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**MID DAY MEAL SCHEME IN THE ENHANCEMENT OF RETENTION IN  
SCHOOLS**

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***Introduction***

Education goes a long way in the fruitful development of an individual. It is true that it helps him to explore the new horizons of knowledge, but at the basic level he gets to acquire skills necessary for sustainable earning potential. Undeveloped potential is a national loss. Well educated citizens of a nation can propel it towards greater prosperity and stability.

Our country has huge material resources as well as human resources with remarkable intellectual potential. Both these resources can be utilized in productive manner if we cultivate adequate knowledge about them. If material resources is to be used effectively, people should have proper attitude and sensitivity towards their environment. If human resources can be developed, it can also be done only if we place high value on human capacities. But the intellectual potential and right attitudes that can maximize the use of resources can be manifested at the practical level only through proper education.

Having realized the importance of education, India has been making efforts right from the time of independence to provide education to all its citizens. The main thrust was given through the constitutional commitment of providing free and compulsory education for all children until they completed the age of fourteen years. Although various programmes and policies related to primary education have been mooted this goal has not been achieved yet.

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## ***Programmes and schemes started by government***

- The **Operation Blackboard** scheme, started in 1987-88, which aimed at improving the classroom environment by providing infrastructural facilities, additional teachers etc.
- The scheme of **Restructuring and Reorganisation of Teacher Education**, started in 1987, aims to strengthen the institutional base of teacher training by taking up special programmes for training of teachers in specified areas and other non-institutional training programmes.
- The **District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)**, launched in 1994, is assisted by the World Bank, European Commission, Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). It aims at operationalising the strategies for achieving UPE/UEE through district-specific planning and disaggregated target setting in low female literacy districts and builds on the successful Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) which has created a favourable climate for universalisation.
- Two externally-aided projects for basic education are the **Shiksha Karmi and Lok Jumbish** projects in Rajasthan. Both are innovative projects aimed at the universalisation of elementary education together with a qualitative improvement in remote and socially backward villages with a primary focus on gender.
- **Mahila Samakhya**, was started in 1989 in five States. It aims to promote women's education and empowerment of women.
- The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education commonly known as the **Mid-day Meal programme** was launched in 1995.
- The scheme of **Non-formal education (NFE)**, introduced in 1977-78 on a pilot basis and expanded in subsequent years, focused on out-of school children in the 6-14 age group.
- **Janshala (GOI-UN) Programme** is a community-based primary education programme that aims to make primary education more accessible and effective, especially for girls and children in deprived communities, marginalized groups, SCs/STs, minorities, working children and children with special needs.

- **The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan** was launched towards the end of the Ninth Plan to achieve the goal of UEE through a time-bound integrated approach, in partnership with states

One of difficulties in the realization of the UPE goals refers to non enrollment and drop out of children. Reasons for children not attending school are many.

In order to attract such children and to convince their parents of the value of education , a number of incentive schemes were launched at different periods of time during the last few decades. Broadly , these incentives were in the form of provision of free midday meal to children in schools, supply of free textbooks, free uniforms, scholarship /stipend etc..My paper focuses on the midday meal scheme which has become very popular now. The Supreme Court and the overwhelming majority of academics and NGOs believe in it. A growing number of poor parents have emerged as a pressure group for this scheme.

### ***Its origin and implementation in TN***

Free mid-day meals for school students were first introduced in a Japanese private school in the late 1800s, in Brazil in 1938 and in the United States in 1946. It produced satisfactory results. Comments the Global School Feeding Report of the United Nation's World Food Programme: "School feeding programmes often double enrollment within a year and can produce a 40 percent improvement in academic performance in just two years. Children who take part in such programmes stay in school longer and the expense is minimal".

In India the scheme was first introduced in the southern state of Tamilnadu way back in 1956 and it proved remarkably successful in improving school enrollment in that state. Though partially launched in 1956, the mid-day meal programme was given full shape and form by the state's actor-turned chief minister the late M.G.Ramachandran in 1982.

### **Mid-day meals: MGR's valuable legacy**

The mid-day meal scheme for school children was introduced in Tamilnadu as early as 1925 by the Corporation of Madras, but became a state-wide scheme in 1956 under then chief minister the late K. Kamaraj who introduced it in Adi Dravida community schools as the 'Poor Feeding' programme. In 1961, the government started receiving American

aid for the programme and it was expanded to all corporation and government schools in urban areas.

But it was only in July 1982 under the leadership of the legendary chief minister the late M.G. Ramachandran that the 'Puratchi Thalaivar MGR Nutritious Meal Programme' (PTMGR NMP) was introduced in a phased manner in child welfare centres in rural areas for pre-school children in the age group two-five years and for primary school children in the age group five-nine years. Subsequently on September 15 the same year, despite widespread criticism from economists and pundits, MGR extended the scheme to Nutritious Meal Centres in urban areas. It was further extended to school students between 10-15 years in 1984.

Today, the TN free noon meal is available to all children of government, corporation, panchayat and municipal schools in the state. Old age pensioners and pregnant women can also avail of the scheme. The infrastructure, built gradually over the years comprises child welfare centres, school nutritious meal centres and anganwadi centres monitored by committees at the district, block, corporation, municipality and panchayat levels. Under the scheme, cooked meals are served with calorie value equivalent to 100 gm of wheat or rice per student per school day.

Table 1:Ingredients and their Nutritive Values

Ingredients	2-5 years			5-15 years			Std IX And X		
	Scale of diet (Grams)	Calorie Value	Protein Value	Scale of diet (Grams)	Calorie Value	Protein Value	Scale of diet (Grams)	Calorie Value	Protein Value
Rice	80	276.0	5.12	100	346	6.4	120	415	7.7
Pulses	10	34.2	2.50	15	50	3.2	15	50	3.2
Oil	2	18.0	0	1.0	9	--	1	9	--
Vegetable condiments	50	30.0	1	50	30	1	50	30	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>358.2</b>	<b>8.62</b>		<b>435</b>	<b>10.6</b>		<b>504</b>	<b>11.9</b>

Source Tamil Nadu, government of social welfare and Nutritious meal programme department(undated)

The number of children covered under the programme has risen from 33.4 million in about 3,22,000 schools in 1995-96 to 105.1 million students in 7,92,000 schools spread over 576 districts in 2000-01

### ***Its spread to other states***

The successful introduction of Tamilnadu's NMP prompted the creation of a National Programme of Nutritional Support to primary education (popularly known as the mid-day meal scheme) in 1995. Under this programme the Union HRD ministry supplies free foodgrains to primary school children at the rate of 100 gm per child for ten months in the year. Implemented by the Department of Education of every state, it covers children enrolled in classes I to IV in government and government-aided schools in the whole country. In a few states, the program provides a cooked meal daily during the school year, but in the majority of States, support comes as a foodgrain ration (3 kgs per month). Eligibility requires 80% attendance in the previous month, although mere presence during distribution is usually adequate in many states

Currently, only six states - Gujarat, Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh (174 tribal blocks) and Madhya Pradesh - and the Union Territory of Pondicherry are providing hot cooked meals under the programme. In Delhi, ready-to-eat food is being distributed. The remaining states/ Union Territories are distributing food grains (wheat/rice). States like Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka were able to lift 95.7 per cent, 92.9 per cent, 87.8 per cent and 86.6 per cent of food grains respectively under the scheme in 2000-01 while some others such as Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Delhi lifted only 12.78 per cent, 25.17 per cent, 30.33 per cent and 33.98 per cent food grains respectively.

### ***Present allocation of funds***

Our finance minister in his budget speech 2006 said that there are twelve crore children covered under the mid day meal scheme, which is the largest school lunch programme in the world and that he proposed to enhance the allocation from 3010 crore to 4813 crore.

## ***Role in retention of children***

The drop-out rate (the closest that one can come to, in assessing this phenomenon) in Tamil Nadu has been on a steady decline at the primary level. During 1987-88, the dropout rate for students at the primary level was 21.78 and by 2000-01, the rate had come down to 14.4

Table 2: Drop out rate in Tamil Nadu

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
1987-88	19.44	24.45	21.78
1988-89	19.17	24.01	21.42
1989-09	18.78	23.64	21.05
1990-91	18.27	22.68	20.32
1991-92	17.71	21.16	19.31
1992-93	17.11	19.62	18.27
1993-94	16.39	18.35	17.30
1994-95	15.58	17.65	16.54
1995-96	14.88	16.97	15.85
1995-97	14.05	16.20	15.06
1997-98	13.99	16.18	15.05
1998-99	12.98	16.15	14.52
1999-2000	12.93	16.07	14.41
2000-01	12.86	16.03	14.40

Source : Tamil Nadu, government of, Policy note, Department of Education, various years

The Mid-day Meal scheme has been evaluated by different agencies at different points of time. The Operations Research Group, evaluated the scheme in July 1999 in ten states with the support of UNICEF and found that the scheme has attracted SC/ST children and children belonging to lower income groups to school. The Planning Commission also commissioned two studies in April 2000 to measure the impact of the scheme and found that a cooked meal programme was preferable not only from the health point of view but also because it attracted more children to schools. Similarly, other studies conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) have also upheld the view that the scheme has had a positive impact in the direction of universalisation of primary education

Evaluation of the programme revealed that the scheme has attracted children of underprivileged sections to schools and has led to improvement in the enrolment and attendance in many states. Not only in terms of attendance in the classroom one more positive impact is the interest shown by parents to send their children to school. There has been dramatic impact in the enrolment and retention of girl children specially. Jean Dreze, a visiting professor at Delhi School of Economics, with impeccable research credentials believes that apart from boosting school attendance and child nutrition, mid-day meals have an important socialization value and foster gender equity. "As children learn to sit together and share a common meal, one can expect some erosion of caste prejudices and class inequality. They also reduce the gender gap in education, since they boost female school attendance more than male attendance," he says. Nutritional status of children studying in primary school in government, local, and government aided school have also shown improvement.

### ***Weaknesses of the programme***

Some of the weaknesses of the programme are:

- Ø Non-provision of a cooked meal.
- Ø Enrolment data, which is to be provided by the states each year and on the basis of which food grains are allocated for ten academic months, is not available. This is evident in the fact that there is a mismatch between the allocation and lifting of food grains.
- Ø Inability of states to arrange the timely delivery of food grains. A major reason for this is the non-availability of funds with the implementing agencies to meet the initial expenditure on transportation charges, which is later reimbursed by the central government. This particularly affects schools in far-flung areas.
- Ø Community participation in the implementation of the programme is lacking because of poor awareness and advocacy among other things.
- Ø Since the initial arrangement for Management Information System (MIS) through the National Informatics Centre NET (NICNET) did not take off, close monitoring and supervision of the programme was negligible, resulting in furnishing of erratic reports on utilisation as well as beneficiaries covered under the scheme.
- Ø Some states argue that the number of meals and children involved are too large to be manageable.

Ø Social activists allege that the food was being prepared by untrained cooks in unhygienic cooking conditions.

Ø Some believe that the provision of cooked meals disrupts classroom processes. Some media reports suggest that teachers spend too much time supervising culinary operations to the detriment of academic timetables.

### ***Steps in effective management of the scheme***

Decentralising the free mid-day meal to the maximum possible degree is very important. “The main work is at the micro level. The more we involve government machinery, the more difficult it becomes to supervise because this is a programme which needs micro-management at the grassroot level. Village Education Committees and Village Panchayats have to assume responsibility of ensuring that the mid-day meal scheme works in their local schools,” says S.C. Tripathi secretary, elementary education in the ministry.

“Sensitization of teachers about the positive aspects of the scheme is very important. The majority of teachers fear classroom disruption and worry that it will take up too much of their time. Greater awareness of the benefits of mid-day meals would help to overcome such fears,” says Jean Dreze.

Although there is bound to be initial setbacks government should persist in continuing with the scheme

Involvement of independent self-help groups in the form of mothers’ groups in every school offering the scheme could be another method of tackling the issue

State governments also need to co-opt and involve India’s massive number of NGOs (non-government organisations) which are ever-ready to lend a helping hand to education causes.

### ***Conclusion***

Education has an intrinsic value for the development of the society and helps in the achievement of a better social order. Greater literacy and basic education help individuals to make better use of available economic opportunities. The Government has decided to

make free and compulsory elementary education a fundamental right. Services like literacy, elementary education, primary health care, nutrition, mother and child care, family welfare and rural development have strong linkages and can only be strengthened through an appropriate integrated approach which will optimise public expenditure and reinforce the effective delivery system.

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