

Reforming the Mid-Day Meal Programme

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The scheme of mid-day meal is a very important means of improving nutrition of children and at the same making schools more attractive for children. However some problems have reduced the attractiveness and acceptability of this scheme. Some reports suggest that cooking of mid-day meals creates disturbance in teaching work to some extent. In addition several instances have been reported of poor quality food being distributed, and of children falling ill after eating contaminated food. To avoid these problems the following improved version of the scheme is suggested.

- (1) The mid-day meal should consist of a dry food that can be easily preserved, without any loss of quality and need for chemical preservatives, for about two or three days at least. One possibility is whole wheat flour biscuits (as distinct from maida biscuits generally sold in market by big companies which have a lower nutrition value). The technology for making whole wheat flour biscuits is readily available and several small-scale bakeries prepare these biscuits in our towns and cities. Although here we take up the example of only whole wheat flour biscuits, the possibility of many other local foods certainly exist. All that we'll like to emphasise is that the food should be (a) dry (b) preservable for two or three days without adding chemical preservatives (c) high in nutrition and (d) not too expensive.
- (2) This dry meal should be given to students twice a day. First at the start of the school day. This will help those students who have not eaten a breakfast. The second meal should be given during the normal lunch-break in school.
- (3) The work of preparing whole flour biscuits (or other food items) should be given to self-help groups or cooperatives of women from weaker sections. These women should include a good percentage of dalit women at the panchayat level. Assuming that about ten thousand biscuits are required in one panchayat for the mid-day meal scheme per school day, considerable employment can be provided to the women from weaker sections on this basis. Training schemes are already available which can be used to train women to prepare nutritious food item in a hygienic way. The government should provide two rooms to this self-help group for cooking-baking work as well as for packaging and storage purposes. The self-help group will get an assured market but it'll have to satisfy clearly laid down requirements of hygiene and quality control. As village women will be cooking/baking for

their own children, their motherly affection will be the best guarantee for maintaining the quality of the food.

- (4) Whenever possible grain and other raw material should be purchased from local farmers and provided to the self-help group. First preference should be given to organically grown grain, wherever this is available.
- (5) Several schools have open space inside or near the school. While some of this space has to be kept as a playground, wherever extra space is available this should be used to grow fruits and those vegetables which can be eaten raw (such as carrot, radish, tomato, cucumber etc.). Purely organic methods should be used to grow these fruits and vegetables and absolutely no chemicals should be used to avoid all hazards for children. Each class can be given a small plot of land to cultivate. This will provide nature's own lab to study many aspects of plants and crops. Children will take a lot of delight in watching the gradual growth of the plants sown by them. They will learn to share the produce of land among themselves on an equitable basis. This raw food will prove a rich source of vitamins and minerals for them. The produce of these school gardens should be meant entirely for children. This can be added to their normal mid-day meal.

These reforms will go a long way in improving the mid day meal programme.

