

THE POSSIBILITIES OF MID-DAY MEAL PROGRAMME IN WEST BENGAL

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1. PREAMBLE

Primary education in West Bengal is at a dialectical crossroad. On the one hand there is an immense possibility of spreading the light of education to the remotest corners of the society. This reflects the relatively larger scope and space created for the marginalized communities to express their aspirations towards acquiring education by their children (thanks to the other positive developments like land-reform, panchayat, and so on). On the other hand the growing class division in the field of primary education through the reliance on private tuition and private schooling (mainly because of the poor quality of education delivered in the primary schools) has led to the emergence of a threat before the public education system. This context adds relevance and urgency to the launching of the cooked Mid-day Meal Programme in the primary schooling institutions. Important in itself, because of the role of school feeding for health and nutrition, the programme can also be a very important input towards the strengthening of the public delivery of primary education. I am grateful to the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, for giving the opportunity to share some of our field level experiences on the issue before this learned assembly.

Incontrovertible it is that the cooked Mid-day Meal Programme (which is basically a

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up the directives.⁸ And there is still to bemoan – while many of the state governments missed the deadline, but started slowly complying with, some of the state governments like Bihar and Jharkhand (the two most potential state for the success of the programme given the wide range of poverty and hunger prevalent among their people) has not yet started the programme even after three and half years of the Supreme Court's pronouncement.

The government of West Bengal took some time to overcome the initial hiccups and has finally come up to meet the terms of the Supreme Court directives to implement the programme in every primary schooling institution (including the Sishu Siksha Kendras – SSKs). The beginning was made with some 1,100 primary schools in five districts (Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura, Paschim Midnapore, and Jalpaiguri) and extended to some other districts. A total of 5,200 primary schools were brought into the fold of the programme till March 31 2004. Further, a decision has been taken to bring all the primary schools and SSKs into the fold of the programme (vide DO No. 18 (18) –CS/2004, dated 18.02.2004). At the time of writing of this paper the allocation has been made to cover another 10,711 primary schools across the state, excepting the district of Kolkata (Annexure A to the G.O. No. 595 (14) –SE (Pry) dated 02.07.04).

The initial impact of the cooked Mid-day Meal programme in the selected primary schools was found to be impressive. The major impact as recorded in some studies was with regard to the enhancement of attendance of the children in schools. For example, in Murshidabad district⁹ the rate of attendance went up by eight percent after the launching of the programme. Findings from the other districts, like West Medinipur, Birbhum, Bankura and Jalpaiguri¹⁰, are also positive. At the same time, the studies have focused on some problems and constraints related to the implementation of the programme.

The Pratiche Trust, in accordance with its findings of the studies¹¹ on the delivery of primary education in West Bengal, made a strong suggestion of replacing the dry ration programme with a hot cooked mid-day meal. In the studies done in West Bengal the research team found a division of responses based on the line of class and social identities

⁸ Dr. N.C. Saxena and Mr. S.R. Sankaran, Commissioners of the Supreme Court in the case PUCL Vs UOI & Others, Writ Petition (civil) No. 196, of 2001

⁹ Go WB(2003) Op. cit

¹⁰ Go WB & UNICEF (2003) Op. cit

of the people interviewed. While the majority of the SC, ST and other poor people firmly wanted a cooked meal for the children in school, the relatively affluent section of the society thought this not only completely unnecessary but also hazardous and harmful to schooling. This division has been reflected in some of the studies on the impact of the Mid-day meal programme.¹²

Needless to mention, the important role played by class and other social identities in the delivery of primary education is a fact well established in popular discourse. And the role of the cooked Mid-day Meal Programme cannot but be seen in the complex perspective of the social structure. Moreover, the impact of the programme cannot be simply confined to the enhancement of enrolment and attendance, or eliminating classroom hunger. It has many other impacts like narrowing the gaps of social distances (caste, religion, gender, etc.), as found by Dreze and Goel (2003) in Rajasthan, Karanataka, and Chattisgarh. Our studies in West Bengal found a strong inclination of the common public to taking part in the governance of schools, and it was felt that the cooked Mid-day Meal programme could be a very good entry point towards this direction, where participation of the people and the implementation of the programme could compliment each other at a substantial level.

In order to draw a broader picture of the impacts, constraints and possibilities of the cooked Mid-day meal programme the Pratiche Research Team took up a study in Birbhum district of West Bengal, where the implementation of the programme has been on course in three hundred primary schools (out of 2334) in three (out of 19) CD blocks (Suri II, Bolpur-Sriniketan and Sainthia). For a comparative analysis we selected on a random basis 15 primary schools (five from each block) where the programme had been operative and another 15 primary schools (following a similar method) without having the programme. Apart from interviewing the teachers of the selected primary schools and parents and children of 300 households (10 from each of the schools), we interviewed the Anganwadi Sahayikas and others involved in cooking and members of Mother-Teacher Associations (MTA, which have been formed in some primary schools recently). Also we made some interviews of the Panchayat members and other political and social activists

¹¹ Rana k et al (2002) op. cit and Rana K et al (2004)Pratiche Siksha Pratibedan, Deys Publishing, Kolkata

¹² Dreze and Goel (2003) Op. cit

in the villages. The fieldwork of the study began in the last week of May 2004 and was completed in the end of June in the same year. Analysis of the collected data is still in progress. But the preliminary indications are quite explicit in suggesting a very positive impact of the programme not only on attendance and partial elimination of hunger but also on the overall governance of the primary schools. The preliminary findings were also well corroborated by the respondent parents and teachers assembled in a workshop organised by the Trust on 15-16 July 2004¹³.

Apart from the preliminary findings of the said work I would also incorporate some of the materials collected from some villages of West Medinipur district in June 2004.

2. IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAMME

Bhokila Chhua mene – the hungry children

I spent a week in the end of June 2004, in a village in Gopiballavpur I block of West Medinipur (an area sharing its border with Orissa and Jharkhand). Seventy five percent of the village population consists of the Santal and Munda tribal communities (414 out of 555 according to 2001 Census). Revealingly, in spite of achieving some remarkable successes in terms of economic development thanks to land struggle and multi-crop agricultural practices, the literacy rate of the village population is still very low – only 38 percent. The female literacy rate is still lower –only one third of the total literates. Of some three scores children of school going age only a half was reported to have been going to school regularly (although the enrolment rate was nearly hundred percent, a significant advancement in the last thirty years. Around 1970 the enrolment rate among the adivasis in the village was not more than twenty percent). Mention may be made that there was hardly any illiterate among the non-adivasi population.

Why was it so? A simple narrative, I consider, will shed some light on the in-built condition of socio-economic distance between the Adivasi and non-Adivasi people.

There was a marriage ceremony in a non-adivasi family (all the non-adivasis are land-owners; in fact their ancestors, as the records and oral history testifies, immigrated from

¹³ Workshop on the “Role of Parents and Teachers in the Governance of Primary Schools and the Mid-day Meal Programme”. The participants included 120 parents and teachers from a number of primary schools from various districts of West Bengal (on 15 July), and Chairpersons of various District Primary School Councils, officials of the state government, members of the various teachers’ unions, academics and so on (16 July). A full report of the work shop can be harvested from praticirt@sancharnet.in

outside and grabbed the land of the adivasis). We came across the dismal fact when a teen-ager was about to start distributing the leftovers of the breakfast among the adivasi children waiting outside the house, an elderly person rushed out from nowhere to stop him. There were some thirty odd children and the experienced man feared that the crowd would multiply by the three or the four once distribution of food was started. He screamed, “*Bhokila chhua menku sambali parbu?* Can you manage the mess that would be created by the hungry children?” Why are they still so hungry, particularly in a village where rice is grown two times a year and forest produces and agricultural wage employment have offered prosperity?

Firstly, though landlessness has been eliminated, still the inequality in terms of land-ownership is very high. Most of the adivasi households have less than one acre of cultivable land. Moreover, the lands they possess are mostly single cropped (as opposed to those of the non-ativasis). Secondly, own harvest, wage employment (which was around Rs 30 per day) and other income could sustain the hard pressed Adivasi households only for 8-9 months of the year if they consumed to their requirements. So most of the households cut a sizeable quantity from the daily ration to sustain them during the hungry months of Bhadra and Aswin (August-October). As Pitho Marandi told me,

“I have a family of six members – three adults and three children. We require at least three kgs of rice everyday. Where would we get that? So we eat less in order to save some rice for the hungry days lurking ahead. All of us earn something. Even the children are engaged in plucking green sal leaves to make leaf-plates. They can at least supplement a portion of the food requirement of the household. When would they go school, and how? A hungry stomach does not allow learning.”

During my stay at Gopiballavpur I visited another five villages and found the situation worse in some of them. Not only the tribals, but also among the poorer communities like mal, majhi (bagdi) and dom of the area hunger and poverty are still synonymous.¹⁴ Many of the parents of the poorer communities told that they could not provide their children with enough food and this caused the poor rate of attendance in the school (*Khaite di*

¹⁴ In Santali *rengec'* means hunger. Also it means poor. *Rengec' kana* – feeling hungry. *Rengec' hor kanain'* – I am a poor man. In the local dialect of Gopiballavpur area *bhok* denotes hunger and *bhokila* denotes both hungry and poor. However, the relatively affluent non-Adivasis, sometime use the term *garib* (poor) for self-ascription. For example, *Amar garaib nok-* We are poor people. Such poverty does not relate to hunger, but to the want of wealth or prosperity. On the other hand, they consider the hand to mouth toilers *bhokila* (hungry). *Bhokila nok ga* – the hungry people, or more specifically, *bhokila mulia-kamunga* – the hungry male and female workers.

parini, iskool ki patheiba?) Many of the parents said – “*khali pete ki parha hai? Parha nai kari parne master pitla, ar iskoolke gelanni* – children can not learn in empty stomach. When they fail to recite the lessons teachers beat them and children stop going to school.”¹⁵

Gopiballavpur is obviously not an exception. The presence of hunger, particularly in the classroom, was reported again and again in the districts of Birbhum, Murshidabad and Puruliya during our studies¹⁶. The reported starvation deaths in the tea gardens in Jalpaiguri district and very recently in Amlasole village of Binpur Block have created a lot of debate and discussion on hunger in West Bengal, although the extent of hunger is not completely known and the reported deaths caused by starvation are still very controversial issues. However, the present Pratichi study on Mid-day Meal Programme found the presence of classroom hunger in Birbhum district to a large extent, particularly among the Dalits and Adivasis. The study was conducted in summer when the schools re-scheduled the timing in the morning. A considerable number of children of the working class families told us (in reply to a question as to what they ate before coming to school) that they had not eaten anything. Another large section said that they drank tea before coming to school – biscuit is still a luxury for many of the rural households. Several parents and some of the teachers strongly corroborated the above findings in the workshop mentioned above.

¹⁵ The wide prevalence of poverty and hunger has influenced the literacy rate of the area. For example, the literacy rate of Gopiballavpur I Block is, according to 2001 Census, 57 percent, while the rate of literacy of the district of Medinipur (undivided) is 75 percent. Number of female literates in this block is just half the number of the male literates. Again, the workers' profile show that above 40 percent of the main workers are agricultural labourers, which is a little above 24 percent. Such regional variations are caused of different reasons – geographical, climatic, and perhaps very importantly demographic. All the blocks of Jhargram sub-division of Medinipur district, an area with high concentration of Adivasis, have much smaller literacy rate than the state and district average. Also the state level data regarding the literacy rate and work profile among the adivasis show a clear correlation between these two. The overall literacy rate among the adivasi communities in West Bengal in 1991 was a little above 27 percent (the overall literacy for the state was 57 percent). Again the main workers among the Adivasis were consisted of more than 50 percent of agricultural labourers, while the figures for the other castes was only 25 percent. Among the SCs figures for literacy rate and contribution of the agricultural labourers to main workers were 42 percent and 41 percent respectively. Thus, most of the studies on Mid-day Meal have found much higher acceptance of the programme from these communities.

¹⁶ See Rana et al (2000, & 2004), Op. cit.

Eta je kata baro upakar - What a great favour this is!

Pete na thakle dana, buddhi hay kana,

Pete thakle dana, buddhi sholo ana

(The mind stops working in empty stomach, a full stomach makes it active)

The copyright of the above rhyme goes to a teacher of a primary school. However, many of the parents and teachers who we met during the study made similar observations. “Even when the child attends the classes, hunger hardly allows her to concentrate on studying or learning. *Khidar jala je katabara jala!* (The pain of hunger is so acute!)”, said a parent. Such a state, makes people recognise the unqualified need for the provision for a hot cooked meal (*eta je katabaro upakar* – what a great favour this is!), particularly for the children of the underprivileged families. As found in many other studies cited above, our study too found a substantial enhancement in the rate of attendance of the children after the programme was launched.

A comparative analysis of the average attendance records of the children (for the month prior to the launching of the programme and for the month preceding the study) shows a 10.1 percentage point of increase in the rate of attendance. A comparison between the records of the schools with and without the MDM programme also substantiates the difference – while the non-MDM schools had a rate of attendance of 60.6 percent in the month preceding the study, it was 71.9 percent in the case of the schools with MDM programme.

However, the *upakar* (favour) was not found to have a uniform coverage. Attendance records show that the impact of the programme on the attendance of children was much higher among the dalit, adivasi and Muslim children. The rate of attendance of the caste Hindu children (which has been impressive in general) has not been influenced much.

Table 1. Enhancement in the rate of attendance in the primary schools under study*

Caste	Average attendance of children in the primary schools under study in the month (in percent)			Average attendance of the studied Primary schools without MDM programme
	Preceding the launching of MDM programme	Preceding the study (MDM programme already in operation)	Point increase in the average rate of attendance	
SC	54.7	67.3	12.6	59.8
ST	57	76.9	19.9	55.2
Muslim	59.6	72.8	13.2	39.8
Caste Hindus	67.6	71.4	3.8	69.8
All	61.8	71.9	10.1	60.6

*For gender break-up of the rate of attendance see Appendix Table A

Jar darker se-i er marma bujhe – only those who need [the food] can appreciate it

The mixed responses on the impact of the programme and the varied performances of the schools as regards implementation of the programme reveal the complex class structure of West Bengal society. While the working class respondents – both parents and children – were found to welcome the programme, a large section of the upper economic strata (who mainly belonged to the caste Hindu communities) were found to be not only reluctant but also sometime hostile in their attitude towards the implementation of the programme. The resistance to the implementation came in many different forms. While some of them were found to have launched an unorganised whispering campaign to highlight the “certainty of the uncertain future of the programme” (which affected the enthusiasm of the other villagers involved in the programme, at least partially, as the relatively affluent section, thanks to their socio-economic advantage, could play a major role in building the opinion); some others were found to be extremely non-cooperative to extend parental help towards its implementation. Besides them, some of the richer parents were found to have played a role in implementing the programme in a ramshackle manner (being the leaders of the society, politically and socially, they enjoyed the power to control the operational side of the programme). Some of the teachers were also found to be hostile. However, many of the teachers appeared to be indifferent towards the programme and apparently took it as a mere routine work. In four of the 15 schools under survey teachers were found to be well disposed to and enthusiastic about the programme. And as a result, both the level of people’s participation and the delivery of the programme were satisfactory.

The need-based attitude towards the programme was amply clear from the fact that while the caste Hindus made a lot of complaints against the monotonous menu of *khichuri* everyday, their lower caste counterparts in the villages seemed to be elated with the programme, however repetitive the menu might be. Many of them, particularly from the adivasi Santal and Kora communities mentioned that they did not bother much about the repetition of the menu as, at home, they are perforce used to eating a repetitive diet of rice and leafy vegetables (*daka ar ara*) almost everyday (and not always in sufficient quantity). Also many of the dalit and Muslim respondents expressed satisfaction over the implementation of the programme. The enhancement in the rate of attendance was far more conspicuous among the SC, ST and Muslim children. The percentage point increase

was 12.6 for the SCs, 19.9 for the STs and 13.2 for the Muslims. Against this augmented attendance rate of those sections, the comparative percentage of the caste Hindu children was a paltry 3.8 percent.

However, some of the relatively affluent families of the adivasi and other poor communities (Dalits and Muslims) echoed the view of the caste Hindu respondents for bringing about a variation in the menu. Nevertheless, almost all such respondents strongly wanted the programme to continue. This observation is not to undermine the aspects of quality and attractiveness of the food served; we will focus on these issues in a minute. What is important to note here is that when a small provision in the form of *khichuri* or rice and dal was found so valuable by many of the poor children and their parents, one can imagine what a great impact can it have if an improvement upon the flat diet were given due consideration. It may also be worthwhile to mention that most of the children (irrespective of caste and religion) took (or wanted to take) the meals. Obviously a more attractive and nutritious meal could have exerted much wider impact not only on the rate of attendance but also on the general learning achievement and other social advancements (narrowing down the social distances caused by caste, religion, gender, and so on).

Miyetakeo roj iskoole pathai - I send my daughter to school everyday

Ek dubha basi mar talay duti bhat hey

sei dekhe bahu kanday sara sara rat hey

(A little rice and a bowlful of stale rice-water, the [quantity and quality of food] makes the daughter-in-law weep the whole of a night)

Not only the daughter-in-law, as mentioned in the above *jhumur* song, girls in general experience discrimination in the allotment of food in the households. The cooked Mid-day Meal programme thus becomes more relevant and urgent for the girls. Many of the parents had this to say that their daughters had started going to school more regularly than the boys. Although we could not gather any correlative evidence of nutritional improvement (we did not have the scope to incorporate this aspect in the study), some of the mothers told us that their daughters have gained better health after the launching of the programme.

3. PROBLEMS AND CONSTRAINTS

Amader chelemeyera ki goru chhagal – should our children be treated like cattle?

In spite of the general acceptance of the programme, particularly by the Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims (who were generally found to be the poor wage earners)¹⁷ the quality of food served and the dullness of the menu (as a parent jokingly said, “*khichuri khey khey pete dhipi bendhe jabe* – children will grow mounds in their stomach because of the repetitive menu of *khichuri*) were found to be a cause of concern, which was also reinforced in the stated workshop¹⁸. Although parents of the SC, ST and Muslim communities did not appear to be as harsh as to compare the food with fodder for cattle, many of them strongly suggested the schools give priority to bring about change in the menu and adding more ingredients to the food to make it more nutritious, attractive and beneficial for the children. Four of the 15 primary schools (with the MDM programme) we visited were found to have introduced variations in the menu. Also the quality of the food was improved by adding some ingredients like vegetables. The rate of attendance and acceptance of food in these schools was much higher, and the inhibition of the high caste Hindus towards the meal was found to be less or not significant.

Pacha chal, tao thik samay asena – the quality of rice is appalling, and yet it is not supplied regularly

One of the major complaints made by some of the parents and teachers was that the quality of rice supplied was very bad, even “*gorute o khabena* - the cow would resist eating.” The problem of supplying of the rice and other ingredients was evidently a bigger problem in many of the areas. In some places the ration dealers and some other influential persons were reported to have surreptitiously done some mischief, like supplying lesser quantity of rice than stipulated, and making unnecessary delay in the supply. The bureaucratic and somewhat centralised process of implementation often creates difficulty in the releasing of fund and supplying of ingredients.

¹⁷ A study done by the Birbhum District primary School Council, as reported by its Chairman Mr. Gautam Ghosh in the workshop mentioned above, has also found that the programme has had much impact on the SC, ST and Muslim children.

¹⁸ Similar problems have been noticed elsewhere, for example in the schools of Delhi, where the meals were reported to be “Less than Palatable”. See Devraj, Ranjit (2004) “Development India: Free Meals for Children Less than Palatable”, in www.ipsnews.net/interna.asp?idnews=23520

Randha nayto kanda – Cooking is so hazardous that it makes us weep

A major complaint, mainly of the ICDS workers who cooked the meal, was that they were provided with (a) inadequate infrastructure, utensils and other accessories, (b) inadequate ingredients and condiments, and (c) very low remuneration (which was paid on a very irregular basis) for their services. Also, in some schools cooks and teachers faced a great difficulty in serving the food owing to the lack of space for the children to sit. These problems were also raised again and again in the workshop of parents and teachers mentioned above. Separate cooking shed and better storage facility for both the uncooked ingredients and cooked food are essential for a proper materialisation of the programme. The recent tragedy in Kumbhakonam, where the outrageous flames of a kitchen shed spread wildly rapidly over the school and roasted about 100 children to death, and some other incidents of food poisoning, etc. reported from some parts of the country, have given alarming call to take up immediate measures on the aspects of safety and hygiene.

The Commissioners of the Supreme Court have also written to the state government to “ensure that every school is provided with adequate space separately for storing and cooking the mid day meal”, and “it should also be ensured that every school is provided with a source of clean drinking water and adequate utensils to store water and cook[ed] food.” Also they have insisted on increasing the financial allocation for the programme – a sum of Rs 2 per child per day as conversion cost (oil, salt, spices, dal, fuel, etc.) from the present allotment of Re 1 per child per day.¹⁹ (The Union Government provides the grain and the other costs are met by the state government).²⁰

The government of West Bengal has already taken some measures to build cooking sheds and provide adequate utensils.²¹ However, a lot of work is still needed to be done, both in respect of infrastructure and conversion cost. Also, provision for a better remuneration for the cooks and increasing their number has to be given a priority.

¹⁹ Letter of the Commissioners of the Supreme Court in the case of PUCL Vs UOI and Ors. Writ petition (civil) No. 196 of 2001 to the Chief secretary, Government of West Bengal, dt. July 8 2004, re: MDMquality/196/WB

²⁰ For details see “Basic Guidelines for Implementation of Cooked Mid-day Meal Programme for the Primary School Students”, by the Joint Secretary to the Government of West Bengal, School Education Department.

²¹ As stated by the Special secretary to the Government of West Bengal, School Education Department in the above mentioned workshop.

Given the poor state of the government ex-chequer this might be a difficult task. However, generating local resources through the involvement of the local communities could be a much effective option, particularly in reducing the conversion cost.

Parabota kakhān –when would we teach [the children]?

Many of the teachers and some of the parents from the affluent section complained that as the cooked Mid-day Meal programme demands a lot of time so it disrupts the teaching activity itself, particularly in the schools with high enrolment of students. However, such a complaint does not bear much weight, as evidences from many schools²² show that a well-planned and organised system can easily overcome this problem. On the other hand a half-hearted effort, alienated from the local community, not only proves to be disturbing for teaching, but also makes the meal more repelling than attractive.

Neta ar opisarra kheyē jachhe – the [political] leaders and the officials are eating up [the fund/rice]

In almost all the villages we heard people grumbling about the nexus of political leaders and the government officials, who according to people's perception, were involved in some corrupt practices, such as siphoning of the funds and grain that led to irregularity irregular and short-supplying of the grain as well as paucity of fund. In most of the villages surveyed, the local leaders were found to be hailing from relatively advanced socio-economic background, who according to the common people, profusely control every development activities in the villages. Many of the respondents complained that the leaders contacted them only during the time of election, and when the leaders were contacted for some help "they don't even find time to give us a hearing." In a village, inhabited by the Bagdi (SC) and Santal communities, the local leader of the dominating party was a salaried employed person from a high caste background. Many of the Bagdis and Santals complained that the leader refused to store the rice in the school and kept it in

²² We have found some schools with very high enrolment, where teaching activity hardly gets disrupted. In these schools the organisation of the programme has well been orchestrated with the sincerity of the teachers and the voluntary involvement of the parents and other local community members. Similar evidences were also found by Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee, who has been very closely associated with the Mid-day Meal programme. He has travelled extensively across the state and has also contributed with some innovative developments, like growing *pushti-bagan* (nutrition-garden), in the schools and finding means to minimise the cost and hazard of cooking through improved chullah. Also he has developed a cost effective but nutritious menu with a varying routine. For details, contact Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee, Pushti, 364/31, NSC Bose Road, Naktala, Kolkata –700047, Phone – 0091-33-2471-0149.

his custody. When asked about this the leader admitted the fact with ‘qualification’ - “*era sab garib lok, iskool theke churi kare nebe* (they [the common villagers] are poor people and they would steal the rice from the school”). As reported, the leader controlled the Village Education Committee and the local panchayat and was well equipped with the government and political connection.

Apni to Brahman, apni ki oder hater ranna khaben – Being a Brahman would you take food from them[the lower castes]?

The findings of our earlier studies (on the delivery of primary education in six districts of West Bengal) confirming varying degrees of social discrimination based on caste and religion in the state, have received criticism from some quarters of the society, particularly from the left. According to a representative of a teachers’ union, who participated in the workshop stated above, “the Pratichi Research Team has been highlighting the stray incidences of caste-based discrimination in the arena of primary education”. Some others also raised this elsewhere in a similar tone.²³ On the other hand many villagers bore out the findings of this crucial reality during our fieldworks related to some other studies on primary education (viz. on the emergence of private schooling, and the present study on Mid-day Meal): “*jati thakle jatibhed o thakbe, eta natun katha ki* – the existence of caste (or religion) invariably brings forth the discrimination based on caste (or religion), what is new in it?”. However, as we clearly stated in our reports, such discriminations do not follow a uniform pattern and there had been substantial overlap between caste and class.

In the present study too, we have found some evidence of discrimination based on caste and religion. In two of the 15 villages under the study, upper caste Hindu children did not take food in the school, as the cook was a Muslim lady in one school and in the other she was a Dalit. In a school, children of caste Hindu families told us that they wanted to take the food but their parents forbade them from doing so. “*Chan na kare ghare dhukte debena* – [parents] won’t allow us to enter the house without having a bath.” Such an injunction is rooted in the notion of purity and profanity considering that the people of lower social strata cooking the food will cause pollution. Some of the parents of these

²³ They include some politicians including the Minister-in-charge, Department of School Education, Government of West Bengal.

two schools (and also in some other villages, which were not covered by the study) were also quite explicit in their refusal to allow their children to take the meal at the school. One of our researchers (a Brahman by caste) was asked whether she would take the food cooked by the people of lower social order. (To be specific, the cooks were addressed as ‘*Ora*’ – ‘they’, asserting the binary opposition between “we” and “they”, the others.) The affirmative reply of the researcher was not only surprising for the particular parent but also upsetting.

However, as mentioned above, this was not the case everywhere. In many villages we have found children of all socio-economic background sharing the food sitting on a single line. As it happened, in these schools the food was found to be of a much better quality with a variation in the menu. The finding was also supported by some other observers, working in different areas. Though some of the parents were quite adamant to keep the sanctity of their *jati* unharmed, an attractive and variant menu with better quality of food has the potential to reducing the social distance to a considerable degree.

4. THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE MID-DAY MEAL PROGRAMME

Apart from playing a very important role of eliminating classroom hunger and reducing the level of undernutrition – the prevalence of which, according to Amartya Sen, is much higher in the sub-continent than even in the Sub-Saharan Africa – and subsequent increase in the enrolment and attendance, for its being a transaction-intensive programme it has immense potential to act as a rallying point for the local community. Needless to mention that the local communities, particularly the parents are the most essential driving force not only for the implementation of the Mid-day-Meal programme, but also for the governance of the primary schools as a whole.

Amader chelemeye khabe amara korbona – our children would eat the meal, won't we help the programme?

Nearly 80 percent of the parents strongly expressed their willingness to take part in the implementation of the programme to make it successful. However, such participation was found in four of the 15 primary schools, and in those schools the programme was running most successfully. The success covered many different aspects – from the quality of food to a substantial increase in the quality of schooling. The parent-teacher relationship was found to be very cooperative in those schools and parents assisted the teachers in many

different ways. In one of the schools, members of the Mother-Teacher Association were even found to share some responsibility of teaching in the classrooms (the enrolment was very high and teachers struggled to manage the situation). In those schools parents, particularly mothers were closely involved in the organisation of the Mid-day Meal – storage of ingredients and grains, assisting in cooking and serving, donating vegetables and fuel, etc. are the few to mention. Teachers and parents discuss the possible improvement of the school on a regular basis in a friendly environment.

In these schools, as parents reported, both the teachers and the other authorities (Panchayat and political leaders) were very keen on the parents joining the process of the Mid-day Meal and taking full responsibility. But, in many of the schools parents did not get similar opportunities. Even in some schools parents complained that they were deliberately excluded from the organisational aspects of the programme. However, in some of the schools, particularly with higher caste Hindu (and relatively affluent) population, parents were found to be somewhat indifferent to the implementation of the programme.

Amader hate chhere diye dekhun, chalate pari ki na – Leave it to us and see whether we can run it [the programme] or not

Many of the parents, particularly mothers said that they could run the programme in a much better way if devolved on their hands. At the same time some of them said that they would participate in the programme conditionally – provided there was complete transparency and the parents were empowered with some administrative power to run the programme as well as the school. “*Amra ranna karbo, khatbo , aar babura dhandli karbe, ta ki hay* –We would do all the hard work and the authorities would be doing some fraudulent activities. How come the both go together.” Many parents, both during the field work and in the workshop, said that they had been involved in the schooling process to ensure a better delivery of education, and if the Mid-day Meal programme was entrusted with them it would surely be more successful than what so far has happened and it would further strengthen the governance of schooling.

Sudhu khaowa nay, sab kichhu bhalo habey – Not only the meal, there will be improvement in every aspect

The most important aspect of the Mid-day Meal programme is perhaps its possible effectiveness to extend beyond the impact of eliminating classroom hunger, reducing the level of undernutrition and enhancing attendance.

Firstly, for such a programme to succeed it needs close community participation. As some of the participants of the aforementioned workshop, observed that administrative initiative following the directives of the Supreme Court is too inadequate a measure to make the programme a success. It needs larger public participation, since law alone cannot ensure a proper implementation. Such participation cannot just be limited to meetings or giving suggestions, but demands a day-to-day engagement of the community, particularly of the parents, in the school premises. Being a closely interactive process, this would develop a living relationship between the parents and the teachers, and thus it can play a much better role in ensuring an equitable and improved quality of education. Also, empirical evidences suggest that the enhancement in the rate of attendance of children and teachers' absenteeism are inversely proportionate – when the first goes up the second comes down and vice versa. The main reason behind the reluctance (or even resistance) of a section of the primary teachers towards the programme was not because of what they claim, 'The Mid-day Meal programme is disruptive of teaching activities and too time consuming', but because of the fact that they had to ensure their attendance in the school for two reasons – the official requirement for the MDM programme (signing the papers etc.) and the higher rate of attendance of the children (as they did not find any lame excuse for their absenteeism, like "*bacchara asena , amra ese ki karbo* – children don't come to the school, whatelse shall we do here?")

Secondly, such participation would open the avenues for more interactive processes in the other fields of society, such as development work, social matters and so on. There is a strong possibility for a fresh move towards political and social empowerment of the people at the grass roots level. A small beginning towards decentralisation of power (in a much broader sense, a departure from the conventional electoral democracy as argued by many²⁴) through this process could open the floodgates for creating larger space to contest the existing socio-economic hierarchies.

Thirdly, such a transaction-intensive process would help larger public (including the government and other policy level people) to identify multifarious challenges and find

out the means for countering them. Many of the questions related to the problems of primary education and other developmental activities could be well replied at the local level. The tangible examples of some of the primary schools and SSKs in West Bengal show that the local communities themselves have generated resources at their own end to improve the infrastructure, quality of the cooked food and also the quality of schooling. To illustrate, many of the primary schools in the state have substantial asset in the form of land²⁵. This somewhat idle asset can be put to use in a much effective way to generate recurring income for the schools (such as by planting trees) and a source of ready and fresh ingredients to improve the quality of the cooked meal (by introducing kitchen garden, involving the children in the process of production with all enthusiasm, which would eventually broaden the scope of learning for them²⁶).

Of course, there should not be any illusion about the role of the state; it has to take much bigger responsibility in the social sector than it presently does. The point is to create larger space for the people to take part in the affairs of the state through self-assertion and empowerment. The implementation of the Mid-day Meal programme offers such a material condition.

The effective use of this material condition depends on the political will of the government, political parties and other policy makers. Entrusting the responsibilities implementation of the programme in the hands of the local communities, particularly the school-specific parent-teacher committees, which have to be formed on the basis of proportional representation of different social groups (caste, class, religion and gender) with a legal status to govern the primary schooling institutions, could be a very effective remedial measure to eradicate many different types of ills of the primary schooling system, particularly the unimaginably poor quality of education. It also needs full transparency – all the parents and teachers have to be provided with the detailed

²⁴ Majumdar, Manabi (2002): Decentralisation Reforms and Public Schools: A Human Development Perspective (mimeo); Bardhan P (2002), “Political Institutions and Processes”, in The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology, OUP, Delhi

²⁵ Recently we have visited a primary school in Birbhum, which has two acres of land and a pond. The Chairman of the Birbhum District Primary Education Council told us that most of the schools possessed some land, which could be utilised for a much fruitful purpose. An effort in this line is underway, as stated by the Chairman.

²⁶ The author has seen some schools in the worst drought affected Kalahandi district of Orissa where a similar initiative has been yielding excellent result. Children were found in a very health condition – both physically and academically. Because of the collective effort of the children, teachers and parents the great return from the production consumed very little individual time. A secondary school in Medinipur district of West Bengal (Saria ST High School) has accumulated a substantial amount of school-fund through the utilisation of the uplands owned by it (by planting trees). In Birbhum a similar beginning has been made in primary school (through developing a *pushti-bagan* - nutrition garden; at Ruppur and Sajina).

information concerning the programme. Further, in all probability, it would create a base for expanding democratic practices in larger public arena.

However, it has to be noted that the cooked Mid –day Meal programme alone cannot change the whole schooling system – increased attendance of the children does not necessarily mean a better quality of education. Efforts are needed to streamline the whole schooling system – from allocating more funds for infrastructure to ensuring better teaching and learning in the classroom. Mere pious pieces of advice by the political leaders and government officials are not sufficient to put a stop to teachers’ absenteeism of various kinds, particularly under a ramshackle inspection system. Stronger supervision by the local community can be the best corrective measure to eradicate these evils. Parents’ involvement in the implementation of the Mid–day meal programme armed with certain legal power (through the parent-teacher committees) can bring about a sea change in the actual delivery of education. At the same time such participation will go a long way in providing a newer platform to begin a new process of decentralisation of power through expanding the scope of democratic practices to a much deeper level of the society.

Appendix A. Enhancement in the rate of attendance in the primary schools under study

Caste	Gender	Average attendance of children in the studied primary schools in the month (in percent)			Average attendance of the studied Primary schools without MDM programme
		Preceding the launching of MDM programme	Preceding the study (MDM programme already in operation)	Point increase in the average rate of attendance	
SC	B	52.8	66.3	13.5	60.5
	G	57.4	68.2	10.8	58.7
	T	54.7	67.3	12.6	59.8
ST	B	55.7	72.6	16.9	53.7
	G	61.5	86.9	25.4	56
	T	57	76.9	19.9	55.2
MUS	B	58.6	73.9	15.3	18.8
	G	60.4	71.6	11.2	47.7
	T	59.6	72.8	13.2	39.8
OTH	B	68.1	70.2	2.1	72.2
	G	66.8	72.7	5.9	66.8
	T	67.6	71.4	3.8	69.8
TOT	B	61.4	71.2	9.8	60.3
	G	62.4	72.6	10.2	61
	T	61.8	71.9	10.1	60.6