence on PDS for food (10 responses), followed by lack of irrigation (7), low market prices for crops (3), and labor shortage (2); a further 17 respondents cited an unspecified “other” reason. This indicates that while PDS dependence is a meaningful factor, rising input costs and irrigation constraints are cited at least as often as PDS reliance as direct causes of declining production a nuance that qualifies the more one-sided narrative sometimes offered in local discourse, where PDS is blamed almost exclusively for the decline, as shown in Figure 7.

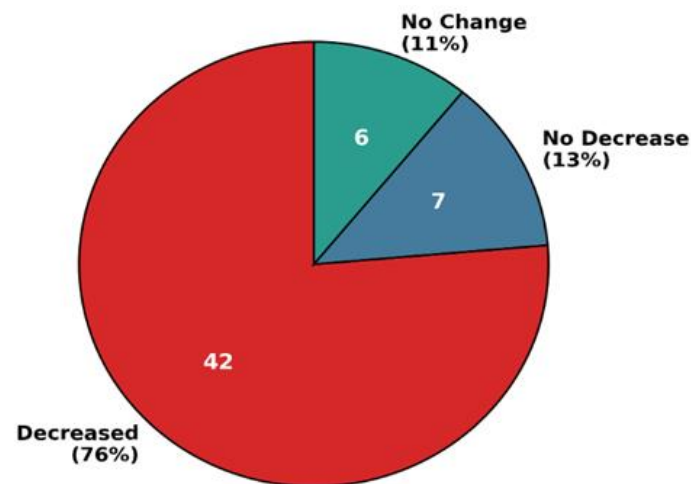


Fig 7: Reported decline in agricultural production over the last 5 years

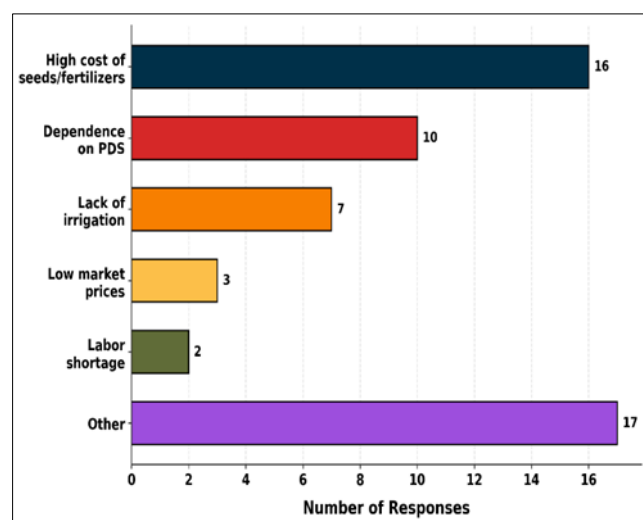


Fig 8: Reasons cited for decline in agricultural production

4.4. Patterns of PDS Use

Of 55 households, 44 (80%) reported using PDS rations. But dependency was varied: 28 households (51%) received less than 25% of their monthly food requirements from PDS, 15 (27%) received 25–50%, 7 (13%) received 50–75%, and only 5 (9%) depended on PDS for over 75% of their food needs.

This means that, for most respondents in the household, PDS plays an auxiliary role rather than the primary one, which gives an essential qualification to the assumption of an entire, or near complete, household dependency on PDS, as shown in Figures 8 and 9.

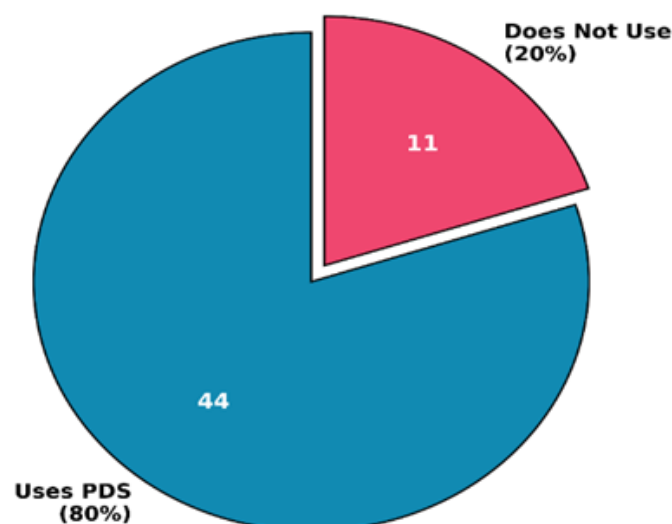


Fig 9: Households using PDS rations

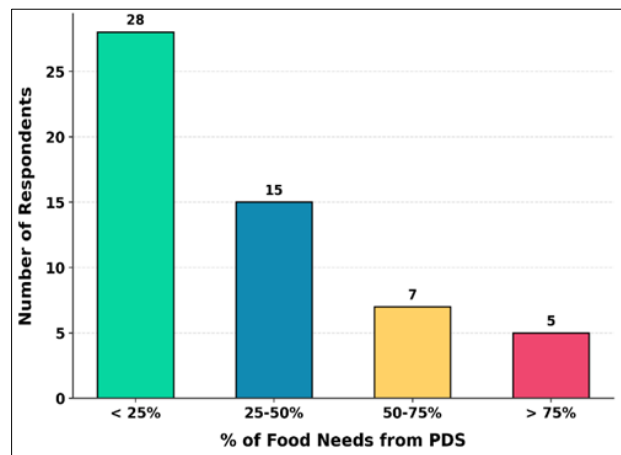


Fig 10: Share of monthly food needs met by PDS

4.5. Perceived Effect of PDS on Farming

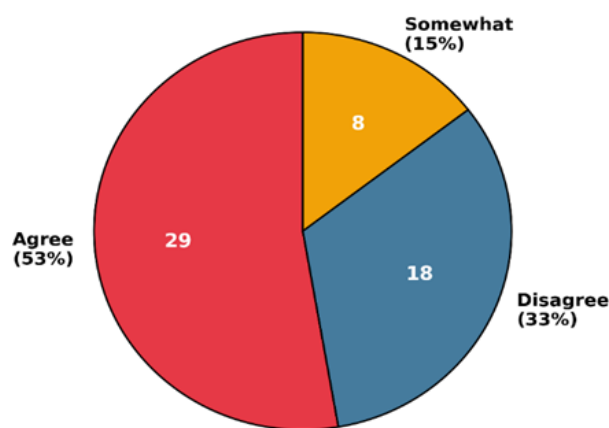


Fig 11: Has PDS reduced the need to grow own food?

Around 29 respondents (53%) agreed that PDS has decreased their need to grow their own food, with 18 (33%) disagreeing and 8 (15%) saying “somewhat.” For profitability, the response was split more evenly: 25 respondents (45%) either agree or strongly agree that PDS has made farming less profitable, 16 (29%) are neutral, and 14 (25%) are disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (see Figures 10 and 11). This near-even split may indicate that the PDS-profitability association, which is relevant to a high proportion of

households, is not felt uniformly across the sample. It also relates to the pattern of market disruption noted by farmers and local traders interviewed as they describe themselves: when demand for home-grown staples weakens, local grain markets see less activity while middlemen and traders in Mendhar, for instance, say business is reduced, a second-order impact of PDS on the rural economy that is felt beyond individual farming households.

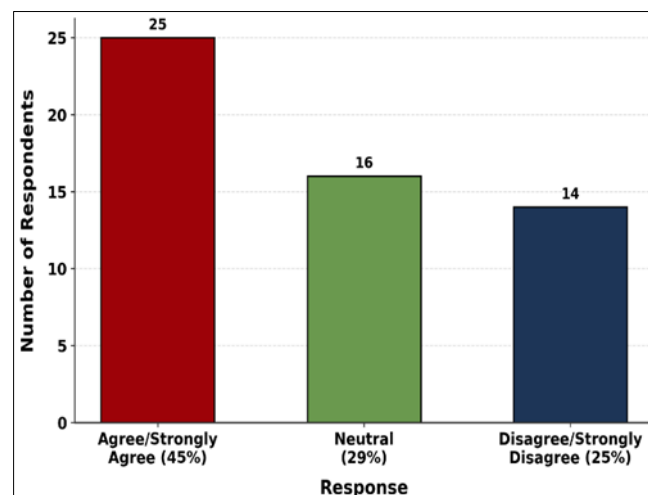


Fig 12: Perception that PDS has made farming less profitable

4.6. Influence on Farming Decisions and Youth Attitudes

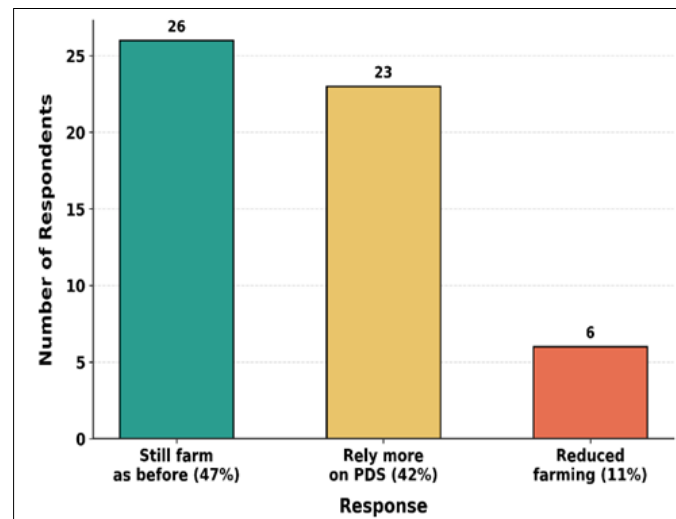


Fig 13: Has PDS influenced the decision to continue farming?

When asked directly whether PDS had influenced their decision to continue farming, 26 respondents (47%) said they still farm as before, 23 (42%) said they now rely more on PDS, and 6 (11%) said they have actively reduced farming because of PDS. Complete abandonment of farming is still restricted to a small minority, however, the increased reliance on PDS for nearly half the sample indicates a slow behavioural shift rather than a sudden withdrawal from agriculture, as figure 12 illustrates.

Based on generational attitudes, 29 respondents (53%) indicated that the younger members of their family preferred PDS over farming, 17 (31%) said no, and 9 (16%) indicated

“somewhat.” As the sampling of the survey was specifically biased toward the young (Section 4.1), this result is more likely to have been true and likely more a direct report of the youth than of older household members and thus more robust to testing. It hints at a longer-term threat to the sustainability of farming in Mendhar beyond current production levels: where the present generation continue to cultivate, succession planning appears weak, and the lack of interest of the young might compound the impact of any short-term decline in production into a longer-term structural shift from farming as a livelihood in the region seen in Figure 13.

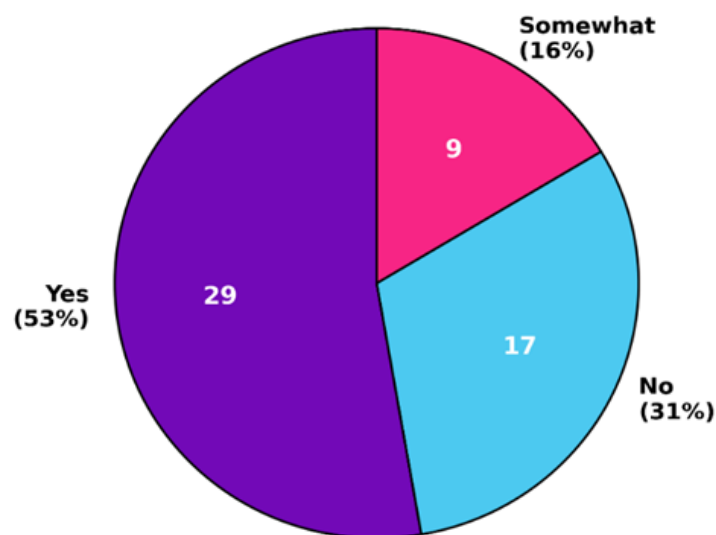


Fig 14: Do young people prefer PDS over farming?

4.7. What Would Encourage Farmers to Farm More

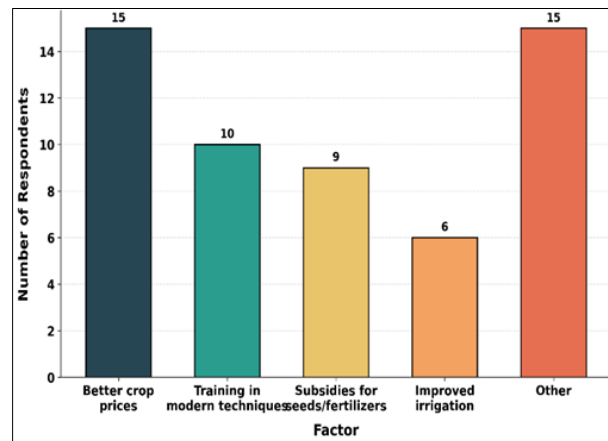


Fig 15: Factors that would encourage farmers to farm more

When asked what could help respondents farm more, the most common reasons given were better crop prices (15), training in modern farming techniques (10), subsidies for seeds and fertilizers (9) and improved irrigation (6), followed by other unspecified factors (15). It implies that market pricing and technical capacity policy interventions may be, at least in part, as critical to agriculture as PDS reform in reviving agricultural participation, and is directly relevant to the subsequent policy debate, which has been illustrated in Figure 14.

4.8. Socio-Economic Consequences

Beyond the farm-level statistics published above, the departure from traditional farming has three wider socio-economic implications for Mendhar. For one thing, self-

sufficiency has reduced: the majority of surveyed farmers no longer produce enough for their own household consumption, much less for the market. Second, it makes households more vulnerable, as dependence on PDS increases the risk of supply chain disruptions, delays in ration distribution, or changes in eligibility rules risks that were largely absent when households produced their own food. Third, and perhaps less apparent immediately in the survey data, is a kind of cultural erosion: as fewer people become involved in agriculture and interest among the youth continues to dwindle (Section 4.6), traditional farming knowledge, crop rotation practices, local seed varieties, and rain-fed cultivation techniques suited to Mendhar's terrain risk being lost between generations.

4.10. Summary of Key Findings

Table 1

Indicator	Result
Respondents aged 18-30	47 / 55 (85.5%)
Male respondents	47 / 55 (85.5%)
Graduate or above (education)	40 / 55 (72.7%)
Households owning farmland	48 / 55 (87%)
Reported decline in production (5 yrs)	42 / 55 (76%)
Top cause of decline	High input costs (16), PDS dependence (10)
Households using PDS rations	44 / 55 (80%)
Food needs met by PDS < 25%	28 / 55 (51%)
PDS reduced need to grow own food (Yes)	29 / 55 (53%)
Agree PDS made farming less profitable	25 / 55 (45%)
Now rely more on PDS (behavioural shift)	23 / 55 (42%)
Youth prefer PDS over farming	29 / 55 (53%)
Top ask to farm more	Better crop prices (15)

5. Conclusion

While PDS has been essential for food security, its unintended implications on agriculture in Mendhar ought not to be trivialised. Survey research reveals that most households have reported falling agricultural production, with PDS dependence as a contributing factor for many, but not the only or even the leading cause; high input costs, lack of irrigation, and low market prices weigh just as heavily. We need the balance; we need the access without compromising farming for food. Policy reforms must combine PDS with

incentives for agriculture in particular enhanced crop prices, irrigation infrastructure, training in modern techniques to reintroduce sustainable farming to the area. Another consideration was that the survey participants included a significant proportion of young (18-30), male, and mostly educated respondents. This gives more confidence in the findings of the study on PDS and agriculture attitudes of youth: these perspectives were taken from first-hand experience, not recorded by elder family members; but at the same time, it implies the findings should be interpreted as

being most reflective of the younger Mendhar farming household's, and future survey should seek to be more balanced on various demographic and age characteristics to be sure whether there are older farmers reporting a similar outcome.

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How to Cite This Article

Mir Q, Hussain P, Shah ZA. Public Distribution System and the Decline of Traditional Agricultural Practices: A Case Study of Mendhar, Poonch. *Int J Multidiscip Evol Res*. 2026;7(2):31-40. doi:10.54660/IJMER.2026.7.2.31-40.

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