

# Role and Importance of Mid-Day Meal in Enhancing the Nutritional, Educational and Social Equity Status of School Going Children.

Dr. Manoj Kumar Mishra\*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

We must see the importance of attainment of children's right for Social transformation and deepening of democracy. Throughout the world, feeding is widely perceived as an expression of love. Giving and sharing food can do more to foster friendship and affection than the most eloquent religious sermons.

When the students in all government schools across India get up from their seats, sit in a row and eat a nutritious meal cooked by the school. This is the ideal scenario for the world's largest nutrition programme, the Mid-day Meal scheme. On Paper it ensures a single Meal daily for children of the poorest families if they are going to school. Though almost half-a-century old the scheme was former Tamil Nadu chief minister Kamraj brain wave to check drop-out rates it actually took off under MG Ramachandran. The southern State's success Story inspired then finance Minister Manmohan Singh to extend it to the entire country in 1995. And just as it threatened to turn into another good idea badly implemented, the Supreme Court passed a landmark order in a case filed by PUCL, in NOV. 28, 2001 in this order, It said that the every state government must implement the scheme by providing every child in every government school with a prepared mid-day meal with a minimum 300 calorie content and 8-12 gm of Protein for minimum of 200 school days each year.

Ten years after the Supreme Court order it is worth examining the role of mid day meals. Experience suggests that well-devised school meals have much to contribute to the advancement of elementary education, child nutrition, and social equity. However, these achievements depend a great deal on the quality aspects at mid day meals.

The Scheme requires kitchen facilities. Only Karnataka has some Pucca (31%) kitchens. The rest manage within sheds or in classroom; others use verandahs some depend on utensils donated by the sarpanch and charitable families. In

some States, children are asked to bring their own plates to eat off. In Rajasthan, students even use their pages torn-out of notebooks as plates.

The cost of vegetables, spices, oil and salaries of cooks are paid by the state. The centre makes a fixed contribution (Rs. 50 per quintal an amount that is never enough) to the cost of transporting grains from local FCI godowns to schools.

According to estimates if all 150 million Primary and Secondary schools children were provided a meal as in the US, the additional cost would be 9000 crore annually, 11 per cent of the national education outlay. But the flesh is weak when the spirit is unwilling.

\* Lecturer in Economics, SVM +2, Barwat Sena, Bettiah

The benefits of this expenditure is just about a meal for the students. A survey by the centre for equity studies in Delhi shows that the class I enrollments rose by 15 per cent within the year with the introduction of Mid-Day Meals; the comparable figures for Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan were 17 and 25 per cent respectively.

Apart from these Mid-day Meal has dimensional Impact on elimination classroom hunger, children learn to sit together and eat together overriding cast and gender biases. And some imaginative states are combining it with health benefits such as Vitamin A or Iodine dosages and deworming exercises because National Family Health Survey observations (1998-99) that 74 per cent of Indian children between 6 and 15 years were anaemic, affecting their mental as well as physical growth. Nearly 50 per cent of children under three were under weight. There are other positive Spin-offs of Mid-day Meal. In this prospects a recent survey initiated by the centre for equity studies (hereafter CES), new Delhi, findings are present as a summary here.

### **PERSPECTIVES OF MID-DAY MEALS.**

Before examining the findings of the CES survey, it may be useful to recall the diverse personal and social roles of mid-day meals. Briefly, the case for mid-day meals can be made from at least three crucial perspectives: educational advancement, child nutrition, and social equity.

Each of these perspective, in turn, has different aspects, some more ambitious than others. To illustrate, one basic contribution of mid-day meals to educational advancement is to boost school enrolment. Going beyond that, mid-day meals may be expected to enhance pupil attendance on a daily basis (and not just annual enrolment). School meals may also enhance learning achievements, insofar as 'classroom hunger' undermines the ability of pupils to concentrate and perhaps even affects their learning skills. Finally, a well-organised school meal can have intrinsic educational value, in addition to what it contributes to the routine learning process. For instance, school meals 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, a balanced diet, and related matters.

Similarly, the nutritional objective of mid-day meals has several layers, ranging from the elimination of classroom hunger to the healthy growth of school children. In many respects, a mid-day meal programmed is (potentially at least) a nutritionist's dream; the children come every day, on their own, and they eat whatever is given to them. This makes it possible not only to raise their intake of calories and proteins, but also to provide nutritional supplements such as iron and iodine, which need to be ingested in small doses over a period of time. Mid-day meals also provide an excellent opportunity to implement nutrition programmes that require mass intervention, such as deworming. Available experience indicates that these interventions are highly effective: for instance, a combination of mass deworming with vitamin A and iron supplementation can significantly enhance children's nutrition for as little as Rs 15 per child per year.

The contribution of mid-day meals to social equity also has a variety of aspects. For instance, mid-day meals help to undermine caste prejudices, by teaching children to sit together and share a common meal. They also foster gender equity, by reducing the gender gap in school participation, providing an important source of female employment in rural areas, and liberating working women from the burden of having to feed

children at home during the day. To some extent, mid-day meals also reduce class inequalities. Indeed, in contemporary India, children enrolled in government schools come mainly from disadvantaged families. Thus, mid-day meals can be seen as a form of economic support to the poorer sections of society. More importantly perhaps, mid-day meals facilitate school participation among underprivileged children. This is likely to reduce future class inequalities, since lack of education is a major source of economic disadvantage and social marginalization. In short, despite their innocent garb, mid-day meals are a significant challenge to the prevailing inequalities of caste, class and gender.

Much of this paper is devoted to a closer examination of these potential benefits of mid-day meals. We shall also discuss some possible adverse effects, such as the disruption of classroom processes and the risk of food poisoning. The practical achievements of mid-day meals, we shall argue, depend a great deal on adequate attention being paid to quality issues.

### **ENHANCED SCHOOL ATTENDANCE**

Earlier research on primary education in rural India suggests that mid-day meals enhance school participation, especially among girls. One recent study estimates that the provision of a mid-day meal in the local school is associated with a 50 per cent reduction in the proportion of girls who are out of schools [Dreze and Kingdon 2001]. Early evaluations of the mid-day meal programmes initiated in response to the Supreme Court order also point in the same direction.

There is also much informal evidence that mid-day meals have enhanced daily school attendance (and not just annual enrolment). Schools records are little help here, because teachers have a tendency to mark most pupils as 'present' irrespective of the actual attendance. However, qualitative data point firmly in the direction of a significant improvement in daily attendance. Many parents, for instance, reported that mid-day meals had made it much easier for them to send their children to school in the morning. Children need less ceasing and cajoling, as they now look forward to going to school. Most teachers also felt that mid-day meals had raised daily attendance, especially among young children.

Some teachers also pointed out that mid-day meals make it easier to retain pupils after the lunch break. Earlier, children used to go home for lunch and many did not return. Now, they stay on the schools premises and classes resume smoothly after the mid-day meal. The fact that mid-day

enhance school attendance in the afternoon contrasts with the common argument that mid-day meals 'Disrupt' classroom activity and interfere with the teaching process.

### **End of Classroom Hunger**

Assessing the impact of mid-day meals on child nutrition is beyond the scope of the CES survey. Given the rudimentary nature of the menu, it would be naïve to expect mid-day meals to have a dramatic nutritional impact on their own. However, low nutrition related achievement do emerge from the survey. First, mid-day meals facilitate the elimination of classroom hunger. Many Indian children reach school on an empty stomach in the morning. Either because they are not hungry at that time or because their parents are too busy to arrange an early morning breakfast. In the absence of a mid-day meal, pupils often become hungry after a few hours and find it hard to concentrate. "The children of agricultural labourers used to lose interest and fall asleep around mid-day, because, they were hungry". This problem is now largely resolved.

Second, in the more deprived areas where some children do not get two square meals a day, the mid-day meal is protection against hunger in general. This year, for instance, mid-day meals have helped to avert an intensification of child under nutrition in many drought-affected areas. Similarly, poor households such as those headed by widows or landless labourers value the assurance of a free lunch every day for their children. The contribution of mid-day meals to food security and child nutrition seems to be particularly crucial in tribal areas where hunger is endemic.

### **LEARNING TO SHARE**

Aside from promoting school attendance and child nutrition mid-day meals have an important socialization value. As children learn to sit together and share a common meal. One can expect some erosion of caste prejudices and class inequality. Of course, it is also possible for mid-day meals to be a tool of reinforcement rather than erosion of prevailing social inequalities. How common is caste discrimination in the context of mid-day meals? The CES survey suggests that open discrimination is rare. For instance, we did not find any cases of separate sitting arrangements, or of discriminatory practices such as Pupils of all social backgrounds seen to be quite happy to sit together and share the same food. Parents, too, claim to welcome the arrangement in most cases. Teachers confirmed that parents rarely objected to their children sharing a meal with children of other

castes. And among disadvantaged castes, very few parents felt that their children had ever been victims of caste discrimination in the context of the mid-day meal.

These responses, however, do not rule out subtle forms of caste prejudice and social discrimination. While open objections to the mid-day meal on caste grounds were rare, upper-caste parents were often skeptical of the scheme and even actively opposed it in a few cases. Some upper-caste parents send their children to school with packed food, or ask them to come home for lunch. Whether this is manifestation of caste prejudice (as opposed to class privilege) is not always clear, but the caste factor is likely to play a part in many cases.

Further, there does seem to be much upper caste resistance to the appointment of Dalit Cooks. These findings do not detract from the general socialization value of mid-day meals. In a sense, they even enhance it, if upper caste parents initially resist mid-day meals. There is much value in overcoming that reluctance. There are strong indications that the caste barriers, such as they are, tend to weaken quite rapidly over time.

### **GENDER ASPECTS**

A side from helping to defeat caste prejudices, mid-day meals also contribute to gender equity. For one thing mid-day meals reduce the gender gap in education, since they boost female school attendance more than male attendance. As mentioned earlier, this is consistent with independent evidence suggesting that female education is particularly responsive to school incentives. As the PROBE report notes (with reference to north India) 'Parents are not generally opposed to female education, but they are reluctant to pay for it. School meals could make a big difference here, by reducing the private costs of schooling.'

Another way in which mid-day meals contribute to gender equity is by creating employment opportunities for poor women. In the schools, a large majority (68%) of the cooks are women, and most of them come from underprivileged backgrounds. This is not surprising. Since the work is fairly demanding and salaries are low. In addition, the scheme guidelines often state that priority should be given to disadvantaged persons when cooks are appointed.

There is another important way in which mid-day meals contribute to the liberation of working women: when children get a hot meal at school, mothers are free from the burden of having to feed them at home in middle of the day. This

feature is especially relevant for widowed mother, who often work outside the house without the benefit of any domestic support. Having said this, it should be mentioned that the contribution of mid-day meals to the empowerment of women has been diminished by the unfair if not exploitative conditions under system.

### MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME (MDMS) IN BIHAR

MDMS was initially launched in the state on 1<sup>st</sup>. September 2004 with an initial coverage of about 1 lakh children. The cooked mid-day meals are being served in all the primary school of the state from January 2005. Coverage under the scheme increased gradually and all children in classes I-V, including those in EGS/AIE centers, were covered from April 2005. the MDMS was introduced in UPS in all the 530 EBBs since March 2008. The state government is paying @ 60 paise per child the Central Govt. giving Rs. 1.50 per

child per day. From 2008-09, the scheme is covering UPS in all block of the state.

The scheme is implemented by Vidyalaya Shiksha Samit (VSS), a 15 member body of parents for school development and community participant, constituted under the Bihar VSS Act 2000. At least one third of the members of the Samiti are mother. The state govt. has delinked the procurement of food grains and cooking tasks from teachers and handed them to Panchayat workers and Mata Samitis / Self help groups.

But as with most other schemes in this state, this too evaporates on the way. None of the eight school that the Sunday express surveyed in west Champaran District served mid-day meals cooked or otherwise. And none, incidentally, had teachers attending school either.

No wonder then; west Champaran has the highest drop-out rate in Bihar: 74 percent, overall 43 % dropout in the primary stage and not more than 40 percent of all enrolled Matriculate.

### MID-DAY MEAL IN BIHAR (2009-10)

SI	Particulars	Details
01	Nodal department for the scheme	Dept. of Human Resources Development
02	Implementing agency at local level	Vidyalaya Shiksha Samiti (VSS)
03	State level Nodal Transport agency for Food grains	State FCI
04	Year since when cooked meal universalized	April 2005
05	No. of children of classes I-VIII covered in 2009-10	86.21 Lakhs (PS) + 24.88 Lakhs (UPS) = 111.09 Lakh
06	No. of institutions covered during 2009-10	All govt./aided schools & EGS/ AIE centers
07	No. of schools day to be covered during 2009-10	231
08	Central assistance release for 2009-10 (up to 04-09-2009) 1. Cost of food grains paid to FCI 2. Cooking Cost 3. Transport Subsidy 4. MME @ 1.8%	Total allocation 2009-10 Rs. 467.80 Cr. Releases Rs. 159.48 Cr. 1. Rs. 42.53 Cr. 2. Rs. 108.84 Cr. 3. Rs. 5.35 Cr. 4. Rs. 2.76 Cr.
09	Total Central allocation for cooking cost for 2009-10: Minimum Mandatory state contribution for cooking cost.	Rs. 435.35 Crore. Re. 0.50 paise per child per school day
10	Calorific Value	PS. 450 calories with 12 g of protein. UPS 700 calories with 20 gm of protein.
11	Weekly menu	Sabji/Rajma/Rice/Dal/Rice-Dal-Sabji, Khichri-Choka, Daliya, Egg Curry
12	Constitution of steering –cum-monitoring committees at state level/district level / block level	Yes/Yes/Yes/ But their functions seem to be ineffective



Thus it is clear that the nutrition value of Mid-day meal is very high 450 cal & 12 gm of protein for PS and 700 cal and 20 gm protein for UPS in just 0.50 paisa. MDMS is popular and widely known in Bihar all the children spoken to informed that food is served in their school – although there were general complaints about quality. Though, those things are improving. A pilot project to provide cooked midday meals is operational in 30 of the state’s least literate blocks “By the next academic year it will expand to the 10 least literate districts of the state, however to cover the entire state in proper way. We need central assistance.

#### **Impact of Mid-day meal (An eco-socio-academic analysis)**

Thus, one argument for providing cooked mid-day meals in primary schools is that this makes the school environment less hostile for the child. For Indian children, the school environment is often stifling and unfriendly. Verbal humiliation and physical brutality are common, and children rarely enjoy gestures of appreciation or encouragement from the teachers. In this situation, mid-day meals can play an important role in making children feel well and welcome at schools.

Mid-day meals, of course, can also serve many other useful purposes. Aside from the “well-being” argument, the case for mid-day meals can be made from at least three crucial perspectives: educational advancement, child nutrition, and social equity.

There has been a wave of interesting Impact of Mid-day meals during the last few years. Some are as follows:-

First, mid-day meals are in place in most primary schools. Some states took several years to implement the Supreme Court order of 28 November 2001, which directed them to provide cooked mid-day meals in all primary schools within three months. But ultimately they all fell in line, and the coverage of mid-day meal schemes is now close to universal. Further, field studies indicate that the provision of mid-day meals is fairly regular in most states.

Second, mid-day meals are popular. Parents and teachers generally want the scheme to continue. There are, however, substantial pockets of opposition among upper-caste parents and sections of the teaching community. Upper-caste parents often resent their children being made to share food with Dalit children, or eating food prepared by a Dalit cook. Teachers often complain that mid-day meals disrupt classroom activities. This opposition typically wears out if the scheme is

well implemented: over time, mid-day meals get smoothly integrated in the school routine, and upper-caste parents resign themselves to the fact that “times have changed.” In some states, however, haphazard implementation has strengthened the opposition lobby and a backlash against mid-day meals cannot be ruled out.

Third, children too are generally happy to get a mid-day meal at school. This is not so much because they are hungry, or because the food is better than what they get at home but because they enjoy sharing a meal with their friends. Many states have started enhancing the variety and nutritious content of mid-day meals, and this tends to make them even more popular among children.

Fourth, mid-day meals seem to be quite effective in promoting regular school attendance. This is one of the most common findings of recent studies on mid-day meals. Sometimes the reported effects on school attendance are astonishingly large. For instance, a recent study coordinated by Samaj Pragati Sahyog in Madhya Pradesh found that school enrolment in Class 1 had shot up by 36 per cent within a year after cooked mid-day meals were introduced. A similar jump in school enrolment among SC/ST children is reported for Jharkhand in a recent report prepared by Gram Swaraj Abhiyan. These particular figures may be on the high side, due to small samples or reporting biases, but what is not in doubt is that mid-day meals have major effects on school attendance, especially among girls and disadvantaged families. In this respect, quantitative data corroborate wide-ranging testimonies from teachers, parents and other observers.

Fifth, mid-day meals help to break caste barriers and foster a sense of social equality among school children. This is very important, because the early years of primary school correspond to a vital period of children’s lives, when their perceptions of social identity take shape. It is around that age, for instance, that children develop a consciousness of their caste and its place in the social hierarchy. The experience of sitting together and sharing a meal, irrespective of caste and class, can help to impart a sense of social equality at this crucial stage. The fact that upper-caste parents often resist this arrangement confirms that it does challenge prevailing social norms in an important way.

Sixth, the socialization value of mid-day meals is defeated when mid-day meals themselves become a site of social discrimination. A recent incident in Bhokludih village of Mahasamund district (Chhattisgarh) illustrate the problem, as well as how it can be turned into an opportunity to challenge social exclusion. In Bhokludih, some

Dalit children complained that they were given less food than other children at school, made to sit separately, and prevented from entering the kitchen on the grounds that they were “Chamars.” When a local teacher (Kamala Chauhan) took up their cause, she was transferred. On a more positive note, this incident received wide publicity and helped to raise public awareness of the need to deal sternly with any incident of caste discrimination at school.

Seventh, there is some interesting evidence on the value of mid-day meals as a means of nutrition supplementation. While mid-day meals certainly help to protect children from classroom hunger, they may or may not lead to a sustained improvement in their nutritional status. In fact a poor mid-day meal (say rice and salt) can even be counter-productive, if it “kills” children’s appetite and reduces their intake of richer food at home. In this connection, it is interesting to note that according to a recent study the improved mid-day meal scheme in Madhya Pradesh “reduces the daily calorie deficiency of the average primary school going child in the survey region by almost 35%, the daily iron deficiency by 25% and meets almost their entire daily protein deficiency.” Many other states have also started enhancing the nutritional value of mid-day meals (e.g. by providing eggs and fruit), or combining them with micronutrient supplementation (e.g. iron and vitamin A). Having said this, there is still a long way to go in making full use of mid-day meals as an opportunity to improve child nutrition.

## II. CONCLUSION

Almost all recent studies of mid-day meals point to the need for further improvements in the qualitative aspects of mid-day meal schemes. Basic facilities such as cooking sheds and drinking water are still lacking in many schools. Hygiene and health safeguards are often neglected. And social discrimination (particularly against Dalit cooks) remains quite common. These problems need to be firmly resolved if mid-day meals are to realize their full potential. Thus Supreme Court orders on mid-day meals can be seen as an instructive example of the possibility of constructive judicial intervention to protect children’s right to food. However, Court orders are little more than a temporary solution. Ultimately, nutritious mid-day meals need to be recognized as an integral part of a healthy school environment, just like a blackboard or textbook. And this recognition needs to be reflected in permanent legal entitlements as well as in political priorities and financial allocations.