

MIDDAY MEALS: A PRIMER

October 2005

Every child who goes to primary school is entitled to a nutritious, cooked "midday meal". This is an important step towards the right to food and the right to education. This booklet tells you what every concerned citizen should know about this basic entitlement of all Indian children.

ABOUT THIS PRIMER...

This “Primer” is addressed to all those who are interested in joining the campaign for nutritious midday meals to all children in primary schools. Much can be done by different people at all levels, from remote villages to the national capital. But the first step is to understand the issues: why midday meals are important, what the Supreme Court orders say, how the quality of midday meals can be improved, and so on. This Primer attempts to answer these basic questions, and many more.

The preparation of this Primer was a collective effort. The final version was written by Vandana Bhatia, Jean Drèze, and Vandana Prasad, but many others contributed in one way or another. Special thanks to Samir Garg, Shanti Ghosh, Tara Gopaldas, A.K. Shiva Kumar, Anuradha Rajivan, Dipa Sinha, Reetika Khera, Harsh Mander, Nandini Nayak, Claire Noronha, Shonali Sen, Devika Singh, Shantha Sinha, Vivek S. and C.P. Sujaya for many useful insights. Suggestions for further improvement are welcome - just send a line to righttofood@gmail.com or write to the secretariat of the Right to Food Campaign at the address given in the Appendix. We hope to hear from you!

MIDDAY MEALS: A PRIMER

INTRODUCTION

The condition of Indian children is best described as a permanent humanitarian emergency. According to the National Family Health Survey 1998-99, about half of all Indian children are undernourished. Hunger and undernutrition ruin children's health, undermine their learning abilities and impair their lives in many other ways. Very few countries have such high levels of child undernutrition.

Education statistics are no less alarming. At least 20 per cent of Indian children (in the 6-14 age group) are out of school. This too, impairs their future in many ways. Child labourers are the worst victims.

This situation is a gross violation of the fundamental rights of children. Under Article 21 of the Constitution, all Indian children have a fundamental right to life. And as the Supreme Court has made clear on several occasions, the right to life is a right to live with dignity, which includes the right to food and related necessities. Under Article 21A of the Constitution, Indian children are entitled to free and compulsory education from the age of 6 to 14. These rights are also implied by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which India is a signatory.

The well being of children is everyone's responsibility - not just that of their parents. Indeed, parents alone are not always able to protect their children's interests, especially when they are weighed down by poverty, illiteracy, poor health and social discrimination. This is one reason why the protection of children's rights depends crucially on social arrangements, such as universal schooling.

These arrangements are typically initiated by the state, but their effectiveness depends in many ways on the involvement of the public at large. For instance, the success of a village school depends a great deal on what the teachers, the parents, the Gram Panchayat and the village community actually do for it. Even the physical presence of a school often requires organised demand from the village community in the first place.

The provision of cooked, nutritious midday meals in primary schools is another example of social arrangement geared to the protection of children's rights. Their primary objective is to promote the right to food and the right to education, but they can also serve many other useful purposes (see below). Today, every child who attends a government or government-assisted primary school is entitled to a nutritious midday meal, as per recent Supreme Court orders. However, this entitlement is far from being realised: the coverage of midday meals is close to universal, but their quality is still very low in most states.

Here again, public action is required to ensure that the state fulfils its legal and constitutional obligations. The question-answer dialogue below discusses what can be done to ensure that every Indian child actually gets a free, tasty and nutritious midday meal every day.

PART I: MIDDAY MEALS AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Q1. What does the "right to food" really mean?

It means that every citizen has a right to be protected from hunger and undernutrition. The right to food places an obligation on the state to ensure that everyone is well nourished. This can be done through various means: land reform, the public distribution system, an Employment Guarantee Act, and nutrition schemes for children, among others. These steps complement each other – no single intervention can ensure that the right to food is fully realised.

Q2. What is the right to education?

Every Indian child is entitled to "free and compulsory education" from the age of 6 to 14. This has recently become a "fundamental right" under Article 21A of the Constitution. The State, therefore, must facilitate free education for all children and ensure that each one of them attends school on a daily and regular basis.

Q3. How can midday meals contribute to the right to food and the right to education?

A healthy midday meal can help to protect children from hunger, and to provide supplementary nutrition. Midday meals are not enough to guarantee the right to food, but they are an important step towards it. Similarly, cooked midday meals contribute to the right to education by facilitating regular school attendance and enhancing children's learning abilities.

In addition, midday meals serve many other important purposes, such as fostering social equality and helping to impart nutrition education to schoolchildren. The diverse roles of midday meals are further discussed in Box 1.

Q4. Is every school-going child entitled to a nutritious midday meal?

Every child who attends a "government or government-assisted" primary school is entitled to a nutritious, cooked midday meal. This includes Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) centres as well as Madrasas/Maqtabs which fall within the category of government aided schools.

BOX 1: WHAT CAN FREE MIDDAY MEALS ACHIEVE?

If you feel that midday meals in primary schools are “a waste of time”, think again! The potential benefits of nutritious midday meals are many:

Promoting school participation: Midday meals have big effects on school participation, not just in terms of getting more children enrolled in the registers but also in terms of regular pupil attendance on a daily basis.

Preventing classroom hunger: Many children reach school on an empty stomach. Even children who have a meal before they leave for school get hungry by afternoon and are not able to concentrate, especially children from families who cannot give them a lunch box or are staying a long distance away from the school. Midday meals can help to overcome this problem by preventing “classroom hunger”.

Facilitating the healthy growth of children: Midday meals can also act as a regular source of “supplementary nutrition” for children, and facilitate their healthy growth. For instance, midday meals rich in iron can help to prevent “anaemia”, a widespread cause of weakness and poor growth among children.

Intrinsic educational value: A well-organised midday meal can be used as an opportunity to impart various good habits to children (such as washing one’s hands before and after eating), and to educate them about the importance of clean water, good hygiene and related matters.

Fostering social equality: Midday meals can help to spread egalitarian values, as children from various social backgrounds learn to sit together and share a common meal. In particular, midday meals can help to break the barriers of caste and class among school children. Appointing cooks from Dalit communities is another way of teaching children to overcome caste prejudices.

Enhancing gender equity: The gender gap in school participation tends to narrow after midday meals are introduced, as midday meals erode the barriers that prevent girls from going to school. Midday meals also provide a useful source of employment for women, and help to liberate working women from the burden of having to feed children at home during the day. In these and other ways, women and girl children have a special stake in midday meals.

Q5. Is this a legal right?

Yes, it is a legal right because it derives from a Supreme Court order.¹ This order, dated 28 November 2001, directs all government and government-assisted primary schools to provide cooked midday meals. Thus, children (or their parents) can demand school meals as a matter of right, and enforce this right through Courts if necessary.

Q6. What about children who are studying in private schools - are they also entitled to a midday meal?

No. The Supreme Court order does not apply to private schools.

Q7. What about children below the age of six, who are too young to go school?

These children are supposed to receive nutritious food under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). In practice, however, the coverage of ICDS is quite limited – barely one fourth of all children under six. A recent Supreme Court order directs the government to “universalise” ICDS, i.e. extend it to all children under six, but this is yet to happen.²

Q8. What about children who are not going to school at all?

Going to school is a fundamental right of every child. Ideally, all children should be going to school, and if this is the case, midday meals will also reach every child. Of course, in practice many children are out of school (about 20 per cent of all children in the 6-14 age group). In principle, midday meals should be extended to these out-of-school children.

Q9. How did the Supreme Court come into the picture?

In April 2001, a human rights organisation called People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) filed a petition on the “right to food” in the

¹ This is an “interim order”, which applies until the final judgement of the case. However, the final judgement is unlikely to dilute this interim order.

² If you are interested in this issue, see the companion booklet “ICDS: A Primer”.

Supreme Court. In those days, the godowns of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) were overflowing with grain. So much so that if these sacks of grain had been stacked in one vertical pile, they would have reached well beyond the moon. Meanwhile, millions of people suffered from hunger and undernutrition across the country. PUCL argued that this idle grain should be used to protect people from hunger, for instance by launching food-for-work programmes, strengthening the public distribution system, and providing midday meals in primary schools.

The PUCL petition triggered a massive “public interest litigation” on the right to food in the Supreme Court, known as “*PUCL vs Union of India and Others (Writ Petition [Civil] 196 of 2001)*”.³ In this litigation, PUCL took up the cause of the right to food on behalf of all those who are deprived of it, including hungry children.

It is in the context of this litigation, which continues today, that the Supreme Court issued sweeping “interim orders” on 28 November 2001. One of these orders directs all state governments to provide cooked midday meals in primary schools.

Q10. What was the situation before the Supreme Court order?

A few states, such as Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, already provided cooked midday meals in primary schools before the Supreme Court order (on Tamil Nadu, see Box 2). Other states were just providing “dry rations” (usually 3 kgs of grain per child per month) under the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education, initiated in 1995. Under this programme, state governments were actually supposed to start cooked midday meals, but most of them never went beyond “dry rations”, until the Supreme Court intervened.

³ A public interest litigation is a court case fought on behalf of a whole section of the public by a petitioner who may or may not belong to that group.

BOX 2
MIDDAY MEALS: TAMIL NADU SHOWS THE WAY

Tamil Nadu was the first Indian state to provide universal midday meals in primary schools. Pioneer schemes were introduced as early as 1923 in Madras city. Large-scale provision of midday meals began in the 1960s under the Chief Ministership of K. Kamaraj. In 1982, Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran (“MGR”) extended midday meals to all primary schools.

It is said that the idea of midday meals occurred to Kamaraj after an encounter with a small boy who was looking after his cows and goats. When the Chief Minister asked him, “Why didn’t you go to school today?”, the boy replied, “If I go to school, will you give me food to eat? I can eat only if I earn.” The boy’s answer sparked the whole midday meal programme. MGR, too, experienced hunger as a child, and protecting other children from hunger became his mission.

Initially, MGR’s bold move encountered much resistance. Many experts, bureaucrats and journalists dismissed the scheme as a waste of public money. However, midday meals turned out to be very popular, and over time, the scheme won wide acceptance. Successive governments have remained committed to midday meals, irrespective of political affiliation.

Today, midday meals have become an integral part of the school “routine” in Tamil Nadu. Every primary school has a staff of three: a cook, a helper, and an “organiser” who deals with logistics and accounts. Because there is adequate staff and infrastructure, the classroom process is undisturbed. A recent investigation of welfare schemes in Tamil Nadu, reported in *Times of India* (21 May 2003), had the following to say about midday meals:

“It was a joy to observe the mid-day meal programme in primary schools. Everywhere, the meals were served on time according to a well-rehearsed routine. The children obviously enjoyed the whole affair, and the teachers also felt very positive about this arrangement. Nowhere did we find any sign of the alleged drawbacks of mid-day meals, such as stomach upsets or disruption of classroom activity. Seeing this first-hand, one wakes up to the fact that midday meals should really be seen as an essential feature of any decent primary school, like a blackboard.”

Sources: Anita Pratap, “Strike Against Hunger”, *Outlook*, 18 August 2003; *Times of India*, 21 May 2003; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mid-day_meals.

Q11. *Why are midday meals better than “dry rations”?*

Cooked meals are better in many ways. While dry rations may help to increase school enrolment, they don't help to ensure regular attendance. Midday meals, by contrast, are quite effective in that respect: they prompt children to go to school on their own, without much cajoling or coaxing from their parents. Midday meals also make it easier to retain pupils at school after the lunch break: it is easier to reconvene classes in the afternoon session when children take their lunch on the school premises. When they go home for lunch, they don't always return!

And of course, midday meals prevent “classroom hunger” which dry rations may not do. Finally, midday meals have various “socialisation” roles, mentioned earlier (see Box 1 above), which cannot be performed by dry rations.

Q12. *Just out of interest, what else did the Supreme Court orders of 28 November 2001 say?*

These orders focus on eight food-related “schemes”: midday meals, the Integrated Child Development Services, the Public Distribution System, Antyodaya Anna Yojana, Annapurna, the National Old Age Pension scheme, the National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS) and the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS). Essentially, the Supreme Court orders of 28 November 2001 converted the benefits of these “schemes” into legal entitlements. This means, for instance, that if someone has an Antyodaya card but she is not getting her full quota of 35 kg of grain per month at the official prices (Rs 3/kg for rice and Rs 2/kg for wheat), she can claim her due as a matter of right, by going to Court if necessary.⁴

Q13. *How are these orders monitored?*

In an order dated 8 May 2002, the Supreme Court appointed “Commissioners” to monitor the implementation of all orders relating to right to food. The Commissioners are empowered to enquire about any

⁴ If you are interested in this public interest litigation, and the “interim orders” that have been issued by the Supreme Court from time to time, please consult the sources listed in the Appendix to this booklet. Some of these orders are quite far-reaching and it is a good idea to study them.

violations of the orders and to demand redressal, with the full authority of the Court. They also submit periodic reports to the Supreme Court. These reports enable the Supreme Court to keep a close watch on the status of its orders, and to issue further orders as and when necessary.

Q14. How are the orders on midday meals implemented?

The overall responsibility for implementing the orders rests with the State Government. However, the Central Government provides financial assistance under the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education, in various ways (for details see below).

Q15. *Have state governments implemented the Supreme Court orders?*

Initially, most of the state governments claimed that they had “no money” to provide midday meals in primary schools. But the Supreme Court took a firm stand on this and told them to “cut the flab somewhere else” [sic]. Campaigns for midday meals also sprang up all over the country. So midday meals were gradually introduced in one state after another, and today, they are in place almost everywhere. It is worth remembering, however, that this was supposed to happen within six months of the interim order of 28 November 2001. In practice, it took nearly four years for this order to be implemented.

Also, there have been various follow-up orders on midday meals, relating for instance to the quality of the meals, the expenditure norms, the provision of infrastructure, and so on (see Box 3). In most states, these orders are yet to be implemented. So the battle is far from over.

BOX 3: SUPREME COURT ORDERS ON MIDDAY MEALS

The Supreme Court has been issuing “interim orders” on midday meals from time to time, starting with the landmark order of 28 November 2001. The key orders are summarised below. For further details, see the sources mentioned in the Appendix of this booklet.

Basic entitlement: “Every child in every government and government-assisted primary school should be given a prepared midday meal; with a minimum content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein each day of school; for a minimum of 200 days a year.” (*Order dated 28 November 2001*)

No charges: “The conversion costs for a cooked meal, under no circumstances, shall be recovered from the children or their parents.” (*Order dated 20 April 2004*)

Central assistance: “The Central Government... shall also allocate funds to meet with the conversion costs of food-grains into cooked midday meals.” (*Order dated 20 April 2004*)

Kitchen sheds: “The Central Government shall make provisions for construction of kitchen sheds.” (*Order dated 20 April 2004*)

Priority to Dalit cooks: “In appointment of cooks and helpers, preference shall be given to Dalits, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.” (*Order dated 20 April 2004*)

Quality safeguards: “Attempts shall be made for better infrastructure, improved facilities (safe drinking water etc.), closer monitoring (regular inspection etc.) and other quality safeguards as also the improvement of the contents of the meal so as to provide nutritious meal to the children of the primary schools.” (*Order dated 20 April 2004*)

Summer holidays: “In drought affected areas, midday meals shall be supplied even during summer vacations.” (*Order dated 20 April 2004*)

Joint quality monitoring: “We direct the Union of India and the FCI to ensure provision of fair average quality grain for the Scheme on time. The States/UTs and the FCI are directed to do joint inspection of food grains. If the food grain is found, on joint inspection, not to be of fair average quality, it will be replaced by the FCI prior to lifting.” (*Order dated 28 May 2001*)

PART II: OFFICIAL NORMS AND GUIDELINES

Q16. How are midday meal schemes funded?

Midday meals are jointly funded by the Central and State Governments. Each state has its own midday meal “scheme”.

Q17. What is the contribution of the Central Government?

The Central Government supplies food grains free of cost, provides transport allowances, and contributes one rupee per child per day towards cooking costs. The details of Central Government assistance (as of December 2004) are presented in Box 4.

BOX 4:	
CENTRAL ASSISTANCE FOR MIDDAY MEALS (DEC 2004)	
Item	Central Assistance (Rs/child per school day)
Average “economic” cost of food grain (100 gms per child per day)	1.11
Average transport subsidy (from nearest FCI godown to the primary school @ Rs.75 per quintal)	0.08
Assistance for cooking costs ^a	1.00
Assistance for “management, monitoring and evaluation”	0.02
Total	2.21
<p>^a Cooking cost refers to the cost of converting raw grain into a meal. This would typically include the following components: (1) cost of ingredients other than grains such as pulses, vegetables, cooking oil, condiments; (2) cost of fuel; and (3) wages payable to personnel, or amount payable to SHG, VEC, Mahila Mandals responsible for cooking.</p> <p>In addition to the above, the Central Government has to give assistance for provision of midday meals during summer holidays in drought-affected areas.</p>	
<p><i>Source:</i> MoHRD Guidelines, December 2004.</p>	

Q18. What about the contribution of State Governments?

This varies a great deal between different states. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu the state governments contribute about one rupee per child per day towards cooking costs, in addition to the contribution of the Central Government. But in Uttar Pradesh, the state government contributes very little. The quality of midday meals varies accordingly: school children in Tamil Nadu enjoy nutritious midday meals, with different “menus” on different days of the week, while children in Uttar Pradesh have to eat the same tasteless *khichri* day after day.

Thus, it is very important to press for higher contributions from the state governments. The Commissioners of the Supreme Court have recommended a *minimum* national norm of two rupees per child per day for cooking costs, with the Central Government and State Government contributing equal amounts (one rupee per child per day each). This is a very modest norm, and of course it should be adjusted over time to account for rising prices.

Apart from financial contributions, it is important that state governments ‘own’ the midday meal scheme and back it fully. It is this involvement and political backing of the state government that makes midday meals much more successful in some states than others.

Q19. Can resources from other government schemes be used to improve midday meals?

Yes. In most states, some components of the midday meal scheme can be funded under other schemes. In rural areas, for instance, cooking sheds can be constructed under the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), drinking water can be arranged under the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP), and funds for cooking utensils are available from Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). In urban areas, similar facilities are available under schemes such as the National Slum Development Programme (NSDP) and Swarna Jayanti Shahri Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY). Hopefully, further opportunities of this kind will be available soon under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Q20. How are cooks and helpers supposed to be appointed?

The cook and helper should be appointed with full community participation. The parents and other villagers are meant to elect Village Education Committees (VECs) and Parents Teachers Association (PTAs), which then choose cooks and helpers from the community. As per Supreme Court orders dated 20 April 2004, preference should be given to “Dalits, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes”.

Q21. Are midday meals provided during holidays?

This is not mandatory under Supreme Court orders, but it is a good practice. Some states, notably Tamil Nadu, continue to serve cooked meals to school children even when the schools shut down for holidays. Note also that a Supreme Court order dated 20 April 2004 makes it mandatory to provide midday meals during summer vacations in “drought-affected areas” (see Box 3 above).

Q22. Do children or their parents have to make any contribution to the cost of the meal?

No. Supreme Court orders categorically state that cooking costs should not be recovered from the children or their parents under any circumstances. Sometimes, primary schools encourage “voluntary donations” from the community, and this is not necessarily a bad practice. But contributions should never be compulsory – all children are entitled to a free midday meal.

PART III: PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF MIDDAY MEALS

Q23. Doesn't the cooking and distribution of meals in the schools interfere with classroom activity?

This concern is well taken. However, if the midday meal is well organized, it should not disrupt classroom activities. This requires a good infrastructure, including for instance cooking sheds: if meals are prepared inside the classroom, you can imagine how difficult it would be for the teacher to conduct his or her classes. We will come back to that. Also important is a clear division of tasks between the cook, the helper, the teacher and the community. Each has a vital role to play in ensuring the smooth and hazard-free provision of midday meals.

Cook and helper

A cook and a helper must be employed to prepare the meal, without any assistance from children or teachers. The responsibility of the cook is to ensure that a tasty and nutritious meal is ready on time, every day. A helper is needed to assist the cook, and to facilitate clean and hygienic cooking as well as proper washing of the cooking utensils. Until the meal is ready, the teacher is not required and must continue with his or her class timetable.

Teacher's responsibilities

The teacher should "taste" the food before it is served to the children, to check that no stale ingredients have been used and that the meal is wholesome (rice and salt will not do!). The teacher should also supervise the hand washing by the children and in the process can also look at children's nails and general hygiene. The actual serving and consumption of the meal should also be supervised by the teacher so that it is done in an orderly and hygienic manner. The midday meal can also be used by the teacher as an opportunity for various educational activities: teaching good eating habits to children, training them to thank the cook and helper before eating, imparting some nutrition education, and so on.

In some states, teachers also have some organisational responsibilities as part of the midday meal scheme, such as keeping accounts or arranging the collection of grain from the ration shop. Ideally, this should be avoided, as it may divert teachers from classroom activities. In some states, each school has an "organizer" who takes complete charge of midday meals, leaving teachers free to teach. This is the best arrangement, in terms of avoiding any disruption of classroom activity.

Community Participation

Active Gram Panchayats, Village Education Committees (VECs) and Parents Teachers Associations (PTAs) can play a very useful role in ensuring that midday meals are provided in a fair and efficient manner. These institutions, especially the Gram Panchayats, often have formal responsibilities as part of the midday meal scheme. In some states, for

instance, the Gram Panchayat is responsible for arranging the purchase of cooking ingredients, fuelwood, etc. In many states, Mahila Mandals and Self Help Groups are actively involved in the management of midday meal schemes. Through these groups, the women of the community come into direct interaction with the schools. In Himachal Pradesh, for example, the Mahila Mandal is often in charge of cooking the food.

Aside from these formal responsibilities, active community participation can help in many ways. For instance, members of the community can informally “monitor” the midday meal and report any irregularity to the Gram Panchayat or other concerned authority. They should also be consulted when the cook and helper are appointed. Voluntary contributions from the community, for example in the form of kitchen utensils, cooking fuel, fresh vegetables, or dairy and poultry products, should be encouraged. The community can also help the school to set up a vegetable garden to enrich the midday meal.

In short, midday meals require a good infrastructure as well as effective use of human resources. If these safeguards are in place, midday meals need not interfere with classroom activity.

Q24. What are the basic infrastructure requirements for an effective midday meal?

The very basic infrastructure required for an effective midday meal includes:

Kitchen shed and storage facility: In the absence of a separate kitchen shed, cooking distracts students and hampers the learning process. Kitchen sheds are also essential from the point of view of safety – to avoid contamination, fires, accidents, and so on. There should be adequate protection from smoke through the use of chimneys, smokeless chulhas, exhaust fans or other devices. Storage facilities are a must to protect grains against rodents and infestation. Ideally this should be a separate room that can be locked. It is also advisable to store grains in containers rather than sacks.

Clean water: A source of clean water should be available within the school premises. This facilitates clean and easy cooking. Clean water is

also needed for drinking purposes, and for washing and cleaning. Children need to be taught basic hygiene such as washing hands before and after eating, and this can only be done if clean water is available in the school. This also saves the cook the added burden of fetching water from a nearby source - which in some cases means a few kilometers!

Cooking implements: Hygienic and hassle-free cooking requires a whole range of cooking implements, starting with a convenient stove or *chulha*. There should be large flat-bottomed pots and utensils for preparing food in big quantities. Other handy utensils include long-handled ladles for stirring and serving food, measuring devices for ingredients, sharp knives, lids, peelers, chopping boards, air tight masala containers and so on. These utensils should be washed properly with a good cleaning agent.

Fuel: Fuel arrangements vary from state to state. For instance, LPG cylinders may be provided to the schools, or fuelwood may be purchased locally. Fuel arrangements are often neglected, and this can lead to serious disruptions of the midday meal. Next time you visit the local primary school, why not check that adequate fuel arrangements are in place?

Q25. What are the safety and hygiene measures to be followed in the preparation of midday meals?

Safety and hygiene are absolutely crucial for the success of midday meals. Lack of cleanliness occasionally leads to food poisoning: children fall sick and there is a backlash against the whole programme from parents and teachers. This is actually not difficult to avoid, but it requires paying close attention to safety and hygiene at all times. The cook and helper have a special responsibility in this respect. Anyone who is involved in the cooking process should maintain strict personal hygiene and other safety measures.

Ten “tips” for safety and hygiene are given in Box 5.

BOX 5:
TEN TIPS ON SAFETY AND HYGIENE

1. **Kitchen sheds:** Food should be cooked in a kitchen shed, located at a safe distance from the classrooms. The kitchen should always be kept clean. It should preferably have a raised platform for cooking, adequate light, a ventilation device, and arrangements for drainage and waste disposal.
2. **Food storage:** All these ingredients should be stored in proper containers, safely protected them from moisture, pests, etc.
3. **Fuel storage:** Fuel should also be stored safely and separately from the kitchen, to avoid any fire hazard.
4. **Smoke:** As far as possible, “smokeless chulhas” should be used. Indoor smoke from ordinary chulhas is bad for the lungs and eyes.
5. **Hygiene:** All persons engaged in handling of ingredients, or in cooking and serving the midday meal, should follow hygienic habits (e.g. regular cutting of nails, tying of hair in the kitchen, washing hands and feet with soap before cooking).
6. **Food quality:** All ingredients used for cooking (i.e. food grains, pulses, vegetables, cooking oil, condiments) should be free from adulteration and pest infestation, and should be used only after proper cleaning, washing, etc.
7. **Cooked food:** After the food is cooked and ready to eat, it must be kept covered and protected from insects.
8. **Checkups:** Special attention should be paid to ensure that the cook and helper do not suffer from contagious disease, so that germs are not passed through the food. They should undergo regular medical checkups.
9. **Washing up:** All cooking and serving utensils should be properly cleaned and dried every day after use.
10. **Disposal of waste:** Waste must be disposed well and not thrown in the open.

PART IV: NUTRITIONAL ASPECTS OF MIDDAY MEALS

Q26. How can midday meals make a real difference to the nutrition of children?

The midday meal cannot claim to satisfy all the daily nutritional requirements of the child. However, it is a good opportunity to improve the nutritional status of a vast number of Indian children. This requires providing a nourishing meal and ensuring that most or all groups of essential foods are included (see Box 6).

Simple processes can be used to enhance the nutritional value of common foods at little or no extra cost. These include sprouting, fermenting, using iron vessels and adding the edible leaves of vegetables. With a little creativity and imagination locally available foods can add nutrition to the midday meals at minimum cost in most parts of the country. For example, some variety of *saag* (spinach) is available in most areas and can simply be added to the dal.

BOX 6: NUTRITION FACTS

Cereal Grains and Products.

Foods such as rice, wheat, jowar, bajra, ragi, maize etc., are in this group. These foods supply energy or calories, protein, invisible fats. They also contribute iron, thiamine, riboflavin, folic acid and fiber.

Pulses and Legumes.

The foodstuffs in this group are pulses and legumes (beans, soya beans, peas, Rajmah, Bengal grams, etc). They provide energy, protein, invisible fat, Vitamin B1, Vitamin B2, folic acid, calcium, iron and fibres.

Milk , Nuts and Meat Products.

They include milk, curd, skimmed milk, cheese, almonds, groundnuts, chicken, meat, liver, egg, fish and other flesh foods. All these foodstuffs supply mainly protein, fat, calcium and vitamin B2.

Fruits and Vegetables.

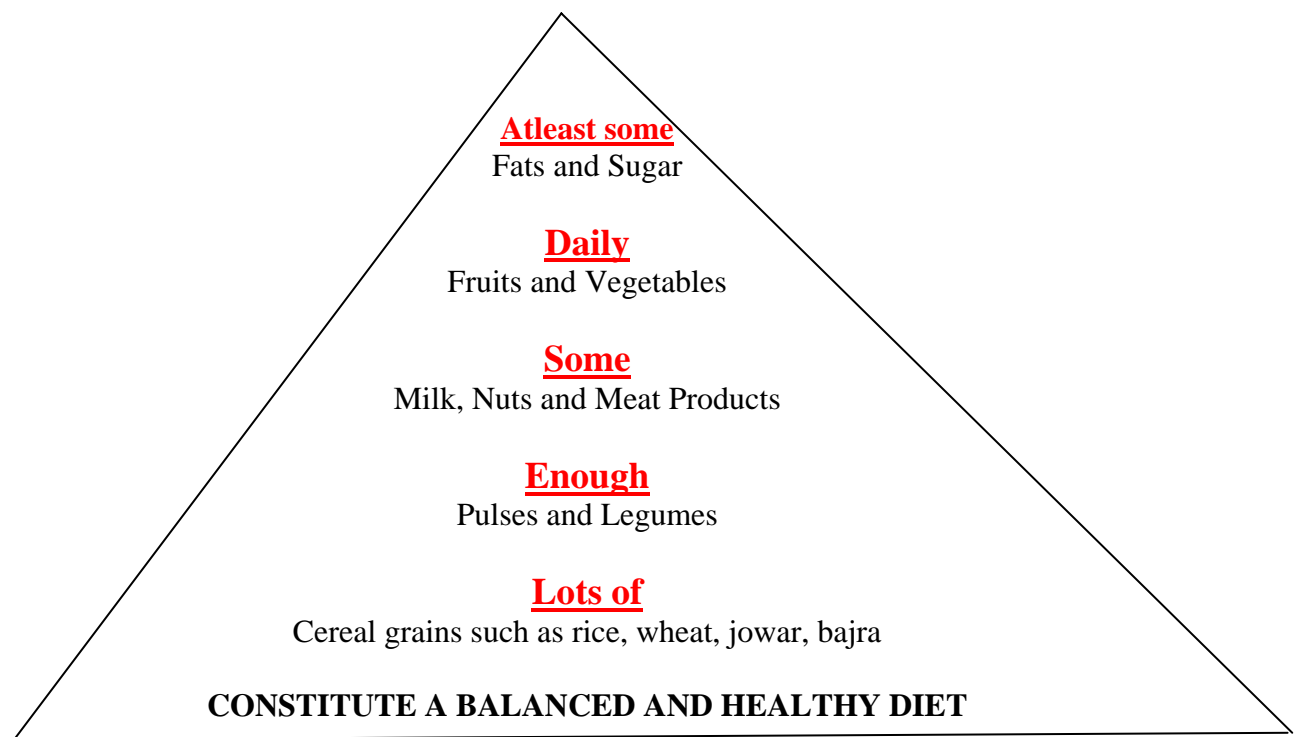
These include green leafy vegetables, yellow or orange fruits and vegetables such as papaya, mango, carrots, tomato, pumpkin, stems, leaves and flowers of plants, ladies finger, brinjals, bitter gourds and other gourds, cabbage, cauliflower, drumsticks. Fruits such as amla, lemons, orange are rich in minerals and vitamins, especially vitamin C and calcium, iron and folic acid and vitamin A. Other major nutrients are invisible fat, vitamin B2 and fibre. They provide variety in taste and texture and furnish roughage in the diet.

Fats and Sugars

All these foodstuffs supply energy or calories – vegetable oils, vanaspati, ghee, cream, sugar and jaggery. They add taste and flavour to the food, and are calorie dense. They can be used to enhance the caloric content of the small volumes of food children eat. In India, commonly available cooking oils include mustard oil, coconut oil, gingelly oil, groundnut oil, palmolein oil and sunflower oil.

Q27. How much food should be cooked?

According to the official guidelines, it should be 100 grams per child per day of food grains, supplemented with other items such as dal, vegetables, oil, spices etc. It is important to ensure that children are allowed to eat their fill. If required, additional resources should be mobilized to increase the quantity of food being cooked. If food routinely falls short, the first thing to check is whether any food or funds are being “siphoned off”.



Q28. *Should the same menu be followed day after day?*

Not at all. In fact, efforts should be made to make the meal as varied, interesting and wholesome as possible. No single vegetable or fruit or grain contains all the essential nutrients. Variety in the meals also helps to ensure that the children eat well throughout the week.

It is possible to plan an economical, yet varied and nutritious menu. This can be done in consultation with the local community, PTAs, women's Self-Help Groups and also nutrition experts (e.g. from Home Science Colleges). Items like pulses, green leafy vegetables, sprout lentils, eggs and milk, fruits like bananas can be given, and more attractive and varied dishes can be made like dhokla, dal bhaat, dalia, kheer. Menus should be planned locally (at the district level or even below), as food resources and dietary patterns vary a great deal between different areas.

Q29. *What can be done to improve the health and nutrition of children through the school, in addition to midday meals?*

A well-run "school health scheme" can be of great value in this respect. This could include growth monitoring, micronutrient supplementation (e.g. iron tablets), immunization, deworming as well as dealing with common ailments and conducting dental or eye checkups. It is also essential to ensure freely available potable water and accessibility to clean functional toilets for the students.

PART IV: WHAT WE CAN DO

The near-universal coverage of midday meals is a victory of sorts as it reflects organised public pressure, with a little help from the Supreme Court. However, the quality of midday meals is still quite low in most states: the content of the meal is inadequate, health safeguards are lacking and social discrimination is common. Thus, the next challenge is to achieve a radical improvement in the quality of midday meals. This again is likely to require sustained public pressure, as children's rights tend to have a very low priority on the political agenda. Everyone can contribute to this effort: public action is needed at all levels, from remote villages to the national capital. And there is a role for everyone: parents,

teachers, journalists, politicians, researchers, or just concerned members of the community.

There is no “recipe” to go about this. Much depends on local conditions and people’s imagination. Therefore, no attempt is being made here to provide a blueprint for action. Rather, we list below some ideas and suggestions that have come up during this campaign. Many of them have already been used with good effect somewhere or the other. We hope that these “hints” will help you to initiate similar activities in your own area.

What to “investigate”

The first thing to do, as far as local action is concerned, is to find out the status of midday meals in your village or area. This can be done through informal enquiries (e.g. by visiting the school or enquiring from children), or through formal “surveys” (see below). Here are some examples of issues to “investigate” in one way or another:

- Are midday meals being provided regularly in the local school(s)?
- How nutritious are midday meals? Have adequate efforts been made to enhance the nutrition content of the meals using available resources, including “creative” resources such as growing a vegetable garden near the school?
- Have there been any incidents of social discrimination, such as a Dalit cook or helper being “removed”, or children of different castes being made to sit separately?
- Do the teachers, parents, cooks, helpers or children have any complaints about midday meals? For instance, have there been any incidents of food poisoning?
- Does the cook or helper face any difficulty that requires attention?
- Is the midday meal organised in such a way that classes are not disrupted?

- Is the required infrastructure available including a kitchen shed, storage arrangements, cooking utensils and clean water?
- Are the essential safeguards for safety and hygiene in place?
- Is there any evidence of corruption in the provision of midday meals?

These are just some illustrations of the key issues – the list can be expanded without difficulty in the light of local conditions.

How to complain

Suppose that you have noticed an “irregularity” in the provision of midday meals in your area. For instance, the midday meal scheme has been disrupted in a particular school, or a Dalit cook has been “removed” by high-caste village leaders. Where and how should a complaint be made?

The best thing to do is start at the local level, and appeal to “higher” levels if you are unable to sort things out at the local level. For instance, if the problem concerns a particular school, it would be natural to speak to the teachers, the Parents Teachers Association (PTA), or the Gram Panchayat. Often it is possible to solve the problem at that level, if it is dealt with in a constructive way.

If this does not work, try to find out which “department” is in charge of midday meals in your area. In official jargon this is called the “nodal department”. In some states, the Education Department is the nodal department, but it may also be some other department such as the Department of Women and Child (in Orissa) or the Panchayati Raj Department (in Rajasthan) or the Midday Meal Department (in Tamil Nadu). The issue can then be raised with concerned officials in this department, for instance the Block Education Officer (BEO).

A “public hearing” is often a good way of drawing the public’s attention to a particular issue, and of putting pressure on local officials to take action. If they don’t wake up, various forms of “agitation” can be considered, such as a rally, dharna or gherao.

If a complaint is not getting attention through official channels, you can also approach the “advisor” to the Commissioners of the Supreme Court. Each state has its own advisor (see Appendix for further details). The advisor is often able to take up these matters with the state government and persuade it to intervene.

In cases of severe apathy or resistance from the local administration, a complaint can also be sent to the Commissioners of the Supreme Court in Delhi. Interventions from the Commissioners have often (not always) proved effective in the past. This is because the Commissioners act with the full authority of the Supreme Court, as far as the monitoring of interim orders is concerned. However, appeals to the Commissioners are best used as a “last resort”, when local action has failed. And these appeals should be well documented, to enable the Commissioners to demand specific action from the concerned authorities – typically the Chief Secretary of the state government. For instance, an affidavit on stamp paper, mentioning verifiable facts and supporting evidence, tends to be more useful than a general complaint.

Community action

As mentioned earlier, lack of “community participation” is a common problem with programmes like the midday meal scheme. Here are some things that can be done to promote community participation:

- Make regular enquiries from children about the quality of midday meals: how nutritious the meal is, whether the children like it, whether anyone fell ill after eating the midday meal, and so on.
- Attend meetings of the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) and draw the attention of the PTA to any irregularities that have come to your notice.
- Insist on regular monitoring of midday meals by the Village Education Committee (VEC).
- Raise issues relating to midday meals in the Gram Panchayat or Gram Sabha and ask for the accounts to be made available for examination.

- Ensure “surveillance” of the food delivery arrangements and expenditure of funds.
- Demand swift action against corrupt officials in the event of any misuse of funds.
- Collect funds to enhance the quality of midday meals by purchasing utensils, improving the infrastructure, providing richer meals on special occasions, and so on. One way of doing this is to organise a “chanda” (collection of voluntary donations) from time to time.
- Ensure that the appointments of cooks and helpers are made in a fair and transparent manner, and that preference is given to Dalit women. If needed, facilitate the acceptance of Dalit cooks in the community.
- Help to enhance the capacities of cooks and helpers so that the midday meal is safe, nutritious and tasty.
- Facilitate the involvement of Mahila Mandals and Self Help Groups in monitoring and implementation of midday meals.
- Spread awareness of the Supreme Court orders among all concerned: teachers, parents, village leaders, and even local officials if needed.

Box 7
COMMUNITY ACTION FOR MIDDAY MEALS IN ANDHRA PRADESH*

There have been many creative initiatives of community mobilisation for midday meals. During the last 14 years, the MV Foundation has worked with village communities in Andhra Pradesh for universal schooling and the abolition of child labour. Local committees of the Child Rights Protection Forum (CRPF) were formed in many villages, and existing committees (such as Gram Panchayats and School Education Committees) were also activated.

When midday meals began, these committees tried to ensure that the scheme was implemented. The community contributed generously. For instance in Kondakal village (Ranga Reddy District), the Gram Panchayat donated plates and glasses. And in Chittoor District, several School Education Committees raised funds to construct kitchen sheds.

The midday meal scheme is run through the Scheduled Caste mahila sanghas. Initially the programme faced much resistance as upper-caste children refused to eat food prepared by Dalit cooks. In such instances meetings were organised with the parents, teachers and School Education Committees and the significance of the midday meal explained. As a result of such meetings in most schools, children of all castes began to eat together.

In Ambatpally village (Mahaboobnagar District), for instance, many upper-caste children dropped out because Dalit cooks had been appointed. So a CRPF meeting was held to convince parents to send their children back to school. When the parents refused, CRPF decided that it needed more time to solve this problem. A door-to-door motivation campaign was held and parents were spoken to individually. Some of them agreed to send their children, and allow them to eat with everybody else. A meeting was then organised in the village for which the Mandal Education Officer and other dignitaries were also invited. After this most children came back to school, and slowly children of all castes began eating the midday meal prepared by Dalit cooks.

In most of the villages where such mobilisation has taken place, the provision of midday meals is regular and caste tensions have been resolved. But the struggle to ensure a good quality meal continues. In many villages, children get only plain rice and dal. However, in some villages where there has been a more sustained pressure and monitoring by the community and eggs, fruits and vegetables are also given.

* Contributed by Dipa Sinha.

Advocacy and media

Some problems are difficult to resolve through “local action”, and require policy changes at higher levels. For instance, if the budget allocation for midday meals is low (say, below the proposed minimum norm of “two rupees per child per day”), the local headmaster and even the Block Education Officer may not be able to do anything about it. This is because budget allocations are decided by the state government.

Achieving policy changes requires organised “advocacy”. This involves activities like lobbying Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), sending petitions to the Chief Minister, organising rallies in the state capital, writing in the newspapers, and so on. Here are some demands that can be made in this context:

- The state government should spend at least two rupees per child per day on cooking costs (see above).
- Provision should be made for kitchen sheds and other basic infrastructure in all primary schools.
- The state government should issue clear “guidelines” on midday meals and ensure that they are widely disseminated.
- Midday meals should be provided during school holidays, at least in drought-affected areas, and preferably everywhere.
- Midday meal schemes should have a “micronutrient supplementation” component, involving for instance the provision of vitamin A and iron tablets.
- Special attention should be paid to children who are excluded from the schooling system, especially child labourers and street children.

If you take up advocacy work, don’t forget the media. Mass media such as daily newspapers and TV interviews are the best way of reaching a large audience in a short time. Also, politicians and bureaucrats tend to be quite concerned to avoid “critical” media reports, so this is a good

way to keep them on their toes. However, getting attention for social issues like midday meals in the mainstream media is not always easy. It requires taking time to write, building contacts with friendly journalists, conducting “newsworthy” investigations, organising effective press conferences, and so on. “Learning by doing” is the best approach here, but it is also useful to seek advice from people with media experience. Effective media work is hard work, but it is a powerful tool of action.

“Research”

Research is another useful tool of action. If you have solid facts, it will be that much harder for the concerned authorities to ignore your demands.

Like media work, good research is hard work and there is no alternative to “learning by doing”. But much can be learnt from surveys and studies of midday meals conducted earlier in various states: Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal, among others. Many of these studies are available on the website of the right to food campaign (www.righttofoodindia.org). Also on this website, you will find samples of survey questionnaires, guidelines for field investigators, and related material.

BOX 8: THE MIDDAY MEAL CAMPAIGN IN JHARKHAND

There have been lively campaigns for midday meals in many states during the last few years. These campaigns have played a key role in persuading the state governments to implement the Supreme Court order of 28 November 2001.

To illustrate, consider Jharkhand. The campaign for midday meals there began with the “Dhanbad appeal”, issued on 17 February 2002 by Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS). The appeal drew attention to the Supreme Court order of 28 November 2001 and called for a “day of action” on 9 April 2002. The highlight of this day of action was a “people’s school meal” organised by local communities. The aim was to shame the government and show that people were tired of waiting for the implementation of the Supreme Court order.

This action day was preceded by a major programme of awareness generation using posters, leaflets, wall painting, street plays, etc. On 9 April 2002, many organisations joined the “day of action”. A people’s school meal was prepared in hundreds of schools with the involvement of Panchayats, Gram Sabhas, teachers, and the general public. In Ranchi, some 2,500 children gathered at the Town Hall to demand the introduction of midday meals in primary schools.

Another agitation took place on 11 July 2002. Hundreds of children marched to Chief Minister’s residence in Ranchi. Ignoring “Section 144” and slipping around security guards, they invaded his house and gave him a petition. The Chief Minister listened sympathetically and promised to “look into the matter”.

However, the Jharkhand Government continued to drag its feet, and to find one excuse or another to postpone the launch of the midday meal scheme. In November 2003, there was another wave of campaign activities including an extensive signature campaign, another “people’s school meal”, a “bal sansad” (children’s parliament), and a sit-in outside the Secretariat.

In response to these agitations, the Jharkhand Government finally introduced midday meals in primary schools in December 2003. As elsewhere, there were many problems in the initial phase, including logistic problems, cases of food poisoning, and some resistance from upper-caste parents. However the reach and quality of midday meals is steadily improving over time.

A survey conducted by Gram Swaraj Abhiyan in late 2004 found that midday meals were being served every day in most of the sample schools. The quality of food was generally considered “good” by the parents, and major increases in school attendance were observed, especially among girls and disadvantaged children. All the teachers except one wanted midday meals to continue.

Working Together

The campaign for universal, nutritious midday meals in primary schools is rapidly becoming a broad-based “people’s movement”. Many organisations and individuals around the country are taking up this issue in their own way. It may be a good idea to check who is working on this in your area or state, and to link up with other like-minded people. United action is especially important for successful “advocacy” with the state governments.

A good place to start searching for like-minded people is the “right to food campaign”, an informal network of individuals and organisations committed to the realisation of the right to food in India. For advice on how to contact the campaign, see the Appendix of this booklet.

Last but not least: if you found this “Primer” helpful please help to disseminate it. Here are some ways in which this can be done:

- Organising a group discussion of this Primer in your village or organisation.
- Arranging a translation in the local language, if it is not available already.
- Using portions of this Primer to prepare posters and leaflets. For instance, Box 3 with the Supreme Court orders could be used to make a poster to be displayed in the local school, panchayat bhawan, etc.
- Distributing or selling copies of this Primer in your area. Bulk orders can be sent to the secretariat of the right to food campaign, at the address given in the Appendix.

And please remember that we are interested in your comments and suggestions on this Primer – this is only the first version!

The campaign for universal midday meals is important not just from the point of view of children’s rights. It is also an opportunity to mobilize, organize and intervene on a wide range of issues: gender inequality, caste discrimination, corruption, state accountability, democratic

participation, among others. It is also a significant example of how legal action can be used to assert economic and social rights. Last but not least, it shows that organized action can make a difference!

Appendix: Further Resources

If you have access to the internet, you may be interested in the website of the “right to food campaign” (www.righttofoodindia.org). This website has a large amount of material on midday meals and related aspects of the right to food, including:

- The full text of Supreme Court orders on the right to food.
- Information on the status of midday meals in different states.
- A summary of the official “guidelines” on midday meals.
- A “soft copy” of this Primer.
- A more detailed “Handbook” on midday meals, particularly useful for training workshops.
- Guidelines for conducting field surveys of midday meals, along with readymade “questionnaires”.
- Lots of articles and field reports on midday meals.
- Links to related sites.

If you do not have access to the internet, you can contact the office of the Commissioners or the secretariat of the Right to Food Campaign for guidance – see addresses below.

Useful addresses

Office of the Commissioners of the Supreme Court: c/o Centre for Equity Studies, R-38A South Extension Part II, New Delhi 110 049. Tel/fax: 011-5164 2147. E-mail: commissioners@vsnl.net

Secretariat of the Right to Food Campaign: Siddiqui Building, Bara Hindu Rao, 6122 Bahadurgarh Road, Delhi 110 006 (street address); 257 DDA Flats (RPS), Mansarovar Park, Shahdra, Delhi 110 032 (correspondence address). Tel: 011-2351 0042, 9350530150. E-mail: righttofood@gmail.com

Note: The Commissioners have an “advisor” in each state, you can check his or her name and address from the Commissioners’ office. If you notice any violation of

Supreme Court orders in your area, and if you are unable to obtain redressal from local authorities, please contact the Commissioners or their advisor in your state.