

National Programme of Mid-Day Meals in Schools

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The National Food Security Act, 2013 lays down the legal entitlement of every school child up to the age of fourteen years to a free, cooked, hot midday meal in all schools either run or aided by the government or local bodies and prescribes nutritional standards required to be met. Before this, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 had mandated the provision of a kitchen in every school, where the midday meal would be cooked. But the seed of midday meals in school had been sown nearly a century ago and evolved through successive avatars before it was given legislative status as a crucial tool for children's food security.

History

In 1925, Madras Municipal Corporation began to provide the disadvantaged children in its schools a midday meal (MDM). This was later extended across Tamil Nadu. Gujarat and Kerala soon followed suit. By the middle of the 1980s, these three states as well as the Union Territory (UT) of Pondicherry had universalised, with their own resources, a midday meal programme for children studying in primary schools. By 1990, the number of states using their own funds to run significant MDM programmes had risen to twelve.

The Government of India recognised the potential of MDM to enhance enrolment, retention and attendance in schools by addressing classroom hunger and in 1995 stepped in with the launch of the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NSPE). This was conceptualised not as an end in itself, but with the objective of educating and improving the health of children, helping their cognitive development and promoting social integration. Initially implemented in 2408 Blocks, NSPE was soon extended to all Blocks in the country. The spread increased in 2002 to children studying in alternative schools such as those set up under the Education Guarantee Scheme. Launched as a centrally sponsored scheme, the Central and

State Governments shared the provisioning under NSPE. The principle of fund sharing still continues although the sharing pattern has undergone changes.

The year 2007 saw a major expansion in coverage when the school meal reached upper primary schools in nearly 3500 educationally backward Blocks and was renamed the National Programme of Mid-Day Meals in Schools. The rest of the upper primary schools did not have to wait long as MDM was extended to the entire country in 2008. At the same time, it also began to be implemented in all madrasas and maqtabs supported under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. In 2009, children studying in National Child Labour Project schools were also covered under MDM.

The past nine years have not seen any revision in MDM's coverage. Some states and Union Territories have, however, used their own resources to extend it to secondary school students and/or to add a healthy snack (examples are egg, banana, milk, peanuts and chana) on all or some days in the week at another time in the school day.

Evolution of MDM and present dimensions

In a landmark order delivered in November, 2001 on the Right to Food Case¹, the Supreme Court directed all State Governments and Union Territories to provide a cooked midday meal to every child in every government and government-aided primary school within six months. The meal was to consist of a minimum content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein to be served on at least 200 school days. The Government of India was to be responsible for supply of quality food grains for MDM. This was followed by another order in the same case in April, 2004 primarily requiring full compliance of the 2001 order by September, 2004. A direction was also given that the cooked meals shall be provided to children free of any cost. The Court also ordered that the Central Government

¹People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India and Others, CWP 196/2001, popularly known as the 'Right to Food Case'

shall provide for cooking costs and construction of kitchen sheds in schools, preference must be given to Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the appointment of cooks and helpers and MDM shall be supplied even during summer vacations in drought- affected areas.

The order of the Supreme Court led to the MDM Programme being significantly revised in September 2004 to provide a cooked midday meal in keeping with the Court’s direction. In addition to free supply of food grain and transport subsidy, the Government of India undertook the responsibility of cooking cost (one rupee per child per school day). The revised scheme also provided for management, monitoring and evaluation costs as well as provision of MDM during summer vacations in drought- affected areas.

The MDM Programme underwent another comprehensive revision in 2009 following extensive consultations with States/UTs, nutrition experts and other stakeholders. Food norms were improved and

cooking costs were increased to ensure a balanced and filling school meal. Further, cooking costs were to be revised every year to keep pace with rise in prices. Other modifications were also made to bring in greater flexibility and responsiveness to the diverse needs of States and UTs. For example, a common unit cost of construction of kitchen sheds for the whole country was impractical. Cost sanction was therefore linked to prevalent construction costs in different states, based on a plinth area norm tied to enrolment. Difficult geographies were also given the benefit of transportation costs at par with the Public Distribution System (PDS).

Differential nutritional standards and cooking costs have been in place for children in primary and upper primary classes since extension of MDM to the latter. Cooking costs have risen to over Rs 4 and 6 per child / per school day for primary and upper primary stages respectively. The nutritional entitlements of schoolchildren under MDM are shown in the following tables:

Nutrition norm²

Item	Nutrition norm per day/child	
	Primary	Upper Primary
Energy (Kcal)	450	700
Protein (grams)	12	20

Food norm³

Item	Quantity per day/child (in grams)	
	Primary	Upper Primary
Food grains	100	150
Pulses	20	30
Vegetables (leafy also)	50	75
Oil & fat	5	7.5
Salt & condiments	As per need	As per need

²Prescribed in Schedule II of the National Food Security Act, 2013

³Source: MDM website – mdm.nic.in

In reality, though, the above norm translates typically into a meal that consists of sambhar or dal, cooked with or without vegetables, accompanied by either rice or roti (or one of its variants) depending on local preferences. On some days, *khichdi* or *daliya* or a soyabean product may be served, again with or without vegetables. However, despite the well-intentioned food norm, the inclusion of fresh vegetables, especially green and leafy vegetables, remains a challenge.

The MDM Rules framed in 2015⁴ essentially place the revised scheme of 2009 on a legal footing and they have gone a few steps further to strengthen its monitoring and ensure that implementation is uninterrupted. The MDM Rules mandate the School Management Committee (SMC) to closely oversee the operation of MDM in the school. They empower the Head Teacher of the school to temporarily utilise any funds available in the school in order to prevent discontinuation of MDM for lack of funds. In the event of the meal not being provided on any school day for any reason, the children are entitled to a food security allowance comprising food grain and money. So the child's right to food has undergone a significant extension with the National Food Security Act and the consequent MDM Rules.

According to a notification⁵ issued by the Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) in February 2017, possession of an Aadhaar number is required for anyone who wants to avail the benefits of the MDM programme. This applies to schoolchildren as well as cooks and helpers, and the deadline for applying for Aadhaar enrolment was set at 31 December, 2017.

What has MDM achieved?

Nearly 10 crore children studying in over 11 lakh schools benefit from MDM, over 25 lakh cooks and helpers (more than 80% women belonging mostly to SC/ST/OBC) are engaged to cook and serve the meals, and over 8 lakh kitchens-cum-stores have been constructed so far to ensure that the food grain storage and cooking happens in clean and

hygienic spaces.⁶ Occasional attempts by vested interests to replace cooked meals with ready-to-eat food such as biscuits have been effectively resisted by the government as well as civil society. It is clear that the cooked meal at school is here to stay and MDM is today the largest programme of its kind in the world. In terms of regularity and scale, MDM is acknowledged as one of the more successful food security programmes of the Government of India.⁷

Sample evaluation studies and performance audits conducted by independent agencies have shown that cooked MDM in schools has had a positive impact on enrolment, retention and attendance, especially in the case of girls and students from disadvantaged groups. Their findings show that it has been successful in addressing classroom hunger and helps children learn better. Studies have also shown positive nutrition effects and reduced protein and iron deficiency. MDM has promoted social equity (**equality?**): children from diverse social and economic backgrounds sit together to eat. There is evidence to suggest that children of 'upper castes' eat the school meal (in all probability cooked by someone belonging to SC/ST/OBC) even though they had been instructed by their parents to refrain from doing so. MDM has promoted women's empowerment by creating new employment opportunities for underprivileged (often destitute) women, involving women's self help groups (SHG) in preparing the meal and sharing the responsibility of school-level supervision with mothers of schoolchildren. It has encouraged good hygiene practices such as washing of hands before and after meals. Further, it has presented an opportunity to impart nutrition education, although this still remains under-utilised. The School Health Programme (SHP), which aims to screen children for basic health parameters within school, is also strategically linked to MDM. It works well in some States but this conceptual link generally needs to be strengthened at planning and implementation levels. Periodic health check-ups of cooks and helpers also require much greater attention.⁸

⁴Under Section 39 of the National Food Security Act, 2013

⁵Under Section 7 of the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Act, 2016

⁶Source: MDM website: mdm.nic.in

⁷Saxena, N. C. (2011), 'Hunger, Under-Nutrition and Food Security in India', CPCR-IIPA Working Paper 44, and Khera, Reetika (2013), 'Mid-Day Meals: Looking Ahead', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVIII No. 32

⁸This paragraph draws on: (i) Section on Mid Day Meal in MHRD's Working Group Report for preparing the 12th Plan.

(ii) MDM website - mdm.nic.in

(iii) Khera, Reetika (2013), 'Mid-Day Meals: Looking Ahead', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVIII No. 32

Some states have innovated to improve the appeal and implementation of MDM. Tripura, for example, has constructed well-designed yet low-cost dining halls, with stone tables and benches. Gujarat involves the community through an initiative called *Tithi Bhojan*, which encourages members of local village communities to add to the nutritional value of MDM, either by supplementing the regular school meal or providing a full meal on days/dates significant to the donor. Some other states have also adopted this model. Maharashtra has erected fire-proof, prefabricated modular kitchen sheds in several districts in order to save both cost and construction time. Sikkim uses fresh and local organic vegetables in the preparation of MDM. Fund flows, which used to be a major constraint in earlier years, are much smoother now in States/UTs that have adopted the practice of advance fund transfer to districts. It is heartening that some States/UTs willingly contribute more than their required fund share.⁹

Challenges and the road ahead

Although MDM is generally considered to be a success, some areas of concern remain. Sporadic

supervision at school level, the problems of MDM will continue to recur. The media also needs to use its power to spread awareness about the positive results of MDM instead of reporting only when things have gone wrong.

The nutritive quality of the meal remains a major concern. In one project in Faizabad district, Uttar Pradesh, implemented by Swami Sivananda Memorial Institute (SSMI), it was found that MDM provided the following nutrition before SSMI's intervention:¹¹

For better meal quality, SSMI took some simple steps such as outlining standard practices of preparation, quantifying and standardising portion sizes and training as well as supervising cooks. These resulted in a considerably improved meal in terms of nutrition (averaging 455 Kcal and 11.7 grams of protein). Measures such as these and others listed in the MDM guidelines, can go a long way in not only merely raising the nutritional value of MDM but also add to its variety, taste and appeal to children.

There is still a significant gap (over 3 lakh) between

Stage	Energy (Kcal)		Protein (grams)	
	Norm	Faizabad	Norm	Faizabad
Primary	450	353	12	6.6
Upper Primary	700	507	20	9.6

media reports appear on children falling ill and even dying after eating the meal in school. While such instances appear to have decreased over time, they still occur on account of entirely preventable causes. Grievances regarding MDM implementation generally centre on unsafe food, poor meal quality, irregularity, misappropriation of funds, and caste issues. Detailed guidelines covering every aspect of MDM have been issued by MHRD and are available in the public domain.¹⁰ But without building the capacities of the implementation machinery at all levels and ensuring adequate monitoring and

the schools covered under MDM and the kitchens-cum-stores provided.¹² A number of these schools would, of course, be served by centralised kitchens. But the worrying fact is that out of a cumulative sanction of over 10 lakh kitchens-cum-stores up to 2016, construction of 11% had not even started.¹³ The importance of proper infrastructure for MDM cannot be stressed enough as it directly impacts clean and hygienic storage and cooking. It also protects children from fire, smoke, hot cooking vessels and hot food spills.

⁹This paragraph is based on 'Mid Day Meal Scheme - Best Practices followed by States/UTs (2015-16)', Department of School Education and Literacy, MHRD, Government of India

¹⁰MDM website: mdm.nic.in⁶Source: MDM website: mdm.nic.in

¹¹Swami Sivananda Memorial Institute (2014): 'Mid-Day Meal Scheme: Comprehensive Review and Interventions', Report on the SSMI-MHRD Faizabad Pilot Project

¹²Source: MDM website: mdm.nic.in

¹³MHRD presentation to the Empowered Committee on MDM Scheme, September, 2016

Fuel cost and efficiency are yet to be adequately addressed. At present, most of the cooking under MDM is done on firewood, which causes internal pollution and is not eco-friendly. Its use is particularly inadvisable in such a massive government programme. In principle, use of LPG (the least costly and most user friendly option available today) has been encouraged by the government but specific resources have not been provided to change over from firewood to LPG. Nonetheless, some States and UTs have made the switch in all or most of their schools. The remaining States must also move in this direction in a phased manner. An earmarked provision in the MDM budget may need to be considered for this purpose.

A persisting challenge is the involvement of teachers in MDM. According to MDM guidelines, "The tasting of the food by a teacher just before serving is mandatory. The teacher is to maintain a record of tasting in a register. SMC member should also taste the food on a rotation basis along with the teachers before it is distributed to the children." This is the only responsibility assigned to a teacher under MDM. Yet it is widely believed that teachers are saddled with a host of MDM related-duties, which interferes with teaching and learning, though this perception may not be baseless. Many primary schools have no staff other than two teachers; it is unrealistic to expect that MDM will only marginally engage them in such schools. The Model Education Code¹⁴ offers a more practical approach to the duties a teacher may reasonably be expected to perform in order to use the opportunity for teaching and learning presented by the serving and eating of the meal in school. They can effectively foster social cohesion if they try to ensure that a spirit of togetherness and equality prevails at meal times.

Some States have suggested that teachers can be unburdened by providing for more schools to be served by centralised kitchens. While cooking at one location and transporting cooked food to schools has its advantages in urban and semi-urban areas, the extension of this system to rural areas demands caution. The obvious problem is the quality of road

connectivity, which the MDM Rules have taken into account.¹⁵ The not so obvious reason is that in addition to providing a school meal, MDM also seeks to encourage involvement and participation of local communities, especially parents of children studying in the school. SMCs are expected to monitor and supervise MDM at school level, which would not work with centralised kitchens. The capacities of SMCs and local communities need to be built for exercise of supervision on MDM, which is a valuable stepping stone for SMCs to engage in other aspects of school management. Trained SMCs with a sense of agency can be a game changer in improving the quality of school education.

MDM guidelines have for many years allowed the services of SHGs, non-governmental and civil society organisations, to be used for cooking the school meal. Revised guidelines have been issued in 2017, which require a contract to be signed with the government. Criteria for selection of the organisation as well as roles and responsibilities of the contracting parties have been spelt out in detail. Despite this framework, there is a need to be vigilant about the way in which these arrangements take shape on the ground. Nutrition programmes in the past have suffered because *Mahila Mandals*/SHGs were captured by influential people with vested interests resulting in multiple instances of unhygienic, contaminated and non-nutritious food being given to children. The requirement of cooked meals has, to an extent, addressed the possibility of such hijacks. But SMCs, local bodies and the media must constantly play the role of watchdog to protect schoolchildren from unscrupulous elements.

Conclusion

The interventions of the Right to Food Campaign and the Supreme Court have played a critical role in ensuring the present salience and magnitude of MDM. The vigilance and constant monitoring by various agencies, notably the Supreme Court Commissioners in the 'Right to Food Case', have spurred constant improvements in MDM and its implementation. Its visibility has led to strong media focus. The potential of a cooked meal to

¹⁴T National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi (2015), 'Model Education Code: Practices and Processes of School Management'

¹⁵MDM (Amendment) Rules, 2017

enhance children's nutrition and universalise elementary education with equity and a better quality of learning has academics tracking the impact of MDM, and it is commonly held to be a success story. In the last ten years, the Government of India's budget for MDM has gone up from over Rs 6500 crore to Rs 10000 crore. In addition, the States and UTs have contributed their share.

Going forward, we need to ensure that we can look back and feel we made a good investment in our schoolchildren. We have to build on our successes if the full promise of MDM is to reach every child at the elementary stage of education.

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