

**Avanee Khatri and A. K. Sinha**

## **WHAT WENT WRONG? : EXAMINING MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME IN THE PRESENT DAY INDIAN CONTEXT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

India the biggest democracy in the world is going through a lot of changes and turmoil, both from within and due to outside forces. As a country, it is unparalleled in its diversity cultural, religious, social, and economic as well as political. Day in and day out we come across newspapers and government reports bolstering India's increasing GDP and economic growth. But at the same time we have issues that are the cause of major concern and which are hurdles in the growth of India to become a developed nation. These concerns are malnutrition, poverty, illiteracy, population growth, corruption and so on, the list is endless. Malnutrition and illiteracy are the most dreaded problems of our nation as it has direct impact on the children which are considered to be the assets of a nation.

Education and health are the most important sectors for development of a nation. Education is the best legacy a country can give to her citizens. A nation cannot progress until its people are healthy.

But considering the statistics of World Bank data that indicates India has one of the world's highest demographics of children suffering from malnutrition raise a cause of concern. Also, India ranks 67 out of 80 nations in the Global Hunger Index with 44% of children under the age of 5 are underweight, while 72% of infants have anemia (World Bank Report, 2012). To tackle the problem of malnutrition and illiteracy in recent years, Ministries of Government have come up with various schemes time to time for children of India. The major schemes in this respect are:

- Article 47 in the Constitution of India contains a commitment to improving nutrition: 'The State shall regard the raising of the level of the nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health among its primary duties'. Accordingly the National Nutrition Policy, which recognized the importance of National Nutrition Surveillance (NSS), was designed in 1993. It advocates coordinated action between food production, food

distribution, education, health and family welfare, people with special needs and National Nutritional Surveillance.

- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is the centrally sponsored scheme of non-formal education (NFE) was introduced in 1979-80 on a pilot basis with the aim to support the formal system in providing education to all children up to the age of 14 years. The National Policy on education 1986, recognize that the school could not reach all children and a large & systematic programme of non-formal education would be required for school dropouts, for children from habitations without schools, working children & girls who could not attend full day schools. Thus NFE became an important component of the overall strategy for achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE). The NFE scheme was revised in 1987-88.
- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Government of India sponsored programme, is India's primary social welfare scheme to tackle malnutrition and health problems in children below 6 years of age and their mothers. The main beneficiaries of the programme were aimed to be the girl child up to her adolescence, all children below 6 years of age, pregnant and lactating mothers. The gender promotion of the girl child by trying to bring her at par with the male child is a key component of the scheme. It was launched on October 2, 1975, by Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya scheme was introduced by the Government of India in August 2004, and then integrated in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan program, to provide educational facilities for girls belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, minority communities and families below the poverty line in Educationally Backward Blocks.
- The National Literacy Mission (NLM) was a nationwide programme started by Government of India under Ministry of Human Resource Development in May 5, 1988. It aims to make 80 million adults in the age group of 15 - 35 literate over an eighty year period. By "Literacy", the NLM means not only learning how to read, write and count but also helping people become aware of why they are deprived and helping them move towards change.
- Midday Meal Scheme launched on August 15, 1995 by Ministry of Human Resource Development with a aim to tackle malnutrition by providing free lunch to school children on all days.

Of all the initiatives taken, mid-day meal scheme was the most sought and which has yielded fruitful results in terms of uplifting nutrition levels and school attendance of children in rural areas. Before critically examining the scheme let us first look at its background for proper understanding.

### **MID-DAY MEAL AT A GLANCE**

The Mid Day Meal (MDM) scheme grew out of the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-SPE), which sought to increase primary school enrolment and attendance rates by offering meals to improve the nutritional levels of children. By providing a nutritious meal at school, the scheme seeks to improve child health, improve their ability to concentrate, and incentivize parents to send their children to school.

The concept of supplementary nutritional support through educational institutions took its root in India when Madras Corporation developed a school lunch program in 1925. In the post-independence era, Gujarat was the first state to start school lunch programme in 1984. However, it was only in 1995 that the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) was launched at the national level (GOI, 1995). With a view to enhancing enrollment, retention and attendance and simultaneously improving nutritional levels among children, the NP-NSPE was launched as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme on 15th August 1995, initially in 2408 blocks in the country. By the year 1997-98 the NP-NSPE was introduced in all blocks of the country. It was further extended in 2002 to cover not only children in classes' I-V of government, government aided and local body schools, but also children studying in Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) centres (Non formal education centres under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan). Central Assistance under the scheme consisted of free supply of food grains @ 100 grams per child per school day, and subsidy for transportation of food grains up to a maximum of 50 per quintal.

In September 2004 the scheme was revised to provide cooked mid-day meal with 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein to all children studying in classes I – V in Government and aided schools and EGS/ AIE Centre's. In addition to free supply of food grains, the revised scheme provided Central Assistance for (a) Cooking cost @ 1 per child per school day, (b) Transport subsidy was raised from the earlier maximum of 50 per quintal to ' 100 per quintal for special category states, and 75 per quintal for other states, (c) Management, monitoring and evaluation costs @ 2% of the cost of food grains, transport subsidy and cooking assistance, (d) Provision of mid-day meal during summer vacation in drought affected areas.

In July 2006 the scheme was further revised to provide assistance for cooking cost at the rate of (a) 1.80 per child/school day for States in the North Eastern Region (NER), provided the NER states contribute 0.20 per child/school day, and (b) 1.50 per child/ school day for other States and UTs, provided that these States and UTs contribute ' 0.50 per child/school day.

In October 2007, the scheme has been further revised to cover children in upper primary (classes VI to VIII) initially in 3479 Educationally Backwards Blocks (EBBs). Around 1.7 crore upper primary children are expected to be

included by this expansion of the scheme. The programme will be extended to all areas across the country from 2008-09. The calorific value of a mid-day meal at upper primary stage has been fixed at a minimum of 700 calories and 20 grams of protein by providing 150 grams of food grains (rice/wheat) per child/school day.

### ***How does it work?***

As per the scheme's original design, *panchayats* and *nagar palikas* were the implementation unit, with the district being the unit for allocation of food grains. Following the 2004 revision of guidelines, the responsibility for implementing MDM was vested with state and union territories governments while the National level Steering cum Monitoring Committee has oversight authority. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MoHRD) conveys all central assistance to State Nodal Departments, which in turn convey the funds to District Departments or to *Panchayati Raj* Institutions in states where applicable. Table 1 gives an outlay of Mid-day meal Scheme.

### **REALITY CHECK**

The mid-day meal program exhibits a positive influence on enrolment and attendance in schools. A hungry child is less likely to attend school regularly. Hunger drains them of their will and ability to learn. Chronic hunger leads to malnutrition. It also delays or stops the physical and mental growth of children. Mid-Day Meals have an important social value and foster equality. As children learn to sit together and share a common meal, one can expect some erosion will be there in caste prejudices and class inequality. Various studies have found mid-day meal scheme has a positive effect in that it led to a significant increase in enrolment and attendance of children, the increase being particularly marked in the case of girls and children from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme provided employment for more than 26 lakh cook-cum-helpers engaged by the State/UTs during 2010-11 for the preparation and serving of school meals. Most of them were women and a part of them belonged to the Scheduled Castes and other vulnerable social groups. (PEO, 2010).

But the recent speculations and the mid-day meal tragedy in Bihar in 2013 where several children lost their lives after having mid-day meal food, forces us to rethink how safe are we in our nation "India"? The sad loss of 23 innocent lives after consuming hot cooked meals in a school in Bihar has rightly shocked and angered people. The highly poisonous pesticide *monocrotophos* found in children's food and a headmistress overlooking the cook and the children's protests about the oil and not tasting the food herself (as is the instruction) before serving is criminal negligence. Further, the usage of toilet water to wash utensils of food in a primary school of Panchkula, A dead lizard was found in the food in a primary school of Haryana and many more. These

incidents have become common. Furthermore, the food was being prepared in open in primary schools of Mohali. Hence, non-seriousness in the implementation of the scheme is directly observed in these cases.

A spate of incidents, coupled with the national alarm triggered by the deaths of nearly two dozen school children in Bihar and other states has forced the state governments to look for newer ways and means to check the rot in mid-day meal disbursing mechanism. The root cause that came forward in mid-day meal tragedy are, the unhygienic conditions, dirty and defaced kitchen walls, improper storage of various raw materials, cats and puppies in the wash area, fungus on the kitchen roof, flies and insects in and around the kitchen area, Maggots in wheat, fungus-laden and insect-infested rice and rotten vegetables formed the mid-day meal. The supply of food grains to cook food, though adequate, is of quite low quality. Due to faulty system of purchasing and storage of food grains by the Food Corporation of India, sometimes the food grains supplied have been found to be rotten and full of insects and pests. Corruption is involved in the delivery system. Fake enrolments are being done to embezzle money. Government agencies are not doing the monitoring. Even if there are committees at some places, they are not functional. They submit reports sitting at their tables without having visited schools. The money provided fills the pockets of those who arrange for supplies.

It is a pity that this has happened at a time when the mid-day meal scheme had improved a lot over the years. The mid-day meal scheme provides children in over 1.2 million government-run schools a hot and nutritious meal every day, which besides encouraging attendance and improving nutritional levels, also helped to arrest dropout rates.

The scheme actually suffers from structural problems, major being lack of monitoring mechanism. Also, there is no clear structure defined, and every state functions according to its wish. It is unfortunate that government schools covered under the government grants have almost replaced effective education with mid-day meals to the students and that too of indifferent quality. Since there is no examination stipulated up to eighth class in government schools, in the absence of accountability, the teachers have taken it to be no teaching up to that level. As a result the status of these students has been rendered to virtual beggars that came to the school more for food than for education. These ill-educated children, when they enter the high school classes, get totally lost and the drop out percentages increases suddenly. In majority of the places, teachers are in charge of management of the scheme. They have to take care of everything right from the material to cooking to maintaining records. Usually government schools in rural areas have very few numbers of teachers and when they are laden with the burden of maintain and keeping records, it consumes almost all their time, which has direct impact on their teaching. Also, the infrastructure of many of government schools in rural areas

is very poor and there is less number of classrooms, so there is no proper place for cooking area and the cooking area is made near sink which cultures many fungus and bacteria's due to open and humid environment. Further, there is lack of proper storage mechanism for storage of grains and other food materials. The drinking water is also unsafe. These tragic incidents have also pointed towards the quality of food grains and stuff being used in this scheme. When this scheme was initiated, it was included in the guidelines that the food grains for this scheme would be subsidized. The prescribed food menu has generally been defied due to paucity of utensils, non-supply of requisite items for food preparation, the operator's sweet will and workload of the cooks. There is no suitable place where the children could sit properly and consume food as a homogenous group. The officers of the Education Department hardly visit the schools with a view to monitor the operation of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. Apart from this also, the quality of food grains purchased and given to poor children is indeed a matter of shame and an act that questions the very essence of humanity.

Jolted by the mid-day meal tragedy in Bihar, and other places government and media are coming up with new guidelines and measures to improve the quality of mid-day meal and bring back the confidence of the poor people. According to new guidelines, every school has to purchase mustard and vegetable oil bearing agmark and other items bearing ISI mark. The purchase details were required to be entered daily in the register which would be checked by officials visiting the schools frequently for inspection. The need of the hour is to coordinate the functioning of various departments with regard to the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. An alternative system should be introduced which also has the benefit of simultaneously helping *anganwadi's*, providing employment to local women from weaker sections and helping organic farming. According to this system, the responsibility of preparing and distributing mid-day meals will be given Self Help Groups (SHG's) of local women. These groups will be provided with some initial capital in its back account by the government. The government will also provide a clean kitchen, utensils and a cooking gas. The kitchen will be near school not inside it. The SHGs will prepare nutritious traditional local dry foods, which will vary according to the season. The raw material will be purchased from local or nearby organic farmers to ensure encouragement to organic farming. Twice every day at attendance time and tiffin time, women from SHGs will go to local schools and distribute the food after tasting it. The teachers will merely have to sign the papers for food received for so many children. This can help teachers to concentrate on teaching. The government will quickly make payments on the basis of these papers at a rate that gives good margin to SHGs.

Last but not the least, the concept of implementing mid-day meal is almost a century old in India. With early beginnings in Madras Presidency and followed by its introduction in Gujarat and Delhi, in that order, in the

post-independence period, today the scheme is being implemented in most states. The scheme is important in terms of its potential for substantially improving the health of the younger generation of the country as also in terms of the enormity of spending of taxpayer's money. It is also an important instrument to encourage children to attend school. Therefore, it becomes imperative that a comprehensive evaluation of the programme efficacy be undertaken. Government should take serious steps towards improving hygiene conditions and nutrition level so that the vision with which this scheme was devised can be achieved.

Also, if we want the free India to reflect the true character of an egalitarian democratic society with equal opportunities to all the children of the nation, it must focus on improving levels of education, providing equal and free education to all irrespective of the economic and social status of the families and by making same course curriculum throughout the state. This will provide level playing ground for all the children of the state for admission to the higher institutions of learning, especially the professional and technical courses in college and universities. The time for action is now.

**Table 1**  
**Outlay of Mid-day meal Scheme**

Ministry	Ministry of Human Resource Development (MoHRD)
Department	Department of School Education and Literacy
Sector	Education
Goal	Support universalization of elementary education
Output Indicators	Nutritional status of children, Enrolment, Attendance, Retention
Funding	Shared by Centre and states
Year of Inception	1995
Expiration date	None
2009-2010 Budget outlay	8,814 Crore
2013 Budget outlay	13, 250 Crore

Source: IFMR Research, Centre for Development Finance.

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