

## HUNGER IN THE CLASSROOM

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Ten months have passed since the Supreme Court directed the state governments to introduce cooked mid-day meals in all primary schools within six months. Some state governments are implementing the order, but many others are trying to buy time, plead for central government funding, or even reverse the order. The Supreme Court seems determined to enforce the order, but public pressure also has an important role to play in overcoming these hesitations.

In states that have started providing mid-day meals, various implementation problems have arisen. There have been occasional reports of food poisoning, notably in Pondicherry where hundreds of children recently fell ill after consuming the mid-day milk. Teachers often complain that mid-day meals encroach on their time or disrupt classroom processes. And in some states, high-caste parents have objected to the idea of an all-caste lunch, or to the mid-day meal being prepared by a *Dalit* cook.

It is, however, important to avoid a loss of nerve in the face of these teething problems. Consider for instance the issue of food poisoning. Occasional incidents of indigestion at school carry little weight against the enormous health gains (present and future) that may be expected from higher school attendance and reduced hunger in the classroom. According to recent investigations by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) in Delhi, even in the national capital a large proportion of children from poor families go to school with an empty stomach. Better-fed and better-educated children are the key to the future health of the nation.

Similarly, the much-cited problem of encroachment on teacher time is far from unsurmountable. The more enterprising states have already appointed helpers to cook and serve the mid-day meal. In some circumstances, the provision of pre-cooked food can also help to avoid disruption of classroom processes. Further, it is important to remember that one of the biggest disruptions of classroom processes in Indian schools arises from the absence of a mid-day meal: children go home for lunch and many of them do not come back.

As far as caste conflicts are concerned, it is a positive feature of mid-day meals that they challenge traditional caste prejudices and teach children to share a common meal irrespective of caste. In Karnataka, most cooks are *Dalit* women, and there appears to be wide acceptance of this arrangement. In Rajasthan, perhaps a more conservative society as far as caste is concerned, significant incidents have occurred, as in village Kolu Pabuji of Jodhpur district where a Rajput parent is reported to have thrown sand in the mid-day meal because it had been cooked by a Meghwal woman. But even in Rajasthan, the mid-day meal programme is on track and high-caste resistance can be expected to melt over time.

This is not to dismiss the implementation problems that have arisen. But these problems are best seen as a useful reminder of the importance of the quality aspects of mid-day meal programmes (such as adequate infrastructure and hygiene) rather than as an indictment of the entire project. Further, it is important to note that many positive achievements have already emerged from the new mid-day meal programmes, even though these achievements tend to be less widely publicised than the juicy stories of food poisoning or caste conflict. In particular, there is growing evidence that school meals have boosted school attendance in many areas. To illustrate, a recent survey of 26 villages in Sikar district (Rajasthan) found that school enrolment was much higher than last year in all the schools, and had risen by more than 25 per cent on average. In some “alternative schools” located in deprived hamlets, enrolment nearly doubled after the introduction of mid-day meals.

One of us recently participated in informal investigations of mid-day meals in Karnataka, where the programme has been introduced in seven districts on a pilot basis. The overall picture was very encouraging. In most of the eight sample schools visited, adequate logistic arrangements (including provision for water) had been made and mid-day meals were served regularly. No incidents of food poisoning had occurred. Most of the cooks were *Dalit* women and no objections had been raised, except in one village where high-caste children abstained from the mid-day meal. By all accounts, school enrolment had increased, and daily attendance was also more regular.

There is, in short, little reason for delaying the extension of mid-day meal programmes to other states. The main stumbling block, here as in many other contexts, is the reluctance of state governments to bear the overhead costs. While grain for the mid-day meal programme is provided free of cost by the central government, the states are expected to pay for the other ingredients, and also for transport and cooking arrangements. These overhead costs vary depending on the arrangements being made, but taking Karnataka's relatively successful model as a benchmark, it appears that a sound mid-day meal programme calls for a financial allocation of about one rupee per child per day.

Most state governments are reluctant to bear this financial burden, arguing that their coffers are empty. But if the public capitulates to such arguments, the social sectors will never get their due. Ultimately, it is a question of priorities. Indeed, the same state governments that complain of financial bankruptcy often manage to find hundreds of crores of rupees overnight when powerful interests are involved.

To illustrate, a high-level official from the Education Department in Uttar Pradesh recently mentioned at a workshop in Lucknow that a mid-day meal programme would cost Rs 680 crores per year, and that the state government was at a loss to find such resources. Yet a few days later, the MLAs of Uttar Pradesh passed a motion raising their own salaries and perks at a potential cost of Rs 425 crores per year for the state exchequer. Commenting on this, a ruling-party MLA complained that existing allowances were "not even sufficient to foot our monthly tea bills" (Times of India, 4 September). The full significance of this comment probably escaped most readers, unless they noticed another news item published the same day in Hindustan Times, according to which the Ministers of the Mayawati government had consumed Rs 6.71 lakhs worth of "tea and snacks" since May. Such is the state of Indian democracy that our political leaders are allowed to gorge themselves with expensive snacks while children are going to school on an empty stomach.

On 28 November 2001, when some state governments argued in the Supreme Court that mid-day meals were unaffordable, the bench sternly told them to "cut the flab somewhere else". The advice has not lost its relevance. Besides, there is always the possibility of raising taxes to generate additional revenue. Indeed, taxation rates in

India are quite low by international standards. And as pointed out by Dr. John Kurian of the Planning Commission, in many states even a moderate surcharge on liquor taxes would be quite enough to fund a mid-day meal programme. There is no excuse for allowing the continuation of hunger in the classroom.