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impressions

Strike Against Hunger

MGR was rebuked for it 20 years ago. Now his midday meal-scheme is India's ideal.

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German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer observed: "All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident." In 1982, when Tamil Nadu's legendary chief minister M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) launched his free midday meal scheme for schoolchildren (it cost the state Rs 200 crore), he was initially scorned and attacked. Journalists (me included) criticised MGR for being a vote-catching populist. "Shouldn't he spend money on creating jobs? How would he raise the money? How would he implement this scheme state-wide? How would he ensure hygiene and non-pilferage?" We were full of questions and doubts.

MGR didn't have a love-hate relationship with the press. It was just hate-hate. He didn't bother to answer. He just went ahead and implemented it. As a child, MGR knew what it was to go to bed hungry. It was a terrible experience that he wanted to spare the children of his state. So, ignoring Cassandra-like predictions, he steamrolled ahead with his pet project. Media criticism only got his back up. MGR galvanised the state machinery to translate his dream into reality.

Within weeks, I wrote an article praising the midday meal scheme in Sunday. Amazingly, not only were meals being provided daily, the programme had many spinoffs?teachers said school attendance had risen dramatically. So, not only would Tamil Nadu's children be healthier; more would be educated. But as soon as word spread about the success of the midday meal scheme?which sent MGR's popularity skyrocketing?his opponents got active. Suddenly, children in several schools suffered from food poisoning. Having been impressed with the level of hygiene while reporting the earlier story, I smelt something fishy. I investigated and published my discovery: MGR's opponents were dropping dead lizards into the sambar to destroy his popular scheme. But public outrage and greater state vigilance quickly crushed the dirty tricks. Since then, Tamil Nadu's midday meal scheme has been a shining example and 15 years after his death, MGR was vindicated when in 2001 the Supreme Court directed all states to implement this scheme.

Unfortunately, most chief ministers lack the vision, capability and basic humanity to take care of their children. The two worst states are UP and Bihar. A study on midday meal schemes by the Centre for Equity Studies has shown how vital it is to make the free midday meal scheme a national priority. Just as female literacy has many other far-reaching side-benefits such as improving hygiene and ensuring lower birth rates, feeding our poor children has several vital spinoffs, as this study points out. Classroom hunger has declined dramatically. Rural children almost invariably walk to school on an empty stomach. Satiating their hunger in school has improved their concentration?the study found that earlier most children slept in the afternoon due to hunger and exhaustion. Besides, this is the sole meal of the day for many. School enrolment and daily attendance have risen, most importantly among girls. And it's not true that children attend school only for the meal. Post-meal attendance has risen significantly. Even more far-reaching is another side-benefit?caste and class barriers are breaking down for a whole generation of Indian children. They sit, eat and socialise together.

But problems persist in the "laggard states". Hygiene is poor. Education is disrupted because teachers have to substitute as cooks and the classroom as kitchen. Hostile sarpanches disrupt food supplies. Mean-spirited upper castes oppose free meals for low-caste children. The menu is the same everyday?the hard to digest ghoogri, a gruel of boiled wheat in Rajasthan that contributes to indigestion. But all these problems are surmountable. Not only Tamil Nadu, other southern states like Karnataka have shown that with minimal investment but proper commitment, the midday meal scheme can function effectively. An additional makeshift shed becomes a kitchen; destitute widows are hired to cook. In these states, midday meals are hygienic, regular and non-disruptive. The investment required to popularise the scheme isn't crippling?Karnataka spends Re 1 per child per day whereas Rajasthan spends 50 paise. It's not a question of money,

it's a matter of priorities. No government can argue it lacks the resources to implement this scheme. Bihar spends 4.2 per cent of its gdp higher than most other states on education. The question is, how is the money spent?

Only one thing is required to prioritise the midday meal scheme in every state the chief minister's political will. MGR showed the way and it's for the other recalcitrant CMs to emulate. And if they don't, civil society must make them. Non-implementation isn't merely a matter of incompetence or disinterest, it emblazons a diabolical indifference that shouldn't be tolerated. Surely, a Rabri Devi, who has fed nine children of her own, must know the joy of feeding hungry children. How can she morally retain her job when children in her state are malnourished and even die of hunger, only because they have been born a Bihari?

It's a pity MGR didn't live long enough to draw satisfaction from the Supreme Court order or this recent study that describes the TN meal scheme as "a joy a living example of what can be achieved when quality safeguards are in place". But, at least, it came within the lifetime of most of MGR's critics! Wherever he is, he must be smiling his famous lopsided smile. Ridicule and criticism have faded away as the proven, multi-faceted merits of the midday meal scheme have become a self-evident truth today.

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