

Groundswell for mid-day meal scheme

The Supreme Court and the overwhelming majority of academics and NGOs believe in it. A growing number of poor parents have emerged as a pressure group for this programme, report [Kalpana Parikh & Summiya Yasmeen](#).



January 2004 - It's a measure of the low priority accorded to elementary education in post-independence India that only on July 1, 2003 was the long-standing proposal to provide a free mid-day meal to all students in government primary schools implemented in the southern state of Karnataka (pop. 56 million). After the introduction of its Akshara Dasoha mid-day meal scheme, Karnataka became the eighth of India's 31 state governments to action this scheme which has universally effected dramatic improvements in school enrollment. However some of the largest states of the Indian Union including Uttar Pradesh (pop. 160 million), Maharashtra (96 million), Bihar (82 million) and West Bengal (80 million) are yet to introduce the free mid-day meal scheme within their administrative jurisdictions.

Free mid-day meals for school students were first introduced in a Japanese private school in the late 1800s, in Brazil in 1938 and in the United States in 1946. With evidently satisfactory results. Both Japan and the US boast 100 percent adult literacy and even Brazil which (like India) is classified as a medium income nation by the United Nations Development Programme has attained 87.3 percent literacy according to UNDP's Human Development Report, 2003 as against India's 58 percent. Comments the Global School Feeding Report of the United Nation's World Food Programme: "School feeding programmes often double enrollment within a year and can produce a 40 percent improvement in academic performance in just two years. Children who take part in such programmes stay in school longer and the expense is minimal."

The reluctance of India's central planners, policy formulators and educationists to action the free mid-day meal scheme to incentivise parents at the base of the social pyramid to send their children to school is especially surprising. The scheme, first introduced in the southern state of Tamilnadu way back in 1956, has proved remarkably successful in improving school enrollment in that state. Though partially launched in 1956, the mid-day meal programme was given full shape and form by the state's actor-turned chief minister the late M.G. Ramachandran in 1982. Since then its efficient state-wide implementation has vaulted Tamilnadu into the ranks of the most literate states of the Indian Union (adult literacy: 73.5 percent), an attribute which has endowed this southern state (pop. 62 million) with a shower of benefits including a stable population, steady industrialisation and perhaps the best physical and social infrastructure in the country.

Under the Tamilnadu government's Nutritious Meal Programme (NMP), 7.8 million children are provided a daily cooked meal in 39,036 rural and 2,082 urban centres. In addition 19,366 ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) — a central government initiative — sponsored child welfare centres also provide noon meals. The state government's budgetary provision for NMP for the year 2003-04 is a relatively sizeable Rs.659.39 crore (2.47 percent of its annual budgetary outlay). Against this modest cost, the benefit has been a dramatic increase in school enrollment in the state — in primary schools it has shot up 31 percent from 5.04 million in 1985-86 to 6.59 million in 2002-03. Moreover in middle school, drop-outs have decreased from 24 to 13.85 percent during the same period.

"A free mid-day meal is provided to all children in government, corporation, panchayat and municipal schools — primary and secondary — in the state. The main objective of the mid-day meal scheme was to boost enrollment and reduce school drop-outs. These objectives have been substantially attained, with dramatic impact on the enrollment and retention of girl children in particular. Additionally it has provided employment to destitute mothers who work as cooks in the various noon meal centres in the state. Our well-developed infrastructure and community participation has ensured that the scheme runs smoothly, without any problems," says Chandrakanta Gariyali, secretary, social welfare department of the government of Tamilnadu.

Quite evidently the Tamilnadu experiment is replicable in other states given political will. A recent study of mid-day meal schemes in three states of the Indian Union — Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Karnataka — conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies of the Delhi School of Economics clearly indicates the nexus between improved student enrollment and retention and the free mid-day meal. A study of 81 schools in which free mid-day meals were introduced in July 2001, indicates class I enrollment rose by 15 percent within the year. Particularly impressive jumps were made in female enrollment in Chhattisgarh (17 percent) and Rajasthan (29 percent).

"Apart from our own findings, provisional enrollment data for Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan as a whole supplied by the education department, also suggest major improvement in female enrollment in 2002-03: 19 and 18 percent respectively after the introduction of the mid-day meal scheme. There is also much informal evidence which indicates that mid-day meals have enhanced daily school attendance and not just annual enrollment. Many parents, for instance, reported that the availability of a mid-day meal made it much easier for them to persuade their children to go to school in the morning. Most teachers also concur that mid-day meals have raised daily attendance, especially among young children," says Jean Dreze, visiting professor at the Delhi School of Economics who was a member of the team which conducted the study. Dreze's observations are important because his research credentials are impeccable. He has co-authored a number of books with Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen and is a member of the support group of the Right to Food campaign, an informal network of organisations and individuals committed to the realisation of the right to food in India.

Dreze believes that apart from boosting school attendance and child nutrition, mid-day meals have an important socialisation value and foster gender equity. "As children learn to sit together and share a common meal, one can expect some erosion of caste prejudices and class inequality. They also reduce the gender gap in education, since they boost female school attendance more than male attendance," he says.

Mid-day meals: MGR's valuable legacy

The mid-day meal scheme for school children was introduced in Tamilnadu as early as 1925 by the Corporation of Madras, but became a state-wide scheme in 1956 under then chief minister the late K. Kamaraj who introduced it in Adi Dravida community schools as the 'Poor Feeding' programme. In 1961, the government started receiving American aid for the programme and it was expanded to all corporation and government schools in urban areas.

But it was only in July 1982 under the leadership of the legendary chief minister the late M.G. Ramachandran that the 'Puratchi Thalaivar MGR Nutritious Meal Programme' (PTMGR NMP) was introduced in a phased manner in child welfare centres in rural areas for pre-school children in the age group two-five years and for primary school children in the age group five-nine years. Subsequently on September 15 the same year, despite widespread criticism from economists and pundits, MGR presciently extended the scheme to Nutritious Meal Centres in urban areas. It was further extended to school students between 10-15 years in 1984. The successful introduction of Tamilnadu's NMP prompted the creation of a National Programme of Nutritional Support to primary education (popularly known as the mid-day meal scheme) in 1995. Under this programme the Union HRD ministry supplies free foodgrains to primary school children at the rate of

100 gm per child for ten months in the year.

Today, the TN free noon meal is available to all children of government, corporation, panchayat and municipal schools in the state. Old age pensioners and pregnant women can also avail of the scheme. The infrastructure, built gradually over the years comprises child welfare centres, school nutritious meal centres and anganwadi centres monitored by committees at the district, block, corporation, municipality and panchayat levels.

The positive feedback from schools in the state indicates that the scheme has more than fulfilled its main objectives of combating malnutrition among children, increasing literacy, serving as an incentive for enhancing enrollment and retention of students in primary and middle schools. As a consequence enrollment in primary schools has risen by 35 percent from 4.8 million in 1984-85 to 6.5 million in 2002-03. Simultaneously the dropout rate in middle school has reduced from 24 percent in 1984-85 to 13.85 percent in 2002-03.

Given the proven efficacy of the mid-day meal scheme in improving school enrollment and attendance in a society in which an estimated 59 million children in the age-group six-14 are out of school, it is shocking that only half of India's 31 states provide cooked mid-day meals in schools within their administrative borders, though three states have launched the scheme on a pilot basis in some districts. Seven states with an aggregate population of 400 million don't provide a cooked meal despite a Supreme Court judgement of 2001 directing all state governments to provide cooked mid-day meals in primary schools within six months.

In its judgement in *People's Union for Civil Liberties vs. Union of India & Ors* (Writ Petition (Civil) No. 196 of 2001) the apex court decreed that state governments must "implement the mid-day meal scheme by providing every child in every government and government assisted primary schools with a prepared mid-day meal with a minimum content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein each day of school for a minimum of 200 days. Those governments providing dry rations instead of cooked meals must within three months (28 February 2002) start providing cooked meals in all government and government-aided primary schools in half of the districts of the state (in order of poverty) and must within a further period of three months (28 May 2002) extend the provision of cooked meals to the remaining parts of the state."

Though most of the defaulting state governments failed to meet the apex court deadline of May 28, 2002, the governments of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have expanded their mid-day schemes to cover all primary schools administered and aided by them. The recalcitrant states which despite repeated warnings from the Supreme Court have not yet implemented the cooked mid-day meal scheme are Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand which host an aggregate population of 275 million citizens of whom 50 percent are comprehensively illiterate. These rogue states have remained indifferent even to the Supreme Court's order of May 2, 2003 that they "make a meaningful beginning of the cooked mid-day meal scheme in at least 25 percent of the districts, which may be most poor".

Following this latest directive of the apex court, in Uttar Pradesh — India's most populous (160 million) state — in June this year the government cleared the decks for providing cooked mid-day meals in six of its most backward districts. But following the fall of the Mayawati government on corruption charges, this project still awaits implementation. The initiative which would benefit 1.5 million students in 8,670 primary schools and cost the state exchequer a mere Rs.20 crore (an infinitesimal percentage of the state government's annual expenditure of Rs.49,000 crore) has been shelved because of "lack of funds".

Subsequently in November (2003) the state's basic education minister Kiranpal Singh in the newly sworn-in Mulayam Singh government announced that the "yet to be implemented" scheme will be extended to 18 of the most backward districts of the state and for good measure added that those found lax in the task will be punished. But this well-intentioned resolve is yet to be translated into action.

Not surprisingly the dominant sentiment within the ministry of education in Lucknow is sceptical. Department officials concede that if the free mid-day meal scheme could not be implemented in the six most backward districts for lack of funds, it is highly unlikely that it will be implemented in 18 (out of a total of 70) districts in the state. They argue that the number of meals and children involved are too large to be manageable. According to a highly placed official in the Basic Education Directorate which is responsible for the implementation of the mid-day meal scheme: "Since the Supreme Court has issued directives on the implementation of the scheme, steps will have to be taken. Capacity and will, and not resources, are the real constraint. But we are making a modest beginning in 18 districts where the scheme should be operational by January 2004," he promises.

Though lack of budgets and financial resources is the standard excuse of recalcitrant state governments, the consensus of informed opinion is that it is the lack of political, bureaucratic and societal will which has delayed and hamstrung the implementation of the free mid-day meal for school children.

According to the CES survey (mentioned earlier), the approximate cost to state governments of providing cooked meals for 200 days a year (as stipulated by the Supreme Court) is a mere Re.1 per day per capita because the central government provides grains and cereals from the rotting 65 million tonne foodgrains mountain stored in the makeshift godowns of the public sector Food Corporation of India. Therefore for instance, it would cost the Uttar Pradesh government a mere Rs.300 crore per year to provide mid-day meals to all primary (upto class V) children. And if all the estimated 150 million children enrolled in government primary and secondary schools across the country are provided free mid-day meals (as in the US), the additional expenditure incurred (including the cost to the central government, transportation and state government costs) at Rs. 3 per student per day for 200 days would aggregate Rs. 9,000 crore annually — an 11 percent increment of the national education outlay of Rs. 80,000 crore.

Though ex facie the incremental sum of Rs.9,000 crore per year required to implement the free mid-day meal scheme in all government and aided schools countrywide seems too large to be affordable, in reality it's a small price to pay to reap a potentially monumental socio-economic benefit. Particularly if one bears in mind that the national annual expenditure on unmerited subsidies to the relatively rich middle class (on electricity, water, cooking gas, food, fertiliser, higher education etc) aggregates Rs.120,000 crore and the nation's annual defence expenditure is Rs.70,000 crore. Quite clearly the question is the lack of political and societal will to redraw national spending priorities.

This conspicuous lack will to implement a scheme which offers great cost-benefit advantages is rooted in several socio-economic factors. For one, India's new tribe of self-perpetuating politicians is subliminally aware that an educated population is certain to demand good governance and accountability from them. Secondly there is a deep-rooted bias in favour of merit-based rather than universal education within the nation's dominant middle class. Thus while considerable pains are taken to establish excellent institutions of education such as the Kendria Vidyalayas and Jawahar Navodalayas and top-rung private sector schools for high performance primary and secondary students (and the IITs and IIMs for school leavers), there is little interest within governments at the central and state levels to raise universal primary and secondary education standards which would benefit poor citizens at the base of India's complex and massive social pyramid.

"Politicians and bureaucrats tend to be lukewarm about the free mid-day meal programme because there are very few rent-seeking opportunities in such low-budget schemes. In fiscal 2001-02 the Karnataka state government spent Rs.35 crore on free uniforms for school children but could spare only Rs.1.06 crore for partial implementation of the mid-day meal scheme. Hence the lack of pressure (from the poor) for the noon meal programme despite its obvious socio-economic benefits," says Dr. A.S. Seetharamu, professor of education at the Institute of Social & Economic Change, Bangalore.

But with the free mid-day meal scheme having dramatically improved enrollment and retention in schools in the southern states, the central government accepts that beyond merely providing free foodgrains to state governments, it will have to also allocate monetary resources to some of the laggard state governments. Says S.C. Tripathi, secretary elementary education in the Union HRD ministry: "We have suggested that the prime minister's Gramod Ayojana programme contributes 15 percent of its funds for the mid-day meal scheme. That will convert into an additional allocation of Rs.450 crore per year which will be disbursed to the states for conversion of foodgrains into cooked meals. We are also working on the possibility of getting another Rs.600 crore from other national employment schemes."

Laggard states surprisingly include Maharashtra, which is also India's most industrialised state and is impressed by positive cost-benefit reports from the southern states. Of the state's 64,000 primary schools, 31,483 schools have begun providing cooked mid-day meals since end July. According to S.P. Joshi, deputy secretary of primary school education in the Maharashtra government "the mid-day meal scheme will very soon be extended to all government primary schools in the state". "Though the scheme is also applicable to government-aided schools, their managements tend to be uninterested because children in such schools are usually from a higher strata of society and tend to be wary about the quality of food provided," says Joshi.

Low rent-earning opportunities apart, a possible cause of the general lack of will within state governments to action the school mid-day meal programme could be lack of confidence about implementing this inevitably massive programme while maintaining minimum quality standards. Within a week of expanding its free mid-day meal scheme to all primary schools on July 1 last year, the Karnataka government's much-publicised Akshara Dasoha free meals scheme suffered a major setback when over 150 children in the Gadag district were taken ill after a mid-day meal in school. NGOs and social activists alleged that the food was prepared by untrained cooks in unhygienic cooking conditions. But despite this initial hiccup, the government persisted with the programme and today it's listed as a major achievement of the S.M. Krishna administration. Indeed the CES study is replete with high praise. "Karnataka boasts the best menu: apart from rice and sambhar, school children enjoy vegetables, pongal, lemon rice and even sweets like kshira," say the authors of the study.

"There were some problems in the initial stages, mainly due to the hasty appointment of untrained cooks, which were blown out of proportion by the media. The problem occurred only in about ten locations while the Akshara Dasoha programme was implemented in 38,000 villages. However we learned a lesson. Now we formally train cooks in cooking as well as hygiene and cleanliness. District level training camps of three-five days duration are conducted in all district headquarters to train kitchen staff. Moreover to date 8,000 kitchen blocks have been built in schools and another 30,000 will be built by the end of the next academic year," says G. Chandrashekhar, the Bangalore-based joint director of the mid-day meal scheme.

The general lack of establishment enthusiasm in some states is also influenced by the widely held belief that the provision of cooked meals disrupts classroom processes. Some media reports suggest that teachers spend too much time supervising culinary operations to the detriment of academic timetables. Jean Dreze (quoted earlier) acknowledges this apprehension while dismissing it as exaggerated. "Sensitisation of teachers about the positive aspects of the scheme is very important. The majority of teachers fear classroom disruption and worry that it will take up too much of their time. Greater awareness of the benefits of mid-day meals would help to overcome such fears," says Dreze.

But while there are pockets of resistance and scepticism about the cost-benefits of the free mid-day meals within the teachers community, somewhat belatedly a groundswell of societal pressure is building up across the country in favour of the scheme. In Karnataka within a short while of the free mid-day meal scheme having been expanded to cover 4.5 million students in all lower primary schools across the state, parental pressure is being exerted to expand it to cover students in higher primary classes — standards VI and VII — as well. "After some initial glitches the Karnataka government's Akshara Dasoha scheme is running very smoothly because local level SMDCs (school development monitoring committees) comprising parents and panchayat governments are monitoring the scheme. Decentralisation is the vital prerequisite of the success of this scheme," says V.P. Niranjanaradhya, research officer at the Centre for the Child and Law of the National Law School University of India, Bangalore.

The critical importance of decentralising the free mid-day meal to the maximum possible degree has impacted itself upon the educators of the Union HRD ministry in New Delhi. The ministry is currently proposing the constitution and involvement of independent self-help groups in the form of mothers' groups in every school offering the scheme. "The main work is at the micro level. The more we involve government machinery, the more difficult it becomes to supervise because this is a programme which needs micro-management at the grassroot level. Village Education Committees and Village Panchayats have to assume responsibility of ensuring that the mid-day meal scheme works in their local schools," says S.C. Tripathi secretary, elementary education in the ministry.

State governments also need to co-opt and involve India's massive number of NGOs (non-government organisations) which are ever-ready to lend a helping hand to education causes. For instance in Karnataka 20 NGOs provide free mid-day meals to 100,000 children in 670 schools while the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in Bangalore offers a daily mid-day meal to 50,000 children (see box). Likewise in Hyderabad, the Nandi Foundation manages a central kitchen which provides mid-day meals to approximately 200,000 children. Quite clearly the introduction of nutritious and quality free mid-day meals for children in all government schools — primary and secondary — is a long overdue and urgent necessity. The Supreme Court believes it; the over-whelming majority of academics and NGOs agree, and a growing number of hitherto apathetic parents at the base of the social pyramid has emerged as a pressure group for this programme whose vital connection with the spread of literacy and education is painfully self-evident.

The ISKCON intervention

In July 2000 while the S M Krishna government in the southern state of Karnataka was still mulling the introduction of cooked mid-day meals in its 43,000 government primary schools, the Bangalore-branch of the US-based International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCon), launched its Akshaya Patra mid-day meal scheme in government schools in the rural areas of Bangalore district. The Akshaya Patra Foundation (estb.2000) which administers the mid-day meal programme began with providing free cooked mid-day meals to 1,500 children of government and municipal schools on the outskirts of Bangalore. Today it provides free meals to over 50,000 underprivileged children enrolled in 235 schools.

Comments Chanchalapati Das, vice chairman of the foundation: "For many of these children, this is the only complete meal they eat during the entire day. And unlike the government scheme wherein each child is rationed 100 gm of rice and sambar per meal, we provide unlimited amounts of food. Curd is also provided along with rice and vegetable-rich sambar. Significantly the schools which receive the Akshaya Patra meal have recorded an average 35 percent increase in enrollment."

An administrative miracle, the Akshaya Patra operational model has acquired a sterling reputation for its professional management and meal preparatory and delivery infrastructure. The free mid-day meal is prepared in a modern kitchen in ISKCon's seven-acre Bangalore headquarters and consists of mechanised steam-heated cauldrons custom built to cook "native foods".

It takes six hours to prepare the 50,000 meals for the 235 schools covered by the scheme. The food is then packed into stainless steel containers and 11 custom-built vehicles transport the ready-to-eat meals to 235 schools in and around the garden city before noon. The estimated cost of this state-of-the-art infrastructure is Rs.2.6 crore. The one-time infrastructure cost apart, ISKCon spends Rs.6 per day per child (cf. the state government's Re.1) to provide free mid-day meals to 50,000 children incurring an annual expenditure of Rs.6.6 crore.

"We have been raising funds for the Akshaya Patra programme through direct mail. Thus far we have enlisted the support of 7,500 donors around the world who contribute a minimum of Rs.1,200 to feed one child for one year. We already have the infrastructure to provide mid-day meals to over 60,000 children. We want to scale up the programme to feed 100,000 children by 2005," says Das.

Akshaya Patra's efficient operating model should serve as an inspiration and a practical logistical guide to other NGOs and of course to the various state governments interested in implementing the mid-day meal scheme.

The only pockets of resistance to the scheme are to be found within the warrens of the powerful bureaucracies of the central and state governments which have to finance and action the scheme. But as discussed, their usual argument of paucity of resources to universalise the programme on a national scale is unwarranted. Likewise the arguments related to waste of teacher time and disruption of the academic calendar are unsustainable, if not specious.

The bottom line is that the politician-bureaucracy combine is less driven by moral exhortations than by public pressure. Therefore there is a great onus on the academic community and the nation's educated middle class in particular to intensify pressure on the political establishment to extend coverage of the provenly beneficial free mid-day meal to all government schools across the country. The national interest plainly demands it. ⊕

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With Mona Bharbaya (Mumbai); Hemalatha Raghupathi (Chennai) & Srinidhi Raghavendra (Bangalore).

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