

Problems of MDM in Mayurbhanj District: A Micro Study

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ABSTRACT: The MDM (Mid Day Meal) programme in Mayurbhanj no doubt has intervened in exerting impacts on nutrition and education of the school children. In particular the programme has brought the children of the disadvantaged groups in to the realm of primary education who suffered from the traditional weakness of virtual inaccessibility of primary schooling. It has helped eradicating class room hunger as well as under nutrition among the children of the underprivileged groups. The mid-day meal programme seems to have offered an opportunity to reduce the sense of distance between the children of different social groups. The programme has also created large scope of income generating activities for the women. Now the Women Self-Help Groups (WSHGs) are involved in implementing the MDM programmes. However, there is a long way to go for complete success of the programme in a less developed district like Mayurbhanj. Strong political will, adequate and timely supply of materials, increasing allocation of funds, filling up of all vacant posts, provision of sufficient infrastructure, effective supervision and accountability of the programme, devolving power to panchayatiraj institutions will definitely help the overall success of the programme. If all these recommendations are taken in right time and true spirit, then the objective of MDM scheme will not only be fulfilled but also it can contribute towards human capital formation in the formative years.

Key words: Mid Day Meal, Nutrition, Health, Primary Education, Mayurbhanj

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mayurbhanj is one of the districts in the country which is endowed with rich natural and mineral resources. But at the same time it has been identified as a backward district. It is a tribal dominated district which is home to less educated and malnourished people. The human capital status of the district is deplorable. Thus, this district was covered under the MDM programme in the first phase of its inception. It was understood that MDM will meet the requirement of human capital formation at the formative years of the children. The scheme will not only attract children to the school but also meet their nutritional requirements. The families will be supplemented if they send their children to the school. The analysis reveals that the mean heights, weights and BMIs for both boys and girls are greater than that of out of school children. This implies that the nutrition level of school children is better than that of the out of school children. However, it is disheartening to note that while both the school and out of school children are still below the prescribed standards of height, weight and BMI, the school children taking MDM are found closer to the standards. The impact of MDM on the health and nutrition of school children is also found to be statistically significant. Therefore, it is concluded that the MDM programme has intervened in fulfilling the requirement of health and nutrition of the children and thereby helped human capital formation in the formative years to certain extent. As nothing goes without flaws, MDM is no exception to it. The problems of MDM are mentioned below.

1.1 Problems in Organisational Structure

The implementation of MDM scheme is not free from hindrances. The following problems are reported to have been encountered by the implementing agencies.

(i) Serious Quality Problems

Serious quality problems persist in the provision of MDM. Mid-day meal are a health hazard because these are not prepared in hygienic condition. Pupils do feel unwell from time to time after consuming the contaminated MDM. Investigations reveal marked contrast in the standard of the MDM across the study area. Sometimes food is also cooked under the open sky which is unhygienic. The same problem was earlier pointed out by Dr. S. N. Mishra and Dr. M. Behera (2000), Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi (2003) Jean Dreze (2007), Jean Dreze and Aparajita Goyal (2003), Madhu and Bharat Dogra (2004) in their respective studies.

(ii) Lack of Basic Infrastructure

MDM disrupts classroom activities due to inadequate infrastructure. MDM is often cooked very close to the space where children are meant to be studying. Not surprisingly teachers in these schools often complain that the sight and smell of hot food has distracting effects on the pupils. In most of the schools, verandah is the

main venue for serving food. Earlier studies made by Jean Dreze and Aparajita Goyal (2003), Dipa Sinha (2008), Jyotsna Jain and Mihir Saha (2005) in their respective studies in different parts of India corroborate this finding.

(iii) Social Discrimination

Social discrimination is not rampant, i.e., negligible in our study area. In one school only, it is learnt that high caste parents object to the idea of an all caste lunch and MDM being prepared by lower caste cook. This contradicts the findings of the studies made in Chhatisgarh, Rajasthan and Karnataka with the leadership of Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi (2003) and Jean Dreze and Vivek S. (2003).

(iv) Corruption and Pilferage

It is found from the present study that the MDM scheme like other schemes of the government has been victim of corruption and pilferages. This point was also raised by Sambhu Ghatak in his article "Performance of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme". In the year 2001-02, Bishnupada Sethi made a study in Rayagada, Odisha, pointed out that there is corruption and pilferage in the MDM programme affecting the very objective of the programme for which it is meant, i.e., to provide nutritional food to school going children at the elementary level. The same thing is also pointed out by Jean Dreze (2007) and Dipa Sinha (2008) in their studies on MDM.

(v) Absence of Separate Budgetary Provision

There is the absence of a separate budgetary provision for the smooth implementation of MDM programme. Presently in our state, the programme is sustained by the allocation of funds by Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Odisha which receives the budgetary grants for several welfare schemes. MDM programme is looked upon as one of such programmes.

(vi) Absence of Weighing Machine

The absence of weighing machine in most of the sample schools makes it difficult to measure the quantity of food grains delivered. The highhandedness of higher officials at the distribution level forces the teachers to receive lesser quantity which later affects distribution of food in the school.

(vii) Inadequate Wages to Cooks and Helpers

It is disheartening to note that the wages paid to cooks and helpers at present are less than the minimum wages prescribed by the state. With such a low salary sometimes it becomes very difficult to find a cook and helper. Conversion cost is also found too inadequate to make a proper meal.

(viii) Delay in Disbursement

Sometimes there is delay in payment of bills to cooking agencies for which they are forced to take a cash loan or buy the ingredients on credit, sometimes at high interest rates. Dipa Sinha (2008) in her article- "Social Audit of Mid-Day Meal Scheme in Andhra Pradesh" raised the same issue.

(ix) MDM is not given in Holidays

In our sample schools, MDM is not given in holidays and Sundays. The poor parents expect that MDM should also be provided in holidays.

(x) Contractor Raj

It is observed that MDM is served by contractors under the disguise of Non- Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Self Help Groups (SHGs) and it confirms the finding of Sambhu Ghatak in his analysis- "Performance of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme".

1.2 Problems with the Staff

(i) Participation of VECs and PTAs in Decision Making Process is absent

Though the VECs and PTAs are expected to be active participants in all school related issues within panchayats, their participation in the decision-making process is found almost absent. The same was found by Farzana Afridi (2005) in the case of Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka.

(ii) Disruption in Classroom Activities

MDM disrupts classroom process because many of the teachers in charge of MDM spend a fair amount of time in organising and supervising the MDM. This largely affects the efficiency of the teachers and their ability of teaching. The teaching hours in schools get disturbed. During the field study, it was noticed that in most of the schools, particularly in interior areas, the number of teachers appointed are less than the sanctioned strength. With reduced number of teachers in the schools when one of the teachers is engaged for MDM

programme, the study hours in the school get dislocated. Teaching gets seriously hampered. Dr S.N. Mishra and Dr M Behera (2000), Bishnupada Sethi (2001-02), Anita Pratap(2003), Centre for Equity Studies (2003), Jean Dreze and Aparajita Goyal (2003), Jyotsa Jain and Mihir Shah (2005) and have also pointed out the same thing in their studies on MDM.

(iii) Participation of Children below Six Years

In many schools, children aged below six years come for the MDM and teachers find it difficult to refuse them food. This is accommodated for by showing excess attendance of school children. Dipa Sinha (2008) opined the same thing in her study.

(iv) Fake Students' Attendance

Some of the sample schools are found to have siphoned off food grains under the MDM scheme by showing fake attendance. The teachers, the government officials and the programme implementing agencies are all responsible for such unfortunate happenings.

(v) Maintenance of Stock Register

It is seen that headmasters in many schools are not properly maintaining the utilisation of rice. The stock registers are only filled at the end of month without checking the actual number of children or the actual amount of rice cooked. It implies that rice supplied for MDM is not being properly utilised. Sometimes food is prepared on the basis of the number of children enrolled rather than the number of children present. The surplus food is kept by the teacher, cook or helper to eat or take home.

(vi) No Organised Way of Serving MDM

In most of the schools there is no organised way of serving the MDM. Usually, the cook sits in one place and serves the meal while the children stand in a line with their plates taking turns. Once their plates are filled, the children sit in small groups on the open ground and come back individually if they want a second helping. This system results in lot of food being dropped while the children walk up and down; dirtying the place and even mud gets into the food because of all the movement.

1.3 Problems of the Students

Monotonous menus undermine the nutritional value of MDM. In most of the sample schools, children are served only rice and dal without any vegetables. There is no weekly menu followed by the implementing agencies. In some schools the quality of the meal is so poor that some children prefer to eat at home. Sometimes eating food makes them ill. The children are of the opinion that the food served is not sufficient for them. Though there is the provision to give eggs for two days in a week - on Wednesday and Friday- it is learnt that in some cases they are given for one day only. This is due to unavailability of eggs in the local market as reported by the teachers. Often bad quality eggs leads to students' sickness. Also it is revealed that sometimes students are distributed raw eggs instead of boiled ones. While the programme implementing agencies face problem to procure eggs for MDM programme, they distribute fruits like apple or banana as substitute of eggs. Fruits are not the exact substitute of eggs. So the nutritional support to children through MDM is hampered to some extent.

1.4 RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

On the basis of the findings and problems discussed above the present study prescribes following suggestions those have far-reaching policy implications for human capital formation in the formative years through the effective implementation of MDM in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha.

(i) Better Monitoring System

Monitoring system needs to be overhauled. Close supervision and regular inspections are essential to achieve higher quality standards. Better monitoring would also help to eradicate petty corruption, such as the pilferage of food by various intermediaries like suppliers of food materials, programme implementing agencies, e.g., SHGs and NGOs, teacher in charge of MDM, cooks and helpers.

(ii) Timely and Right Quantity of Delivery of Food Items

It is suggested that rice should be supplied directly to schools after weighing rice bags in the presence of the civil supplies staff and teacher in charge of MDM programme. Co-operation and co-ordination among the officials of FCI, Civil Supply Corporation, block officials and teacher in charge of MDM programme may be improved to overcome this difficulty.

(iii) Enhancement of Financial Allocation for MDM

The allocation of Rs.3.30 for the meal per child per day is too low. This must be raised to considerable level especially because the quantity and quality of the meal being served, both of which are inadequate at

present. The teachers, parents and officials feel that the prices of the vegetables, spices and other food materials are on the rise and therefore the allocation against these items should be enhanced. It is further suggested that the present supply of 15 grams of dal per student per day is not adequate and the amount be raised to 25 grams. Besides, there is also the suggestion that for effective continuity of the programme, the Central government need to provide both rice and dal freely to state governments. This will reduce the burden of the state governments to a considerable extent. At the same time, when both rice and dal will be provided by the Central Government, the state government will have greater accountability in the management of two principal food items. Further, the state governments will be in a position to allocate more money on the other items like vegetables, oil, spices and eggs, which they are not in a position to do now.

(iv) Improvement in Infrastructure

To achieve continuity in the programme, the basic infrastructural facilities required for the purpose need be improved. There must be a well-built spacious kitchen cum- dining hall in each and every school. Once kitchen-cum-dining hall is there, the problem of storage and cooking food will not arise. This has also been ordered by the Supreme Court. Besides this each school should be equipped with requisite utensils for cooking, serving, storage and eating.

(v) Plan and Implement Development Programmes

Since most of the children are not getting adequate food in their daily intake as per the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) recommendations as confirmed by the findings of our study, the state and district administration and other NGOs need to plan and implement other development programmes in addition to MDM programme for improving the nutritional status of the children in general, and those of the poorer, disadvantaged and downtrodden sections in particular.

(vi) Linking of MDM Programme with Related Inputs

Taking a longer view, there is much potential for linking MDM with related inputs such as micro nutrient supplementation, health services and nutrition education. As educational achievement is found to have been influenced by physical development, there should be systematic school health programme, comprising the following measures:

- ❖ Provision for regular medical check up of the children,
- ❖ Preventive measures,
- ❖ Nutrition services,
- ❖ Maintenance of mental health and
- ❖ Maintenance of health records.

Chronic respiratory and stomach infections undermine efficiency of nutrient absorption and utilisation which in turn increases vulnerability to infection. Recognising this synergy between health and nutrition, school health programme should be integrated with MDM.

(vii) Socialisation Value of MDM

The socialisation value of mid-day meal can be enhanced in various ways. Instances of social discrimination at school have to be firmly dealt with. Clear guidelines for the selection of cooks need to be issued and enforced. Through MDM children can also imperceptibly learn to combat stubborn caste prejudices when they sit together and eat.

(viii) Creation of a Social Norm

The MDM programme to be effective must also generate a social norm that no child must be hungry and their rights to food would be guaranteed by all children being retained in school.

(ix) Need of Political Will

Of course, there should not be any illusion about the role of the state; it has to take much bigger responsibility in the social sector than it presently does. The point is to create larger space for the people to take part in the affairs of the state through self assertion and empowerment. Entrusting the responsibilities of implementation of the MDM programme in the hands of the local communities, particularly the school specific PTA which has to be formed on the basis of proportional representation of different social groups (caste, class, religion and gender) with a legal status to govern the primary schooling institutions. This could be very effective in eradicating different types of ills of the primary schooling system, particularly the unimaginably poor quality of education. All the parents and teachers have to be provided with the detailed information concerning MDM programme and this will not only ensure transparency but also help expanding democratic practices.

(x) Purchase of Raw materials from Local Farmers

Whenever possible, grains and other raw materials should be purchased from local farmers. First preference should be given to organically grown grains, wherever this is available.

(xi) Minimum Wage for Cook and Helper

Cooks and helpers must be paid a fixed wage, based on the statutory minimum wage (taking into account their hours of work). In appointing fresh cooks, highest priority must be given to women belong to ST,

SC or other backward castes. The discrimination in the MDM process based on the social background of children or cooking staff should be discouraged.

(xii) Training to Teacher in-charge of MDM and Cook

The teachers' in-charge of MDM and the cooks must be given training on aspects related to organising and managing mid-day meal. Seminars and symposia may be organised for them to share experiences and suggest better cost effective methods of providing MDM.

(xiii) Additional Incentives

At school level either the head master or the teacher in charge of MDM discharging the duty of supervising MDM may be given some additional incentives for the smooth running of the MDM scheme and this should be done in a rotation basis.

(xiv) Appointment of Line Staff

The teachers need be associated with the MDM programme for supervision and monitoring of the programme. The teachers understand the psychology of the students better than anybody else. They will understand the food habit of children and can persuade them to take food that contains more nutrition. However, entrusting all responsibilities to teachers for the management of the programme, is also unwarranted. It is, therefore, suggested that the head master or his representative assistant teacher need not be too much engrossed with MDM work. The burden need be reduced by creating a post of MDM organiser on contract basis, without being made a government servant, who would work in close collaboration with the teacher in the implementation of the scheme. He should be answerable and accountable to the headmaster or his nominee teacher on matters relating to MDM. The responsibilities of the teachers will be limited to supervision and close surveillance of the programme.

(xv) Vegetables Garden

Several schools have vast open space inside or near the school. A part of this space may be kept as a play ground and the remaining part may be used to grow fruits and vegetables. Purely organic methods may be used to grow these fruits and vegetables to avoid hazards for children arising out of chemical fertilisers. Each class can be given a small plot of land to cultivate. This will provide nature's own lab to study many aspects of plants and crops. Children will take a lot of delight in watching the gradual growth of the plants sown by them. They will learn to share the produce of land among themselves on an equitable basis. This raw food will prove a rich source of vitamins and minerals for them. The produce of these school gardens should be meant entirely for children. This can be added to their normal MDM. This particular reform will go a long way in improving the MDM.

(xvi) Community Participation

For the success of MDM programme, it needs close community participation. It is observed that administrative initiative following the directives of the Supreme Court is too inadequate a measure to make the programme a success. It requires a larger public participation, since law alone cannot ensure a proper implementation. Such participation need not just be limited to meetings or giving suggestions, but demands a active participation of the parents in the school premises. Being a closely interactive process, this would develop a living relationship between the parents and teachers, and thus, it can play a much better role in ensuring an equitable and improved quality of education

(xvii) Multi-pronged Efforts to Educate Parents

As the parent's education has proved to be of immense importance in improving the nutritional status, physical growth as well as development, and educational performance of the children, there ought to be multi-pronged efforts by the state and district administration and other line departments to educate the people. Effective ways of educating the parents, who are out of formal education, could be through extension education programmes.

(xviii) Improvement in the Economic Status

Since economic conditions of the family has much significance in maintaining nutritional status of the children, the government vis-à-vis NGOs should take adequate steps towards improvement of the economic status of the communities through provision of gainful employments. Though there are several programmes in operation in rural areas, these are to be converged in such a way that there are uninterrupted employment opportunities for the people.

(xix) Provision of MDM Both in Working Days and Holidays

There is the necessity for implementing the MDM programme both in working days and holidays including Sundays. This will create interest for reading and attending school. On Sundays the children may be encouraged to participate in quizzes, debates, competitions etc. for personality development.

(xx) Different Menu for Week Days

Children like varieties. That is why menu should be different for different week days. A change through the inclusion of different types of food is essential to generate sustained interest on the food supplied through the MDM programme on the part of the tiny children. Proper guidelines with regard to a weekly menu, cost norms, etc., must be made available and displayed in all the schools.

(xxi) Provision of Education Package

MDM scheme is one of the incentive packages given to primary school-going children. Apart from MDM, the primary school-going children should also receive an 'education package' in the form of free books, free note books, free writing materials, free uniforms and free bus passes etc. MDM when combined with such education package creates interest among children for attending schools regularly and showing greater zeal and enthusiasm for learning and acquiring knowledge.

(xxii) Healthy School Living

Provision should be made for healthy school living which includes good hygienic environment of the school premises; adequate space in the class room according to the number of students, proper ventilation and light conditions, potable drinking water, facilities for sanitary toilets. By this the objectives of MDM programme will be fulfilled.

(xxiii) Learning of Good Habits

The lunch time routine can be used to impart various good habits to children, such as washing one's hands before and after eating with cleaning agents. Housewives interested for the purpose may be involved.

(xxiv) For Education and Human Capital Formation

- ❖ Students may be motivated by the teachers not to leave the school in the post lunch session and by that their learning level may be improved.
- ❖ More teachers may be appointed for having a low teacher-taught ratio as it will improve the standard of the students.
- ❖ More nutritious MDM should be provided by the government to school children to have better impact on human capital formation in the formative years.
- ❖ Steps may be taken to reduce dropout rates and attract the out of school children to schools.

1.5 CONCLUSION

The MDM (Mid Day Meal) programme in Mayurbhanj no doubt has intervened in exerting impacts on nutrition and education of the school children. In particular the programme has brought the children of the disadvantaged groups in to the realm of primary education who suffered from the traditional weakness of virtual inaccessibility of primary schooling. It has helped eradicating class room hunger as well as under nutrition among the children of the underprivileged groups. The mid-day meal programme seems to have offered an opportunity to reduce the sense of distance between the children of different social groups. The programme has also created large scope of income generating activities for the women . Now the Women Self-Help Groups (WSHGs) are involved in implementing the MDM programme in a bigger way not only in cooking but also procuring the vegetables and other ingredients. However, there is a long way to go for complete success of the programme in a less developed district like Mayurbhanj. Strong political will, adequate and timely supply of materials, increasing allocation of funds, filling up of all vacant posts, provision of sufficient infrastructure, effective supervision and accountability of the programme, devolving power to panchayatiraj institutions to coordinate between the government officials and school administration will definitely help the overall success of the programme. If all these recommendations are taken in right time and true spirit, then the objective of MDM scheme will not only be fulfilled but also it can contribute towards human capital formation in the formative years.

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