

Status of Mid-Day Meal Scheme in India

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive development is new Mantra of development in a democratic and developing country like India. The Mid Day Meal Scheme is the only panacea for improving the poor performance in respect of health standards and academic achievements of the students belonging to lower strata of the society in the country. The Midday Meal Scheme was unable to mitigate the centuries-old problem of malnutrition because it is limited to school days, class Ist to VIIIth and not implemented in effective way. The government of India needs to bring reforms in MDMP, which is about three decades old scheme for making it more inclusive, administratively efficient and focused. These reforms may include rebranding of MDMP, the inclusion of nursery students who are already beneficiaries of free eatables, emphasis on social audit, Tithi Bhojan, kitchen garden, etc. Providing one-time lunch during school working days will not solve the problem. Government should understand the urgency of the elimination of malnutrition and its long-term benefits. It is highly recommended even by the National Policy of Education to start the breakfast under this scheme for the future generation of India. The MDMP should be extended up to the senior secondary level as their body needs more nutritious meals for growth and development. In the nutshell, it can be stated that there is urgent need of reforms. The government should open its treasury for the future generation because there is no better investment than investing in the future generation of India.

KEY WORDS: Mid Day Meal, Nutrition, PM Poshan Scheme, Wasting, Stunting, Underweight.

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1. INTRODUCTION

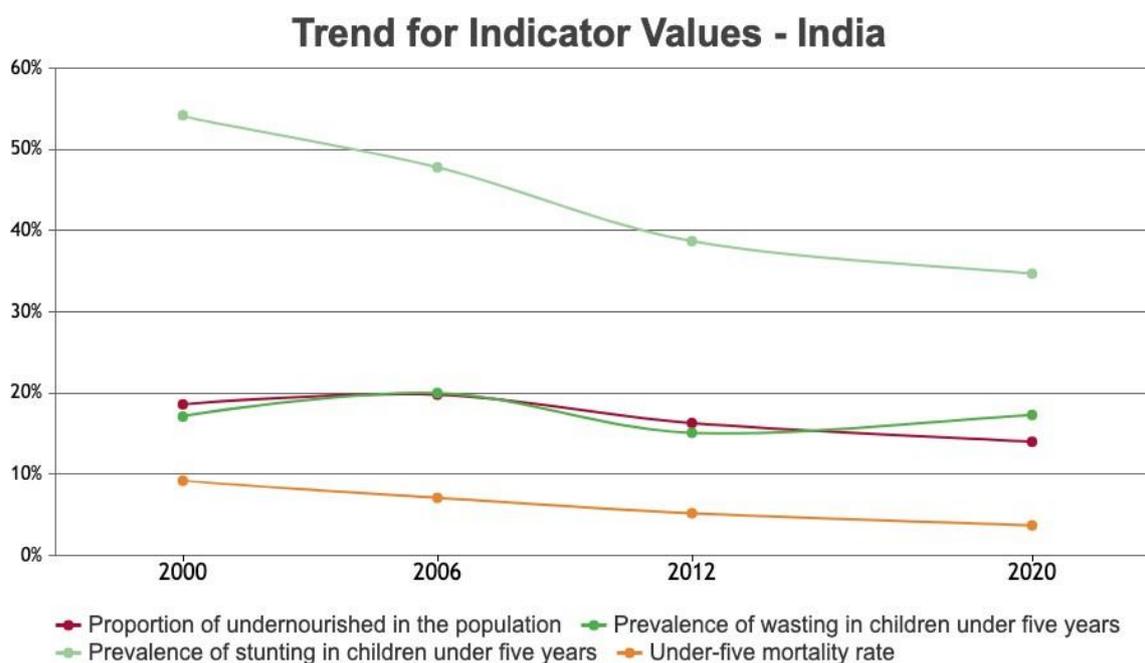
“An investment in education always pays the highest returns”.

- Benjamin Franklin

Children are the future of a country and its future is bleak if its children are uneducated, stunted, and malnourished. Malnourishment is a silent Covid-19 disease because it brings illness, morbidity, and high mortality among children in developing countries. Nobel laureate of Economics, Angus Deaton stated that problem of malnutrition in India is mainly related to calorie intake, and India's dietary chart is mainly comprised of carbohydrate rich food articles

which on other hand based on low protein and fat that worsens the level of nutrition. India's malnutrition problem is even worse than Haiti, Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, or North Korea. It is expected that about 88 countries including India will miss the global nutrition target by 2025 (Global Nutrition Report 2020). The most disparities in terms of stunting were found in India, Indonesia and, Nigeria, where the levels of discrimination varied for times among various sections of population. According to Global Hunger Index 2020, India stands at 94th position in 107 countries, which is one of the lowest rankings and it is even lower than its neighboring countries. This index points out that, "India is suffering from a serious hunger problem." The following graph is evidence of its pathetic health record.

Figure-01



Source: Global Hunger Index 2020

This graph reflects that India is performing poorly in fighting hunger. It scored 35 points in prevalence of stunting in children under five years which keeps it in the 'Alarming' category; it scored 18.1 points in 'Wasting' which keeps it in the 'moderate' category and it scored 14.8 points in 'undernourished', which keeps it in 'moderate' category. The GHI 2020 states that India's fight for mitigating stunting is deteriorating in comparison with previous years despite a record level of food grain production of 308.65 million tons in 2020-21. India is home for undernourished children in the world, In India out of every five children, two are undernourished. (Times of India, Feb 18, 2020).

Besides good health, education plays a vital role in human evolution. It is education that transforms an animal into a man. It brings social change and the development of the economy. The investment in education has the highest multiplier effect than in any other sector. Noble laureate Amartya Sen stated that education enhances the production capacity of a person by making him more efficient. This can add to the value of production in the economy and also

to the income of the person who has been educated” (Konwar, 2003). Hence investment in education is the best option.

It is in the interest of developing countries like India to prepare proper planning and optimal allocation of scarce resources in the education sector for mitigating existing disparities in respect of the distribution of educational facilities (Varghese, 1997). Equal distributions of educational facilities are essential because the existing social structure in India ensures that rich people grabs the optimum benefit from socio-economic development (PROBE 1999; Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2010). The agony of this inequality even in education is due to ‘resilience of social structure’ (D’Souza, 1990), i.e. Indian society is having hierarchical division based on class, creed, caste, and gender of the individual. To solve these twin problems of hunger and universal education, India launched the largest food program in the world in government primary schools on 15 Aug 1995.

MID DAY MEAL SCHEME IN INDIA:

In India, 19.7% of the population is in the age group of 5-14 years of age (Census 2011). It is the duty of the governments to provide free and compulsory education to its children under article 45. The majority of the children belonging to the lower strata of socio-economic society are suffering from malnutrition; wasting and stunting as shown in above mentioned GHI 2019 graph. Such parents are not able to cater the nutritious meal to their wards. So being the welfare state, it becomes the constitutional and moral responsibility of the Central and State governments to provide nutritious food in the government-run or aided schools of India.

Mid Day Meal Scheme which is formally known as Nutrition Support to Primary Education Scheme has a long history in India. It was initially started by Madras Corporation in 1925. In the mid of 1980s three states viz. Tamilnadu, Gujarat and Kerala, and Union Territory Pondicherry launched cooked Mid Day Meal Programme. In 1990-91, 12 more states implemented MDM Programme from their resources for children up to the primary stage. Having realized the constitutional responsibility, the Central Government launched the world’s largest Mid Day Meal Programme on 15th Aug 1995 to improve enrolment, attendance, retention, and providing nutritious food in 2408 blocks of the country. MDMP was implemented in all the blocks of the country in 1997-98. It is a centrally sponsored program in the ratio of 60:40 for non-North East Region (NER) states; 90:10 for NER and three states located in the lap of Himalaya states and 100% sponsored for Union Territories. This missionary program was extended to students of Alternative Institutes of Education (AIE), Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS), and registered Madrasas in 2002. In this scheme, 100 Gms of dry food grains was provided to each student per day. After Supreme Court’s intervention, the MDMP was transformed into a cooked nutritious meal in September 2004. Under this scheme, 300 calories of food and 8-12 Gms of protein were provided to each student of primary school. This program was further extended to students of Upper Primary schools in India from 01st April 2008.

At present, MDMP is the largest food program in the world. In this program, 11.59 crore students are the beneficiary across India and 25.95 lakh Cook cum Helper (CCH) who belongs to lower strata of the society, works in 8.45 lakh kitchen cum stores of schools (mdm.nic.in)

retrieved on 31st March 2020). The performance of the states in implementing the MDMP varies as per the dedication and efficiency of the state machinery. States like Tamilnadu, Kerala, and Gujarat are the role model for implementing this program (Grover and Kaur, 2012).

REFORMS IN MID DAY MEAL:

Indian government has renamed MDMP as PM Poshan Scheme (Formally called Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman Yojna) for the next five years on 29th September 2021. It is restructuring of Mid-day Meal Program. This scheme will come into effect from next year. It will render benefit to 1.8 crore students studying in 11.2 lakh government and aided schools. The government has planned to make an outlay of

₹1.31 lakh crore. It also includes the state government's share of ₹ 31,733.17 crores. This scheme is designed to focus on "holistic nutrition", learning outcome, and enrolment of students. It will also help in programs like Atamirbhar Bharat and vocal for locals. It has the provision of a 5% flexi component in the existing budget so that states can incorporate additional items of nutrition, e.g. fruit, milk, egg, or fortified food. Besides it, other reforms are:

Inclusion of Balvatika students: This scheme will include 24 lakh pre-primary children studying in Balvatika. These Balvatika were opened last year and it is attached with Angandwadis Kendra.

Supplementary Nutrition: The new scheme is not only limited to feeding an empty stomach but is dedicated to providing nutritious meals so that a student can be saved from the menace of malnutrition. The Central Government has identified 120 aspirational districts across India where malnutrition and a high prevalence of anemia are prevailing. In these districts, nutrition supplements will be provided. In this scheme, more fortified foods will be provided.

States to decide diet: In the new policy, states can make their menu as per locally available resources. The local dishes will be cheap and more nutritious. The Central government's assistance is not limited to food grains only. Now Centre is ready to bear the cost of eggs, milk, etc.

Nutri-gardens: Under this scheme, Nutri-garden will be developed in each school, so that students can get fresh and organic vegetables to cater to their nutritional requirements. Students will get firsthand experience of food production and nature. If there is no land available in the school then local vegetable plants will be grown in big pots. The Forest department will help in developing these gardens. Students will directly participate in the development, maintenance, and understanding of the concept of nutrition. These gardens will be a learning place for Science, Math, and Agronomy, etc.

Women and FPOs: This scheme will also promote vocal for locals by encouraging women self-help groups (SHG) and farmer producer organizations (FPO). These agencies will provide locally grown traditional and nutritious food items.

Social Audit: In Mid-day Meal Scheme, only two districts were assigned for social audit in a

state but now all the districts in the country will authorize students of medical colleges and universities to visit and examine the Poshan scheme and send their feedback to the higher authorities. Now social auditing is mandatory for this scheme. It will bring more accountability, transparency, and efficiency to the scheme.

Tithi-Bhojan: It is a special feature of this scheme, earlier this scheme was successfully implemented in the Gujarat state. Now, this scheme is being institutionalized. It is a community participation program in which people provide a feast to students on special occasions/ festivals. Students belonging to affluent families will be requested to bring two lunch boxes to provide nutritious food to the needy students. It will be voluntary participation.

Direct Benefit Transfers to school: The Centre govt. will directly transfer amounts to school account for cooking cost and honorarium amount for cook cum helpers. It will stop leakage and misuse of the amount and save time.

Nutrition expert: Government will appoint a nutrition expert for each school. These experts will ensure that the students will get a nutritious meal that will take care of the Body Mass Index (BMI) and haemoglobin level of students.

Bringing awareness about nutrition: The scheme emphasizes bringing awareness about nutritious food among students and parents. The parents will be trained about the preparation of the nutritious meal and its importance in the life of a growing child.

Cooking competition: Cooking competition will be organized from village level to national level to encourage innovative menus based on locally available ingredients. It will enhance the capability of the cooks.

Discussion: One of the objectives of Mid-day meals is improvement in child nutrition level. Child nutrition is based on three parameters, i.e. stunting, wasting, and underweight. To mitigate these lacunae Mid-day Meal was launched which is the largest school lunch program in the world. It has helped in obtaining various educational parameters viz. improvement in students' attendance, enrolment, and nutrition level. But this scheme could not eliminate the problem of malnutrition in the last 25 years of its journey. India's nutrition report is pathetic, it reveals that its, 50% women are suffering from anemia in reproductive age, 33% students are stunted, and 20% students are wasted in the age group of under five years. Stunting is prevalent among students belonging to lower strata of society. It is found that stunting is 10.1% higher in rural than urban areas. On the other side, prevalence of overweight is 20.7% in women and 18.9% in men. So, there is the coexistence of under nutrition and overweight causing double challenge of under nutrition. It is evident that there is disparity in quality of life among Indians despite socio-economic development. This variation of socio-economic development is also found within states (Global Nutrition Report 2020).

According to National Family Health Survey-V (2019-20), we have done badly in child nutrition in the last five years. Big states like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar, Assam, J&K, Karnataka, Telangana, Kerala, and West Bengal have reversed the trend of improvement of child nutrition. For example in the rich state like Goa, stunting has gone up from 20% to 25.1%, the other state Kerala that holds the highest HDI rating but its stunting increased from

19% to 23%. If such states are not able to even maintain their earlier level then other states are expected to perform more poorly. India has reversed its performance in all three parameters. The other type of malnutrition is the problem of overweight e.g. this problem increased in Gujarat from 1.9% to 3.9% and in Himachal Pradesh, the problem increased from 2.6% to 5.7, In J&K problem increased from 5.6% to 9.6%. It shows consumption of more carbohydrate meals and junk food which has fewer vitamins, minerals, and micro-nutrients. On the other hand, India is the home of 25.5 million wasted children out of 49 million worldwide, i.e. more than half of stunted children live in India. It is a matter of great embracement for a nuclear weapons empowered country which has hoisted its national flag on the Moon.

It does not mean that India has not done anything; it has performed very well in the hygiene sector and the access and extension of integrated child development services (ICDS). But it could not reverse the performance for child nutrition. Child nutrition is based on a bench that has three legs, viz. Hygiene, government support, and family income. If two legs (Hygiene & government support) become longer and stronger but the third leg (family income) remains weaker and shorter than the base/ bench will not be balanced and good child nutrition cannot take place due to the decline of Indian GDP rate. In other words, the family income of the poor population did not rise especially after demonetization and before the Covid- 19 pandemic. So, India could not even hold its previous level of child nutrition.

The present status of Mid-Day Meal and micronutrient supplement schemes by the government of India have insignificant but might have a positive impact on the health-related fitness of school children. Mid-Day Meal and MDM+ Micronutrients Supplement programs did not have statistical significance but had a positive impact on Cardio-Vascular Endurance. Both the Experimental groups were more effective than the control group. In which MDM + MNS group was more effective in comparison to the MDM group (Rashidi, 2018). Although the erstwhile MDMP was able to increase enrolment, attendance, and academic level it has not been able to improve nutrition level.

Malnutrition is caused by inequity— both under nutrition and overweight. Inequities in food and health lead to more inequalities that perpetuate a vicious cycle. To reduce the intensity of inequality Indian government launched the program to Transform Aspirational Districts to bring integration and equitable nutrition in 2018. This program aims to bring social justice, equity, and inclusion in 115 ‘Aspirational districts in India. It is a scheme to improve the level of nutrition, health, education, agriculture, infrastructure, and water resources in each ‘Aspirational’ district of India. This program also mitigates disparity in living standards and enhances the skill of citizens to participate in economic activities in the ‘Aspirational’ districts of India.

While the NEP also proposes breakfast in schools, the government has not taken any decision on that yet. It is hard to believe that a single lunch for 220 days in a year can mitigate malnutrition which is not only inherent but also prevailing in the family due to low income. Including pre-nursery classes in PM, Poshan Scheme is a welcome step of the central government but it should have included the senior secondary school students also.

The government and policymakers are increasingly recognizing the seriousness of the consequences of malnutrition. It is the earnest desire of the government to prevent and treat the causes of malnutrition at the early stage because it is highly cost-effective at this stage. Strong political commitment is required for tackling malnutrition, huge investment and data systems required for the execution of PM Poshan programs. The reforms in the Mid-day Meal scheme are a good step in the right direction but these reforms are not sufficient to mitigate the lacuna of malnutrition because it is half-hearted.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MORE REFORMS:

The government cannot still away from the responsibility of welfare of its students who will own the responsibility of running this country. A strong political commitment, leadership, and governance are required to achieve equality in nutrition outcomes. It can be achieved with a combination of training, capacity-building, financial assistance. The malnourished students should be identified and a comprehensive package that includes nutritional diet, health facilities, and physical exercise with yoga.

1. New Education Policy has recommended that breakfast should be provided under Mid-day Meal Scheme. So government should make provision of nutritious breakfast for the students in the schools because single meal that too in working days is not sufficient for mitigating the menaces of malnutrition.
2. PM Poshan scheme should be extended to class 10+2 because nutritious food in adolescent age is crucial for the growth and development of a student. Students should be provided breakfast and lunch on nonworking days also as it is a physical requirement without any break.
3. The government must turn the Covid-19 pandemic into opportunities to take initiative to address the problem of inequities across malnutrition in all its forms. It is necessary to prioritize policies and financing to mitigate malnutrition because a citizen can access good quality of education, health facilities, and nutritious diet only if he enjoys power, resource and money.
4. Nutrition data can play crucial role to find out the nutritional disparity among students of various socio-economic backgrounds in India. Besides it, these data will reveal the pattern of diet, anthropometry, micronutrient status, and health outcomes. These data should be shared between various agencies which are connected with the mission for the mitigation of malnutrition.
5. The Global Nutrition Report 2020 recommended that nutrition should be integrated with the universal health program of the country. It will give dual benefits by reducing the expenditure on health care and make it inclusive. Level of nutrition should be monitored and evaluated so that equitable distribution of nutrition services can be ensured in terms of delivery, coverage, and access.
6. The honorarium of cooks and workers should be hiked so that they work with more motivation. They should be provided in-service training.

7. Government should scale up a nutrition-care budget and sustain it till malnutrition is mitigated. Several qualified nutrition experts should be appointed to improve the standard of nutritional care. They can conduct training camps and awareness meetings for parents.
8. Government should provide nutrition products, ready-to-use therapeutic foods, at affordable rates.
9. Innovative technological solutions, e.g. counseling and web applications, should be used to enhance access to quality nutrition care, particularly for those living in remote areas.
10. Students should be called for 30 minutes early in school for Yoga & Pranayama. It will improve their overall health and eliminate malnutrition.
11. Government should intensify poverty mitigation program so that parents can afford nutritious meals for their wards.

CONCLUSION:

Inclusive development is the best Mantra of development in a democratic and welfare country like India. The Mid Day Meal is the only panacea for improving the poor performance in respect of health standards and academic achievements of the students belonging to lower strata of the society in the state. The Midday Meal Scheme was unable to mitigate the centuries-old problem of malnutrition because it is limited to school days, class Ist to VIII and not implemented in an effective way. The government of India announced reforms in MDMP, that is about three decades old scheme for making it more inclusive, administratively efficient and focussed. These reforms like rebranding, the inclusion of Balvatika students who are already beneficiaries of free eatables, emphasis on social audit, Tithi Bhojan, kitchen garden, etc are mere eyewash. Providing one-time lunch during school working days will not solve the problem. Government should understand the urgency of the elimination of malnutrition and its long-term benefits. It is highly recommended even by the National Policy of Education to start the breakfast for the future generation of India. The PM Poshan Scheme should be extended up to the senior secondary level as their body needs more nutritious meals for growth and development. It should also bring equality of opportunity and implement schemes so that family income can be increased. In the nutshell, it can be stated that these are half-hearted reforms. The government should open its treasury for the future generation because there is no better investment than investing in health and education of the future generation of India.

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