

Mid day Meal Scheme and Schools –A Need for Universal Coverage (Shantha Sinha)

Introduction

On November 2001, in its interim order in Peoples Union for Civil Liberties versus Union of India & Ors a (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 school 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 (28th 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 (28th May 2002) extend the provision of cooked meals to the remaining parts of the state”. This is indeed a historic and significant judgment, having far reaching implications for defining the role of schools, and the need to have every child in schools. Provision of cooked food in all the States would mean that schools have a role in providing better nutrition for children and alleviating hunger among children. Further in the contemporary context when the poor are struggling against all odds for resources that are due to them as a matter of right, schools as institutions open up as sites for contestation of power and all other accoutrements.

Implementation-Logistics

The problems of implementing the programme and the sheer logistics and details that had to be worked out to reach every child in school have in itself been an overwhelming exercise. While at the macro level it meant transfer of resources of purchase of food grains by the education department from the civil supplies, at the local level it meant working out modalities to identify the agency that would actually procure food grains, cook the meal and deliver it to the children. The mammoth task meant involvement and convergence of multiple departments such as the education, civil supplies, revenue, transport, energy, women and child, health and so on. There have been operational

problems to be sorted out in terms of infrastructure funding utensils, kitchen and providing drinking water. Simultaneously social and cultural hierarchies had to be waded through and caste tensions to be resolved in the process of launching a universal rights based agenda. Noting such difficulties in implementation, the Report of the Commissioner to Supreme Court advised the Court to issue directions to ensure “that a fair proportion of Scheduled Castes are appointed as cooks and helpers in the mid-day meal programme. They should include, at least (a) reservation of at least 50% for SC future appointments; (b) reinstatement of cooks and helpers who have because of their caste; (c) ensuring that at least one third of all cooks belong to the Scheduled Castes” (Fourth Report of the Commissioner to the Supreme Court)

A Preliminary Assessment

The programme also attracted criticism as it invited wastage; inefficiency and corruption wherein the amounts allocated in the name of maintenance of the programme at Rs.1.25 per child per day could be manipulated locally. In spite of such enormous difficulties in reaching out to the students the value of mid-day meal scheme cannot be under stated. There are indications through studies that there is a correlation between the mid day meal programme and enrollment of children, especially that of girls in schools. A recent survey initiated by the Centre for Equity Studies indicates that the class 1 enrollment rose by 15 percent within the year with more girls being enrolled in schools as for example 17 percent in Chattisgarh and 29 percent in Rajasthan. There have been other spin offs too. Children are imperceptibly learning to combat stubborn caste prejudices, even as they sit together and eat. In a way schools are becoming spaces for harmonizing relations among the communities.

The programme also is an attempt to respond to the appalling conditions of health and food of millions of children in this country. For instance NFHS data of 1998-99 shows that 74% of Indian children between 6-35 months of age were anemic, and thus impairing cognitive performance, behavioral and motor development, coordination and language development. Likewise statistics also show that more than 50% of children under three years of age were moderately or severely underweight and this was much more for the

rural population especially amongst scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. Further, desegregation of data showed the poor nutritional status of women and girls reflecting a gender bias.

While it is an accepted fact that mid-day meal scheme has had a positive impact on some children it must be recognized that it has not met the issue of freedom from hunger of *all* children. Thus if there has been a marginal increase in attendance of children due to the mid-day meal scheme this may have provoked only some children but not all children to be in schools regularly. While, those children who are out of school are left out of the scheme, even those who attend school regularly are not all reached out to by the mid-day meal scheme because the programme is confined only to the primary level and even this is yet to be initiated in many states. Thus as of now there are only 50 million children who avail of the opportunity for the mid-day meal scheme and about 150 million children in the 5-14 age group are not being covered under this programme. It is estimated that the overall coverage of the scheme as of January 2004, is only in half of India's 31 states, with seven states with an aggregate of 400 million population not implementing the scheme so far despite the Supreme Court order. It is being implemented fully in the states of Gujarat, Kerala, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu and in substantial parts of other states including Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal, partially in Chattisgarh, Delhi, Orissa, and Punjab, but not at all in Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana (Third Report of the Commissioner, May 1st, 2003). The expected reason given by the states that have not implemented the scheme has been that of 'lack of funds'. However it has been seen that it is more lack of the political will to implement the scheme rather than anything else. 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" (Groundswell For Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Kalpana Parikh and Summiya Yasmeen, <http://www.indiatogether.org/2004/jan/pov-midmeal.htm>). The real challenge of the programme lay in working out modalities for reaching out to every child who is already attending the school and to ensure that all other children who do not go to schools are actually attending schools and not in mobilising adequate funds.

Need for universal coverage

While planning for implementation of mid day meal programme, the issue of universal coverage is seldom raised. It is assumed that all children may not be able to come to schools and therefore the mid day meal scheme can act as an incentive to increase the enrolment and attendance of children in schools. In doing so, unwittingly the issue of provision of midday meal is seen as a means to increase enrolment and therefore is satisfied when there is a slight shift in the enrolment figures as a consequence of the scheme. Since the issue of hunger touches each and every child, and since a large number of children still do not access schools, calculations made on the basis of 'some more' children being in schools and not on all children requiring being in schools are just not enough. It is necessary to see that to achieve a universal coverage of the right to food programme there is a universal access of every child to schools.

There is a flaw in assessment of the impact of the mid day meal scheme while measuring it on the basis of its impact on enrollment figures. Logically, the argument either assumes that children who do not come to schools have enough food. Or it could also imply that what is supplied, as food in schools is not enough and so children need to work hard to earn more. In other words the food security offered through children's work has greater rewards than the provisioning of food through the programme. It must be seen that children's right to food is to be measured on the basis of the impact it has had on the nutrition and health status of children. In doing so the capacity of the system that delivers

the programme is built, corrected and even monitored, for the indicators it has set out to achieve. It would establish indicators such as the increase in height and weight of children, assessment of children's health condition, and so on. In doing so there is a monitoring of the nutrition and health status of children as a matter of right and institutional responses to the entitlement of food and nutrition of children soon becomes a societal concern as well as a State issue.

It is argued that the programme of children's entitlement to food must be regarded as independent of children's right to education. Establishment of a link between attendance in school and availability of food does not reflect the actual predicament of poor children and their inability to get their entitlements. The only reason why they get combined, is due to the fact that schools have been seen as best institutions which can make all rights children must enjoy possible.

Why schools?

What is needed in this context is to have clarity on the role and function of schools in the context of poor children and their entitlements. Schools are to be recognized as institutions that not only provide children their right of education but must also be seen as the only institution that can offer all other rights to children. In fact, it is this understanding that informs the Supreme Court order that mid day meals have to be provided through schools. It is felt that it is only when *all* children are in schools that their freedom from hunger is possible, and all policy endeavors for their care and protection and a realization of their fullest potential can be achieved. Therefore in order that children secure their rights such as right to food, right to health, right to education it must be predicated by the act of all children actually being in schools.

Thus a universal access to the mid-day meal scheme must ensure that all children actually join schools and are retained. For this to happen there must be a firm conviction in making education compulsory. While there is largely an agreement that all children must attend schools, it is often seen as an impracticable proposition As a result there have often been an endorsement of less uncompromising views on issues of child rights, and thus an

allowance is made for children to be in work and remain out of schools. Drawing lessons from history on the other hand would demand that for ensuring that children's rights are protected the starting point has to be a firm belief in their inalienability.

However in the absence of an uncompromising stand on the abolition of child labor, with discussions on *can* this be done rather than *how* this should be done no real solution will emerge. A demand for schools can happen only when children's rights are viewed as being paramount in every context. Once children's rights are seen as inviolable, institutions such as the school begin to be judged by their ability to protect these rights for *all* children.

Right to Food—Demand for Universal Education

In the ultimate analysis irrespective of the policies adopted by the State the poor have always found their own ways of overcoming the limitations facing them and their own reasons for doing so. The challenge of securing a better future for their children is in no way different from their overall struggle to access resources and institutions in general. The real issue is whether the policies and programs aimed ostensibly for their benefit recognize this and support them in their endeavor.

This can happen only if there is a demand created for schools and such a demand can emerge through an intense social mobilization and public action programme against child labor and in favor of children's rights especially the right to education through full time formal schools.

It is imperative to have a conviction that all children must attend full time formal schools and that it is not only necessary to do so, but is also possible. Every effort must be made to build a social norm against violation of child rights and especially in support of children's right to education through full time formal schools. Simultaneously there must be a preparedness of the institutions to accept a ground swell of enrolment of children of all ages in schools. A plan of action therefore is immanent to raise a demand through public action and local institution building processes and involvement of the community at large to enable children access schools and other institutions that are meant for them. Simultaneously all efforts must be made to correct the system and build its capacities to

respond to the demand that is generated. Indeed this is the crux of politics of public provisioning.

Building a Demand for Children's Rights

Provision of a supply side programme without building the confidence of the poor in public institutions does not automatically make it a workable institution. It is in the process of creating such demand for schools through a well-orchestrated community support that schools begin to function and children attend schools. In fact, it must be recognized that with such an massive campaign and enrollment of children in school the government must be prepared to absorb as many as children as possible. It is only then one would discover that the infrastructure in terms of adequate teachers, classrooms is hopefully inadequate. The mid day meal programme to be effective must also generate a social norm that no child must be hungry and their right to food would be guaranteed by all children being retained in schools. For e.g. during the summer of 2003, when the schools closed down, in several villages in Andhra Pradesh where children's rights were on the fore and community was fully involved in bargaining for protection for children's rights they felt that the mid-day meal should continue even during summer vacations. Some thousands of postcards and letters were sent to the Chief Minister on the issue and the media also covered the demand from the community. As a consequence the Government decided to continue with the mid-day meal scheme even during summer vacations.

In dealing with such a demand for the right to food there would emerge creative ways of supplying the food needs of children and the provision made for supply of mid-day meal would also be doubled if every child actually came to schools.

Both the schemes for right to food programme through the mid-day meal scheme or even the right to education programme by providing schools, teachers, and other infrastructure have so far been looked upon as supply side issues. Since these programmes have not emerged in response to an articulated demand there tends to be a lot of wastage and inefficiency in its implementation. There is a general complacency in the inability to

reach out to all the children and have a universal coverage. It is only when efforts are made to create a demand for education and food through full time formal schools that the supplies begin to make sense. With every child in school an atmosphere is built to take up social as well as political responsibility to guarantee that all other rights that are ensured through schools. In doing so each of such rights must be reviewed and monitored independently with indicators that have been specifically designed to fulfill such objectives.