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Enhance mid-day meal programme

Caste bias, corruption and poor quality

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The midday meal scheme, Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN), is a significant initiative by state and Union governments to provide nutritious food to schoolchildren, particularly from marginalised and backward communities. Although the policy was initially introduced by states like Puducherry even before Independence, it gained widespread popularity and implementation across the country after the Supreme Court of India advocated the policy in 2002. This food support programme has led to increased enrolment, attendance, and academic performance among students. However, the scheme faces several challenges, including poor quality of food, hygiene and sanitation issues, corruption, incidents of worms in food, food poisoning, wastage, and caste-based discrimination.

After its national launch, the programme evolved into the largest school-feeding initiative globally. During a drought in Karnataka, the state government extended the scheme through the two-month vacation, benefiting an estimated 55 lakh students. The midday meal has been linked to improved school attendance and retention, particularly among girls, who also showed better height-to-age ratios compared to those not benefiting from the programme.

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Despite its obvious advantages and successes, both state and Union governments have failed to effectively monitor and implement the scheme. Several incidents highlight this lack of commitment and institutional support. Recently, an image of

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cooked. Such poor-quality food also leads to food poisoning and the ill health of the students.

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consuming meals under the scheme. Cases of improper meals under this scheme have been the norm for a while now.

When the Karnataka government decided to increase the weekly egg count for children under the scheme, it was widely appreciated, but after a viral video of two government workers snatching the egg away from children after filming them receiving the eggs surfaced, there have been concerns expressed by many about the proper implementation of the midday meal scheme in the country.

The issue of discrimination based on caste is also a major challenge for the midday meal programme. In several states, including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh, caste-based discrimination practices are reported. These include marking dining plates with students' caste initials and identities, segregating students based on caste during meals, and removing Dalit chefs from kitchens and cooking duties. Dalit children aren't allowed to touch the food, reinforcing untouchability and the notion of impurity.

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Even though midday meal schemes benefit a large number of children, India still has one of the highest percentages of children going without food for an entire day. UNICEF's 'Child Food Poverty' metric highlights the food crisis faced by children globally, country-wise. According to the metric, 40% of Indian children under the age of five do not receive a proper diet with adequate nutrition. Children who don't have access to a proper nutrition diet at young ages end up in poverty-driven adulthood. As a nation with one of the largest young populations, India must address these issues to ensure that its

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efficient execution. They are currently plagued by a lack of awareness among the people and

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discrimination in schools through strict legal measures.

In response to these challenges, some districts, like Bettiah in Bihar and Thane in Maharashtra, have employed women—primarily mothers—as chefs, yielding positive results in the implementation of midday meal programmes. This approach could be experimented with and replicated across the country.

Measures such as community monitoring and the publication of data and menus could help reduce corruption and mismanagement of resources in the midday meal programmes. Corruption remains a major problem in the midday meal programme across the country. A systematic review of the quality and quantity of food products and the provision of necessities like cooking gas should be done rigorously enforced by the government.

(Fardin Jahangeer is a Research Scholar, and Karamala Areesh Kumar is Head, Department of International Relations, Peace, and Public Policy, St Joseph's University, Bengaluru)

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In Perspective

Mid-Day Meal

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