

Whose Right to Food? Caste Discrimination and Food Security Programs

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Kalpanaⁱ, a second standard student of a government school located in the dominant caste quarter of Kamalaputhur Village in Tamil Nadu, was denied food and chased out of school when she tried to participate with the rest of the students in the government Midday Meal Program. The problem was that she was Dalit, while her classmates were dominant caste.

In villages within an hour's drive of Bihar's capital city Patna, the government Public Distribution System's "Fair Price" shop owners, belonging to a dominant caste, do not distribute goods to Dalit customers until they have hung cloth screens in place to "protect" themselves from the polluting presence of the "untouchables".

These are examples not of sensational exceptions, but relatively common events in the Dalit experience of government food related programs. The findings of a survey conducted in 531 villages of five states expose patterns of caste-based exclusion and discrimination that afflict, if not overwhelm, the Indian Government's Midday Meal Scheme (MMS) and Public Distribution System (PDS).ⁱⁱ Conceived as a means to complement existing Right to Food research, the purpose of the survey was to obtain a current, ground-level view of how, where, and to what degree caste discrimination and "untouchability" operate in government MMS and PDS programs as they are implemented in villages across India. In doing so, it addresses the broader question of how caste functions as a barrier to the universal attainment of the Right to Food. In addition to examining the treatment of Dalits in these government programs, the survey attempts to measure various indicators of Dalits' access to and participatory empowerment in the MMS and PDS, and through analysis of resultant data, discern potential avenues for improvement.

Following the view that victims of discrimination are their own best spokespeople, the survey was conducted through formal interviews with the Dalit communities of 531 villages in five states – 26 from Rajasthan, 120 from Uttar Pradesh, 95 from Bihar, 180 from Andhra Pradesh, and 100 from Tamil Nadu, in 2003. Given the behavioral aspect of discrimination, qualitative informant responses are included to supplement the survey's quantitative data. The discussion below presents key findings of the survey, first regarding the MMS, and secondly the PDS.

The Midday Meal Scheme

In November, 2001, in response to a Public Interest Litigation filed by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), Rajasthan, the Supreme Court of India ordered all state governments to implement the central government's lagging 1995 National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education, providing free, cooked meals to all children in government primary schools, within six months. In states where it has been implemented, this program is popularly known as the Midday Meal Scheme (MMS). Of the states considered in this study, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have implemented the MMS. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, on the other hand, have not implemented the Midday Meal Scheme, but continue with a program in which a fixed quantity of dry grain is provided monthly to government school children. For the following discussion, then, UP and Bihar data will refer to this pre-MMS dry grain distribution system, and will be considered apart from the data for the fully implemented MMS in Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Naduⁱⁱⁱ.

In order to assay caste discrimination and exclusion in the MMS, the survey considers three factors, the first of which is Dalit children's *physical access* to the midday meal. Three indicators measure this: the existence of a functioning MMS, its physical setting, and its location in terms of caste geography. First, what is the percentage of villages with a functioning, implemented MMS? Secondly, in what percentage of these villages is the MMS held in a physical setting accessible to Dalit children, e.g. in the school building as opposed to in a Dalit-exclusive temple? Thirdly, in what percentage of villages is the MMS situated in a locality non-threatening to Dalits, e.g. a Dalit colony as opposed to a dominant caste locality?

The second factor considered is Dalits' *participatory empowerment/ownership* of the MMS. This is evaluated using two measurable indicators: first, the percentage of Midday Meal Schemes that are organized/operated by Dalits, and second, the percentage of Midday Meal Schemes in which the cooks are Dalit.

The third and last factor considered is Dalits' *community-level access* to the MMS, as gauged by the following three indicators. First, are Dalit children completely excluded from the midday meal or its dry grain equivalent? Second, where they are allowed to participate, is some kind of segregation practiced that keeps Dalit children negatively distinct from dominant caste children (e.g. separate seating arrangements or separate cooking arrangements)? Third, do dominant castes oppose the hiring of Dalit cooks?

Physical Access, Participatory Empowerment, and Community-Level Access

Physical access to the Midday Meal Scheme is first and foremost contingent on the implementation of the scheme by state governments. Looking at the first indicator for physical access – the percentage of villages covered by the MMS program – we find that the governments of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have largely achieved the initial step towards facilitating access, by implementing the MMS in 301 villages out of the 306 villages surveyed in these three states. Thus, 98.4% of respondent villages have a functioning MMS in their village. (See Table 1)

Coming to the second indicator – the physical setting of the MMS – we find that of the total villages that have functioning MMS schemes, 93% hold the MMS in the school building itself, as is appropriate. In the remaining 7%, the MMS is held in other public buildings, with the notable exception of two villages in Tamil Nadu in which the MMS is held in Hindu temples. As temples exclude Dalits as a matter of convention, the midday meals in these two villages require immediate relocation so as to enable the participation of Dalit children.

Applying the same measurement to Uttar Pradesh, we see a different problem. Unlike Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the pre-MMS distribution of dry grain to government school children in UP is conducted in the school building in only 57% of respondent villages, and in other public buildings in 6%. In 37% of villages, on the other hand, the MMS is conducted in “another place”, most often the home or shop of the PDS dealer, which, in terms of fair access to Dalit children, is an unacceptable alternative to the school building.

If the physical setting of the MMS is important, the locality in which that space is situated is equally if not more significant. Considering the third indicator of physical access – location of the MMS in terms of caste geography – we note that Rajasthan and

Tamil Nadu have very low percentages of villages in which the MMS is held in a Dalit locality: 12% in Rajasthan and 19% in Tamil Nadu. Most midday meals in these states are held in dominant caste localities. In notable contrast, 47% of respondent villages in Andhra Pradesh hold the MMS in a Dalit locality, and as we will see later, this goes a long way toward assuring Dalit access, and may help erode dominant caste prejudices against entering Dalit localities. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Physical Access – Existence and Location of MMS

Physical Access in the MMS (in percentage of respondent villages)				
	3 State Avg	Raj	AP	TN
I. Existence of MMS	98	100	98	98
II. Location				
Dalit colony*	26	12	47	19
Higher caste locality*	74	88	53	81

*school building, temple, public building or other

Source: IIDS survey 2003

Considering location in Uttar Pradesh, the distribution of dry grain to government school children takes place in dominant caste localities in 90% of respondent villages, while in only 10% of villages is the distribution conducted in Dalit localities.

In UP, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, then, the vast majority of Dalit children must enter an area of heightened vulnerability, tension and threat, in order to avail themselves of the midday meal or its dry grain equivalent. Access for Dalit children is thus conditional, and hostage to the fluctuating state of caste relations in the village or region. A pattern of incidents documented in the study, to be discussed later, demonstrate how Dalit children's access to the MMS, already tenuous because it is held in the dominant caste locality, is then cut off when dominant castes feel the need to demonstratively reassert their hegemony.

In measuring Dalits' *participatory empowerment* in and *ownership* of the MMS, the survey data unearths interesting interstate variations. We may recall that two indicators are used to evaluate Dalit participatory empowerment/ownership of the MMS, namely, the percentage of MMSs organized/operated by Dalits and the percentage of MMSs in which Dalit cooks are engaged.

In hiring practices, Rajasthan is consistently the least likely to employ Dalits, with 8% of respondent villages having a Dalit cook, and not a single respondent village having a Dalit MMS organizer. Tamil Nadu hires proportionally more Dalits, while still keeping them firmly in the minority, with 31% of respondent villages having Dalit cooks, and 27% having Dalit organizers. Andhra Pradesh leads the three states in indicators of Dalit empowerment and ownership of the MMS, with 49% and 45% of respondent villages having Dalits as cooks and organizers, respectively. (See Table 2)

In Uttar Pradesh, measurable indicators point to an extremely low level of Dalit participatory empowerment and ownership of the pre-MMS dry grain distribution system. In 94% of respondent villages in UP, the distribution organizer is dominant caste; Dalit organizers are found in only 4% of respondent villages (the remaining 2% have Scheduled Tribe organizers). The issue of hiring cooks, of course, does not arise where dry grain is distributed in lieu of a proper, cooked, midday meal.

Table 2: Participatory Empowerment – Caste of MMS Cooks and Organizers

Caste of MMS Cooks and Organizers (in percentage of respondent villages)	3 State Average		Rajasthan		Andhra Pradesh		Tamil Nadu	
	Cooks	Organizers	Cooks	Organizers	Cooks	Organizers	Cooks	Organizers
Only SC	29	24	8	0	49	45	31	27
Only ST	2	5	4	14	1	2	0	0
Only Dominant caste	67	70	88	86	47	51	65	73
Various castes*	2	1	0	0	3	2	4	0

*more than one cook/organizer, from any combination of SC, ST, and Dominant castes

Source: IIDS survey 2003

Survey findings with reference to the third factor, Dalit *community-level access* to the MMS, indicate that caste-based exclusion and discrimination of one form or another do in fact plague a significant percentage of Midday Meal Schemes across the country. Looking first at the aggregate data, in which all forms of caste-based exclusion and discrimination are considered together, 52% of respondent villages from Rajasthan, 24% from Andhra Pradesh, and 36% from Tamil Nadu (giving a three-state national average of 37%) report that there *is* a problem of caste discrimination in the Midday Meal Scheme in their village. (See Table 3).

Table 3: Community Level Access – Caste-based Discrimination in the MMS

Incidence and Forms of Discrimination in the MMS (in percentage of respondent villages)				
I. Percentage of villages reporting discrimination of any kind	3 State Avg	Raj	AP	TN
	37	52	24	36
II. Type of Discrimination*				
Segregated seating	31	0	31	41
Segregated meals altogether	9.2	0	11	10
Opposition to Dalit cooks	48.3	92	46	36
Inferior or insufficient food for Dalit children	9.2	8	6	13
Other	2.3	0	6	0

*Of the respondent villages that specify the forms of discrimination in their village

Source: IIDS survey 2003

This aggregate data encompasses cases both of exclusion and discrimination, defined as inclusion with inequitable treatment. First considering cases of outright exclusion, in six respondent villages in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, Dalit children are completely barred from the MMS by dominant caste communities on account of being “untouchable”. While these six villages constitute only 2% of the 306 villages surveyed, the living practice of outright exclusion anywhere has profound implications for the Right to Food, and Dalits’ access to that Right.

Several cases of outright exclusion are also reported in the dry grain distribution system in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Epitomizing this phenomenon, in Sonadi Village in

Gazipur District, UP, respondents report that the dominant caste teacher arbitrarily withholds the monthly rice allotment from some SC children, while giving it to other SC children and all of the dominant caste children. When the Dalit community approached the dominant caste PDS dealer to lodge a complaint, the dealer responded that the grain is “not for your children anyway”.

Setting aside blatant exclusion, what are some of the manifestations of discrimination that arise in the MMS? As mentioned above, a three-state national average of 37% of respondent villages (about 105 villages) report discrimination of one form or another. While all of these villages are afflicted with some kind of caste discrimination in the MMS, only 79 of these respondent villages specify the character of caste discrimination in the MMS.

Of these 79, the largest portion, 48.3%, reports the problem of dominant caste opposition to Dalit cooks. The second most common issue, at 31%, is segregated seating. A more intensified practice of segregation, in which Dalits and dominant caste children are served separate meals altogether, is reported by 9.2% of respondent villages. Another 9.2% report that teachers discriminate among students by giving inferior or insufficient food to Dalit children, and 2.3% of respondents identify other problems. (Again, refer to Table 3).

Many survey respondents provide narrative explanations of the character of caste discrimination in the MMS in their villages. These qualitative details furnish essential insight into the practical functioning of phenomena of caste discrimination. Making use of these narrative aspects, the following discussion elaborates on the most widely reported manifestations of caste discrimination in the MMS – opposition to Dalit cooks and forms of segregation.

Opposition to Dalit Cooks

“Opposition to Dalit cooks” is actually a blanket term describing several different patterns of specific acts of caste discrimination and exclusion observed in the study. The patterns can be grouped into five, which take place at different points during the process of MMS institution and continuance. First, when local administrators are putting the MMS into place, dominant caste community members intervene to block the hiring of Dalit cooks, favoring dominant caste cooks instead. Where a Dalit cook has been hired, dominant caste parents then begin sending their children to school with lunches packed at home, or require their children to come home for lunch, in any case forbidding their children to eat food prepared by the Dalit cook. In the third stage, dominant caste parents or community members pressure the local administration to dismiss the Dalit cook, on any pretext, and hire a dominant caste cook instead. Where this is ineffective, or sometimes without the intervening step, the dominant caste parents campaign to shut down the MMS in the village school altogether. Finally, some dominant caste parents react to the hiring and keeping of a Dalit cook by withdrawing their children from the school, and sometimes admitting them in a different school where the cook is not Dalit.

Some examples may help illustrate the above patterns. The first is adequately exemplified by Komara Village in West Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh. There, dominant caste women organized in the state government’s DWACRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) scheme successfully mobilized community and

administrative support to prohibit a qualified Dalit women's DWACRA group from obtaining employment as cooks in the village MMS.

Bhunabhay Village in Ajmer District, Rajasthan, illustrates two of the trends identified above. In Bhunabhay, when the MMS began in July 2002, Sunita Bhil, a Scheduled Tribe widow, was hired to prepare the midday meal of *ghughri*. Dominant caste parents, considering Sunita polluted on account of her caste, ordered their children not to eat the midday meal at their school, effectively launching a proxy hunger strike through their children. Alongside this, the dominant caste parents met with and pressured the dominant caste headmaster of the school to dismiss Sunita Bhil from employment. Ultimately, the headmaster consented, expelled Sunita Bhil, and hired a dominant caste woman to cook in her place.

Typifying the fourth trend, the MMS of a government school in Ranga Reddy District, Andhra Pradesh, lasted exactly ten days before the dominant caste community, incensed that Dalit cooks had been hired, shut down the school^{iv}.

Behind all of these trends of dominant caste behavior is the classic Hindu understanding of purity and pollution, according to which food prepared by a Dalit – that is, an “untouchable” – is considered “polluted” by virtue of its contact with the intrinsically polluted Dalit. On another level, dominant caste opposition to Dalit cooks also represents a power struggle over livelihood rights. In the manner of social boycotts, concerted dominant caste opposition to Dalit cooks functions to break Dalit economic aspirations, i.e. Dalit entry into new livelihood domains such as government employment as MMS cooks at the village level. The rural dominant caste establishment, which traditionally enjoys the economic dependence of the Dalit community, perceives Dalit entries into new economic spheres as threatening, and therefore responds with a backlash.

Segregation and Opposition to Shared Meals

Several variations on the theme of segregation surface in the survey data. 31% of the villages that specify the form of caste discrimination in their MMS identify separate seating as the primary problem. In these instances, Dalit children are required to sit apart from the dominant caste children; sometimes simply apart within the same space, other times outside of the school building while the dominant caste children sit inside, on the floor or on dirt when dominant caste children sit on mats, or on a lower level than their dominant caste peers.

9.8% of villages report that the Dalit children and dominant caste children are required to eat separate meals altogether. This is most often the case where there are two MMS cooks for the same school, one Dalit and one dominant caste. The practice of separate meals usually implies segregated drinking water arrangements as well.

Another 9.8% report more subtle forms of discrimination. In these villages, dominant caste teachers practice caste favoritism in serving the MMS, treating the dominant caste children preferentially and reserving the smaller or less desirable portions for Dalit children.

Interestingly, segregated seating is not always an institution from the beginning of the MMS. In Enathi Village in Sivagangai District of Tamil Nadu, for instance, in 2001, the dominant caste community instituted segregated seating in the MMS in a primary school where Dalit and dominant caste children previously had been sitting and eating together. In Enathi, following a dispute between a dominant caste woman and a Dalit

woman over the latter's right to draw water from a public well, the dominant caste woman's community attacked the Dalit colony, causing the Dalit woman and her husband to be hospitalized. When the Dalit community approached the police and local administration for justice, Enathi's dominant caste community organized a rigorous social boycott of the Dalits, physically enforced by barricading the Dalit colony; and it was in this context, as part of the boycott, that segregation was launched in the previously shared MMS.

Similar incidents reported in the survey suggest a trend in which a caste conflict unrelated to the MMS flares up in a village, often as a result of Dalit assertion of rights, and in its effort to reestablish hegemony, the dominant caste community inaugurates new forms of segregation (in the MMS, for instance) and asserts new practices of untouchability. In one village in Tamil Nadu, respondents to the survey state that the dominant caste government schoolteacher "solved" the caste tensions in their village by introducing segregated seating. While it is common in popular discourse to describe phenomena of caste discrimination as "remaining", "still continuing", and "lingering", such language does not accurately characterize the ground reality. Like sexism, racism and other related social phenomena, caste and caste discrimination continually adapt to new circumstances, finding new resources and new media of expression, rather than ceasing when confronted with "education", "modernity" or "progress". Discourse aimed at eradicating caste discrimination, if it is to be effective, must take into account the dynamism of caste phenomena, erroneously portrayed as an ailing artifact by the dismissive language of inevitable social progress.

Observations

Returning to the earlier discussion, and taking a closer look at the interstate variation for reported incidence of caste discrimination in the MMS (Table 3), it can hardly escape notice that this configuration is a direct inverse of the interstate variation for percentage of villages with Dalit cooks, percentage of villages with Dalit organizers, and percentage of villages in which the MMS is held in a Dalit locality. That is to say, Andhra Pradesh, which has the highest percentage of Dalit cooks, Dalit organizers, and Midday Meal Schemes held in Dalit localities, simultaneously has the lowest percentage of reported caste discrimination in the MMS. Rajasthan, which has the lowest percentage of Dalit cooks and organizers and Midday Meal Schemes held in Dalit colonies, simultaneously has the highest rate of reported caste discrimination; and Tamil Nadu stands about midway between Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh with regard to each of these variables. (Compare Tables 1, 2 and 3).

While direct causality cannot be proven, quantitative and qualitative evidence from the field suggests that the above variables have a significantly influential relationship with the degree of reported discrimination in each state. Considering each variable alone, for instance, the rates of reported discrimination are consistently lower when Dalit organizers are in charge of the MMS, when Dalit cooks are cooking the midday meal, and when the MMS is held in a Dalit colony, than when dominant caste organizers are managing the MMS, dominant caste cooks are cooking the midday meal, and when the MMS is held in dominant caste localities. Subjective comments from researchers and respondents also affirm that these trends are interlinked.

How is it that Andhra Pradesh has come to have, relative to other states, higher levels of Dalit participatory empowerment and Midday Meal Schemes held in Dalit colonies? One primary reason seems to be that the Andhra Pradesh government conducts the MMS through local women's organizations (DWACRA groups). As an alternative to implementing the scheme only through the usual channels of entrenched government machinery, having a joint set-up between the government and local social organizations, appears to have an invigorating effect on all actors involved. But the mere implementation of the MMS through DWACRA groups does not ensure meaningful Dalit women's participation and ownership of the scheme (dominant caste women's DWACRA groups can – and sometimes do, as cited earlier – monopolize the MMS, for instance). It appears that sustained mass action by mobilized people's movements, particularly Dalit NGOs, in Andhra Pradesh, has led to the relatively large proportion of Dalit women prepared to organize DWACRA groups and take participatory initiative vis-à-vis the MMS. Thus the relatively high indicators for Dalit participatory empowerment and ownership of the MMS in Andhra (49% Dalit cooks, 45% Dalit organizers, 46% MMSs held in Dalit colony) seem to be attributable to a confluence of effective Dalit mass mobilization and the government's initiative in sharing MMS operation with community level organizations.

Public Distribution System

The Indian Government's Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS, or, often, simply PDS) is reputed to be the largest system of controlled food distribution for the poor in the world. At the village level, the system is operated through government-recognized "Fair Price Shops", or PDS shops, run by local, government-recognized PDS dealers.

As with the MMS, *physical access*, *participatory empowerment/ownership*, and Dalits' *community-level access* are the factors according to which the survey evaluates caste discrimination and exclusion in the PDS. Two measurable indicators are employed to gauge Dalit *physical access* to the PDS: existence and number of functioning PDS shops in the village, and location in terms of caste geography. First, are there PDS shops operating in the village, and second, are these shops placed in dominant caste localities, Dalit quarters, or elsewhere?

Dalits' *participatory empowerment* and *ownership* of the PDS is measured by the percentage, out of all PDS shops in respondent villages, of PDS shops owned by Dalits.

Finally, *community-level access* of Dalits to PDS shops is measured by quantifying respondents' responses to questions about various reported forms of caste discrimination in the context of PDS distribution, namely, discrimination in price and quantity, caste favoritism by the PDS dealer, and the practice of "untouchability" by the PDS dealer.

Physical Access, Participatory Empowerment/Ownership, Community-Level Access

In terms of *physical access*, it is to the credit of the Public Distribution System that throughout the country, PDS shops are largely up and running. As a five state average^v, 87% of respondent villages in the study report having at least one functioning PDS shop in their village: 73% of respondents have exactly one PDS shop in their village, while 14% have more than one PDS shop per village. 13% of respondent

villages, however, have no PDS shop in their village, and the poor in these villages must travel outside to avail themselves of their legislated entitlements of subsidized goods.

Most of the villages without PDS shops are in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Taking a look at interstate variation, Uttar Pradesh shows itself the most recalcitrant in assuring PDS accessibility, with 39% of respondent villages lacking PDS shops, and only 7% having more than one shop. Bihar follows with 16% of villages lacking a PDS shop, and only 10% having more than one. Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu score about equally – and adequately – while access appears most assured in Andhra Pradesh, where 44% of respondent villages have more than one shop, 53% have exactly one shop, and only 3% have no shop.

A second factor conditioning Dalit access to the benefits of the PDS is the location in which the shops are physically situated. As a five state average, 17% of villages have PDS shops in Dalit colonies, while 70% (more than four times the former) have PDS shops located in dominant caste localities, and 13% of villages have PDS shops located elsewhere. Considering states individually, Andhra Pradesh has the highest percentage of respondent villages with PDS shops in Dalit colonies at 30%, followed by Bihar with 24%, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh both with 16%, and then Rajasthan, in which not a single respondent village has a PDS shop located in a Dalit locality. In turn, Rajasthan has the highest proportion of PDS shops held in dominant caste localities at 91%, followed by Uttar Pradesh at 82%, Bihar at 76%, Tamil Nadu at 53%, and Andhra Pradesh with 30%.^{vi} (See Table 4)

Table 4: Physical Access, Participatory Empowerment/Ownership and Community Level Access in PDS

Location of PDS shops, Caste of PDS dealers, and forms of reported discrimination in PDS						
(in percentage of respondent villages)						
I. Location of PDS shops	5 State Avg	Raj	UP	Bihar	AP	TN
Dalit colony	17	0	16	24	30	16
Dominant caste colony	70	91	82	76	48	53
Other place	13	9	2	0	22	31
II. Caste of PDS dealers						
SC	17.6	15	10	22	32	9
ST	1.4	0	0	0	7	0
Dominant caste	81	85	90	78	61	91
III. Forms of reported discrimination						
Discrimination in quantity	40	16	56	70	30	29
Discrimination in price	28	0	51	66	9	16
Caste favoritism by dealer	48	42	54	86	17	41
Untouchability practices by dealer	26	0	35	59	11	25

Source: IIDS survey 2003

In terms of *participatory empowerment*, the preponderance of dominant caste PDS dealers and the paucity of Dalit dealers in survey data are equally striking. The five state average comes to 81% dominant caste ownership of PDS shops, and 17.6% Dalit ownership. At the state level, again, Andhra Pradesh stands out as the only state in which

Dalits have attained a significant degree of participatory empowerment, at 32%, followed by Bihar with 22%, Rajasthan with 15%, UP with 10% and Tamil Nadu with 9%. In an interesting departure from earlier patterns, however, in PDS shop ownership it is Tamil Nadu that boasts the most complete dominant caste hegemony (91%) followed by Uttar Pradesh (90%), Rajasthan (85%), and Bihar (78%). (See Table 4).

In terms of Dalits' *community access* to the PDS, four forms of discriminatory practices are reported – discrimination in quantity, discrimination in price, caste-based favoritism by the PDS dealer, and practices of “untouchability” by the PDS dealer – in varying degrees of currency. (See Table 4).

Beginning with discrimination in quantity, as a five state average, 40% of respondent villages report that Dalits receive, for the same price, lesser quantities than the dominant castes receive from the PDS shopkeeper. In ascending order of reported discrimination, 16% of respondent villages in Rajasthan report discrimination in quantity, followed by about 30% in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and a startlingly high 56% and 70% in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, respectively.

Less common, but still a problem, is the practice by some PDS dealers of charging Dalit customers extra for the same quantity of product that dominant castes purchase at a lower cost. The five state average of villages reporting this practice is 28%.

The third and most commonly reported form of discrimination in the PDS is caste-based favoritism by the PDS dealer in the distribution of goods. Taking the five state average, 48% of respondent villages report this to be a problem. 17% of respondent villages in Andhra Pradesh, 41% in Tamil Nadu, 42% in Rajasthan, 54% in Uttar Pradesh, and a remarkable 86% of villages in Bihar, regularly contend with this manner of casteist treatment from their PDS dealers.

Respondents describe this phenomenon taking numerous forms. In some places, PDS dealers service their own caste community, or all dominant castes, throughout the week, while only serving the Dalit community on arbitrarily designated, “Dalit days”, falling once or twice in a week. Preferential order in service, meaning that Dalits are kept waiting and served last while the PDS dealers' caste-fellows or other dominant caste members are served immediately, is widely reported. Describing the way in which caste-based favoritism works in the PDS in their village, respondents in Tarka Village of Gazipur District, Uttar Pradesh, relate an incident in which members of the Dalit community were in severe need of sugar and other goods from the PDS, but the dominant caste PDS dealer flatly refused, saying that his stock had run out. The same day, members of the PDS dealer's own caste had a wedding for which they received “quintal after quintal” of sugar and other supposedly absent goods from the PDS shop.

Turning to the fourth reported form of discrimination in the PDS, a five state average of 26% of PDS dealers, according to survey respondents, practice “untouchability” in the distribution of government goods to Dalits. None of the respondent villages in Rajasthan reported “untouchability” practices in their local PDS shops in the study, though this is likely attributable to the small sample size there, as “untouchability” practices in Rajasthan have been documented abundantly elsewhere. In Andhra Pradesh, 11% of respondent villages reported “untouchability” practices; in Tamil Nadu, 25%; in Uttar Pradesh, 35%, and in Bihar, most disturbingly, 59%.

One classic “untouchability” practice is the dominant caste dropping of goods (water, food, money) from above into cupped Dalit hands below, so as to avoid the

possibility of “polluting” contact between the “upper” and “lower”. This remains in evidence, but other “untouchability” practices, such as dominant caste dealers hanging *purdah* before dealing with Musaher Dalits in Bihar, also emerge in the survey data. As PDS dealers are government actors, the practice by more than one quarter of PDS dealers of “untouchability” in the course of their official duty – in blatant defiance of the Anti-untouchability Act of 1955, the Constitution of India and numerous pieces of legislation since – has serious legal implications for the government.

The survey’s PDS data, then, indicate that certain aspects of the operation of the PDS do in fact influence the degree of Dalit access to the PDS. Where Dalit participation in PDS implementation through ownership of PDS shops is high, and where greater proportions of PDS shops are accessibly located in Dalit localities, levels of reported caste discrimination are lower. As with the MMS, so also with the PDS, Andhra Pradesh emerges from the data as having relatively low levels of reported caste discrimination and greater access to PDS in comparison to most other states. The higher percentage of PDS shops located in Dalit colonies in Andhra also seems to have decreased the scope for dominant caste dealers to practice “untouchability”. Empowerment through participation and ownership, as well as empowerment through sensitive relocation into Dalit areas, emerge from the data as potentialities currently being realized in Andhra Pradesh, which can also be realized in other states.

Concluding Observations

The MMS and PDS are arguably the strongest available tools with which poor and marginalized populations in India can at present actualize their Right to Food. Whether they are operated well or poorly can – indeed *does* – make the difference between sustenance and preventable starvation for Dalits children and adults suffering from chronic poverty.

The survey data presents us with some positive trends. First, 87% of all respondent villages have at least one functioning PDS shop (average of five states), and 98.4% of respondent villages in Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have a functioning MMS. These are remarkable achievements of the government, and without establishing this first crucial step toward actualizing the Right to Food, further talk of access would be remote indeed. Moreover, 63% of respondents report that caste discrimination does not afflict the MMS in their villages, and, while acknowledging extremely wide variation from state to state, the national averages of respondents who report discrimination in quantity and price in the PDS, as well as caste favoritism and “untouchability” practices by the PDS dealer, are each less than 50%. In many places, then, these government food-related programs are living up to their legal and constitutional obligations.

The problem, however, of dominant castes sabotaging the progressive potential of the MMS and PDS through practices discriminatory and exclusory toward Dalits, remains massive. In terms of scale, caste discrimination afflicts more than one out of three PDS shops and more than one out of three government schools serving midday meals (national averages of 35.5% and 37%, respectively). In terms of geographical spread, it is unquestionably a nationwide problem - from 24% in Andhra Pradesh to 52% in Rajasthan, to the vast majority in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, respondent villages from every state report problems of caste discrimination and exclusion in the MMS or its dry grain equivalent. Likewise with the PDS, no state is free of patterns of discrimination -

from 17% in Andhra Pradesh to 86% in Bihar, for instance, every state reports a substantial percentage of dominant caste PDS dealers practicing caste-based discrimination in the distribution of PDS goods.

While the problem is nationwide, its degree varies considerably from state to state, and this variation, considered in light of a parallel variation in other indicators, points to possible solutions. Where higher percentages of MMS cooks and organizers are Dalit, and where a higher percentage of midday meals are held in Dalit colonies, lower incidences of caste discrimination in the MMS are reported. In Andhra Pradesh, where indicators of Dalit participatory empowerment and access are relatively high (49% of respondent villages have Dalit cooks, 45% have Dalit organizers, and 46% are held in Dalit localities), reported caste discrimination in the MMS stands at 24%. In Tamil Nadu, where the same empowerment and access indicators are lower (31%, 27%, and 19%, respectively), reported discrimination stands at 36%. And in Rajasthan, where indicators are alarmingly low (8% Dalit cooks, 0% Dalit organizers, 12% held in Dalit colonies), reported discrimination stands extremely high at 52%.

Simply put, it appears that increased Dalit access (in terms of village caste geography) and participatory empowerment (in terms of employment and decision-making power in the government program) correspond with decreased incidence of exclusion and caste discrimination. A similar pattern emerges in the PDS data, where higher proportions of Dalit PDS dealers and PDS shops held in Dalit colonies correspond with lower proportions of reported discrimination and "untouchability" practices. While the Andhra Pradesh government still has a formidable problem of caste discrimination to confront, its relative success in attaining higher access and participatory empowerment/ownership indicators and lower discrimination levels appears to lie in its engagement with local women's groups in the practical implementation of the government programs. Implementation of the MMS through DWACRA groups, as opposed to the usual government machinery, for instance, increases the scope for Dalit women to make empowered, effective and participatory interventions to ensure their children's equal access to the Right to Food and the Right to Education, as well as their own Right to Employment (as MMS cooks, organizers, or teachers).

There are lessons to be learned from this analysis. In addition to relocating or newly locating MMS centers and PDS shops in Dalit colonies or other accessible caste-neutral localities, state governments can begin tackling the exclusion/discrimination problem by seeking partnerships with Dalit women's groups and other NGOs to jointly implement and monitor the programs.^{vii} By fostering Dalit participatory empowerment in terms of operation and ownership of the programs, the government can decrease incidence of discrimination, improve access, and begin to make the Right to Food a reality for Dalits on a par with other communities. Then going to school will be not a thing of dread for Dalit children like Kalpana from Kamalaputhur, but an opportunity to eat and learn as an equal to her peers, irrespective of caste.

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ⁱ Names have been changed throughout the article.

ⁱⁱ The Indian Institute of Dalit Studies conducted the survey with the help of NGOs affiliated to the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights.

ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, quantitative data on the pre-MMS dry grain distribution system is available only for UP and not for Bihar, for the following reason. Survey researchers in Bihar, understanding the MMS to mean the fully implemented, cooked midday meal program, left the MMS section of the survey blank after correctly answering the introductory question, "Is there a Midday Meal Scheme in your village?" in the negative. In Uttar Pradesh, on the other hand, a majority of researchers completed the survey in the MMS section by applying the questions to the existing program of dry grain distribution. Thus, while qualitative observations and informant responses are available for both states, quantitative data will only be presented for UP in the ensuing discussion.

^{iv} This example comes not from the IIDS survey, but from a media report in the Telugu daily Vaartha, Ranga Reddy District pullout, 4 January, 2003.

^v With regard to the PDS, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar *have* implemented the scheme on a par with the other states, unlike in the MMS. Therefore all five states in the survey are considered together.

^{vi} Only Andhra and Tamil Nadu have significant percentages of PDS shops held in "other places", at 22% and 31%, respectively. In these states, researchers understood "other place" to include the localities of Other Backward Castes (OBCs) instead of only caste-neutral places. Therefore, the percentages of PDS shops held in dominant caste (by which we mean all castes in a position of dominance over Dalits, including OBCs) localities in Andhra and Tamil Nadu may be considerably higher than they appear in our data.

^{vii} In fact, in the context of the PDS, 75% of respondent villages in the survey state that they would prefer to have their own Dalit shops separate from those owned by the dominant castes. Relocating PDS shops in Dalit colonies, and building Dalit ownership of the Public Distribution System, is thus not only an idea that data trends suggest as successful in decreasing levels of discrimination, but seems to be a demand of the Dalit community.