

JCGS POLICY-BRIEF

The plight of the Midday-Meal: A case study in Indian Public Policy

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Executive summary

The mid-day meal scheme covered by the National Food Security Act of 2013 is a welfare scheme that provides lunch to all public schoolgoers at subsidised rates if not free, in the hopes of boosting school attendance rates. This scheme at first glance seems to be a brainwave by the Indian Government however, this scheme is not excused from severe criticism. Every year state and central governments make it a point to talk about how well this scheme is doing and how it has caused an increase in the literacy rate in India. Naturally, there have been several attempts to test this hypothesis however, this scheme is due for a revisit post the 3rd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Introduction

Since the school drop out rate in public schools in India was on the rise, the Government launched the Midday meal scheme formally in 1995 across the nation however, a similar scheme was implemented on a state level in the Union Territory of Puducherry under French Administration in 1930 and Tamil Nadu in the early 1960s pioneered by the former Chief minister K. Kamaraj.

The main goal of this scheme was to incentive students to attend school. Families who lived close to the poverty line usually found it smarter to make their children help out in their jobs in an attempt to make ends meet causing the excruciatingly high group out rate in schools. By providing food, parents do not need to worry about feeding their children once a day hence the scheme highly incentivized children to stay in school. we argue that parents would send their children to school for food and these children would learn as a “side effect” of this scheme.

Research Overview

The main goal of this paper is to assess how successful the mid-day meal scheme has been and to identify if any, shortcomings of the scheme from numerous perspectives hence finally answering the question of how well the scheme is doing and if the money spent on this scheme could be better allocated elsewhere. In addition to this, we have made attempts to talk about how the scheme is doing in 2022 which is the most recent information available to us. this paper is purely based on secondary research i.e., based on the prior work and government documents pertaining to the midday meal scheme.

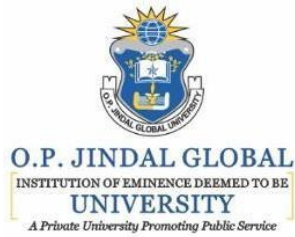


Discussion and main findings

1. Are students benefiting from the scheme?

The mid-day meal has been extensively researched and we can see over time there have been several problems that still need addressing. That being said, we cannot overlook the benefits of this scheme. Sarma (1995) has done a wonderful job of depicting the effects of the midday meal in the late 1990s. The authors used retention rate, dropout rate, attendance and scholastic performances to measure the effect of midday meals among schools that had and did not have midday meal facilities. The authors were able to deduce that the midday meal did boost the retention rate for both genders however, we can also see the grades of said students termed as scholastic performance are relatively unphased. This is slightly counterintuitive given the scheme was made to nudge children to go to school for a good education by enticing them with food. The parents of the said students would be more than happy to send their children to school as well as they would not have to worry about one meal per day hence on paper the midday meal does seem like a wonderful idea, however, in reality, we can see that children may come to school for food, however, there is no incentive for them to pay attention in class.

we can argue that there is no true way to incentive students to study and the onus of quality of education lies partly on the student as well hence we truly are at a loss on how to improve student grades just as Sarma(1995) mentioned.



2. How is the food prepared?

Sarma (1995) highlights the fact that midday meals reduce the likelihood of a child being “stunted” due to malnutrition, however, this is not necessarily true. M. D. M.(2016) states that the quality and method of preparing the meals have never been consistent and the grains usually used are extremely subpar. We also see that the staff who cook these meals are overworked and extremely underpaid not to mention how understaffed these schools usually are. 1 cook is hired for the first 50 students and another 1 cook for the next 50. 1 additional cook is hired for every 100 students after this point hence we can see 3 cooks for 200 students is absolutely outrageous.

3. Caste-based discrimination?

(Civil Services of India 2019) explains that we can see caste plays a crucial role in how much food a child is provided. The Civil Services of India go on to say that people from the lower caste which is also known as the “Dalit” class receive less food than children of higher caste. Dalit children are also beaten for touching plates that are to be used by upper-caste children. This is the reason why the dropout rate of Dalit children has increased by 20% in 2019. Gross irregularities have also been found in the number of children who have benefited from this scheme suggesting foul play. For example, the enrolment rate has been shown to decline however in reality data suggests otherwise. Another example would be the constant use of “inflation” in transportation costs. Such shady events were caught by the CAG audit showing how money is being embezzled by the state government and schools. (Josephine & Raju 2008) add to the above claims and state that corruption was always a problem in schemes. It wouldn't be difficult to argue that the idea of stealing from children is extremely sickening. hence we note that while the scheme may be well made its implementation is extremely questionable

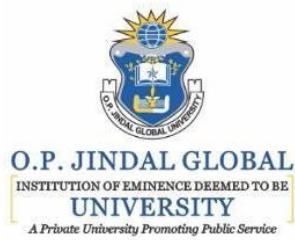


4. Is Mid-day meal well known?

The midday meal is well known in urban areas however, Deepika & Reddy (2019) noted that people in rural areas such as rural Telangana are oblivious to the existence of nutritional programmes other than the midday meal scheme and people in urban Telangana do not know about the midday meal. When people do not use all the social schemes, they are eligible for, it is natural for them to be worse off than they should be. This according to (Deodhar et al. 2010) is one of the many factors that lead to malnourishment. (Sahai 2014) states this is a form of information asymmetry. this when linked with (Deodhar et al. 2010) is a case of bounded rationality leading to people being unable to maximise their welfare and such asymmetric information leads to the free-rider problem. (In this case embezzlement by government authorities)

5. The north v/s the south

(Dreze & Goyal 2009) tried to add a new perspective that was missed before. They suggested taking a look at the differences between north and south India. The research showed that Karnataka (a south Indian state) did much better than Rajasthan (A north Indian state) There were two reasons for this. Firstly, Rajasthan among other north Indian states did not put in much effort to improve the kitchens where the said meals are cooked hence leaving the kitchens to be made of clay rather than brick and Mortar. This led to the constant need to repair the kitchens which syphoned away funds that could be used for making meals. Due to this corner-cutting, the Rajasthan government ended up being penny wise pound foolish and spent more money than Karnataka and ended up benefiting people at a subpar level. The second reason was the different attitudes of various social groups. The authors found that “salaried employees”, “people richer than 20% of the population”, and “OBC groups” (other backward



classes) were not in favour of midday meals the most this is because salaried workers and rich people (in this case people who are richer than 20% of the population) feel they should not be needed to pay for the midday meal since the taxpayer's dime is used to fund such schemes. Such self-centred behaviour is one reason why the author claims Rajasthan is doing worse off than Karnataka even though the quality of grain is much better in Rajasthan.

6. A feeling of shame?

Looking at the OBCs we see they are slightly ashamed to utilize the midday meal scheme. This is similar to the Polish population during the family 500+ scheme. The Family 500+ is a scheme introduced by the Polish government in 2016 where every Polish family is given a monthly cash allowance of 500 PLN by the government per child they have until the child reaches 18 years of age. The scheme however only applies from the second child onwards unless the family made less than 800 PLN per month per head. The aim goal of this scheme was to increase fertility as well as to relieve some of the financial burdens of raising a child. This scheme was however done in slight secrecy so that the citizens were not given the impression that they were getting money for having more children. (Noemi Lendvai-Bainton 2021)

Using this analogy, the OBCs might feel that they are getting aid because they are financially weak and may prefer not to utilize these schemes to protect their ego from being bruised. A bruised ego hurts in the short run but not using schemes will hurt these people in the long run hence we reach Richard Thaler's hypothesis that people discount the future and overvalue the present.



7. The health point of view

(Lakshmiddev 2012) takes a very health-intensive route in analysing the mid-day meal scheme. They look into the nutritional value and preferences of the people in Andhra Pradesh and are trying to see if the addition of Jowhar (Sorghum) into the diets of the children benefiting from the midday meal would be of great use. The addition of sorghum is great as it is cheap and extremely nutritious. This allows for the same level of nutrition at a much lower cost. This would greatly relax the financial needs of the scheme.

8. Some econometrics in the mix

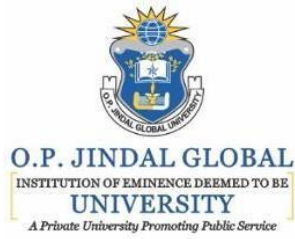
(Singh 2008) and (Singh 2013) are two connected works which use econometrics to talk about the success of the midday meal. Both papers use a simple OLS regression and have used the IV test to make sure there is no perfect correlation between the explanatory variables. Both papers seem to believe midday meals are a good safety net and have great scope in improving welfare in India. These papers take into account floods and the disasters it causes to crop production along with the BMI of children which I feel is a double-edged sword. While BMI is great to have to measure the growth of a child. BMI calculations overlook the fact that no two bodies are the same. Some extremely thin people are called overweight due to heavy bone density and vice versa hence while the use of BMI seems excellent I have my reservations about its use.

9. Updated findings of 2022

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of distortion has taken place in the data. The closest to reliable data that can be used are in the paper by Bhaskar in 2022. We see that all schools in Telangana have adopted the midday meal scheme and more than 7.3 lakh students are benefiting from this scheme. This is a good sign and we also see that the



cost of food is affordable for students. We also see that infrastructure which used to be a massive problem in the past seems to be getting much better. It is not ideal as the access to water staff and storage is limited but progress has been made. As far as discrimination based on caste goes, it does exist in rural Telangana however, it has been nearly eradicated in urban areas. Discrimination has repercussions and people are quickly realising this hence we are one step closer to a “better world”. There is however still a variation in the quantity of food provided by the schools between states and even districts. This is a problem yet to be tackled however the saving grace in this situation is that the meals are more nutrient diverse and the idea of a balanced diet rather than filling stomachs has finally bore through the thick skulls of policymakers and state governments. It is also wonderful to see that eggs are given 3 times a week to students at the price of ₹4 per egg which was definitively a new addition to the menu. We dare say that if the government is giving out eggs the level of embezzlement has drastically fallen which once again is good to see. Circling back to the quantity problem, we do not know if these new additions to the quality of the food have been compensated by a drastic fall in the quantity of food however, the attendance rate has further increased in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and the dropout rate has further fallen. This would lead us to believe that either education has been given more prominence now which was the main aim of the Mid-day meal scheme, or the quantity of food hasn't been decreased to the point where coming to school is unprofitable. Another change we see today is that Telangana Public-Corporate-Partnership Model (PPP) has been introduced where there is a third-party controlling body that is non-profit and self-help groups along with NGOs that make sure that there is some form of accountability when running the midday meal programme. While the government still “owns” the midday meal scheme, the role of the



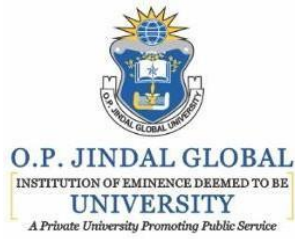
government has been significantly lessened since these private organisations are taking care of the day-to-day workings of the scheme and the government is just there to oversee and collect data to use in the future. We also see that the village panchayat has been made stakeholders in this scheme which from a behavioural perspective is extremely smart given these stakeholder's children would benefit from the well-running of the model and when agents have a mutual goal the level of efficiency would be remarkable. There is much better transparency in the process and hierarchy now hence, we fortify our point on accountability in the scheme.

10. Similar policies around the world

While the Indian midday meal is the most prominent scheme, Bangladesh has followed suit and launched the midday meal and another well-known scheme is the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act in the United States. This is extended to the entire United States subcontinent. The two drawbacks of this act are

- 1) The meals are too insubstantial to be considered meals hence we draw a connection here to the Indian Midday meal scheme where we found good quality food was provided at low prices. The average acquisition cost as shown in the table below for both primary and upper primary schools in India.

Serial Number	Food item	Average cost for primary school students(in INR)	Average cost for upper primary school students (in INR)
1	Grain (rice/wheat,etc)	free of cost	free of cost
2	Pulses	1.38	2.00
3	Vegetables	0.92	1.48



4	oil and fats	0.58	0.87
5	salt and condiments	0.57	0.93
6	fuel	0.68	0.93
	total	4.13	6.16

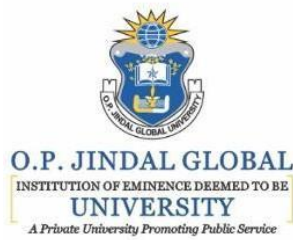
based on the table above, we wonder what leads to the failure of the midday meal equivalent in the US when India who has a much larger population is able to pull this off but this is an argument for another time.

- 2) Secondly, the USA follows a federal government, as opposed to a centralised one. Consequently, the programme allows for too much interference on part of the Federal Government, within the constituent states.

Conclusion

After thorough research on several factors that directly or indirectly affect the Midday meal scheme, we conclude that the midway meal scheme has a rich history which is diverse enough to take a person years to read through thoroughly. We also see that with time several problems seem to fade away and new issues may eventually take their place. Some problems are here to stay such as corruption in the government. Though the magnitude of damage is slowly reducing, the root problem that being the existence of corruption will be here even after we are all long gone.

Certain aspects can be worked upon such as the need to let go of ego. A bruised ego is not too high a price to pay to attain a better standard of living and a better quality of life for one's children. Better staffing and access to fresh water are a must if we are to improve the quality of



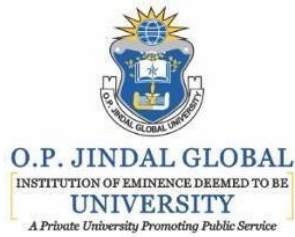
the midday meal scheme. This is naturally going to be costly in the short run however it will be useful in the long run and this additional cost will significantly reduce costs in the future.

We also need to appreciate the fact that the midday meal is not the only nutrition welfare scheme. While upgrading the midday meal is great, a system is only as strong as its weakest component hence, we would beg to question if the other schemes not being so well known among the masses are being swept under the carpet by the government which is only making their job more difficult than before. Perhaps the first step to improvement would be to convince the government that its method needs to be altered. Perhaps a more ideal step would be to nudge people into paying more taxes hence more funds for welfare. Maybe adopting the welfare model from the Scandinavian countries from Europe would prove beneficial from a welfare standpoint. The problem with this form of speculation is that the government has many different aims that could be and not limited to welfare maximisation, growth maximisation, ensuring the safety of the country from foreign attacks and market stability. We see that given the government has so many roles to play in an economy it is bound to do sub-par work in one or more areas. Hence, we could also wonder if the privatisation of the production of the Midday meals is the way to go. If privatised, the productivity and quality problems would instantly be solved as private firms do know their way around efficient production. A technical auction might prove useful to find the best fit for this scheme. The government could give the contract to the most competent firm at the lowest cost, creating a win-win situation.



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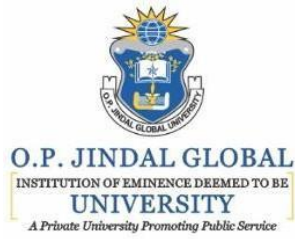
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