



ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME ON ENROLLMENT, ATTENDANCE, AND RETENTION IN INDIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) is a significant initiative of the Government of India aimed at improving child nutrition and enhancing participation in primary education. This study examines the impact of the scheme on enrollment, attendance, and retention in primary schools. Using secondary data from sources such as DISE, ASER, and NSS reports, the study analyzes trends and patterns associated with the implementation of MDMS. Findings indicate that the scheme has contributed to increased enrollment, improved attendance, and reduced dropout rates, particularly among disadvantaged groups, including girls and economically weaker sections. The study also highlights challenges such as infrastructure gaps, irregular supply, and quality issues that affect its effectiveness. Overall, the research underscores the importance of strengthening implementation mechanisms to maximize the scheme's benefits. The MDMS remains a crucial policy tool for promoting inclusive education and supporting the holistic development of children.

Keywords: Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Primary Education, Enrollment, Attendance, Retention, Child Nutrition, Educational Outcomes, School Participation, Dropout Rate, Inclusive Education, Disadvantaged Groups, India

INTRODUCTION

The Government of India has taken a conspicuous initiative to improve child nutrition and encourage attendance among primary education takers, and introduced it by the name of Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS). In 1995, it was officially launched as the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education. Before this



program came into existence, such states as Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat had already adopted similar initiatives for the welfare of their primary school going citizens. MDMS aims to eradicate malnutrition, and ensure high attendance, enrollment and retention rate in educational institutes. The underlying aim of the introduction of this program was that when zero-cost and nutritious meals are provided in schools, it becomes indispensable for underprivileged families to send their wards to school. Over time, MDMS started gaining popularity, and its impact was prominently seen nationwide. Soon afterwards, it was recognised as one of the largest school feeding programs at the international level with significant improvement in areas it was expected to bring.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study studies how three major elements enrollment, attendance and retention of primary educational institutes are affected, directly or indirectly by MDMS. Some of its important roles are as stated: studying the link between engagement and nutrition, motivating the disadvantaged strata of society to participate, identifying loopholes and challenges, and suggesting reforms to deliver efficacious results. Such reports as NSS, ASER, DISE and the like have been used to fetch data for this study. Evaluation of trends and effectiveness has been used as a tool to make comparative analysis. The idea lies in the fact that hunger has been addressed as a barrier to education, henceforth this program has been brought in place to not only prioritize education but also promote overall development.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A deluge of research on Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) has illustrated how this program has benefitted the targeted proportion of population. A study conducted by Laxmaiah A (1999) portrayed substantial improvement in nutritional levels, attendance and enrollment. Jean Dreñze and Amartya Sen (2001) emphasised on the increased participation of the marginalised group resulting from MDMS implementation. Reetika Khera (2006) and Farzana Afridi (2010) opined that implementation of MDMS has directly brought positive changes in attention and attendance among pupils. Similarly, Rakesh Tiwari (2017) states that its continued relevance is highly prevalent. Last but not least, studies by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo (2011), along with National Council of Educational



Research and Training confirm that a significant aberration can be seen in the dropout rate. However, implementation and infrastructural gaps along with some other issues still prevail.

THE IMPACT OF THE MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME ON ENROLLMENT LEVELS IN INDIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

With the aim to attract children of impoverished families and fulfill their daily recommended calorie intake needs, free of cost cooked meals are provided in all the government and government-aided schools. This improves their participation in classrooms and school activities. With the passage of time, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) has become a major tool in tackling low attendance, retention, participation and enrollment especially among economically and socially backward sections of the society. In recent few decades, socio-economic factors varying from poverty and child labour to gender equality and lack of awareness have affected primary education. Families with very limited resources can hardly manage a proper meal a day, so sending children to school for them is a sacrifice on their potential income or household work, and in some cases both. In such scenarios, one complete and fulfilling meal for them is a luresome entity. This one assured nutritious meal a day is an appealing factor not only for little kids but also for their families who struggle to arrange one quality meal each day. An array of studies and research have published that the propagation of getting a meal per day has directly increased the number of enrollments, attendance and their retention. This program has been successful in increasing enrollments from Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC) and other economically weaker sections. Besides, it has brought down the number of instances of gender disparities which has contributed to witnessing a higher number of females taking admissions in primary schools, especially from remote and backward areas. Such an initiative like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has further strengthened the foundation of this scheme. Rural areas where poverty and food insecurity are more widespread, seem to respond better to such initiatives. Following the effective implementation of this program, a significant increase in the number of admissions, attendance and classroom participation has been reported. However, the outcomes differ from region to region. It's not consistent throughout. Various factors, be it administrative inefficiency or corruption, hugely impact its outcomes. Some other kinds of barriers



are irregular supply of raw materials, substandard raw material, the lack of proper cooking facilities, poor hygiene conditions and the lack of professionalism, to name a few. Despite these barriers, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme continues to act as a pivotal intervention that helps address both hunger and limited access to education in its own way. By incentivizing enrollment and attendance, this program continues to strengthen the education system, especially the primary education in India. Thanks to improvised monitoring and implementation, this program stands apart and carries the potential to benefit the education system and support the goal of universal education.

THE KEY CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), a flagship welfare program, aims to parallelly improve both nutritional status of children and school participation. Even though it has been successfully able to bring positive changes in enrollment, attendance and participation, a myriad of limitations and challenges continue to impede its outcomes. It is important to identify these constraints, so that its efficacy is not compromised and all the potential beneficiaries are benefited in the best possible way.

1. Inadequate or obsolete infrastructure is one of the primary challenges that challenge uniform implementation. A majority of schools in rural and remote areas lack access to clean drinking water, clean storage spaces or warehouses, proper kitchen facilities and hygienic cooking conditions, and all these factors combined downgrade the quality of the meals which negatively affects students' health and their willingness to participate in this program.

2. Moreover, overcrowded schools often tend to struggle with the uniform and unbiased food distribution. Irregular supply of raw material be it food grains and resources are another challenge which contributes to uneven service. Delays at different levels of procurement and distribution tend to disrupt the day-to-day smooth functioning of the program. Sometimes the unavailability of raw materials forces schools to temporarily suspend the meal preparation, thus directly making beneficiaries skeptical about the program. The role of authorities from the central to state government in delaying the payments, biased allocation of funds and other financial constraints further exacerbate the issue.



3. The quality of the raw material and the nutritional values they carry, is also an area of concern in certain contexts. While the government has issued clear nutritional guidelines, their implementation varies from region to region. The lack of trained staff, irregular monitoring and other such factors often lead to substandard meals. A low-quality meal not only discourages students from eating it, but also discourages them from being a beneficiary of this program.

4. Incapable monitoring mechanisms and administrative inefficiencies pose another challenge. The widespread implementation of this scheme makes it difficult to supervise its execution in all the schools at the same time, thus giving rise to such issues as mismanagement, corruption, and the lack of accountability, to name a few. Insufficient data tracking and limited use of technology hinder transparency and evaluation.

5. Undoubtedly, caste and creed-based discrimination, and social stigma limit the program's effectiveness and efficiency. Student participation is highly discouraged when social discrimination is prevalent during the distribution of the meals. Such practices undermine its objective of social equality.

6. Overburden in staff and teachers is another hurdle in its smooth functioning. Teachers are supposed to oversee the arrangements, preparation and distribution of the meals which distract them from their academic responsibilities. As a result, this additional responsibility leads to the compromise of their main goal that is quality teaching and learning outcomes

MEASURES FOR IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME IN ACHIEVING BETTER EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

1. Improvement in the infrastructure can significantly boost students' experience. This can be achieved by introducing and ensuring hygienic cooking conditions, clean and adequate water supply, proper storage spaces and adequate kitchen facilities. The authorities, from government to private, should allocate sufficient funds to provide basic infrastructure, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas. Upgraded and well-maintained facilities ensure up-to-the-mark meal quality as well as enhanced overall school experience.



2. A strict vigil on adherence to national nutritional guide lines can ensure fine quality and nutritional value of the meal. A consistent check to monitor the implementation is required. Introducing diversified menus with a main focus on the staple diet that includes nutrient-rich and locally available raw materials and food items, help achieve overall development. Regular nutrition assessment, health checkups and inspections also help keep a track of the outcomes of the program in terms of physical and cognitive development.

3. Consistent supply chain and timely resource allocation is another key factor which can help MDMS become a successful venture. There is no denying that delays in payments and the supply of raw material can bring program's functionality to halt, temporarily. The use of the state-of-the-art tracking system can help keep vigil over the distribution process and ensure timely delivery. The allocation of funds should be timely, uniform and uninterrupted. Introduction of decentralised procurement with the involvement of locals and self-help groups, can also prove beneficial.

4. To stream line implementation, effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be adopted and put to use. This may include encouraging community participation, conduct routine and surprise inspection, and introduce a transparent reporting system. They will help reduce gaps and elevate accountability. Convergent efforts from local authorities, parents, and School Management Committees (SMCs) can play a key role in alleviating the number of instances of mismanagement, corruption and negligence.

5. Administrative burden on teachers should be mitigated. Special trained and dedicated staff including cooks and helpers should be assigned the task of supervision, management, inventory keeping, cooking and distribution so that teachers can wholly and solely focus on teaching and academic activities. This balance is mandatory to ensure that the program doesn't hamper the teaching-learning process.

6.

Eradication of social inequalities and discrimination is important to make this program work. Awareness programs need to be conducted every now and then to promote inclusivity regardless of any social discrimination whether caste, gender, or socio-economic background. Social barriers can be reduced and a sense of ownership can be fostered only when community participation becomes prevalent.



7. The overall impact of the program can be enhanced when broader educational initiatives such as digital learning, remedial teaching, and health programs are integrated in the system. A holistic approach linking nutrition with learning outcomes can ensure students' retention in MDMS and academics.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while child hunger is being addressed, Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) has preponderantly brought notable improvement in enrolment, attendance and retention rate in primary schools. In spite of the foreseen and unforeseen barriers in the effective implementation of this program, anticipated results have been delivered. Only when the infrastructure is strengthened, monitoring is enhanced and consistent quality control is brought into practice, can we expect to bring revolutionary outcomes and support the goal of universal primary education in India.

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