

## **Mid-day Meals: Beyond Ghoogri**

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In a landmark order dated 28 November 2001, the Supreme Court directed all state governments to introduce cooked mid-day meals in primary schools within six months. Rajasthan deserves credit for being the first state to implement the order. Today, cooked lunches have become a familiar part of the daily school routine across the state. However, troubling questions have been raised about the success of the scheme. For instance, it is often argued that mid-day meals disrupt classroom teaching and cause food poisoning.

A recent survey, initiated by the Centre for Equity Studies (New Delhi), attempted to scrutinise the achievements and failures of the mid-day meal programme in Rajasthan. The survey was conducted in 27 randomly-selected schools of three sample districts: Banswara, Churu and Tonk. The results indicate that mid-day meals have made a promising start in Rajasthan. Indeed, the scheme is very popular: 94 per cent of the sample parents wanted it to continue. However, the survey also shows that quality issues need urgent attention if the programme is to realise its full potential.

On the positive side, mid-day meals were in place in all the sample schools and all parents confirmed that the meal was being served regularly. The most impressive achievement of mid-day meals is that they have led to a large increase in school attendance, especially among girls. In the sample schools, enrolment of girls in Class 1 rose by 29 per cent after the introduction of mid-day meals. Official data also indicate a large increase (about 17 per cent) in female enrolment between 2001-2 and 2002-3 in Rajasthan as a whole.

There is also much informal evidence that daily pupil attendance has improved after the introduction of mid-day meals. For instance, parents report that it has become much easier to send their children to school in the morning, as they look forward to eating *ghoogri* with other children at noon. Similarly, teachers report that afternoon attendance has improved. Earlier, children used to go home for lunch, and many did not come back. Today, children stay on the school premises during the lunch break and classes resume smoothly after that.

Another achievement of mid-day meals is the elimination of classroom hunger. A large proportion of Indian children go to school on an empty stomach in the morning. In the absence of a mid-day meal, they become hungry after a few hours and lose interest in

studying, or even go home. Today, this problem has been largely resolved. In areas of endemic hunger, such as some tribal areas of southern Rajasthan, the school meal also makes an important contribution to food security in general, by ensuring that children get at least one square meal a day.

Finally, mid-day meals make an important contribution to social equality, by teaching children to sit together and share a meal irrespective of class, caste and gender. The survey did not find any evidence of open social discrimination in the context of mid-day meals. In one respect, however, mid-day meals perpetuate traditional caste prejudices: very few Dalit cooks have been appointed. Rural Rajasthan is a conservative society and there seems to be much reluctance to accept Dalit cooks. In Karnataka, by contrast, half of the cooks are Dalits.

Turning to other limitations of the mid-day meal programme in Rajasthan, many of them derive from the fact that the expenditure levels are too low. The Government of Rajasthan spends only 50 paise per child per day on recurrent costs, compared with one rupee per child per day in Karnataka. Because of inadequate resources, basic facilities are sorely lacking. For instance, very few schools in Rajasthan have a cooking shed. As a result, the cooking process often disrupts teaching activities, and hygiene levels are inadequate. Lack of money is also the main reason why most schools in Rajasthan continue to serve *ghoogri* day after day, instead of varying the menu. An important opportunity has been missed here to enhance children's nutrition by providing a more substantial diet.

In short, much needs to be done to improve the mid-day meal programme. Indeed, improved mid-day meals could have a major impact on school attendance, child nutrition, and social equity. Priorities for action include higher financial allocations, upgrading the infrastructure, and varying the menu. Last but not least, clear guidelines regarding the appointment of Dalit cooks need to be issued and enforced.