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Mid-Day Meals Scheme in Hilly Areas: Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

In the year 1956 the state of Tamil Nadu introduced the Mid-Day meals scheme for the first time in the country. Today almost all states are following different methods of menu's and patterns. The government is trying to solve the problems of malnutrition and other side to concentrate as school education from 1st standard to 10th standard. In the state one step forward to introduce different food menu and importantly to launched daily eggs for children. Aim of this case study to find out the utilisation of mid-day meals programme among school children based on filed visit in children, teacher, organiser, cook, parents and public and also what are problems are faced by school children in hilly, rural and urban areas. Most of the studies concluded that the scheme is working satisfactorily (urban, coastal areas) in Tamil Nadu and even recommend that other states should follow the Tamil Nadu Mid-Day meals scheme. The working of the Mid-Day Meals Scheme in hilly, rural areas was not assessed till now and needs to be examined. This study was conducted at Theni district, Tamil Nadu. This case study concludes that Mid-Day Meals Scheme in Tamil Nadu has positive points and negative points. The children faced many problems and others opinions are not satisfied. However, with some more Commitment, Vision and Realism the Scheme can be made more effective to fulfil the dreams of K. Kamaraj and M.G. Ramachandran. In the case study strongly suggested alarming findings about the future development of Mid-Day Meals programme.

Keywords: MDM, ICDS, children, cost, leakages, hilly areas

Introduction

Mid-Day Meals Scheme in Tamil Nadu has a long history. It was started by the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu late K Kamaraj in early 1956. It was confined to Primary Government Schools covering about 2 million children. Quality of food was good and the food was cooked in very hygienic environment. The quality of food was so good that even the Teachers used to take the meals. Mr. K. Kamaraj strongly believed that it is of no use to teach children who come to the school with empty stomach. It was a strategy to improve the literacy rate and to reduce hunger among children.

On 1st July 1982, at the initiative of the then Chief Minister late M. G. Ramachandran, this Scheme was replaced by a new Scheme called 'Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme', which covered 5.6 million children in about 32 thousand Elementary Schools and about 20 thousand Child Welfare Centres. Later, (i.e. on 15thSeptember1982) the Scheme was universalised by extending to the urban schools. In 1992, then (and also present) Chief Minister, J. Jayalalitha renamed the Scheme as 'Puratchi Thalaivar MGR'S Nutritious Noon Meal Programme', which is being used even now.

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The Government support policy to the poor children in Tamil Nadu is very comprehensive. Besides providing free meals with a variety (rice, daily eggs, weekly once potatoes), it provides free notebooks, four sets of uniforms, bicycles, school bags, bus passes to students from both short and long distances, mathematical (geometric) box, pencils & colour pencils, atlas (map), footwear, scholarship for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe children all Primary, Upper Primary and Higher Secondary Government and Government-aided Schools. (Jean & Aparajita, 2003) in this study suggests that, 'with informal visits to nine primary schools in rural Tamil Nadu, it's covered by Kancheepuram, Nagapattinam and Dharmapuri districts. Overall results suggest it's to more enjoy all-round support from the village community.

Even teacher's side more positive aspects of school lunches and mid-day meals are conductive to improved school education. Even Unit costs of mid-day meals in Tamil Nadu are not much high. There is much scope for learning from Tamil Nadu's achievements at reasonable cost. And finally suggested no-one recalled any case of food poisoning since mid-day meals started more than 20years ago. (Irudaya & Jayakumar, 1992) in this study find out the primary aim of the objective was to reduce drop-out rate at the primary level, promote universal education and improve the nutritional status of children. Methodology part covered by secondary data collected from various government reports. In analysis part these studies suggest that (CMNNMP) MDM has impact of the primary education in terms of enrolment, in attendance and drop-out on the basis from Nagercoil education district which come under the district of Kanyakumari. (Jitendra, 2013) in this article suggest that 92% schools have good kitchen infrastructure and started upgrading and modernising, it's by providing cooking gas facilities. Complaint boxes have been installed in every school in Tamil Nadu. (Padmini *et al*., 2004) in this study mainly focused Policy Note on 2002-2003. The main aim of the study is to provide adequate nutrition to economically disadvantaged children to improve the health and nutritional status of children to develop their mental and physical ability and to increase the enrolment in schools and reduce dropouts. This study based on hard data from state government reports. The findings part suggest that, there is no doubt that MDM in largest number of beneficiaries, equally large schools dropout rates in primary schools children have come down. In particular girl children are significantly improvement in all schools. In this study also suggested more effective observation and recommendations. (Thozhamai, 2013) one of the NGOs project suggest that, 24% of ICDS centres are not functioning after lunch hours. In 9% of centres supplementary food is not provided to the children. 11% of centres do not provide any education on health and hygiene. 10% centres does not perform the major function of maintenance in proper records. Finally ICDS status was very low level functioning and problems are high. (Planning Commission, 2010) an evaluation report of the national MDM scheme for a few findings and highlights presented. Tamil Nadu and Kerala working of MDM is better functioning compare to other states. In most of the selected states are suffering from the unavailability and poor functional condition of kitchen and other infrastructure. In most of states teachers spend about one or two hours during an activity and reducing precious teaching time.

Need for the present study

There are many studies on the working of Mid-Day Meals Scheme in Tamil Nadu. Most of these studies conclude that the Scheme is working satisfactorily in Tamil Nadu and even recommend that other states should follow the Tamil Nadu Policy. Most of these studies have been carried out in places either near to Chennai or other Urban Centres or in Coastal Districts. The working of the Mid-Day Meals Scheme in hilly area needs to be examined. Towards this end, the working of the Scheme in Theni District, a hilly area in Tamil Nadu has been taken up. In other important concepts in this state to more concentrate on different food menu and daily eggs to all children from 1st standard to 10th standard. In this case study

find out the utilisation of mid-day meals programme in school level children as per filed visit and what are problems are face by school children in hilly, rural and urban areas.

Theni district

Theni District is also called 'The South Kashmir' and is located in the hills of Western Ghats. It is very famous market place for cardamom, coffee, tea, pepper and silk. It is inhabited by two tribes namely Paliyars and Muthuvars. The total area is 3242.3 Sq.km and density of population is 337 Sq.km as per 2011 Census.

The temperature in the plain areas ranges from 16 to 40.5 degree Celsius but data are not available for uplands. Presently, there are 58 Pre-primary Schools, 518 Primary Schools, 181 Middle Schools, 55 High Schools and 72 Higher Secondary Schools in the District. The total strength of boys and girls in first to fifth standard is 12,746 and 11, 692, respectively. The total number of Noon-Meals Centres is 694 and the total number of beneficiaries is 26,074 children. Under ICDS in 2012, 14,999 beneficiaries were registered in 1053 Anganwadi Centres.

Education is fundamental for economic growth and developments. Providing noon meals and other subsides tend to improve children health and increase school stickiness (tendency to stay longer) of the poor children. These measures to some extent help in reducing poverty and in improving social equity.

Introduction of daily egg

According to, 'India State Hunger Index' of 2008, 17 Major States are affected by child malnutrition and under- nourishment. It points out high levels of health problems among school children (like anaemia, deficiencies of iron, protein and other vitamins) in all the states in India. After the findings of the Report, the Tamil Nadu Government (from 2011 onwards) changed the menu of Mid-Day Meals and introduced daily egg in the menu, Vegetarians were given banana, green gram or black Bengal gram, potato. There is a proposal, perhaps for the first time in the country, to introduce millets in the menu to take additional care of school children, the future pillars of our Nation.

Food cost per child

The Government of Tamil Nadu, no doubt, is running the largest feeding programme in the country. This is the most extensive and more expensive nutritious feeding programme being currently undertaken in the State. Over 42 thousand Feeding Centres manned by 128 thousand persons are functioning across the State to feed about 5 million school-going children (i.e. from first standard to tenth standard) (Noon-Meal Programme Report, 2013).

The food cost per child due to inflation and changes in the menu has been increasing (Table 1). For example, in 2001-02 the cost per egg was only 0.18 paise but now it is Rs.3. Neighbouring states also started providing eggs in their noon-meals programme but only once or twice in a week and so food cost per child is relatively low. But provision of daily egg in Tamil Nadu is imposing heavy financial burden to the State Government while children are experiencing diminishing marginal utility.

Table 1: Food cost per child in noon meals scheme in Tamil Nadu

Food Cost Per Child in Noon Meals Scheme in Tamil Nadu			
Schools	2002-03(1)	2007-08(2)	2012-13(3)
Primary level	2.69	4.01	7.32
Upper Primary level	2.69	4.51	7.70

Sources: (1),2),(3) Department of Social Welfare and Nutritious Meal Programme, Government of Tamil Nadu

Table 2: Food cost per child in MDM scheme in selected states in 2012-13

Food Cost per Child in Mid-Day Meals Scheme							
Schools	Tamil Nadu	Kerala	West Bengal	Odisha	Bihar	Karnataka	Andhra Pradesh
Primary	7.32	4.92	3.33	3.61	3.35	3.11	5.51
Upper Primary	7.70	6.00	4.65	5.00	5.00	4.65	5.55

Sources: MHRD- State wise Mid-Day Meals Division Report 2013-2014

Table 2 shows that the food expenditure on noon-meals programme is higher in Tamil Nadu than in other states. It appears that the State Government is taking measures to improve the health status of children and school education. The benefits of the program need to be examined.

Field visit in theni

The present Case Study covers the schools in hilly areas, village, and municipality. Opinion of four stake-holders namely, (a) Students from 5th to 10th standard, (b) School Teachers, (c) Parents of children and (d) Mid-day Meal staff (Organiser, Cook cum Store Keepers) is gathered. In all, the Study covered 42 schools. The study revealed many interesting findings and some important results are discussed.

Opinion of children

In hilly areas, it sounds strange but true, the children are generally regular to the school but not the teachers. The teachers generally stay at foot hills i.e. in the plane and daily commute by undependable bus service. The number of students benefitted by Noon Meals Scheme is low (out of 40 children, only 20 children are having mid-day meals). A student from 6th standard said "I am not interested to eat daily eggs. My friends are also feeling the same. The food is prepared in unhygienic conditions and is not tasty". Children prefer to have the variety rice, eggs for once or twice in a week and tasty millets food, and if possible biscuits, mixed fruit or juices, cashew nuts, date and dry fruits, etc. Girls informed "Some of our friends are daily absent due to health problems. Nobody pays attention to these issues". High School children complained 'basically food is not tasty in our schools'. In the some village like Kandamanur, Mailladuparai, Vellaimalai, Andipatti and Kurankani (rural, hill areas and aided schools) primary and upper primary schools children said that 'one egg is divided into two parts and is given to two children'. This practice is in existence since long time. One child was feeding a part of food given under Mid-Day Meals to an animal. When asked for the reason, he replied "No one can digest this food which has no taste and not good, Sambar is like hot water. The egg is half boiled, sometimes rotten. Due to poverty, I am forced to have this food. I cannot eat fully. I am giving leftover food to the animal. If I do not take the food and egg daily then 'Ayaas' may sell the eggs to the shops. I am preventing it and have the satisfaction of feeding the unfortunate animal".

Opinion of teachers

In hilly areas, in some villages like Kurakani, Agamalai, Uradi, Uthukadu, Vellaimalai, Kadamalaikundu and Varusanadu due to lack of kitchen and other facilities in the Schools, the Noon-Meals is prepared in Anganwadi Centres and is transported to the Schools. Head Masters of some Primary School and Upper Primary School told "kitchen building is very old and expecting a new one with proper gas facilities and store room. We are adjusting with Anganwadi Centres for time being".

Opinion of Teachers about MDM Scheme was collected from different types of schools. One of the teachers, who wanted her name to be kept confidential, shared her experience. She informed "we have 185 students (boys and girls) in upper primary schools. The food is not prepared in clean manner and it leads to lot of health problems to children which, in turn, affects their studies. Only 30 to 40 children are taking

mid-day meals and the rest are bringing their lunch from their home. This issue was brought to the notice of headmasters several times and we also fought with mid-day meals organisers and cooks. We decided to go on strike along with children for a day (in the month of August 2012) without food. Still there is no response from anybody. We also do not know where to go and whom to inform to solve these issues". To make the programme more effective and useful the Teachers suggested that eggs should be given on alternative days like one day to boys and next day to girls or one day to the children of 6th Standard and next day to the children of 7th Standard. The Government provided cooking gas facilities to cook mid-day meals but it is not used by the cooks. Instead of gas cylinders they are using fire wood. Its smoke suffocates the children and also affects their studies. Some High School Teachers (Bodinayakanur, Periyakulam, Cumbum, Theni, Varusanadu, Andipatti in hilly areas and Devaram in the town areas) reported that 9th and 10th boys and girls are not eating mid-day meals because they do not want to appear to be Poor among their friends, a "false social status".

Opinion of parents

It appears to be strange but true. Very few parents are permitting their children to have mid-day meals in school because they opine that the food is not prepared in hygienic environment and having egg daily, up sets the stomach and leads to other health problems. So the parents advise the children not to take anything from the school.

Public opinion

Opinion of people from different walks of life was also gathered. The Government Servants expressed that MDMP was good and food was hygienically prepared during Mr. K. Kamaraj period. But now there are many leakages in the Noon Meals Scheme. In spite of high fees, they prefer private schools only for the better quality of education. Even common persons like auto-derivers, daily wage-earners, vegetable-sellers, small traders etc, prefer private schools. They say "we are not educated, at least let our children be educated and we want to improve our status in the society. In private schools, the teachers are teaching not only in Tamil but also in English (and Hindi for children belonging to other states) and they are giving more attention towards children. The performance of Private Schools is better than the Government Schools".

Opinion of organisers, cooks and helpers

The educational qualification of Mid-Day Meal Organiser is either SSLC or HSC and while that of the Cook and Helper is generally below 8th standard level. Most of the Cooks and Helpers are ladies. The Organisers blame the Cooks and Helpers for the poor quality of food, and the Cooks and Helpers, in turn, blame the Organisers. In this conflict, the children are made to suffer.

Status of anganwadi centres

A visit to some of the Anganwadi Centres in Bondinayakanur, Cumbum, Theni (rural and urban), Periyakulam, Andipatti and Varusanadu during the month of June 2014 revealed unsatisfactory functioning of these Centres. Some of the buildings are very old and only few (15 to 20) children attend the Aganwadi Centre (Bodinayakanur, Periyakulam and Andipatti areas). In some places, new buildings are constructed but there are no children (Munthal, Kurangani, Agmalai, Selamalai, Lakshipuram, T. kallipatti, Chinnamanur, and Devaram). For most of the time the rooms are closed and used for public functions. In few Anganwadi Centres only Teacher and Helper were present. They complained that parents are not willing to send their children to Anganwadi Centre and prefer to take them to their work place.

Leakages

It appears that the Organisers misuse the food items and the workers sell eggs to their relatives at cheap rate. In the Government-aided schools teachers also misuse eggs and other food items. Every school in Tamil Nadu has a Noon-Meal Organiser, a Cook and a Helper. Their salaries are good and enjoy other benefits. These employees are under the control of the Officials at district-level, block-level, and Municipal and Panchayat levels and accountable to them only but school head masters/mistress has no control over them. This is one of the important reasons for leakages in the Scheme. It appears that only 50% of students are participating in the Scheme by taking Mid-day Meals. Further, about 30% of children do not relish the food and leave a part of food. Thus, only 20% of children are fully depending on the Mid-Day Meals Scheme as they get insufficient food at home.

The way ahead

Success of a welfare scheme largely depends on the commitment of the Leader and the implementing agency. Generally, a welfare scheme happens to be brain–child of a Leader and his fortunes depend on the outcome the scheme. Obviously, he will have strong commitment in its implementation and administrative machinery will be geared to implement the scheme. His successors may not evince same interest in the scheme. Their apprehension is that credit for the success of the scheme will go to the leader who started the scheme and will not benefit them much and sometime it may go against their interest (especially, when there is a change in political party in power).

Besides commitment, the Leader should be a visionary, realistic and feel the pulse of the people. In this context it is not out of place to mention briefly about Rs. 2 per KG rice scheme launched by N. T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh during early 1980s. He concentrated on ‘What people want” i.e. rice, which is a staple food in the state. He, keeping in mind the administrative capacity, did not bother to distribute large number of items through PDS. The fact that he was very realistic is reflected in the fixation of ration price of rice, a price relatively lower than open market price. The open market price was Rs3 to 4 per kg and he fixed ration price at Rs 2 per kg. The people were happy with that price. Even at that time nobody demanded rice to be distributed at Rs. 1 per KG.

With the passage of time the commitment of succeeding Leaders, for various reasons, is likely to come down. Further, administrative machinery is entrusted with the task of implementation of other schemes. The general opinion of different stake-holders is that earlier Mid- Day Meals Scheme was serving the intended Objectives. However, with passage of time for various reasons, (at least in hilly areas) different types of leakages have crept into the Scheme.

Effective MDM scheme

Based on the opinion expressed by different stake-holders few suggestions have been made to make Mid-Day Meals Scheme more effective.

The Scheme should not have top-down approach. The menu in the Mid-Day Meals should be changed only when there is a demand from children for a change and not at whims and fancies of some individuals, which may be prompted by various considerations. Even when Nutritional Experts want to change the menu, initially it must be implemented in few pockets fallowed by feed-back from the children. Only when there is a good feed-back from the children, the menu may be changed.

Provision of daily egg has become controversial. As a compromise it may be provided on alternative days.

Mid-Day Meals should not be compulsory but be made optional. At the time of admission, the opinion of children should be elicited. This will go a long way in plugging the leakages and in reducing the wastage by

not serving the food to the disinterested children. Further, it will reduce the burden to the State Exchequer.

To reduce the leakages and for the effective implementation of the scheme, the MDM Organiser, Cook and Helper must be made accountable to the School Staff/Head Masters.

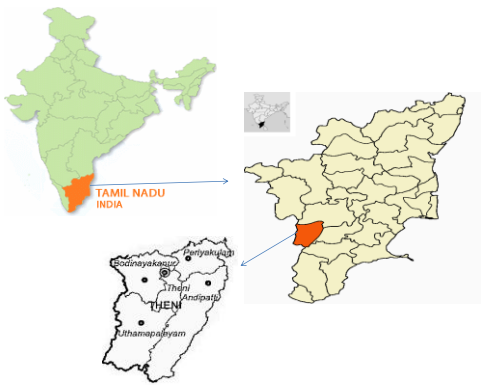
Complaint and Suggestion Box must compulsorily be placed in all the schools.
To make the Scheme children–friendly, a Toll-Free number must be introduced to report any problem in mid-day meals and any related problems.

Biometric Attendance System should be introduced to control the unauthorised absenteeism of the teachers Regular Social Audit, it is hoped, will make the Scheme more effective.

Conclusion

In short, the Mid-Day Meals Scheme in Tamil Nadu has some positive points and some negative points. However, with some more Commitment, Vision and realism the scheme can be made more effective to fulfil the dreams of Mr. Kamaraj and Mr. M.G. Ramachandran**.**

Study area of Theni district in Tamil Nadu, India



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