Right to Education and Midday Meal Programme at Primary Stage.
Marisha Chakrabarti*

Abstract
From April 1, 2010 the Right to Education has come into force ensuring free education to for every child between the ages of 6-14. This means that no direct or indirect cost on uniform, textbooks, mid-day meals, transportation etc need to be borne by the child or parents to obtain elementary education. Everyone has a fundamental right to be free from hunger. Thus it is the responsibility of the state to provide free midday meal to the students of elementary stage. On 28 November 2001, the Supreme Court directed state governments to introduce cooked mid-day meals in all government and government-assisted primary schools within six months. This landmark direction converted the Mid-Day Meal Scheme into a legal entitlement, the violation of which can be taken up in the court of law. The direction and further follow-up by the Supreme Court has been a major instrument in universalising the scheme. Such programs attract children to school by providing nutritious meals in exchange for school participation. The programs may also boost learning and cognitive development by improving attention spans and nutrition. The attraction of these programs is their potential to improve both school participation and learning and cognitive outcomes by increasing the consumption of nutritious food by undernourished children. The key objectives of the programme are: protecting children from classroom hunger, increasing school enrolment and attendance, improved socialisation among children belonging to all castes, addressing malnutrition and social empowerment through provision of employment to women and overall promoting Univerzalisation of Primary Education.

* M. Phil. Scholar & Contractual Full Time Lecturer in Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women Dakshineswar, Kolkata 700035, Contact No. 9433898580/ 033 26546531

Midday Meal Programme
Introduction

The situation of children in India has been aptly described as a ‘silent emergency’. In terms of both education and health, India has some of the worst indicators of child well-being in the world. Nearly half of all Indian children are undernourished, whether we use the weight-for-age or height-for-age criterion. Though there has been some improvement in educational indicators in recent years, the goal of universal elementary education remains quite distant, especially for girls. Wider awareness of these issues has led to significant initiatives such as the recognition of elementary education as a fundamental right, the introduction of an “educational cess” and the launch of “Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan” (SSA). Another major intervention is the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, launched in 1995 with the aim of giving a boost to “Univerzalisation of Primary Education”, by increasing enrolment, retention and attendance and simultaneously impacting on nutrition of students in primary classes.

History of the practice

How can one small boy, herding cattle in a forgotten part of India, bring about monumental change in the country? The answer lies in the words he spoke.

When Tamil Nadu’s former Chief Minster K. Kamaraj saw a boy near the town of Cheranmahadevi herding livestock he asked him,

“What are you doing with these cows? Why didn’t you go to school?”

The child immediately retorted, “If I go to school, will you give me food to eat? I can learn only if I eat.”

Unknowingly, this young boy had touched on a critical problem facing the nation’s children: they cannot learn on a hungry stomach. His simple response sparked a series of events which gave rise to the Mid-day Meal Scheme as it is known today. Started in the 1960s in Tamil Nadu, the program was set up to reduce hunger and encourage universal primary education.

In November 28, 2001 the Supreme Court of India passed an order stating:

"We direct the State Governments/Union Territories to implement the Mid-Day Meal Scheme by providing every child in every Government and Government assisted Primary School with a prepared mid-day meal."

The Akshaya Patra Foundation, which was by then successfully implementing its own school lunch program in Karnataka, was called in to give testimonies for verifying the efficacy of the scheme.

In order to successfully carry out this mandate, each State Government then started its own Mid-day meal program. Initiated by the Government of Karnataka, Akshara Dasoha is one such scheme in place.

Once started, the challenge which now faced the Government was one of successful implementation. As the guidelines for the NP-NPSE, 2006 state, wherever possible, the Government would: ‘mobilize community support and promoting public-private partnership for the programme’

Voluntary organizations such as Akshaya Patra are therefore encouraged to set up operations wherever possible. They act as the implementing arm of the government.
In fact, as the Karnataka Human Development Report 2005 explains, the Government of Karnataka was the ‘first to take this step’ of involving NGOs in development programs. The report states that this ‘involvement of the NGOs in multilateral/bilateral programs, raises the level of co-operations to another level. The NGOs become not only implementers; they also find a place in designing and managing programs together with government at all levels.’

This pioneering move, by the Government of Karnataka, to make NGOs the implementing arm of the Government has been one of the major reasons for its success in attaining the goals of the program. The achievements of these private-public partnerships have even influenced the Central Government. By setting up and encouraging private-public partnerships, the government is successfully leveraging the skills and resources of the private sector for the greater good. Today, India's mid-day meal scheme is one of the largest school lunch programs in the world, reaching out to nearly 120 million children in the country.

**Objective of the mid day meal programme**

- **Promoting school participation:** Mid day 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 the 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 school. Mid day meal can help to overcome this problem by preventing “classroom hunger”.

- **Facilitating the healthy growth of children:** Mid day meal can also act as a regular source of “supplementary nutrition” for children, and facilitate their healthy growth.

- **Intrinsic educational value:** A well-organised mid day 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 other related matters.

- **Fostering social equality:** Mid day meal can help spread egalitarian values, as children from various social backgrounds learn to sit together and share a common meal. In particular, mid day meal can help to break the barriers of caste and class among school.

- **Enhancing gender equity:** The gender gap in school participation tends to narrow, as the Mid Day Meal Scheme helps erode the barriers that prevent girls from going to school. Mid Day Meal Scheme also provide a useful source of employment for women and helps liberate workingwomen from the burden of cooking at home during the day. In these and other ways, women and girl children have a special stake in Mid Day Meal Scheme.
**Psychological Benefits:** Physiological deprivation leads to low self-esteem, consequent insecurity, anxiety and stress. The Mid Day Meal Scheme can help address this and facilitate cognitive, emotional and social development.

### Nutritional Content

To achieve the above objectives a cooked mid day meal with following nutritional content is provided to all eligible children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Upper Primary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calorie</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protein</td>
<td>12gms</td>
<td>20gms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro Nutrient</td>
<td>Adequate quantities of micro nutrients like Iron, Folic acid and Vitamin-A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Monitoring and supervision of mid day meal scheme.

Ministry of Human resource Development and The Department of School Education and Literacy has prescribed a comprehensive and elaborate mechanism for monitoring and supervision of mid day meal scheme. The monitoring mechanisms includes the following –

1. **Local level monitoring** - representatives of gram Panchayat, Gram Sabhas, members of Parent Teacher Association as well as Mother’s Committee are required to monitor the (i) regularity and wholesomeness of the mid day meal served to children, (ii) cleanliness in cooking and serving of the mid day meal, (iii) timeliness in procurement of good quality ingredients, fuel, etc, (iv) implementation of varied menu, (v) social and gender equity. This is required to be done on a daily basis.

2. **Display of Information under Right to Information Act** - In order to ensure that there is transparency and accountability, all schools and centres where the programme is being implemented are required to display information on a regular basis.
   - Quantities of food grains received, date of receipt.
   - Quantity of food grains utilized.
   - Other ingredients purchased and utilized.
   - Number of children given mid day meals.
   - List of community members involved in programme.

3. **Inspections by State Government Officers** - Officers of the State Government/ UTs belonging to the Departments of Revenue, Rural Development, Education and other related sectors, such as Women and Child Development, Food, Health are also required to inspect schools and centres where the programme is being implemented.
4. Responsibility of Food Corporation of India (FCI) - The FCI is responsible for the continuous availability of adequate food grains in its depots and in principal distributing centres. It allows lifting of food grains for any month in advance so that supply chain of food grains remains uninterrupted.

Universalization of Primary education – A misplaced priority in midday meal scheme.

National Programme of Nutritional Support lays down their primary objective as giving a “boost to universalization of primary education, by increasing enrolment, retention and attendance”. However, while planning for implementation of mid day meal programme, the issue of universal coverage is seldom raised. The assumption is that increase in enrolment though a good indicator of the success of the scheme- is often the only criteria required to declare that the mid day meal scheme is a success in a particular region. Such over-emphasis on the enrolment criterion can tend to be a superficial indicator of the success of the Mid Day Meal Scheme – whose aim should ultimately be the universalization of primary education. 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 enrolment 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. Thus, 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. 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. The national guidelines for Mid Day Meal Scheme do not suggest the manner in which these positive rights, such as right to education and right to health can, in fact, be realized and secured for children. All efforts of the national policy makers and state-level implementers seem to be directed towards somehow ensuring that the child is provided with a meal a day during a time in primary school. It should be realized the scheme does not cover those children who, for whatever reason, do not attend school, and hence their right to food and primary education is being completely ignored.

Thus, though the Mid Day Meal Scheme has had an overall success in terms of drawing a greater number of children to primary schools, there seems to be a conceptual hurdle in the extending the goals of the scheme to achieve larger objectives such as Univerzalisation of Primary Education. In the long run, for the Mid Day Meal Scheme to significantly contribute towards securing the right to education
for every child, it will have to go beyond merely relying upon increased enrolment figures for its success.

References


Webliography

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midday_Meal_Scheme