

Special Report

School Lunch Program in India: background, objectives and components

Alka Mohan Chutani RD PhD

All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, India

The School Lunch Program in India (SLP) is the largest food and nutrition assistance program feeding millions of children every day. This paper provides a review of the background information on the SLP in India earlier known as national program for nutrition support to primary education (NP-NSPE) and later as mid day meal scheme, including historical trends and objectives and components/characteristics of the scheme. It also addresses steps being taken to meet challenges being faced by the administrators of the program in monitoring and evaluation of the program. This program was initially started in 1960 in few states to overcome the complex problems malnutrition and illiteracy. Mid Day Meal Scheme is the popular name for school meal program. In 2001, as per the supreme court orders, it became mandatory to give a mid day meal to all primary and later extended to upper primary school children studying in the government and government aided schools. This scheme benefitted 140 million children in government assisted schools across India in 2008, strengthening child nutrition and literacy. In a country with a large percent of illiterate population with a high percent of children unable to read or write; governmental and non-governmental organizations have reported that mid day meal scheme has consistently increased enrollment in schools in India. One of the main goals of school lunch program is to promote the health and well-being of the Nation's children.

Key Words: Mid Day Meal Scheme, malnutrition, education, India, literacy

INTRODUCTION

In India the government-run schools provide free education. Still it has been observed that a large percentage of children do not attend schools, especially from the poor section of society as they remain unconvinced about the value of education. The mid day meal program in schools provided nutrition to children and has been an additional incentive to families belonging to low socio economic society to send children to school.

Background

Mid Day Meal involved in providing free lunch to school going children on all school days. Mid Day Meal Program was introduced for disadvantaged children in Madras Municipal Corporation in 1925. The free school lunch program in southern state of India (Tamil Nadu) introduced by K. Kamaraj in 1960s and expanded by M. G. Ramachandran in 1982.¹

National Program for Nutrition Support to Primary Education¹

The mid day meal scheme became quite successful and popular. Observing this, the then Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao in 1995 suggested and implemented the scheme all over the country and named it as "National Programme for Nutrition Support to Primary Education" (NP-NSPE). This program provided free food grains to school children. This system was called provision of 'dry rations' and was started on 15th August 1995 as a Central Government Sponsored Scheme. It started in some parts

of the country and was later extended all over the country in 1997-98 & 2002 for children studying in classes' I-V. Under the scheme each child per school day was provided with *free supply of 100 grams food grains*. In addition a subsidy for transportation of food grains was provided to the school.

Mid Day Meal Scheme

In 2001 Supreme Court of India directed all state governments to provide cooked meals instead of 'dry rations'. The Supreme Court gave two crucial Court orders on mid-day meals in 2001 and 2004, respectively.² They were considered as mandatory

- The first order - "The State Governments/Union Territories to implement the Mid Day Meal Scheme by providing every child in every Government and Government assisted Primary Schools (1-V) with a prepared mid day meal with a minimum nutritive content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein each day of school for a minimum of 200 days".¹
- The second order- "when it is possible to extend the scheme up to school children of 10th Standard"¹ and

Corresponding Author: Dr Alka Mohan Chutani, CN Centre, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Ansari Nagar, New Delhi-110029, India.

Tel: 91-11-26593624; Fax: 91-11-26588663

Email: alkamohan@yahoo.com

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revised the nutrient content of the mid day meal. Central finance assistance for cooking, transport, management, monitoring, evaluation and provision of cooked mid day meal during summer vacation in drought affected areas was provided.

This direction converted the mid-day meal scheme into a legal entitlement. The direction and further follow-up by the Supreme Court has been a major instrument in universalizing the scheme. The implementation of the above orders has been a long process but most of the state governments are following it now. More emphasis is needed on the quality, content of the mid day meal and health safeguards.

In July 2006, further revision of cooking cost assistance of the scheme took place along with specific contribution by the local State Region. 140 million children were covered under the Mid Day Meal Scheme in 2006-2007. It is one of the largest school lunch programs in the world with an enhanced budget allocation from Rs 3010 crore to Rs 4813 crore in 2006-2007.¹

In 2007-08, the Scheme was extended to cover children studying in Upper Primary Classes in the Educationally Backwards areas.

OBJECTIVES

Following are the objectives of the Mid Day Meal scheme in India:^{1,4,5}

- a) To improve nutritional status of children and protecting children from classroom hunger. Thus to address the problem of malnutrition
- b) To increase school enrolment and promote regular school attendance; especially to encourage children belonging to disadvantaged sections to attend school regularly.
- c) To provide nutritional support to children of primary classes in drought affected areas during summer vacation.
- d) To improved socialization among children belonging to all castes thus helping to undermine caste prejudices by teaching children to sit together and share a common meal. To reduce the gender gap in school participation. Thus school lunch program acts as a strong social equalizer.
- e) To provide social empowerment through provision of employment to women and liberate working women from the task of having to feed children at home during the day.
- f) Act as a source of economic support for the poorer sections of society.
- g) To impart nutrition education to children.

Reports have shown increasing attendance in schools due to the incentive of a meal, even if they are not convinced about the value of education, especially in poorer section of the community.

Reports have also indicated that the School lunch program have helped in bridging gender gaps, with more parents now sending their daughters also to school.³

This program has contributed in the improvement in the nutritional status of children; encouraging poor children, to attend school more regularly and helping them concentrate on classroom activities.

Mid-day meals also contribute right to food and also to the right to education.

COMPONENTS

Mid Day Meal scheme consisted of following components:^{1,4,5}

- Supply of free food grains (wheat/rice) at 100 grams per child per School Day from the nearest Food Corporation of India for cooking the meal.
- Reimbursement of the transportation cost incurred up to a limit in different states and union territories.
- Providing cooking cost assistance with specific minimum contribution by State Governments/Union Territory administration.
- Assistance for cooked Mid Day Meal during summer vacations to school children in "drought-affected" areas declared by State Governments.
- To provide assistance for construction of kitchen-cum-store in a phased manner.
- To provide assistance in a phased manner for replacement of kitchen devices (cooking devices, containers for storage, utensils for cooking and serving) at an average cost per school.
- Provision of assistance for Management, Monitoring and Evaluation (MME) at a specific rate.

The following table provides the nutrient content of the Mid Day Meal.

Table 1. Nutrient content of Mid Day Meal as per the schemes for children studying in primary and upper primary classes.¹

| Nutrient | For primary classes | | For upper primary classes |
|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| | Mid Day Meal, 2004 norm | Mid Day Meal, 2006 revised norm | Mid Day Meal, 2004 norm |
| Calories (Kcal) | 300 | 450 | 700 |
| Protein (gm) | 8-12 | 12 | 20 |

The menu of the Mid Day Meal was developed keeping in mind the requirements of the children and local food habits. The meal included cereal (rice and chapattis), pulses, vegetables and sometimes fruit, depending on local state budgets. The lunch menu varied among states and regions of this vast country, adapting to the local cuisine and seasonal produce. In the northern parts of India, roti (flatbread of wheat or corn) are commonly served. In the south, rice is the staple of every free lunch.

It was felt that for the program to be effective, it was necessary to have a monitoring mechanism. Thus a comprehensive and elaborate mechanism for monitoring and supervision of the Mid Day Meal Scheme had been prescribed by the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development. It included:

- Local level monitoring with local representatives as well as mothers' committees to daily monitor the (i) wholesomeness and regularity; (ii) cleanliness in cooking and serving; (iii) timeliness in procurement of ingredients, fuel, etc.; (iv) implementation of varied

menu; (v) social and gender equity of the mid day meal served to children.

- Display of Information (under Right to Information Act) to ensure transparency and accountability with regards to – Quality and quantity of food grains and other ingredients utilized, daily menu, total number of children provided with mid day meal and duty pattern of community members involved with the program.
- Regular inspections by State Government Officers belonging to different departments.
- Periodic information by the State Government/Union Territory to the Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India with regards to information on total coverage of children, institutions and utilization of the central assistance,
- To develop easily accessible Public grievance redressal by the States and Union Territories.

CONCLUSION

The experience so far has shown that Mid Day Meals have contributed to the wellbeing and future of Indian Children.

School lunch Program in India has improved the school enrollment, increased attendance and raised nutrition levels among the children.⁶ Around 140 million children benefitted from the Mid Day Meal scheme.

Studies from a state have shown that enrollment in primary schools rose by 35% from 1984-85 to 2002-03, and dropout rates in middle school dipping from 24% in 1984-85 to 13.85% in 2002-03.

Research findings have suggested that the school lunch program like the mid day meal scheme help in re-

ducing food insecurity and therefore would help in preventing poverty cycle where poor children go hungry, do not attend school/college and thus remain illiterate and thus fail to rise above their socioeconomic status and in turn have family where children having similar cycle.

The Mid Day Meal scheme in schools is an important step towards the right to food and right to education.

AUTHOR DISCLOSURES

Alka Mohan Chutani, no conflicts of interest

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印度的學校午餐系統：背景、目標及構成要素

印度學校午餐系統(SLP)是最大的食品營養協助系統，每天供給數以千萬的學童。此篇文章提供印度 SLP 的背景資訊回顧，涵蓋早期已知的如全國性對小學的營養支持(NP-NSPE)計畫，及後來的午餐供食計畫，包含這個系統的歷史演進、目標和構成要素/特性。也討論行政人員在監測及評估此系統時所遭遇的挑戰及採取的決策。學校午餐系統始於 1960 年代，最初在少數幾個州實施，以克服營養不良及未受教育的複雜問題。午餐供食計畫是學餐系統的通俗名稱。在 2001 年，由最高法院下令，強制性供應午餐給所有公立及政府資助的小學之學童，後期更擴大到初級中學的學生。這個計畫在 2008 年受惠 1 億 4 千萬學童，遍及全印度的政府扶助之學校，增強兒童的營養及識字率。在印度這個國家有高比例的文盲人口及高比例的兒童無法讀或寫；政府與非政府組織都報告午餐供食計畫穩定地增加就學率。學校午餐系統主要的目標之一為促進全國兒童的健康及福祉。

關鍵字：午餐供食計畫、營養不良、教育、印度、識字