

MID DAY MEAL SCHEME IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Dr. V. S. Murkute,
Associate Professor,
College of Education, Nashik.

INTRODUCTION :

The Mid Day Meal Scheme is a multi-faceted programme of the Government of India that, among other things, seeks to address issues of food security, lack of nutrition and access to education on a pan nation scale.^[1] It involves provision for free lunch on working days for children in Primary and Upper Primary Classes in Government, Government Aided, Local Body, Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternate Innovative Education (AIE) Centers, Madarsa and Maqtabas supported under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Schools run by Ministry of Labour. The primary objective of the scheme is to provide hot cooked meal to children of primary and upper primary classes. With other objectives of improving nutritional status of children, encouraging poor children, belonging to disadvantaged sections, to attend school more regularly and help them concentrate on classroom activities, thereby increasing the enrollment, retention and attendance rates. According to the government, it is the world's largest school feeding program, reaching out to about 120,000,000 children in over 1,265,000 schools and Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) centers across the country.

HISTORY :

Pre-Independence initiatives :

The roots of the program can be traced back to Pre-Independence era when a Mid Day Meal Program was introduced by British administration for disadvantaged children in Madras Municipal Corporation in 1925. In 1928 Keshav Academy of Calcutta introduced compulsory Mid-Day Tiffin for school boys on payment basis at the rate of four annas per child per month. Mid Day Meal Program was introduced in the Union Territory of Pondicherry by French Administration from the year 1930. A school lunch program was started in parts of Kerala in 1941, followed by Bombay implementing a free mid-day meal scheme in 1942 which, with UNICEF assistance, distributed skimmed milk powder to children aged between 6–13 years. Another project was launched in Bangalore city in 1946 where the scheme provided cooked rice with curds to the children.

Initiatives by State Governments :

In 1953, Uttar Pradesh Government introduced a scheme, on voluntary basis, to provide meals consisting of boiled or roasted or sprouted grams, ground-nut, puffed rice, boiled potatoes or seasonal fruits. During 1962-63, Tamil Nadu became the first state in India to initiate a noon meal program to children with the launch of Mid Day Meal Program in primary schools.

Gujarat was the second state to introduce MDM scheme in 1984, but it was discontinued in between. From August 1990 to October 1991 MDM was replaced by Food for Education Program where in children with 70% attendance were provided 10 kg of food grains free of cost. Later, from 15 January 1992 MDM Scheme was re-introduced.

By 1990-91 the number of States implementing the mid day meal program with their own resources on a universal or a large scale had increased to twelve, namely, Goa, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh. In another three States, namely Karnataka, Orissa and West Bengal, the program was being implemented with State resources in combination with international assistance. Another two States, namely Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan were implementing the program entirely with international assistance.

INITIATIVES BY CENTRAL GOVERNMENT :**International Assistance :**

An Expanded Nutrition Program was launched jointly by the Government of India and the FAO, WHO, UNICEF during 1958-59, which subsequently developed, into the Applied Nutrition Program (ANP). Under this, demonstration feeding program for the school children wherein nutritious food was cooked by the women groups and fed to the children under the nutrition education component.

National Program of Nutrition Support to Primary Education :

The Government of India (GoI) initiated the National Program of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) on 15 August 1995 as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme. The objectives of the scheme are to give a boost to universalisation of primary education by mitigating classroom hunger and improving nutritional status of primary school children. Initially, the scheme was implemented in 2,408 blocks of the country to provide food to students in classes I-V of government, government-aided and local body run schools.

In October 2007, the scheme included students in upper primary classes of VI to VIII in 3,479 educationally backward blocks, and the name was changed from National Program for Nutrition Support to Primary Education to National Program of Mid Day Meals (MDM) in Schools

IMPLEMENTATIONS OF THE SCHEME :

During the initial stages of Implementation, it was perceived that the mode of delivery of nutritional support could be in the form of hot cooked meal, precooked food or food grains. Only four states, Gujarat, Kerala, Orissa, and Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Pondicherry were providing cooked meals. All other states were providing dry rations supplied by Food Corporation of India (FCI) distributed under Public Distribution System (PDS) at 3 kg of food grain per child to a family for ten months which would be equivalent to set norms for 100g /day / child for 200 school days (subject to a minimum attendance of 80 percent). States like Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir reported that they could not implement the program due to resource constraints while the Union Territory of Chandigarh and Delhi due to logistic problems continued to serve processed foods like fruit bread, biscuits and fruits.

Criticism on Dry Rations :

The experience of dry rations and biscuits which were part of the NSPE has shown that these were often not consumed by children and though they did push up enrollment it had little impact on attendance and retention levels. The nutritional impacts of dry rations are likely to be lower when compared to a cooked meal. While the freshly cooked meal offers a better range of nutrients, the packaged food on the other hand is costlier in terms of per rupee nutrient yield. Biscuits are processed foods that are low on fiber and high on trans fatty acids, which are seen as an important long-term risk factor for a range of emerging diseases like coronary heart disease and diabetes. In MDM the evidence suggests that children often take the dry rations home and may or may not eat it later, and in contexts of poverty, this food often gets shared by the family. More over, the dry rations lack the socialization value which the MDM scheme provide, whose long term benefits can be seen in caste and class barriers breaking down.

IMPLEMENTATION MODELS :

- Decentralized model :

The MDM scheme guidelines mandates that, as far as possible the cooking should be done in school kitchen by engaging cook cum helpers or self-help groups there are provisions that NGOs may be involved only in extraordinary circumstances in urban area only where cooking is not possible in the school premises. As far as rural areas are considered NGOs should not be involved . In the decentralized model the meals are cooked for an exact number of children in the school, by a cook, helper, and organizer, right on the school premises and the fresh meal is served to the children. Agencies charged with the production of food usually include self help groups (SHG), Village Education Committees and Mother/Parent Teacher Associations. The advantages include catering to local tastes, increasing consumption and minimizing wastage, community participation, transparency, serving as a source of employment for women or lower caste individuals, suppliers and the beneficiaries coming in direct contact. The drawbacks of the model include infrequent monitoring, corruption, and hygiene issues.

- Centralized Model :

In the centralized model, mostly through a public-private partnership, an external organization cooks and delivers the meal to schools. The advantages of centralized kitchen include ensuring the provision of hygienic and nutritious food as well as allowing for the optimum utilization of infrastructural facilities. Various NGO's like The Akshaya Patra Foundation, Ekta Shakti Foundation, Iskcon Food Relief Foundation, Naandi Foundation and Jay Gee Humanitarian Society are providing mid-day meals.

SCAMS AND ISSUE OF ACCOUNTABILITY :

Various scams involving Mid Day Meal Scheme have been unearthed since it was started. In January 2006, the Delhi Police unearthed a scam in the Midday Meal Scheme. In December 2005, the police had seized eight truckloads (2,760 sacks) of rice meant for primary schoolchildren being carried from Food Corporation of India (FCI) godowns in Bulandshahr District of UP to North Delhi. When the police detained the trucks, the drivers claimed that the rice was being brought all the way to Delhi to be cleaned at a factory. However, according to the guidelines, the rice has to be taken directly from FCI godown to the school or village concerned. Later it was found that the rice was being siphoned off by a UP-based NGO, in connivance with the government officials. In November 2006, the

residents of Pembong village under the Mim tea estate (around 30 km from Darjeeling), accused a group of teachers of embezzling midday meals. In a written complaint, the residents claimed that students at the primary school had not got midday meal for the past 18 months.

In December 2006, The Times of India reported a scam involving government schools that siphon off foodgrains under the midday meal scheme by faking attendance. The modus operandi of the schools was simple — the attendance register would exaggerate the number of students enrolled in the class. The additional students would not exist—they were "enrolled" to get additional foodgrains which were pocketed by the school staff. The scam was exposed, when an assistant teacher at a government model primary school acted as a whistleblower. She informed the Lok Ayukta, who conducted a probe and indicted four persons for misappropriation. The whistleblower was harassed by the school staff and transferred, where she again found the same modus operandi being used to siphon off the foodgrains. She again complained to the Lok Ayukta, who issued notice to the school.

Serious concerns were raised after the death of 23 children in Bihar on 16 July 2013 after eating pesticide contaminated mid day meal served in Dharma Sati village in Saran District on . The scheme which costs the national exchequer a huge amount of money every year (the budgetary provisions for the year 2013-14 was around Rs 132,150,000,000 for the country) is marred with corrupt practices and mismanagement while risking the lives of children. On 31 July 2013, around 55 students of a government middle school complained of uneasiness after consuming the midday meal provided by an NGO at Kalyuga village in Jamui district and in Arwal district, 95 students of the Chamandi primary school were taken ill after the meal. While the Bihar MDM tragedy has again highlighted the issue of accountability of officials responsible for the mismanagement of the scheme, in many parts of the country, the MDM scheme still remains a major attraction of children from poorer sections of the country as a reward for attending schools.

CRITICISM :

While the scheme mandates to provide for a hot cooked meal to ensure an energy content of 450 calories and 12 grams of proteins for children studying in primary classes and 700 calories of energy and 20 grams of proteins at the upper primary level, the Ministry of Human Resource Development has confirmed that 95 per cent of meal samples prepared by NGOs in Delhi did not meet nutritional standards in 2010-12 . Vedanta in Odisha has tied up

with the Naandi Foundation to provide mid-day meals to children in Lanjigarh, an area where Vedanta has been accused of plundering mineral resources and locked in a conflict with local tribal organizations. There have been several instances of conflict of interests when NGO's are part of or get assistance from private players. To cite few example - Ekta Shakti Foundation is a society setup by AFP Private Limited (a fast-food company), Jay Gee is the arm of Jay Gee Hospitality, a firm which specializes in catering, Iskcon has tied up with the real estate giant EMMAR to build centralized kitchens. Despite the success of the program, child hunger as a problem persists in India.

According to current statistics, 42.5% of the children under 5 are underweight. This is due to simple reasons such as not using iodized salt. "India is home to the world's largest food insecure population, with more than 500 million people who are hungry" India State Hunger Index (ISHI) said, adding that the country's poor performance is driven by its high levels of child under-nutrition and poor calorie count. "Their rate of child malnutrition is higher than most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa" it noted. A report released as part of the 2009 Global Hunger Index ranks India at 65 out of 84 countries. The 2008 report says that India has more people suffering hunger – a figure above 200 million – than any other country in the world, it says. The report also says "improving child nutrition is of utmost urgency in most Indian states".

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