

UNTOUCHABLE LUNCH?

PARVATHI MENON

in Mandya

The Karnataka government's mid-day meal scheme for primary school children in all government schools across the State has a troubled start with initial reports of food poisoning, but the greater danger relates to upper-caste opposition to Dalits cooking the food.

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Mid-day meal time at the Government Higher Primary School at Boothanahosur in Mandya district.

IMPLEMENTATION glitches beset the Karnataka government's ambitious mid-day meal programme Akshara Dasoha in its first week. The programme, which has already been running for a year in seven of the State's most backward districts, was extended to the remaining 20 districts on July 1, bringing 33,271 more schools and an additional 30.82 lakh children into its ambit. It provides *bisi oota* (a hot lunch) to children of Standards I to V in all government schools.

For a scheme of its size, starting problems were perhaps only to be expected. In the long run, however, the popular and widely welcomed scheme that aims at improving both school enrolment and nutrition amongst primary school children must contend with more serious issues. Politically motivated efforts to sabotage the progressive scheme directly or through the mobilisation of upper-caste resistance to it are already seeking to undermine its reach and spread.

The first setback it faced could have proved costly in terms of the erosion of public confidence in the scheme, had it not been for the quick response of several district administrations to the crisis. On the third and fourth days after the scheme was implemented, the media carried reports from Dharwad, Gadag and subsequently Mandya of an alarmingly large number of children taking ill after consuming school lunches. The first report came from Nargund town in Gadag district, where around 100 children from the Government Primary School 2 were reportedly hospitalised. The news spread like wildfire through the town, bringing hundreds of distraught parents to the hospital in search of their children. Some enraged citizens even attacked the Tahsildar's office. The next day, there were similar reports from Navalgund in Dharwad district, where 33 children

were reportedly hospitalised, and later from Mandya town, where 124 children were reportedly taken to hospital after eating a contaminated lunch.

The staff at the Government Higher Primary School in Guthalu, Mandya, told *Frontline* that in fact no child complained of anything more than a stomach-ache. "When two or three children complained of stomach pain an hour or so after lunch, we took them to hospital just to reassure them, as the news of children falling sick in other centres had appeared, and parents were already worried," the headmistress of the school told *Frontline*. Before they knew it, hundreds of parents had arrived at the school and were taking their children to hospital. Only three children were actually hospitalised for further observation. Several teachers pointed out to this correspondent that if the food was contaminated, all the children who ate it should have fallen sick. *Bisi bele bath* (rice cooked with dal and vegetables), they said, was cooked in a single vessel for 567 students that day. There was no complaint from any student of Standards I and II. Only a small group of children from Standards III, IV and V complained of feeling unwell. A sample of the food, which was subsequently sent for laboratory testing, was found to be uncontaminated.

The rapidity with which episodes of "food poisoning" were reported across the State, with alarmist and unconfirmed accounts of hundreds of children suffering the effects of food contamination, does lend credence to the view that some of these reports could have been instigated in order to discredit the scheme. Most of these accounts were later proven to be exaggerated or false. For example, a report of a child dying in Kadur, Chickmagalur district, because he ate a contaminated lunch provided in school turned out to be false. The school records showed that the child had not attended classes from the date of commencement of the mid-day meal scheme.

"We have verified each and every case of complaint and found that most of them are simply baseless, fuelled by mischievous rumours which led to panic," B.K. Chandrashekhar, Minister for Primary and Secondary Education, told *Frontline*. The extent of illness that was reported was exaggerated, he said. "In Navalgund, for example, there were no cases of vomiting and diarrhoea as was alleged. Some children felt queasy, and teachers did the responsible thing by taking them to the doctor. How did hundreds of townsfolk appear in a matter of minutes at the school and the hospitals, creating panic amongst parents, unless there was some pre-planning involved? Did you know that a rumour had spread that 20 children died and their bodies were stacked on each other?" he asked.

The positive outcome of the food contamination scare has been that school administrations are paying special attention to the preparation of food in the school premises. In the seven schools that *Frontline* visited in Mandya district, the mid-day meal had in fact become the focus of the school, and far too much time and attention was devoted to it by the headmaster/headmistress and the teaching staff. "This is only because the programme has just started and we are still getting used to handling this new responsibility," H.V. Narasimiah, Headmaster, Government Higher Primary School, Thoreshattahalli, told *Frontline*. In all the seven schools, food was being prepared under clean and hygienic conditions with water from clean sources.

Nevertheless, the State government's rush to launch the scheme on July 1, despite the lack of adequate preparation, has created several inconveniences for school administrations and students.

For example, in Mandya district, none of the schools had been provided cooking vessels until as late as July 8. Food was being cooked in vessels borrowed from *anganwadis* or helpful village residents. Secondly, the scheme was launched before kitchens were built in the schools. In each school one classroom has therefore been set aside for cooking alone, while rations are often stored in rooms that double as classrooms. In already small and crowded schools, students are now further inconvenienced. With one classroom now turned into a kitchen, classes are held on the verandas, or two classes are accommodated in one classroom. This situation is unlikely to change in the near future as the State government has sanctioned the construction of only 17,000 kitchens, which will be ready by 2004, whereas there are already 30,389 makeshift kitchen centres in the schools.

But children themselves are most forgiving of any inconvenience caused if it means eating a hot lunch with their friends. For many of them, the *bisi oota* is the only nutritious meal they eat in the day. "The school *bisi oota* is as good as what my mother cooks," said a beaming Roopa, a pupil of Standard 4 at the primary school in Thoreshattahalli. "My children say they like the food," Bhagyamma, a Dalit housewife from the same village, told *Frontline*. "In fact, they actually like going to school now." The majority of the children who attend government schools come from poor homes where both parents often have to go to work.

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C. Chalugaraju, headmaster of the Government Higher Primary School in Uramarakasalagere village, Mandya district, with his pupils. The mid-day meals served in the school were boycotted by upper-caste children as instructed by their parents, as the head cook was a Dalit.

"Most of the children here are from poor backgrounds, and the scheme has helped such families," said P. Purushottam, Vice-President of the School Development and Maintenance Committee (SDMC) of the Higher Primary School at Boothanahosur in Mandya district. "However, the government has sanctioned 20 paise only for vegetables and spices per child per day, and this is not enough."

The children of the school were tucking into a meal of rice with a *saru* (gravy) of dal and drumstick leaves. The headmaster, M.R. Krishnamurthy, told *Frontline* that attendance had gone up since July because of the *bisi oota*. "There was a slight drop in attendance on the day after the food contamination episode was reported in Mandya because parents were worried, but it has gone up again," he said.

PERHAPS the major emerging obstacle to the success and spread of the mid-day meal programme comes from the upper-caste opposition to it. One head cook and two assistant cooks have been appointed to each of the 30,000-plus kitchen centres in 20 districts. In keeping with the State's job reservation policy, one of the posts has been filled by an appointee from the Schedule Castes/Schedule Tribes. This single administrative measure has exposed the ugly face of caste and its continuing grip on the consciousness and actions of people even in a relatively advanced and prosperous district like Mandya. Parents from the dominant Vokkaliga caste would simply not allow their children to eat food cooked by a Dalit woman. Caste opposition to the *bisi oota* scheme is also being stoked by those who wish to see the programme undermined for a larger political agenda.

Several villages in Mandya district have boycotted the programme, protesting against the appointment of Dalit cooks. "The whole of our village consists of upper-caste people. Our children will not eat food made by a Dalit. If the government insists on retaining the cook, then we will reject the entire *bisi oota* scheme. Our children can eat at home," G. Sadasivaiah, the president of the SDMC at the Government Higher Primary School in Gowdeyanadoddi village, told *Frontline*. The *bisi oota* scheme in this village, which ran for just four days, has been stopped. Once the cooks were appointed, upper-caste parents refused to allow their children to eat the school meal.

"In my school, only Dalit children eat the lunch provided in school," said Chalugaraju, almost apologetically, to *Frontline*. As the Headmaster of the Government Higher Primary School in Uramarakasalagere village, Mandya district, Chalugaraju is helpless about changing upper-caste mindsets. "We have 104 students who are eligible for the lunch. On the first day, all the children came. Once a Dalit head cook was appointed, the Vokkaligas refused to let their children eat here. Even the non-Dalit assistant cook refused to work. Now only the 18 Dalit children eat here," he said. As a compromise solution, Chalugaraju even promised that the head cook would only supervise the cooking, but the upper-caste-dominated SDMC was adamant.

"Today the government says that you must eat food cooked by a Dalit. Tomorrow they will ask what is wrong with a Dalit marrying an upper-caste person. We must curb this at the initial stage," K. Devarajan, an SDMC member, said, justifying the boycott. "We have preserved our caste traditions for hundreds of years. Why should we break it now?" he asked.

In some schools, resourceful school administrations have successfully negotiated anti-Dalit caste sentiments without actually confronting them. Mahesh, the Headmaster of the Government Higher Primary School in Emmiggere, has asked Sowbhagya, the assistant cook in his school who is a Dalit, not to participate in the actual cooking. She cleans and washes the rice, washes the empty vessels, and does other odd jobs, but does not touch the food vessels. "If she had been

involved in the cooking, there would have been problems," he said. "Our teachers have assured the village that there will be no caste contamination," he added.

This is precisely how the Headmaster of the school in Thoreshettahalli is also dealing with the problem. "We have told the upper-caste people in the village that the head cook will only supervise the cooking," he said. K.C. Gowramma, the head cook, is more than willing to go along. "I'll do anything they ask me," she told *Frontline*. "My own children study in this school."

"The *bisi oota* scheme can also be used as a way of confronting and eliminating caste discrimination," said T.H. Giridhar, a member of the SDMC in Thorashettahalli. "To the extent that caste and the practice of untouchability have been exposed by the new scheme, they have also been weakened," he added. A public campaign of education against caste discrimination, if made part of the mid-day meal programme, may offer the only assurance of making the programme fully effective.