

Mid-Day Reckoning

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Instituting systems that are designed to fail or falter and then adapting to such dysfunctional systems have been the specialty of the Indian state for long. This has been the driving force behind the philosophy of our centralised welfarism, which has translated into a plethora of central and centrally sponsored plan schemes. Most of these schemes are 'one-size fits all' structures designed by the mandarins of the now defunct Planning Commission. Because they provided a ready source of finance to the cash starved states permanently on the lookout for resources, these schemes took no time to gain acceptance and popularity among the states. One such scheme was the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS). Now a report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India has busted the myth of their so-called usefulness and presented concrete evidence of its lopsidedness, something that we always had suspected. The truth is always difficult to accept, but ultimately it sets us free and enables us to exercise judgment with an open mind.

The MDMS, otherwise known as National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education, was launched in August 1995 under the UPA-I Government to boost government's continuing programmes on universalisation of primary education by increasing enrolment, retention and attendance in schools, while simultaneously ensuring the adequacy of nutrition levels of children. Universalisation of primary and secondary education has always been a debilitating weakness of our democracy. There are two vital aspects to such universalisation- increasing the enrolment and improving the retention and pass-out percentage. Quantity and quality will both remain the essential complementary aspects for any measurement of success in achieving the universalisation of education. Quality again has two components, the hard component of infrastructure and facilities and the soft component of quality of teachers and of the instructions imparted to students.

The Planning Commission experts, while looking at such schemes through the prism of populism that has always suited the ruling dispensation, have laid excessive emphasis on the quantity and provisioning of infrastructure while ignoring the quality aspect so essential for any education. Governments in India spends about 3.5 percent of our GDP on education and individual states spend about 10 percent of their budgets on elementary education. But the sorry state of government schools in respect of the quality of teachers as well as the minimum infrastructure and basic facilities like drinking water and sanitation hardly show any sign of improvement. The outcome therefore remains dismal, as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2015 conducted by the NGO Pratham Education Foundation showed. 32.5 percent of children in class II in government schools cannot recognise letters of alphabet when they are expected to understand simple sentences easily. More than 50 percent studying in class V cannot read class II text books. About 40 percent of rural children studying in class III do not recognise numbers up to 100. Rural government schools are unable to impart these very basic educational skills at the primary and secondary levels. That was precisely why, in 2014, 30.8 percent of rural children in the age group 6-14 went to private schools. Absence of emphasis on quality makes education not substantially different from un-education. It is in the above context that the CAG report on MDMS assumes importance.

The MDMS, on which Government spends about Rs 10000 crore every year, now covers all children till the upper primary stage in government, local body and government aided schools as well as recognised Madarasas supported under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The scheme lays emphasis on providing cooked meals with minimum 400 calories and 12 grams of proteins to every child while also along with essential micronutrients and de-worming medicines, with special focus on children belonging to disadvantaged sections.

The CAG report highlighted that despite emphasis on the meal component, the enrolment of children in the schools covered under the MDMS had consistently declined over the years, from 14.69 crore in 2009-10 to 13.87 crore children in 2013-14. In contrast, the enrolment of children in private schools went from 4.02 crore to 5.53 crore during the same period. Thus MDMS in itself was not incentive enough to retain children in schools, and this is the crux of the issue. As the report spells out in no uncertain terms, “there is a growing section of population which prioritises quality education over free meals...it also shows that a free MDM, by itself is not a sufficient condition to retain children in school, unless accompanied with improvement in teaching/learning outputs. It is time to realise that the meal is a means to an end, serving the larger purpose of education. Clear trends were noticed, which demonstrated that the meal served its purpose only when the expectations of parents, with respect to good education for their wards, was fulfilled.”

This is what we were always afraid to speak out for fear of being branded as ‘anti-poor’ and ‘elitist’ by the pioneering welfarists of our country, even though in our heart of hearts we had always felt that education is not only about facilities or food, but about quality, character and content. That is what makes a person useful to society, gets him/her a job from which he/she finds not only livelihood and sustenance but also derives meaning and purpose for life. Quality is what brings wholesomeness into the personality, without which life becomes too humdrum - a mere existence without purpose.

Governance is all about delivery, and efficient and effective delivery calls for careful planning and monitoring. The CAG report found evidence galore on the absence of purposeful planning or monitoring. All government schemes suffer universally from wastefulness, leakages, financial misappropriations, and institutionalisation of corruption, which together render the outcomes of such schemes fall far below the optimal. Databases are always the weakest links in the chain of delivery, because ensuring the integrity of databases alone has the potential to reduce, if not altogether eliminate, the leakages. The CAG report highlights that the mechanism in place for assimilating data on the number of children availing MDM was seriously compromised. The percentage of actual number of children availing MDM as gathered from various sources was consistently lower than that furnished by the states to the Ministry for claiming cost. There were many instances of exaggeration of figures of students availing MDMs as well as irregular diversion or theft of foodgrains, submission of inflated transportation costs, fudging of data pertaining to supply of foodgrains, leading to spiralling losses, leakages and misappropriations in the scheme.

Most schools lacked infrastructural facilities like kitchen sheds, proper utensils, availability of drinking water facility etc. There were numerous instances of food being prepared in the open in unhygienic conditions exposing children to serious health hazards. Tragedies are not uncommon, the latest on which we had shed the tears of our wrath being as recent as July 2013, when 23 students had died and scores

became ill at a primary school in the village of Dharmashati Gandaman in the Saran district of Bihar after eating a midday meal contaminated with pesticides.

It is time our planners and programme designers realise that feeding children and imparting quality education to them are two entirely different objectives that are disjointed and not complementary. Realisation should dawn upon them that the only thing that can ensure retention of children in government schools is the quality of instruction imparted, and not the quality or quantity of food provided. To pretend that food will help attract children reflects a shrinking of imagination and a refusal to transcend the transactional. As a nation, would we ever strive to extricate ourselves from the quicksand of populism into which we have been sinking slowly and irretrievably, discarding common-sense as well as the wisdom of our forefathers?