

Food, for education

Text and photographs:
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The firm intervention of the Supreme Court makes State governments scramble to implement the mid-day meal scheme, which has been found to be a sure way to increase enrolment in schools and decrease child labour.



Kichdi getting ready at the middle school in Neemarang village, Bihar.

THE mid-day meal scheme is finally taking root across the country, with the Supreme Court fixing January 2005 as the deadline to provide cooked meal to pupils up to Class V and the ones covered by the Education Guarantee Scheme and the Alternative and Innovative Education Centres in government, local body and government-aided schools in all States and Union territories.

Acting on a public interest petition filed by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), the court directed on November 17, 2004 that "every child eligible for cooked meal under the mid-day meal scheme, in all States and Union territories, shall be provided with the said meal immediately, and in any case, not later than January, 2005."

Some of the States that had earlier ignored the court order scrambled to meet the deadline. Bihar, Jharkhand and Assam, which had only partially implemented the "kichdi" scheme, as it is known popularly, have now extended its coverage to their entire territory. The Jammu and Kashmir government has issued the orders, but the State Education Ministry admits that it has failed to implement the scheme.

Rejecting the argument that the delay in the implementation of the scheme was because the States did not receive necessary funds from the Centre, the court instructed the States to use whatever funds were available and claim the costs from the Centre later. The Central support now consists of 100 grams of grain a day per child, Re.1 as conversion cost (for firewood, pulses, vegetables and condiments) and a transport subsidy of up to Rs.50 a quintal of food stuffs from the nearest Food Corporation of India (FCI) depot.

The good news is that in village after village, the cooked meal scheme is leading to higher enrolment and fewer dropouts.



At Neemarang, schoolchildren wait for the mid-day meal to be served.

Anwara Begum, who teaches in Simlaguri village in Barpeta district of Assam, expects the enrolment in the village school, which has a student strength of 107 currently, to rise.

In Chirang district, the mood is rather upbeat. Sushil Kumar Brahmo, coordinator for the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA), the Government of India's programme for the universalisation of elementary education, said it was proposed to start implementing the scheme from February 1. At a meeting held on January 13 for the Boro Bazaar block, the Deputy Commissioner announced that Re.1 would be given per child for 20 days a month to meet the cooking costs and Rs.500 towards wages for the cook. The block office has been giving money for the transportation of foodgrain. "We have been distributing dry rations since 1995. Although each child was supposed to get 5 kg of rice, a portion of it was always sold off to help pay the transportation costs," he said.

However, in Upper Assam, some villages and even sarpanches like Hemlota Das are unaware of the court order.

At Bagetada village in Jharkhand, Muzaffar Hussain, a Class VII dropout, said: "I used to study in Jalvabad middle school. We used to get 3 kg of rice. I hear that the Behervatada primary school serves 'kichdi'. I wish I had not dropped out."

Kedar Prasad Gupta, who runs a tea-stall near Koderma, said: "In Behervatada, only about 25 per cent of the children used to attend classes. Now almost 75 per cent of the children go to school. The school in Giridih has also been providing food for the past two months."

Narayan Kumar, project director for Dalit Vikar Vindhu, a non-governmental organisation operating in Bihar and Jharkhand, agrees that the enrolment in schools has gone up by 50 per cent. "Where awareness is greater, as in Jhumri Telaiya [in Koderma district], the implementation is better. There are still reasons for not sending children to school - children must either look after their siblings or help herd sheep and cattle. We try to resolve this by adopting flexible timings at our centres," he said. He added that although there were schools in almost every village now, thanks to the SSA, there was no proper monitoring of the mid-day meal scheme.



Children cross this bamboo bridge to reach the school in Bongaigaon, Assam. Cooked mid-day meals are not served in the State.

Bihar, one of the toughest States to monitor, has begun full implementation of the "kichdi" scheme. Dr. D.S. Gangwar, Director, Primary Education, Bihar, explained: "We selected three blocks in 10 of the most backward districts, then extended the scheme to the whole district in 2003, and now, to the whole State. We are awaiting reports from all blocks. Twenty-six of the 38 districts have confirmed that they have started serving cooked meals."

But, according to some activists, even in districts where the scheme was in place, the implementation left much to be desired. For instance, in Dhabdhabwa village in East Champaran, one of the poorest districts in Bihar and one selected for the implementation of the scheme earlier, cooked meals were never served. The teacher and the headman had told Action Aid activists that the block administration had failed to deliver the foodgrain.

The middle school at Neemarang in Jamui district in Bihar has started serving meals. The headmaster, Harkishore Mandal, said: "The teachers have borne the transportation costs since we

have been told that the cost will be reimbursed. We get Rs.1.64 a child a day. The cook might get Rs.25-30, depending on the budget. The scheme is monitored by the Vidyalaya Sanchalak Samiti. We have also got Rs.2,000 for buying utensils."

Activist-economist Jean Dreze, who has been campaigning for the right to food, conceded that the ground realities varied a great deal in various States. He said: "It takes some time to put effective mid-day meal schemes in place, and in the initial stages, there tend to be teething problems. That happened even in Tamil Nadu way back in the early 1980s. The main hope is that political leaders will wake up to the popularity of these programmes among deprived sections of the population. This is what has ensured the survival and success of child nutrition programmes in Tamil Nadu for so many years, and the same can happen elsewhere."

Although some teachers feel encumbered by the extra work that the implementation of the scheme involves, there are others who welcome the scheme. Bistisharan Brahmo, who teaches in a higher secondary school in Ghumurgaon in Assam, said: "We are prepared to cook too if the responsibility is given to us."

Sunil Dhar, who runs The Ant, an NGO in Assam, recounting his experience in Tripura, said: "I saw that even private schools have begun to serve free cooked meals to children. Teachers do not mind cooking and serving food, even though they are not required to do so by law. They are indeed glad to do so as it is for the betterment of the children."

Undeniably, there are hitches galore in the implementation of the scheme. For one, many villages are going to face an acute shortage of grain and funds. Ramanand Arya, teaching in a primary *maktab* (Muslim school) in Neemarang, is already struggling with more than he can handle. "I had 183 enrolments last year. The children keep coming in at all hours, up to lunch time. There are about a 100 children in the morning (many children walk a long distance), but by noon most of them turn up. There are 162 new enrolments and the numbers are rising. There is not enough grain, and not enough money. What I have won't last even for 10 days. The meal is supposed to be only for the primary level, but some of those enrolling are older. I cannot turn them away. Now, with 345 kids on the register, how am I to manage alone?"

Transportation of foodgrain is another major problem the schools face. The State Food Corporation is the nodal agency and is supposed to drop the grain at the doorstep of the school. But by all accounts, the children or the village panchayats have had to cough up the money for transportation.

Rohini Kochary, headmistress of a primary school in Palashguri in Assam, said: "Teachers collect grain from the local market. We send representatives from all the schools in the area to the godown. The transporter charges Rs.20 a cartload. This works out to almost Rs.50 a month, so we have had to sell a part of the rice allotted. Besides, the foodgrain stock arrives only once in three months. We distribute the stock at once to avoid storage problems."

Transport costs are a problem in Bihar too. Rajendra Singh from Ghuri Isarve village in Gaya district said: "In our village, cooked meals have not been served until now. The children get 2.5

kg of rice. Even so, the school authorities charge Re.1 or at least 50 paise per head. They say they use a cyclerickshaw to transport rice."

According to Dr. Gangwar, the Government of India has ordered that cereals be transported from the FCI godowns one month in advance. "But that does not always happen. You know what the road conditions here are like. In the Kosi belt, road transport is very difficult. We have to use boats."

Sunil Dhar offers a possible solution. "It makes sense to procure grain locally. FCI godowns are located far from the villages. Most villages grow grain and it is simpler to procure it from the same village rather than waste time and resources in transporting the stock over long distances."

There are other problems too. Ramanand Arya points out that the non-availability of water is one of them. "The children go home to wash their hands after the meal and invariably do not return to school. Thus the very purpose of the meal is defeated."

In Orissa, the implementation of the scheme faced difficulties all through last year. Shaikh Quraish, a right to food activist in Cuttack, said: "The announcement came in 2003, but the scheme is yet to be implemented throughout Orissa. Earlier, the orders were restricted to tribal areas such as Koraput, Keonjhar and Malkangiri. According to our surveys, teachers insist on 80 per cent attendance to provide meals. Parents end up quarrelling with teachers." Quraish said that the mid-day meal scheme was the right path to education and that it would also help abolish child labour. He added that steps were being taken in this direction, with 3,000 child labourers being identified. Of them, 700 have been enrolled in schools. Enrolment, in any case, is increasing.

The quality of the meals being served is the next major issue. Maharashtra is supposed to have implemented the scheme in full but the problems besieging the scheme in the State mostly concern monitoring and quality. Sumita Kulkarni, an activist with CRY, said: "We have interventions in Marathwada, Vidarbha, northern Maharashtra and a few urban areas and we find that the political will to uphold child rights is missing. The scheme works on paper but is mostly an eyewash. The responsibility of cooking is shifted entirely on to the teachers, or delegated to the older children. The food served is often substandard. As it is, malnutrition deaths are high in Maharashtra. Seventy-six per cent of the tribal children in the State are malnourished, as is 50 per cent of the State's population."

Shobha Murti, an activist in the Navi Mumbai municipality area, said: "Food is being cooked but there is not enough of it. There are a number of children working in the markets here. If we had a decent meal in place, we could draw them to the schools. But an effective system is not yet in place even after three years. In the Hanumannagar School in Dhurbanaka, the scheme is not being implemented. The municipality is taking no action."

Jean Dreze agrees that the mid-day meals' impact on child health and nutrition is questionable, as of now. "The quality of the meals is inadequate. However, with the recent injection of financial assistance for mid-day meals from the Central government, there are unprecedented opportunities for upgrading the quality and diversity of the food provided."

With enrolments in schools likely to rise sharply, funds are going to be a problem.

M. Kalita, Deputy Commissioner of Bongaigaon district in Assam, said: "We are planning to meet the officials of the Education Department, panchayati raj institutions and local implementing bodies. A sum of Rs.33 lakhs has been received from the State government. There are 92,000 schoolchildren in Bongaigaon district. We have funds to feed only 82,000 children, for 40 days. The State gives Re.1 per child, which is not enough. Vegetables are expensive. We need at least Re.1.70 per head."

Bipin Bihari Singh, programme officer for mid-day meals in Bihar, says that there is not enough money for proper implementation of the scheme. "A meagre Rs.1.64 is just not enough. The State gives 64 paise and the Centre gives Re.1. But we ran an experiment at Fatuha block and found that the overall costs are close to Rs.3.50. We do not even talk of this kind of money because we know it will not happen. But we have told the Central government that we cannot manage. They keep asking us how other States are able to manage. Apparently, Maharashtra and Rajasthan are managing with 50 paise per head and Karnataka and Uttaranchal are managing with Re.1."

He added: "Other States have communicated to us that the VEC (village education committee) contributes money for transport and other expenses."

In Madhya Pradesh too, lack of funds is causing attendance worries in schools.

Sachin Jain, an activist who has been monitoring the scheme, said: "The State government, led by Uma Bharati (in January 2004), had taken a tough stand. It announced that a full meal would be served at a cost of Re.1.20-1.40. This is just not possible. Also, Rs.233 crores was needed but only Rs.190 crores is available. The government has tried to introduce the concept of parents-teachers association, making it responsible for putting up cooking sheds and procuring fuel, among other things. In rural areas, this is not easy. The parents' economic status does not allow them to take on any extra burden. Often, the money never reaches the schools. In Devas district, for instance, a teacher committed suicide, citing extreme pressure as the cause. Teachers do not even get paid on time. How long can the programme be sustained?"

Sachin Jain added that although there was very little accountability, the media were helping to monitor the implementation. According to the Central government's projected statistics for 2004-05, the scheme covers 583 districts and about 10.76 crore children. Since the implementation often exists only on paper, the battle is far from won.

Nevertheless, an important milestone has been reached. Jean Dreze points out that those States that made an early start after the Supreme Court order of 2001, are doing reasonably well. "The important thing is to avoid a loss of nerve and to use the teething problems as an opportunity to improve the quality of mid-day meal programmes, instead of giving them up." Over time, he added, issues like caste discrimination would also be resolved. Himachal Pradesh is a case in point. Thanks to the SSA and a State government committed to primary education, there are schools in every village and the mid-day meal scheme is in place in almost every school. There are problems like non-availability of water or proper cooking sheds. Caste discrimination is also

rife, but the children themselves have shown the way. There have been instances when students have gone on strike to have a Dalit teacher reinstated.

The future of the mid-day meal scheme, and that of several million children in India, depends on careful monitoring and gradual upgrading of the programme, to include all children up to the high school level.

The Supreme Court says, "The responsibility to monitor the implementation of the scheme essentially lies with the Central government as it is the Central government that is providing assistance."

The Government of India, in turn, laid down guidelines, which say that Members of the Legislative Assembly and Parliament must ensure proper implementation of the scheme. But local MLAs have yet to acquaint themselves with the scheme. One example is Romio Brahmo, MLA from Bijni constituency in Assam. "Mid-day meals happen directly at block levels. So we do not know much about them. We also notice that the executors consider the scheme a burden. According to us, the children should get textbooks for free rather than food."

The country can look towards the tribal women of Chhattisgarh for guidance. With help from the government and from local activists, several villages have sought the services of volunteers called *mitanins*. These women, though uneducated, have started monitoring the schemes.

In Manendragarh block of Koriya district, where 73 per cent of the children are malnourished, these women have fought battles against the local administrators and headmasters. In Rokda village, the *mitanin* Rambai said: "We did not know much about the scheme. Our teacher was alcoholic and would open the school only when he wished. The food was not cooked. Then it turned out that 50 kg of rice had been pilfered and sold off. We complained to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate. An enquiry committee was sent but nothing came of it. We complained again. The authorities came and we managed to get the alcoholic teacher transferred. Now we keep tabs on the teacher's attendance and the cooking of meals. We have formed a *dekh-rekh* samiti. The children are now served kichdi, dal-rice, vegetables... sometimes even *sewaiyan*, and *papad-achar*."

Gangabai, a *mitanin* from the neighbouring village, said: "Teacher absenteeism was a big problem. But now, the teacher informs me every time he is sick or is taking a day off."

One truth emerges clear - that judicial intervention is important in the fight for pro-poor policies. Jean Dreze sums it up best: "It is hard to imagine how mid-day meals could have been extended to 100 million children within three years without the firm intervention of the Supreme Court."

He believes, however, that the right place to bring up issues like right to food is Parliament and not the courtroom. "The fact that it took public interest litigation in the Supreme Court to get political leaders to focus on children's nutrition rights is a telling reminder of the lopsidedness of Indian democracy."