

India's Right to Food Campaign¹

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The Right to Food Campaign is an attempt to realise the aspirations and guarantees enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Article 21 of the Constitution is a guarantee of the “right to life”, and imposes upon the state the duty to protect it. The Supreme Court has held in previous cases that the right to life includes the right to food. However, under-nutrition is widespread and even starvation deaths occur periodically in the country.

In April 2001, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court of India demanding that the country’s mounting food stocks be used to prevent hunger and starvation in the country. In subsequent hearings the Supreme Court issued interim orders with directions for the government. The task of implementing these orders highlighted the need to move beyond the Court to ensure that the right to food is upheld. This was the genesis of the Right to Food Campaign. The campaign’s activities now include research, dissemination, media advocacy, mobilization of public opinion and action on the ground.

The campaign works on food-related issues, with a special focus on children and the destitute. The introduction of cooked mid-day meals in all primary schools and expanded coverage of destitute households in food-security schemes are some specific achievements of the campaign. Some progress has also been made towards providing nutrition and health services to all children below the age of six, under the “Integrated Child Development Services”. In general, the campaign has been successful in drawing greater attention to food-related issues.

A case study: Mid-day Meals

In an interim order dated 28 November, 2001 the Supreme Court directed all state governments to start “providing every child in every Government and Government assisted Primary Schools with a prepared mid day meal ... each day of school for a minimum of 200 days.” Very few states, however, introduced cooked meals in primary schools before the Supreme Court’s deadline of 28 February 2002.

On 9 April, 2002, the campaign co-ordinated a national ‘action day’ to pressurize the state governments to initiate mid-day meals (MDMs) without further delay. Across some 100 districts in 9 states, activists organized a host of activities - school children lined roads with empty plates in hand, memoranda were submitted to government representatives, copies of the Supreme Court’s order were distributed. The highlight of this action day was a symbolic mid-day meal: local communities, NGOs and people’s organisations fed school children in public places, to embarrass the government for not doing it.

As governments slowly fell in line from then on, media reports highlighted various problems with the implementation of mid-day meals. To get an accurate overall picture of the situation, the campaign conducted field surveys in several states. There were areas of genuine concern such as the quality of the meals provided, administrative impediments and meagre financial allocations. However, the surveys also showed that it was possible to implement the scheme well, financial and other constraints notwithstanding. Based on this learning, the campaign lobbied the government for an increase in financial allocations.

1 More information about the campaign is available online at www.righttofoodindia.org.

Another key element in the MDM story has been the intervention of the “Commissioners” (Dr. N.C. Saxena and Mr. S.R. Sankaran, both retired civil servants) who were appointed by the Supreme Court to monitor the implementation of its interim orders. The Commissioners’ reports to the Supreme Court repeatedly highlighted the violation of the order of 28 November, 2001 in states such as Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. These reports along with lobbying of the central government resulted in major increases in budgetary allocations in subsequent years.

Today, about 100 million children in India get a cooked meal at school, making this the largest mid-day meal programme in the world. The key to the campaign’s success lies in its determination to use all the spaces available in the Indian democratic system – legal action, media advocacy, academic research and street demonstrations among others. However, this battle is far from over: the quality of mid-day meals needs radical improvement in large parts of the country.

Move towards the right to work

The campaign and its activities, though an outgrowth of the Supreme Court case, have gained a momentum of their own. This is evident in the growth of a strong movement for an “Employment Guarantee Act”, as a first step towards the right to work. The Act aims at guaranteeing 100 days of work, at minimum wage, to any person willing to do manual work. The purpose of the Act is to provide the most basic safety net for the poor.

Here again, the campaign has used a variety of means of action. The latest initiative was the “Rozgar Adhikar Yatra” (right to work journey), a 50-day bus journey through 50 districts across 10 states, in May-June 2005 which has spurred a spirited public debate across the country. Nearly 150 organizations participated in the series of events organized on the Yatra’s route - public meetings, state conventions, street plays, puppet shows, rallies and other activities.

In the four years since its inception, the campaign has had its share of successes as well as setbacks. What is heartening is the way in which a diverse constituency of people’s movements, NGOs, academics, activists and other concerned citizens have come together on an issue that has been sadly neglected for so many years.