

Bihar school meal disaster: MDMS must stay, while government should go

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On 16 July 2013, school children at a government school in Bihar complained that their midday meal they were served tasted bad. They ate it anyway, because they were hungry, and could not be sure that they would get another opportunity to eat that day. The food was in fact filled with concentrated pesticides, causing 23 children to die and more to fall ill. This was a direct result of the complete lack of oversight and accountability in the implementation of the Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), for which the state government is to be blamed. In addition to this failure, more children died from the lack of available antidotes at health clinics. The government's indifferent attitude towards the basic rights of its citizens has created the horrifying paradox that children have no choice but to risk dying from eating in a starving country. As a consequence the Bihar state government must go.

In making this conclusion, it is important to remember that the MDMS is not a charity. It is an essential component in ensuring the right to food. India's Supreme Court has ruled that the right to life with human dignity, including the right to food and other basic necessities, is a fundamental right, which is the government's duty to respect, protect and fulfil. The Supreme Court has ordered that the national government and the state governments provide cooked midday meals in all schools so that children will not starve and die in a country that has enough food. Even though the MDMS is a national scheme, each state is responsible for implementing it within its territory.

MDMS Bihar

In their 11th report on the status of implementation of right to food in Bihar, the Supreme Court Commissioners, appointed by the court to monitor the compliance of its orders, said there were severe problems regarding the implementation of the MDMS in Bihar. First, most schools did not serve a meal regularly because of problems with the flow of funds and supply of grains. Second, the quality of the food was generally poor.

For example, the quality of rice was very different from school to school and was generally below standard. Third, teachers and government officials' knowledge of the MDMS was poor and their attitude towards the programme indifferent. The report states that community participation was completely absent. Fourth, the facilities were very poor. Most schools did not have sufficient cooking utensils, and half of the schools did not have kitchen sheds. Water facilities were below standard in all schools. Hand washing facilities existed in only half of the schools, and the maintenance of toilets was poor. Most schools did not have any plates for the kids to eat from. The report recommended improved financing, systematic oversight and monitoring, and improvements of the distribution system to ensure the quality and safety of the food. The recommendations of the report have not been followed, and it is therefore no surprise that children have died as a direct consequence. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

Under these circumstances, the Bihar government's attempt to frame the deaths as an unfortunate accident can only be viewed as contempt for its own people. It cannot be called an accident when the government could have prevented it, and when it happens frequently. On July 17 for instance, a further 50 students fell ill in another Bihar government school after eating the midday meal. P. K. Shahi, minister of human resource development in Bihar attempted to put the blame on local corruption:

It is a very daunting task to provide freshly cooked quality meals in 73,000 schools. Many are involved in managing the food programs, including teachers, village elders and state officials. All these people look for easy money, and there is very little scope of making money without compromising the quality and quantity. It is just not possible to taste meals in all the 73,000 schools before children eat the food.

Mr. Shahi and the rest of the government seem to think that preventing corruption and ensuring quality in government services is not the responsibility of the government. This is an absurd proposition. The government has created a system without any form of oversight and accountability despite the Supreme Court directly telling it to do otherwise. Besides trying to avoid the blame, the government has only taken three initiatives in addressing this tragedy. The first was to promptly promise a small compensation to the victim families. This compensation was offered when the ill children did not yet receive adequate health care, and the only purpose of this thus seems to be to improve the public attitude towards the government. The second initiative was to issue a directive in local newspapers that every head teacher has to taste the food before serving the children. This clearly shows the lack of seriousness of the government. The idea of the midday meal is to provide nutrition to the children because the state has failed to secure opportunities for a decent livelihood for their parents. The food should therefore be scientifically tested to ensure its safety and nutritional value. Making teachers taste the food first is missing the point completely, as the food can still be both dangerous and of bad quality without any proper test. It will also not improve accountability since this directive is impossible to enforce. Lastly, the government plans to make it mandatory to paint the safety norms on school walls. Of course, this will not eradicate the real problem. None of these initiatives will prevent future incidents. The lack of any serious action on behalf of the government pointedly speaks to its attitude towards the rights of its people and the MDMS. What is required is prevention of corruption and quality maintenance of government services. The death of 23 children is an enormous tragedy in itself, but the damage done to the reputation of the MDMS might turn out to be even worse.

As described by Shweta Sharma, a Jharkhand teacher, in her passionate account of her experiences with the MDMS, the school meal is often the only opportunity to get a meal for these children, and many parents would not send their children to school, if it were not for the midday meal. Now reports say that the children are refusing to eat the food, and teachers are beaten by students as lawlessness prevails. One can only guess at the number of parents who will not send their children to school in the future, and thus take the only opportunity that these children have at education and development. When the MDMS is properly implemented, it is very effective. Studies show that for a cost of only three cents per school child per school day, the programme can reduce protein deficiency by 100 percent and thus play a crucial role in the implementation of the right to food and also improve school attendance and effectiveness through the reduction of malnutrition. Bihar cannot relieve hunger if the government continues to view the right to food as some kind of charity that people should be grateful to receive. The very purpose of the government is to ensure the rights of its people, including the right to a life in dignity. To have no choice but to risk dying from eating in a starving country because of the government's indifference is a grave violation of this right. The Bihar government has failed its most basic duty; it should admit this failure and resign.

MDMS versus cash transfers

In recent years, India's central government has expressed an increased interest in introducing cash transfers instead of subsidized food. Bihar's MDMS disaster plays nicely into the hands of those arguing in favour of cash transfers. While proponents of cash transfers will be eager to forget the responsibility of the Bihar state government, and argue that the incident shows that the MDMS has failed, in fact, the real problem is the disastrous implementation of the scheme by an indifferent government. When implemented properly, the MDMS delivers safe, cheap meals that improve attendance and classroom teaching, and provide a safety net for children who would otherwise starve.

Proponents of cash transfers make three main arguments against the MDMS. First, they argue that the MDMS will not deliver improvements in nutrition and educational attainment because the MDMS fails to target the children and interferes with teaching.²¹ Second, they argue that the midday meals are a health hazard. Third, it is argued that the Public Distribution System (PDS), which makes the distribution of food to schools possible, is fundamentally flawed and corrupt. What the supporters of these arguments fail to appreciate, is that these problems are not inherent to the MDMS. Ineffectiveness, health hazards, and corruption are a result of poor implementation. And at its root, poor implementation is the result of a lack of political will.

In recent years, several studies have been conducted to investigate the impact of the MDMS in India. In one of the first surveys on the midday meal, Drèze & Goyal (2003) found that the scheme has several good consequences such as improved attendance rate, child nutrition, and social equality. Interviews revealed that the introduction of the MDMS improved not only the attendance of children, but also made them more likely to stay after the lunch break. Before the introduction of the midday meal, many children would go home for lunch and not return. Now the children stay within the school premises, allowing classes to resume smoothly. The study also suggests that the program has proved to be very effective in eradicating hunger. The midday meal helps the children maintain energy levels throughout the day, ensuring better concentration in the process. More importantly, midday meals act as a security net, not only for the children coming from poor families, but also for those affected by natural calamities like drought. In areas where hunger is endemic, the midday meal might be the only thing saving the children from chronic malnutrition.

Some problems are also noted by Dreze and Goyal, such as the programme's interruption of classroom teaching in some schools. This happens because of bad infrastructure such as inadequate utensils, lack of cooking sheds, and poor water supply. It can also happen due to the lack of cooks and helpers, which can put extra workload on the teachers. The authors conclude that the functioning of the programs is determined by political will to a large extent. In the states where the midday meal has been implemented properly with political backing and sufficient funding, the programme tends to function much better. Subsequent studies have since supported these views.

2013V7N3P04-1.jpg Afridi (2010) has studied the short term nutritional impact of the midday meal. The data shows that the scheme reduced the daily protein deficiency by 100 percent, the daily calorie deficiency by almost 30 percent, and the daily iron deficiency by 10 percent. Singh et al (2012) tested the long term impact of the programme using longitudinal data from Andhra Pradesh. They conclude that the midday meal effectively acts as a security net for children affected by drought. These children initially had a much lower height-for-age (called stunted growth) than the average child. The children who received midday meals were able to reverse this stunted growth and catch up with children unaffected by drought, while the children who did not receive midday meals remained stunted. This reversal is possible because long term malnutrition in childhood also delays skeletal growth, making it possible to reach one's growth potential if adequate nutrition is provided. Normally the reversal does not occur because the child will often face the same socioeconomic constraints that resulted in their initial stunted growth. This does not mean that the negative consequences of years of malnutrition in childhood can suddenly be turned around, but it does show the high impact midday meals have on long term nutritional status. It is well established that stunted growth impairs cognitive development and reduces the learning ability of children.

2013V7N3P04-2.jpg After analyzing data from 41 villages in Madhya Pradesh, Afridi (2007) concluded that the average monthly attendance rate for girls increased by more than 10 percent as a result of the MDMS, and thereby increased overall attendance rate and reduced gender inequality. Bonds (2012) analyzed India's 2004 Socio-Economic Survey dataset, and found that attendance rates are 29.5 percent

higher among children in public schools who receive the midday meal compared to those who do not, after controlling for sex, age, rural/urban, family size, household income, and religion. The study also concludes that the rise in attendance is significantly higher among children from poor families.

Singh (2008) found that the midday meal improves the children's learning. The midday meal scheme in Andhra Pradesh improved the pupils' Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test scores by more than 0.6 standard divisions. Whether the increased educational attainment is due to the increased attendance rate or increased learning ability through improved nutritional status, long or short term, has not been thoroughly examined.

These studies show that the MDMS does succeed in targeting the children. The MDMS has proved an essential part of the implementation of the right to food, and aids India's development goals by improving educational attendance rates, learning, and health.

What about the PDS then? If the distribution system is inherently ineffective, then the policy of transfer in kind will be ineffective as well. This, however, is not the case. As Khera (2011) points out in her analysis of leakage in the PDS, the states that make the PDS a priority are also the ones having low leakage in the system. Chhattisgarh is a good example of this. The diversion of grain in Chhattisgarh was very high before the government suddenly decided to stop corruption and make the system work. Reforms of the PDS began in 2004, and now the diversion of grain is close to nothing.

On the supply side, the Chhattisgarh government decided in 2004 to de-privatize ration shops. Community institutions, such as Gram Panchayats, have been put in charge instead. Another reform was to deliver the grain to the shops instead of having the shop owners pick it up from the warehouses. This way the shop owners cannot falsely tell their customers that there was a shortfall at the warehouses, in order to sell the grain on the black market. Another important step was to improve grievance redressal, such as providing active help lines, where complaints from the users can be lodged, and action will be taken. Chhattisgarh has also experimented with SMS alerts to inform citizens, and writing the entitlements of the households on their houses. All these inexpensive measures have the purpose of creating a transparent and responsive system led by the community, and ensure that corrupt shop owners and truck drivers will be punished if they try to cheat.

On the demand side, the government increased the amount of beneficiaries to almost 80 percent of all rural households in 2008. In 2012 this was increased to 90 percent. When almost everybody, including the better educated, has a stake in the PDS, the pressure on the system to deliver is greater. States such as Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, and Orissa have improved their PDS using similar methods. Ration shops in Bihar, on the other hand, are almost exclusively owned by private dealers, and the government does not deliver the grain directly to the shops. It is thus not surprising that Bihar has the most corrupt system by far, with the highest amount of diversion. Only 45 percent of the grain reaches its intended beneficiaries, and 70 percent of respondents report that they have to skip meals because of a lack of food (Khera 2011b).

The alternative to the PDS, cash transfers, remains unpopular with the poor. In a survey of nine states by Khera (2011b), only 19.5 percent expressed preference for cash transfers while 72.8 percent preferred food. The reasons for this are many. First, people have bad experiences with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) wage payments. Since 2008, NREGA wages have been paid through bank or post offices. Many workers have experienced delays in payment (sometimes up to a year), and rampant corruption in the payment of the wages. The banks are often overcrowded, and many workers have to make repeated trips to the bank before collecting their wages. Second, many worry about access to markets to buy food, as well as to banks/post offices to receive money. The study found that the average household has to go a further 3.8 km to reach banks/post offices, compared to the distance to the fair

price shops. Markets can also be far away, and at some places, for example in parts of Orissa and Chhattisgarh, rice is not available throughout the year. Third, many people would be dependent on local traders to deliver food for affordable prices. There is, however, no guarantee that traders will not take advantage of the lack of fallback options by raising prices. Related to this is the biggest worry of all; that increased market prices will decrease food security as inflation correction of the cash transfer will happen with a time lag. In a starving country like India, this will often mean the difference between life and death.

Cash transfers might be a viable option when infrastructure and technology allows for frictionless implementation, but the disastrous results of the government cash transfer pilots prove that this is still a distant future. An attempt to introduce cash transfers instead of subsidized kerosene in a district in Rajasthan for instance, resulted in a 79 percent decrease in sales because a lot of people did not receive their cash transfers consistently. Would it then really be reasonable to expect that the children will receive adequate food and attend school if their parents receive small and unreliable cash transfers? Giving meals directly to the children ensures that the money spent by the government has the intended impact.

Replacing a programme like MDMS with cash transfers would be to disregard available evidence. Studies show that with proper implementation, midday meals are safe and effective, and should be seen as both an essential part of the implementation of the right to food, as well as a high yield investment in human capital. This should be kept in mind when observing how some governments fail to implement the scheme, since it shows their contempt for the fundamental rights of the people, as well as the economic development of society. Good implementation is a matter of creating transparency and accountability, and the achievement of this is a matter of political will. There are plenty of good examples of successful reforms, and the governments of India and Bihar should learn from them. Corruption and neglect can never be an excuse to deny the people their basic rights.

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