

# 'Biscuits can't replace mid-day meals in schools'

NEW DELHI: In what could strengthen the government's case in not letting "100 gram biscuit packs" replace hot cooked mid-day meals in schools, the Supreme Court-appointed special commissioners have slammed the lobbying by members of Parliament to undo the current scheme.

In a no-holds barred communication to the HRD ministry, apex court-appointed commissioners N C Saxena and Harsh Mander said they were "completely opposed to any such step being introduced". They went on to warn the ministry, "There is no room for a re-look at the emphatic orders... any attempt to do so would not only be blatantly illegal but would, most certainly, also be construed as contempt of court by the government of India."

*TOI* had reported on the lobbying by 30-odd MPs on behalf of the biscuit manufacturers association to replace hot cooked meals with their products for more than 12 crore children in the 9.5 lakh schools under the central government's mid-day meal scheme.

The commissioners took umbrage at the attempt by MPs to ignore the existing SC rulings on the matter. The court, in 2001, had ordered that all states should provide cooked meals instead of dry rations. In 2004, the court had re-emphasised its earlier ruling stating: "It's the constitutional duty of every state and union territory to implement in letter and spirit (the 2001 ruling)."

After the *TOI* report, an HRD ministry official said since the lobbying by MPs had come out in the open, biscuit manufacturers would find it difficult to pursue it. "They do not understand the complexities of replacing cooked meal with biscuits. Manufacturers need to see for themselves the groundswell of support cooking has created in rural and semi-rural India," an HRD ministry official said, adding that lobbying for biscuits was in line with the overall pattern of private sector trying to usurp government's role in the name of transparency.

"Everyone wants a pie of the vastly increased education pie," the official said.

The commissioners also pointed to the government's view on the issue expressed by the ministry of women and child development recently. The WCD ministry's food and nutrition board had said that biscuits came under the category of snacks and could not replace meals. The board had pointed out that 100 gram of "snacks" provided only 6.5 gram of protein, which did not fulfil the nutrition amounts fixed under the MDM scheme.

Saxena and Mander also pointed out that centralized procurement, that supply of biscuits would naturally entail, would lead to largescale corruption. The commissioners reminded the government that the apex court had ordered a ban on use of contractors in supply of supplementary nutrition under government programmes. Going beyond the logistical problems of replacing cooked meals with biscuits, the commissioners also said that pre-packed food would undercut the social advantages of a decentralised process that involved members of the local community and "provided opportunity for millions of women engaged as cooks and helpers" in preparing the food served in schools.

They pointed to the Supreme Court ruling that preference should be given to Dalits, Scheduled Castes and

Scheduled Tribes when appointing cooks and helpers. "Centralised food systems do not address such concerns (of social equity)," the commissioners said.