

Mid-Day Meals: Looking Ahead

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The Mid-Day Meal Scheme has been quietly feeding more than 10 crore children every day for more than 10 years. Unfortunately, this popular and relatively successful programme makes it to the headlines only when things go wrong – this time following the tragic death of 23 children in Bihar after eating at school. Recent economic research clearly documents the positive impact of the scheme on enrolment, attendance, retention and nutrition. Hopefully, the Bihar tragedy will provide an opportunity to redress some of the long-standing issues in implementation (food quality and accountability) by learning from states such as Tamil Nadu.

The Bihar Tragedy

On 16 July 2013, the number of children in Gandamal school (Saran district, Bihar) was higher than usual as parents had learnt that school textbooks would be distributed that day.¹ The school does not have a building of its own, and in order to comply with the distance norms of the Right to Education Act, it had been running out of a community building nearby. It did not have a kitchen shed to cook meals either; food used to be cooked in a verandah. There was no proper storage facility for the food supplies. Supplies were stored at the teacher's residence and would be brought on a daily basis to school by the cook. When the cook poured the oil into the pan, besides observing "black smoke" she complained to the headmistress of a foul smell, but the teacher did not pay attention. Once the food was cooked, the preparation seemed discoloured and once again the cook and students complained; the teacher was unmoved and reportedly silenced the complaints with the threat of her stick.

Soon after the children ate the food, they began to feel nauseous whereas others began to faint. Initially, the headmistress' husband offered to pay for all medical expenses but as soon as the first child died, the entire family fled the village. Meanwhile, parents began to take their children to the nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC) in Masrakh block, where the only doctor was reluctant to treat the children; the parents then forced the PHC ambulance to take them to the district hospital. Nearly three to four hours were lost before the children received proper medical attention. Ultimately, the children were taken to Patna for treatment. In all, 23 children died in this tragedy. The tragic incident in Bihar has raised questions about the mid-day meal (MDM) scheme, an otherwise popular and successful programme.

For those unfamiliar with the programme, India's MDM scheme is a huge operation that today provides cooked food to more than 12 crore children every day. It is one of the more "successful" (in terms of regularity and scale) food security programmes initiated by the Government of India.² The programme has been studied extensively for its effects on education and nutrition. The studies show that it has a significant impact on enrolment of children, especially those from disadvantaged groups. Afridi (2011) reports increase in Grade 1 enrolment by 12 percentage points. Jayaraman and Simroth (2011) find even larger positive effects on enrolment in all primary grades, with the largest effect (a 21% increase) for Grade 1 enrolment. It helps retention (postponement of incidents of drop outs) and even regular attendance.

Afridi (2010) found positive nutrition effects among children in Madhya Pradesh – comparing nutrient intake on a school day with a non-school day, she finds that "nutrient intake of programme participants increased substantially by 49% to 100% of the transfers". Deficiency in protein intake is reduced by 100% and iron deficiency by 10%, for a very small cost – "3 cents per child per day". Singh, Park and Dercon (forthcoming) find that the programme had positive effects on nutrition in Andhra Pradesh. Children exposed to droughts early in life and benefiting from the scheme were no worse off than children who had not been exposed to a drought. Finally, children are likely to learn more in school if they have a full stomach. Afridi, Borouah, Somanathan (forthcoming) present some evidence on the effect of MDM on learning outcomes in Delhi.

From the child's point of view, the lure of hot food makes the school environment more child-friendly. Where *anganwadis* do not function regularly, it is not uncommon to see children who are not enrolled also coming to school at the time of the meal. The MDM scheme is popular among parents as well: for poor working mothers, it makes it easier for them to send their child to school. Further, the scheme provides an excellent (underutilised, so

This is an expanded and revised version of an article that was published in *The Times of India*, 21 July 2013. I would like to thank Jean Drèze and Abhijeet Singh for their inputs.

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far) opportunity to impart nutrition education, inculcate hygiene habits (such as washing hands before eating). The programme has been a source of employment for tens of thousands of destitute women. It has provided an opportunity to break the tenacious hold of caste barriers, as children from different communities share a meal, cooked by someone not necessarily of their community. I have witnessed firsthand children from so-called “upper castes” eating at school even though they had been instructed by their parents to abstain.

Tamil Nadu pioneered the scheme in the 1960s, based on which a central scheme was launched in 1995. Most states got away by providing “dry rations” (3 kg of wheat or rice per month to take home, conditional upon 80% attendance) in government schools. These states had to introduce cooked food after the Supreme Court’s landmark order on 28 November 2001. The Court order directed the state governments

to implement the Mid-Day Meal Scheme by providing every child in every Government and Government assisted Primary School with a prepared mid-day meal with a minimum content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein each day of school for a minimum of 200 days. Those Governments providing dry rations instead of cooked meals must within three months [February 28, 2002] start providing cooked meals in all Govt and Govt aided Primary Schools in all half the Districts of the State (in order of poverty) and must within a further period of three months [May 28 2002] extend the provision of cooked meals to the remaining parts of the State.

Tamil Nadu has continued to set an example in terms of nutrition, infrastructure, administration, monitoring and so on (see Table 1). While not many states are able to match Tamil Nadu (where children now get an egg everyday), there has been steady progress across the country (e.g. even poor states like Odisha provide eggs twice a week).

Areas of Concern: Old and New

The tragedy in Bihar has brought into the limelight many concerns that have been raised in the past: lack of proper infrastructure and staff, nutritive quality of the food, accountability mechanisms, caste issues and so on. In many states, the response of the state governments to these

concerns has been largely positive (even though progress has been too slow).

The contrast between Bihar, where the tragedy occurred, and Rajasthan is particularly telling. Neither of these states provided cooked food until the Supreme Court’s order. In Rajasthan, when schools reopened in July 2002, neither state had kitchens, handpumps, utensils, cooks or helpers. Teachers and students took on the task of fetching water, firewood and cooking the meal. The “cooked meal” comprised just boiled wheat with salt or sugar (or, “ghooghri”). The MDM received a lot of bad press then, but Rajasthan has come a long way since then (see the Table). Cooks and helpers have been appointed, handpumps and kitchen sheds are available, teachers mostly only supervise. Starting with ghooghri, now a weekly menu which includes fruit (a banana or guava) twice a week is in place.

Table 1: Mid-Day Meal Scheme – Bihar and Rajasthan in Comparison with Tamil Nadu

	Bihar	Rajasthan	Tamil Nadu
Children (%) who reported “never” consuming at home			
Fruits	43	19	25
Milk	56	19	31
Proportion (%) who said quality of meal was “good”			
Children	6	80	85
Parents	3	81	65
Average hours spent per day supervising and serving	2.23	0.95	0
Proportion (%) of schools with			
Drinking water facility	93	95	100
Kitchen shed	14	37	95

Source: Government of India (2010), Tables 3.7-3.9, 5.2-5.3. The reference period for the study is 2006-7 and National University of Education Planning and Administration (2013).

Bihar, on the other hand, was the last state to comply with the Court order on 1 January 2005 – a full three years after the Court’s deadline. As in Gandaman school, where the tragedy occurred, school buildings, kitchen sheds, utensils for storage remain a concern in many parts of the state. A Planning Commission report (GOI 2010) for 2006-07 reported that the only states that have “low” levels of satisfaction were Jharkhand, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh.

In fact, the trajectory of the MDM in most states resembles that of Rajasthan rather than Bihar. To some extent, even in Bihar, there is some good news: meals are provided regularly, the MDM functions better than most other food security

schemes and there has been slow improvement over time. Given the burden of its past, it will take time to catch up.

Another area of concern is the role of the media. Soon after the news of the Bihar tragedy hit the headlines, news reports on the poor quality of food served began coming in from many parts of the country (Goa, Maharashtra, Odisha and even Tamil Nadu made it to the headlines). None of these cases turned out to be serious. It appears that children were taken directly to hospital in Tamil Nadu as a precaution once they complained of feeling uneasy.

While none of these cases were serious, in many parts of the country the poor quality of the MDM, poor infrastructure and hygiene are issues that have been highlighted repeatedly by researchers and activist groups for some time. It raises the question as to why this was not considered “newsworthy” (especially for the English and electronic media), until children died in the Bihar incident. It suggests that the media is falling short on its “watchdog” role. Moreover, the media also has the role of spreading information to generate informed debate, but if the media reports on these issues only at times of such disasters, readers and viewers are presented a biased picture of the programme. (The imbalance in reporting was corrected, partially at least, in subsequent reports.)

Meanwhile, as budgetary allocations to the programme have risen – the Union Budget allocated Rs 13,800 crore in 2013-14 – private entities have begun to eye the MDM “market”. In 2008, a “Biscuit Manufacturers Association” wrote to Members of Parliament (MPs) trashing the scheme and urging them to replace it with fortified biscuits (Drèze and Khera 2008). Many MPs forwarded this proposal to the concerned ministry. Thankfully, the proposal was shot down (can one imagine eating biscuits everyday instead of a hot meal?).³ Further, putting in place accountability mechanisms is more difficult as many contractors are persons with political clout. The late Ponty Chadha had cornered the entire supply of food to anganwadis in Uttar Pradesh (UP). His contract remained untouched even with a change of

government in UP and reports of supply of poor quality food. Similar issues have arisen in Delhi – with centralised kitchens supplying meals, parents, children, even teachers do not really know where to complain. Samples regularly fail quality tests, but not much has happened to remedy this. These examples point to the general danger of invasion of private interests into such programmes. Contractors will only come for profit, and will not hesitate to cut corners.

There are at least four important lessons from this tragedy: one, administrative and monitoring systems need to be reorganised and improved in line with what is seen in the leading states. Action needs to be taken in a timely manner against all those responsible for the children's deaths, in order to ensure that such incidents do not happen again. Two, there is a need to correct the imbalance in media coverage of rural issues in general, and social security programmes (such as the MDM scheme) in particular. Three, the government must guard against the creation of vested interests in these programmes in the name of "public-private partnerships" or bogus "self-help groups" which often

come with a profit-at-any-cost motive. Four, the laggard states must learn from the many examples (Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu to name a few) and improve the nutritive content of the food provided and use this as an opportunity to catch up with others. Hopefully, the tragic incident in Bihar will also pave the way to end the daily heartbreak of children being served food with poor nutrition in some states. At Rs 5 per child daily, the MDM is perhaps the best investment states can make in their future.

NOTES

- 1 This section draws on a fact-finding report prepared by the Right to Food Campaign Bihar (2013).
- 2 See Drèze and Goyal (2003), Drèze and Kingdon (1999), Khera (2006) for early evidence of the positive effects of the MDM.
- 3 Suggestions along these lines already come in – see Pental (2013). Such suggestions fail to recognise that benefits such as retention, attendance, socialisation, nutrition education may not be as effective when ready to eat food is provided.

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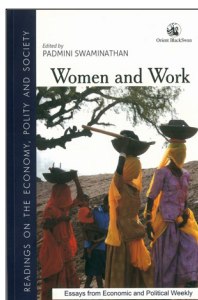
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Women and Work

Edited by

PADMINI SWAMINATHAN



The notion of 'work and employment' for women is complex. In India, fewer women participate in employment compared to men. While economic factors determine men's participation in employment, women's participation depends on diverse reasons and is often rooted in a complex interplay of economic, cultural, social and personal factors.

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Pp xii + 394

ISBN 978-81-250-4777-3

2012

Rs 645

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