

COOKED MID-DAY MEAL PROGRAMME IN WEST BENGAL – A STUDY IN BIRBHUM DISTRICT

by

Pratichi Research Team

Kumar Rana
Subhrangsu Santra
Tapati Banerjee
Arindam Mukherjee
Moumita Kundu

Pratichi (India) Trust
A-708, Anand Lok, Mayur Vihar-I, Delhi - 110091
January, 2005

Acknowledgement

Amartya Sen

Antara Dev Sen

Jean Dreze

Pallav Goswami

Gautam Ghosh

Samantak Das

Sulagna Roy

Shivaditya Sen

Manabi Majumdar

Arabinda Nandy

Saumik Mukherjee

Siddhartha Mukherjee

Partha Pathak

and

All our respondents

CONTENTS

Main Report

	<u>Page No.</u>
Introduction	4 - 7
Study Areas	8 - 11
Impacts of the Programme	12 - 20
Constraints and Concerns	21 - 25
A Concluding Remark	26 - 28
Notes and References	29 - 30

Appendix – I : Statistical Tables

Appendix – II : List of Schools

1.INTRODUCTION

Primary education in West Bengal is at a dialectical crossroad. On the one hand there is an immense possibility of spreading the light of education to the remotest corners of the society. This reflects the relatively larger scope and space created for the marginalized communities to express their aspirations towards acquiring education by their children (thanks to the other positive developments like land-reform, panchayat, and so on). On the other hand the growing class division in the field of primary education through the reliance on private tuition and private schooling (mainly because of the poor quality of education delivered in the primary schools) has led to the emergence of a threat before the public education system. This context adds relevance and urgency to the launching of the cooked Mid-day Meal Programme in the primary schooling institutions. Important in itself, because of the role of school feeding for health and nutrition, the programme can also be a very important input towards the strengthening of the public delivery of primary education.

Incontrovertible it is that the cooked Mid-day Meal Programme (which is basically a School-meal Programmeⁱ) does exert a positive role in the primary schooling institutions, particularly on the enhancing of enrolment and attendance of the children and eliminating classroom-hunger to a substantial level. And it also helps avert severe under-nutrition among many of the children, particularly of the socially and economically underprivileged communitiesⁱⁱ. In addition, this helps the children in their learning achievements, to a certain extent. Not only in the developing countries, the school meal programme has proved to be very beneficial in the developed countries as wellⁱⁱⁱ, and there is more in demand to expand and improve the programme.^{iv} However, the felt need for launching such a programme gains salience in a country like India for the grinding poverty of millions both in the rural and urban areas. Yet, it is unfortunate to find that it needed a wake-up call from the Supreme Court of India (in November 28, 2001 – six years later of the launching of the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education. Under this programme most of the states^v used to provide three Kilograms of grain per child per month^{vi}) to implement the cooked Mid-day meal programme in every primary schooling institution. The Supreme Court has also appointed two commissioners to follow up the directives.^{vii}

The Government of West Bengal took some time to overcome the initial hiccups and has finally come up to meet the terms of the Supreme Court directives to implement the programme in every primary schooling institution (including the Sishu Siksha Kendras - SSKs). The beginning was made with some 1,100 primary schools in five districts (Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura, Paschim Midnapore, and Jalpaiguri) and extended to some other districts. A total of 5,200 primary schools were brought into the fold of the programme till March 31 2004. Further, a decision has been taken to bring all the primary schools and SSKs into the fold of the programme (vide DO No. 18 (18) -CS/2004, dated 18.02.2004). At the time of writing of this report the allocation has been made to cover another 10,711 primary schools across the state, excepting the district of Kolkata (Annexure A to the G.O. No. 595 (14) -SE (Pry) dated 02.07.04).

The initial impact of the cooked Mid-day Meal programme in the selected primary schools was found to be impressive. The major impact as recorded in some studies was with regard to the enhancement of attendance of the children in schools. For example, in Murshidabad district^{viii} the rate of attendance went up by eight percent after the launching of the programme. Findings from the other districts, like West Medinipur, Birbhum, Bankura and Jalpaiguri^{ix}, are also positive. At the same time, the studies have focused on some problems and constraints related to the implementation of the programme.

The Pratichi Trust, in accordance with its findings of the studies on the delivery of primary education in West Bengal^x, made a strong suggestion of replacing the dry ration programme with a hot cooked mid-day meal. In the studies done in West Bengal the research team found a division of responses based on the line of class and social identities of the people interviewed. While the majority of the SC, ST and other poor people firmly wanted a cooked meal for the children in school, the relatively affluent section of the society thought this not only completely unnecessary but also hazardous and harmful to schooling. This division has been reflected in some of the studies on the impact of the Mid-day meal programme.^{xi}

Needless to mention, the important role played by class and other social identities in the delivery of primary education is a fact well established in popular discourse. And the role of the cooked Mid-day Meal Programme cannot but be seen in the complex perspective of the social structure. Moreover, the impact of the programme cannot be simply confined to the enhancement of enrolment and attendance, or eliminating classroom hunger. It has many other impacts like narrowing the gaps of social distances (caste, religion, gender, etc.), as found by Dreze and Goel (2003) in Rajasthan, Karanataka, and Chattisgarh. Our studies in West Bengal found a strong inclination of the common public to taking part in the governance of schools, and it was felt that the cooked Mid-day Meal programme could be a very good entry point towards this direction, where participation of the people and the implementation of the programme could compliment each other at a substantial level.

In order to draw a broader picture of the impacts, constraints and possibilities of the cooked Mid-day meal programme the Pratichi Research Team took up a study in Birbhum district of West Bengal, where the implementation of the programme has been on course in three hundred primary schools (out of 2334) in three (out of 19) CD blocks (Suri II, Bolpur-Sriniketan and Sainthia). For a comparative analysis we selected, on a random basis, 15 primary schools (five from each block) where the programme had been operative and another 15 primary schools (following a similar method) without having the programme. Apart from interviewing the teachers of the selected primary schools and parents and children of 300 households (10 from each of the schools), we interviewed the Anganwadi Sahayikas and others involved in cooking and members of Mother-Teacher Associations (MTA, which have recently been formed in some primary schools). Also we made some interviews of the Panchayat members and other political and social activists in the villages. The fieldwork of the study began in the last week of May 2004 and was completed in the end of June in the same year. The indications are quite explicit in suggesting a very positive impact of the programme not only on attendance and partial elimination of hunger but also on the overall governance of the primary schools.

The findings were also well corroborated by the respondent parents and teachers assembled in a workshop organised by the Trust on 15-16 July 2004^{xii}. The following sections of this report contain the main findings of the study.

2. STUDY AREAS

Study Blocks and villages

As mentioned earlier, three blocks, namely, Bolpur-Sriniketan, Suri-II and Sainthia were selected for the study. Table 1 below provides the details of the sampled primary schools.

Table 1. Sample for the study

No. of CD Blocks in Birbhum district	19
Total number of primary schools	2334
Number of CD Blocks having brought under the cooked MDM programme	3 (Bolpur-Sriniketan, Suri II, Sainthia)
Number of Primary schools covered under the programme	300 (100 each)
No. of sampled primary schools having MDM programme being implemented	15 (5 in each block)
No. of sampled primary schools not having MDM programme being implemented	15 (5 in each block)

(see list of the sampled schools in Appendix-II)

The average literacy rate found in the villages of our study area of the three blocks viz. Bolpur-Sriniketan, Suri-II and Sainthia were 56.8, 57.8 and 67.8 percent respectively (by computing from the 2001 Census data of the villages visited^{xiii}). As for the total literacy rate, the studied villages of Sainthia block showed a higher female literacy rate. The block level literacy data also show that Sainthia is in a relatively better position than the others. The table below gives the details.

Table 2. Literacy rate of the study area and study blocks (in percent)

	Bolpur-Sriniketan			Suri-II			Sainthia		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Our study area	67.8	45.7	56.8	66.6	48.6	57.8	78.9	55.8	67.8
Total block	69.3	50.3	60.0	73.3	53.7	63.8	74.4	54.6	64.9

Source : Census of India, 2001, Primary Census Abstract, West Bengal, Compact Disk (CD) PCA 7

The population of the study villages were consisted of different economic classes and social identities. While the agricultural communities like cultivators and agricultural labourers formed the largest share of the population, some other occupations, like petty trading and vending, service, artisanship, etc. were also found. The separation of the population according to social identities show four major divisions, namely the upper and middle caste Hindus (referred to

Others), the Scheduled Castes (SC), the Scheduled Tribes (ST), and the Muslims. A large majority of the SC, ST and Muslims were found to be daily wage earners.

The literacy rate, as was found, had some direct relationships with the economic and social groupings of the population. However, the 2001 Census data of the study area reveals that it was the social grouping that had more relevance to the literacy rate than the occupational groupings (indicative of economic activity). For example, in Patharghata village of Bolpur-sriniketan block proportion of agricultural labourers to main workers (47.2 percent) was lower than that of Ikshudhara of the same block (67.2 percent). But the former had a higher tribal population (61 percent) than the latter (25 percent). When it comes to the literacy rate, Ikshudhara, despite having a much higher share of agricultural labourers the attainment of literacy by its population is much higher (58 percent) than that of the Patharghata (19 percent, a miserably low figure), which has a lower share of manual agricultural workers. In contrast, barring few cases, majority of the villages with higher SC population has a literacy rate of above 60 percent. The female literacy rate was also found to be equally good in the villages with higher SC concentration. The main reason behind this is the concentration of the some advanced groups of the SC communities (Kaibartya, Sunri, etc.) in these villages.^{xiv}

The 2001 Census data of the study villages reveal that there is a close relationship between the social identities and Female - male ratio (FMR). The FMR of the different study villages found from the 2001 Census shows that villages with higher share of SC and ST population has a better FMR rate than the villages with higher other caste population. The FMR is significantly better in the case of STs, who traditionally has an excellent FMR not only in West Bengal but also through out India^{xv}. Our study villages were not exception in this regard. In one of the study village Posoa, where caste Hindus formed more than two third of the population, the FMR was miserably low (598), although the literacy rate of the village as a whole was the highest among all the studied villages (85.3 percent).

Background of the selected households

As mentioned earlier the study incorporated 150 households each from the two categories of villages - (a) with primary schools that implemented the MDM and (b) primary schools without having implemented the same. The social composition of the rural areas of Birbhum was reflected in the sample households. Majority of the sampled households reported to have a combination of different livelihoods. However, in our study we had considered one of them as the main occupation. The main occupation had been recorded according to the responses of the households - the occupation that the concerned respondent thought to have depended upon most for sustenance.

Among the MDM households SC, ST, Muslims and Others constituted 39.3, 12.7, 24 and 24 percent of the sample respectively. Occupation wise picture shows that majority of the respondents were either wage earners or cultivators. The respective figures were 34.7 and 44.7 percent. Service holders consisted 11.3 percent of the total households.

Table 3. Distribution of the sampled households according to social identities.

	MDM School	Non - MDM School	Total
SC	59(39.3)	58(38.7)	117(39)
ST	19(12.7)	49(32.7)	68(22.7)
Muslim	36(24)	12(8)	48(16)
Others	36(24)	31(20.7)	67(22.3)
Total	150(100)	150(100)	300(100)

(Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

The selected non- MDM households also represented different caste and occupation. SC, ST, Muslims and Others constitute 38.7, 32.7, 8 and 20.7 percent respectively. According to occupational status, wage earners and cultivators respectively formed 53.3 percent, and 35.3 percent of the total households. Households with Service and business as main occupation shared only four and two percent of the total households respectively. SC and ST households were found to be largely dependent upon labour hiring for their survival. Service and business occupations were mainly found among the Caste Hindus. The table below provide the details.

Table 4. Occupation wise distribution of households

	MDM School	Non - MDM School	Total
Cultivation	52(34.7)	53(35.3)	105(35)
Wage earner	67(44.7)	80(53.3)	147(49)
Service	17(11.3)	6(4)	23(7.7)
Business	11(7.3)	3(2)	14(4.7)
Others	3(2)	8(5.3)	11(3.7)
Total	150(100)	150(100)	300(100)

(Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

The complex interweaving of demography, economic relations and other social relations in our society was well reflected on the implementation and various impacts of the cooked Mid-day Meal programme, which would be discussed in the next section.

3. IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAMME

The National Programme for nutritional support to Primary Education, launched on August 15, 1995 had the twin objective of

- Boosting universalisation of primary education by increasing enrolment, retention and attendance; and
- Making positive impact on the nutritional status of children studying in classes I-V in government, local body and Government aided schools.

In January 2003, the Government of West Bengal initiated the cooked mid day meal programme in 1100 primary schools in five districts namely Birbhum, Bankura, Jalpaiguri, Murshidabad and Paschim Midnapore in compliance to the solemn order of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India in W.P. (Civil) No. 196 of 2001 dt. 28.11.2001. The cooked Mid-day meal scheme in Birbhum was started in the third week of January 2003 in 200 schools in two blocks namely Suri-II (68 schools) and Sainthia (132 schools). Later, the programme was extended to Bolpur- Sriniketan block. At the time of writing this report, as mentioned earlier, a total of 300 schools of these three blocks were covered under the cooked Mid-day meal programme.

Different views on the impact of the programme

The major impact of the programme was reported to be the enhancement in school attendance of the children. A comparative analysis of the different types of schools (MDM and Non-MDM) it was found that the attendance rate in the MDM schools was increased by more than 10 percent while the rate remained almost constant in case of the others. The comparative attendance records of the respective categories of schools show the difference - while the MDM schools had a rate of attendance of 72 percent in the month preceding the study, it was 61 percent in the case of the others.

However, the impact was not found to have a uniform coverage. Attendance records showed that the impact of the programme on the attendance of children was much higher among the SC, ST and Muslim children. The rate of

attendance of the caste Hindu children had not been influenced much, given the fact that rate of attendance for the caste Hindu children were generally higher. The percentage point increases in the rate of attendance (in the MDM schools) were 12.6 for the SCs, 19.9 for the STs and 13.2 for the Muslims. The comparative percentage of the other caste children was a trivial 3.8 percent.

It was also apparent that the impact observed to be more prominent in case of ST girl students. The rate of increase in attendance for the ST girls was more than eight percent point higher than that of the ST boys. The table below provides the details.

Table 5. Enhancement in the rate of attendance in the primary schools (in percent)

		Average attendance of children in the studied MDM schools			Average rate of attendance in the studied Non-MDM schools
		Preceding the launching of MDM programme	Preceding the study (MDM programme already in operation)	Percent point increase in the average rate of attendance	
SC	B	52.8	66.3	13.5	60.5
	G	57.4	68.2	10.8	58.7
	T	54.7	67.3	12.6	59.8
ST	B	55.7	72.6	16.9	53.7
	G	61.5	86.9	25.4	56.0
	T	57.0	76.9	19.9	55.2
Muslim	B	58.6	73.9	15.3	18.8
	G	60.4	71.6	11.2	47.7
	T	59.6	72.8	13.2	39.8
Others	B	68.1	70.2	2.1	72.2
	G	66.8	72.7	5.9	66.8
	T	67.6	71.4	3.8	69.8
Total	B	61.4	71.2	9.8	60.3
	G	62.4	72.6	10.2	61.0
	T	61.8	71.9	10.1	60.6

The fact of increase in the rate of attendance of the children induced by the cooked Mid day Meal programme was also well corroborated by some of the other important studies. For example, in Murshidabad district^{xvi} the rate of attendance went up by eight percent after the launching of the programme. Findings from the other districts, like West Medinipur, Birbhum, Bankura, Jalpaiguri^{xvii} and South 24-Parganas^{xviii} were also positive. Observations made by some other people, like the Chairman of the Birbhum District Primary School Council and several parents and

teachers assembled in a workshop (held on July 15 and 16 at Santiniketan, West Bengal) strongly supported the findings of the study.

Responses of the parents (of children studying in MDM Schools)

The general response on the implementation of the cooked Mid-day Meal programme was found to be warmly welcoming. More than 70 percent respondents of the selected households whose children visited the MDM schools reported about the positive impacts of the programme. In tandem with the analysis of the school records mentioned earlier, the impact of the programme was found to be more impressive among the SC, ST and Muslim households.

Again, contrasting sharply with the parents of backward social background, majority of the caste Hindu households (64 percent) felt that the programme did not have any positive impact. There was also clear occupational dimension as well. While the majority of the wage earners and small cultivators (of SC, ST and Muslim background) strongly mentioned about the important impacts of the programme, the relatively affluent service holders or businessmen (mainly of other caste) strongly commented that the programme had had very little or no impact at all. The different views are given in the table below.

Table 6. Impact of cooked Mid-day meal programme (disaggregated with economic and social classification)

	SC		ST		Muslim		Others	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Cultivation	11(78.6)	3(21.4)	6(100)	-	14(93.3)	1(6.7)	6(35.3)	11(64.7)
Wage earner	32(78)	9(22)	12(100)	-	10(83.3)	2(16.7)	1(50)	1(50)
Service	2(100)	-	1(100)	-	1(33.3)	2(66.7)	4(36.4)	7(63.6)
Business	-	-	-	-	3(50)	3(50)	2(40)	3(60)
Others	1(50)	1(50)	-	-	-	-	-	1(100)
Total	46(78)	13(22)	19(100)	-	28(77.8)	8(22.2)	13(36.1)	23(63.9)

(Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

Apart from the impact of the programme on the rate of attendance of children, parents pointed towards the invaluable nutrition support provided for the children, particularly of the poor family background. Many of the children told us that they did not eat anything before coming to school. While asked as to

what impact, according to her perception, the programme had had, a poor Santal lady replied:

Since my children eat in the school the noon meals of their quota are saved. The saving of the food provides us the opportunity, sometime to have a dinner, and sometimes a little better one [since the family often remained hungry].

In addition to school attendance and provision of nutrition for the children (and perhaps for the elderly persons, as described by the Santal lady) the programme had some other impacts like, reducing the gaps of social distances (caste, religion, gender, etc.), as in some cases children of different identities were reported to have shared the food together, despite various social inhibitions prevalent in the larger society. In some cases children even reported to have defied the taboos imposed by their elders (not to eat with the children of lowly backgrounds).^{xix}

Another major impact, reported by some parents, was the regularity of the teachers in attending the school. As the teachers had to take some responsibility regarding the implementation of the programme they had to be in the school in time. Also the increased rate of attendance of children worked as incentive (or responsibility) for the teachers to come to the school regularly.

More than 80 percent of the parents wanted the programme to continue. Only a few of the richer households, mainly of Caste Hindu background, were against the continuation of the programme. Their opinion was reasoned mainly by two factors. First of all, the programme had no particular relevance for their children, as they never visited the school empty stomach. Secondly, (this was expressed more subtly), the programme had attracted the children of the lowly families and has caused in the increase in attendance. This has ceased their children off the opportunity to enjoy their right to get the whole attention of the teachers (in absence of the other children). Nevertheless the number of such parents was not large and a large majority wanted to draw the benefits of the programme, as can be seen from the table below.

Table 7. Attitude towards the continuation of the programme

	SC	ST	Muslim	Others
--	----	----	--------	--------

	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Cultivation	11(78.6)	3(21.4)	6(100)	-	14(93.3)	1(6.7)	8(47.1)	9(52.9)
Wage earner	37(90.2)	4(9.8)	12(100)	-	11(91.7)	1(8.3)	2(100)	-
Service	2(100)	-	1(100)	-	1(33.3)	2(66.7)	9(81.8)	2(18.2)
Business	-	-	-	-	3(50)	3(50)	1(20)	4(80)
Others	2(100)	-	-	-	-	-	1(100)	-
Total	52(88.1)	7(11.9)	19(100)	-	29(80.6)	7(19.4)	21(58.3)	15(41.6)

(Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

Not only expressing a positive attitude towards the programme, majority of the parents, irrespective of caste and occupation were found to be willing to extend different helps voluntarily. Nearly 82 percent of the parents strongly expressed their readiness to take part in the implementation of the programme to make it more successful. As regards the different types of helps, parents listed free labour, cash and kind donation, supervision, and so on. It may worth a mention that, offering voluntary labour was the most spontaneous response of the wage-earning households from SC and ST communities. On the other hand, the relatively affluent households from other caste background (comprising mainly service holders) wanted to help in cash or kind. However, realisation of such participation was found in four of the 15 primary schools. Mention may also be made that the programme was running most successfully in the above-mentioned schools (where parents, involvement was ensured).

Views of the teachers

The response of the teachers of the selected primary schools running with MDM programme was more or less supportive. About 73 percent of them found some or other positive impact of the programme, mainly in connection with the increase in attendance of children. Majority (73.3 percent) of the teachers wanted the programme to continue. However, they highlighted some constraints and wanted some changes in the programme. More on this presently.

Children's responses

The study included interviews of 150 children selected from the MDM schools. It was told that a majority of the schools, barring very few, provide

khichuri (rice cooked with pulses, and seldom some vegetables) as the cooked meal. When asked whether they liked the meal or not, a large section of the children gave positive responses in favour of the meal. However, there were some upper caste children, who in unison with their parents' inhibition towards the meal showed their disliking. The responses of the children are given below.

Table 8. Whether children liked the meal or not

	SC		ST		Muslim		Others	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Cultivation	13(91.9)	1(7.1)	6(100)	-	11(73.3)	4(26.7)	10(58.8)	7(41.2)
Wage earner	39(95.1)	2(4.9)	12(100)	-	11(91.7)	1(8.3)	2(100)	-
Service	-	2(100)	1(100)	-	1(33.3)	2(66.7)	6(54.5)	5(45.5)
Business	-	-	-	-	4(66.7)	2(33.3)	3(60)	2(40)
Others	1(50)	1(50)	-	-	-	-	-	1(100)
Total	53(89.8)	6(10.2)	19(100)	-	27(75)	9(25)	21(58.3)	15(41.7)

(Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

The present study found the presence of classroom hunger to a large extent, particularly among the Dalits and Adivasis. The study was conducted in summer when the schools were running in the morning. As mentioned earlier, a considerable number of children of the wage earning families told us (in reply to a question as to what they ate before coming to school) that they had not eaten anything. Another large section said that they drank tea before coming to school.

Understandably, acute classroom hunger faced by many of the children respondent, developed the strong desire to have a cooked meal in the school.

Table 9 Reasons for liking the food (Caste wise)

	SC	ST	Muslim	Others	Total
Attended school empty stomach	44(81.5)	18(94.7)	18(66.7)	10(47.6)	90 (74.4)
Assuage of hunger helps to increase attention	3(5.6)	4(21.1)	1(3.7)	-	8(6.6)
Food attractive	36(66.7)	12(63.2)	18(66.7)	14(66.7)	80(66.1)
Enjoyed sharing the food with others	39(72.2)	12(63.2)	22(81.5)	15(71.4)	87(71.9)
Total no. of children respondents	54	19	27	21	121

(Responses not mutually exclusive (Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

In reply to the question as to whether the programme should be continued or not, a large section of children (88 percent to be exact) strongly responded in favour of continuing the programme. The differences in social

identities were also reflected in the responses - mainly the children of caste Hindu background formed the group that disliked the programme, while almost all the children belonging to SC, ST and Muslim households were found to be very keen to receiving the benefits of the programme.

However, many of the children suggested that some improvements be made to make the food more attractive. One of the most important of them was provision of vegetable preparations. Some of the children also highlighted the need for a change in the monotonous menu of *khichuri* everyday. The following table presents the various suggestions made by the children.

Table 10. Suggestions made by the children to make the food attractive

	SC	ST	Muslim	Others	Total
Provision for vegetable curry with <i>khichuri</i>	33(55.9)	6(31.6)	10(27.8)	14(38.9)	63(42)
Rice and vegetables	22(37.3)	4(21)	16(44.4)	10(27.8)	52(34.7)
Occasionally provision for egg or fish	9(15.3)	8(42.1)	6(16.7)	6(16.7)	29(19.3)
Cleanliness has to be given priority, while cooking and serving	3(5.1)	-	5(13.9)	1(2.8)	9(6)
Total no. of children respondents	59	19	36	36	150

(Responses not mutually exclusive (Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

Response of the Non- MDM households and School : Demand for Cooked Mid-day Meal

While parents and children of the MDM schools were found to welcome the programme, their counterparts in the non-MDM schools were also found to be very enthusiastic about the possibilities of the programme when implemented. The earlier Pratiche studies on the delivery of primary education in West Bengal gathered the different perspectives of the parents regarding the implementation of the then dry ration programme (distribution of three kg dry rice per child per month) and a future implementation of the cooked Mid-day Meal programme. The responses were overwhelmingly suggestive of a cooked meal^{xx}. In the present study too, a large number of parents of the non-MDM schools were found to be absolutely dismissive of the dry ration programme and strongly wanted that the cooked meal programme be launched immediately.

Although some of the parents, particularly with lower economic background, thought that the dry ration programme had had some or other kinds of impacts, as can be seen from the table below a large majority of them said that a cooked meal would be far more beneficial not only for their children but also for the families.

Table 11. Responses on the dry ration programme

	SC		ST		Muslim		Others	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Cultivation	4(28.6)	10(71.4)	1(11.1)	8(88.9)	1(16.7)	5(83.3)	5(20.8)	19(79.2)
Wage earner	19(54.3)	16(45.7)	12(30.8)	27(69.2)	2(50)	2(50)	-	2(100)
Service	1(100)	-	1(100)	-	-	1(100)	1(33.3)	2(66.7)
Business	-	2(100)	-	-	-	-	1(100)	-
Others	2(33.3)	4(66.7)	-	-	-	1(100)	-	1(100)
Total	26(44.8)	32(55.2)	14(28.6)	35(71.4)	3(25)	9(75)	7(22.6)	24(77.4)

(Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

In this backdrop, we tried to find out the awareness of the parents about the cooked meal programme running in their neighbouring localities. A majority of the parents were found to be quite aware about the cooked programme. They not only demanded the programme to be launched in their villages but also highlighted some significant possible impacts of provision of regular school meal. The major possible impacts included improvement of attendance and quenching of classroom hunger. Again, assuaging of classroom hunger as one of the probable impacts was emphasised mainly by the Adibasis, SCs and Muslim parents (those who were primarily daily labourers). Detailed responses are given below.

Table 12. Possible impacts of cooked mid-day meal scheme

	SC	ST	Muslim	Others
Quality of learning will improve	19(32.8)	10(20.4)	2(16.7)	5(16.1)
Nutritional status will improve	17(29.3)	19(38.8)	2(16.7)	5(16.1)
Attendance will improve	39(67.2)	29(59.2)	5(41.7)	17(54.8)
Will meet the classroom hunger	20(34.5)	21(42.9)	5(41.7)	8(25.8)
Sense of unity will grow	1(1.7)	1(2)	1(8.3)	1(3.2)
Others	-	-	-	2(6.5)
Total respondents	58	49	12	31

(Responses not mutually exclusive (Figures in parentheses indicate percentage))

While demanding the replacement of the dry ration programme by a cooked MDM programme many of the parents were found to be very keen to extend their help for the implementation of the same. More than 90 percent of

the parents of different class and caste showed their inclination towards participating in materialising the programme.

Majority of the teachers of the selected Non-MDM schools, in unison with the parents, stressed that active involvement of parents, particularly by the mothers, was an urgent and essential requirement for the effective delivery of the cooked Mid-day meal programme. Moreover, teachers' responses regarding the possible outcome of the school meal programme were quite similar to what expressed by the parents. They also underlined that, increase in and regularity of attendance would be the major achievements of the scheme. Some of the teachers said that the programme would be particularly beneficial for the poor and hungry children, who could not attend or pay attention to the teaching (even when they visited the school) owing to acute hunger.

The varied responses of parents and teachers on the impacts of the cooked Mid-day meal programme and also concerning the implementation of the programme reveal the complex class structure of West Bengal society. While the wage-earning households – both parents and children- were found to welcome the programme some of the respondents belonging to upper economic strata were found to be indifferent, and sometimes even hostile, in their attitude towards the implementation of the programme. However, parents, teachers and children in general wanted the programme to continue (and also to be launched in the non MDM schools), though large number of them pointed towards some deficiencies and problems concerning the implementation of the programme. The constraints and hindrances are discussed in the next section.

4. CONSTRAINTS AND CONCERNS

In spite of receiving general appreciation from various people, the programme was found to have suffered from some distinct problems. These include: (1) Poor quality of food, (2) The very monotonous nature of food supplied in the schools, (3) Inadequate infrastructure, (4) Very low salary of the cook, (5) Insufficient budget allocation in terms of conversion cost, (6) Caste and religious bias among some parents, (7) Less scope for parents' participation in the programme and so on. We shall discuss these problems below.

Poor quality of food

The major concern that was expressed by most of the parents and teachers was the poor quality of food supplied in the schools. The food, in most of the schools, included only a single item, *Khichuri*, a meal prepared with rice, pulses, and some other ingredients. As reported, the ingredients mixed to prepare the gruel were far more inadequate than required. Complaints were also raised on the poor quality of rice that made the food not only abhor but also unhygienic. Some of the parents complained that their children fell sick after eating the abominable lunch supplied in the school^{xxi}.

Boring menu

Most of the respondents (parents, teachers and children) complained about the monotonous menu of *khichuri* everyday. The repetition of the food even made some of the children (although few in number) skipping their lunch at school. The menu is particularly important, for, in West Bengal society *Khichuri* is not taken as a regular diet, but is considered to be eaten only occasionally, that too during winter or rainy seasons. Generally people never prepare this dish during summer. In this context, *khichuri* as an everyday menu has created some resentments among the parents, particularly of relatively affluent background, although most of the children and some poor parents said that they did not mind the menu.

Inadequate infrastructure

In most of the schools we visited, the available infrastructure for preparing and serving a hot meal was found to be quite inadequate, if not poor. Majority of

the schools had no kitchen shed, and food was being prepared either open air or in a makeshift thatched shed. In both the cases there was enough danger of contamination of food and meeting a severe accident by the whole school. We have several examples from many quarter of the country where children had to suffer from several illnesses owing to the intake of contaminated food. The possibility of a severe accident is more threateningly looming after the fateful event of Kumbhakonam in Tamilnadu, where several scores of children were charred to death on 16 July 2004 when an unprotected and unsecured kitchen shed caught fire and the outrageous flames spread over the whole school-building.

This severe constraint apart, most of the schools had no sufficient utensils to prepare and store the food. Also very few of them had room to store the food and space to serve the meal to the children.

Table 13. Reasons behind disliking the cooked mid day meal

	SC	ST	Muslim	Others	Total
Bad quality of food	8(88.9)	1(100)	11(100)	15(71.4)	35(83.3)
Monotonous menu	5(55.6)	1(100)	-	2(9.5)	8(19)
Bad quality and inadequate quantity of ingredients	3(33.3)	-	7(63.6)	1(4.8)	11(26.2)
Apprehension of getting sick	3(33.3)	-	1(9.1)	5(23.8)	9(21.4)
Cooking done by low caste woman	-	-	-	2(9.5)	2(4.8)
Parents instructed not to eat	1(11.1)	-	1(9.1)	3(14.3)	5(11.9)
Total no. of respondents	9	1	11	21	42

Responses not mutually exclusive (Figures in parentheses indicate percentage)

Inadequate salary paid to the cook

The salary paid to the cook and the assistant was a major complaint raised in all the schools visited. The total amount these two persons received against a month's service was Rs 400 (Rs 250 for the cook and Rs 150 for the assistant). Most of the parents and teachers found this not only discriminatory but also a cause of real concern for the implementation of the programme - the pittance paid as salary could not be considered to be an incentive and hence the cook was bound to loose her heart to do the work.

Insufficient budget allocation in terms of conversion cost

To implement the programme the Central government supplies the rice (100 gm per child per day), and the rest of the expenditures are met by the state

government. The Government of West Bengal provides Re 1 per child per day as the conversion cost (ingredients, vegetables, fuel, etc.), in addition to the salary of the cook (Rs 400 per month). In most of the schools it was reported that the conversion cost was found too inadequate to make a proper meal, and hence, they were forced to stick to the manageable but poor quality of repetitive menu of *Khichuri*.

Caste and religious bias among some of the parents

In some of the schools (three out of fifteen), one section of the caste Hindu parents were found to have strong reservation on taking food by their children in the school, as the meal was prepared by low caste Hindu or Muslim cook. Some of the children of such background told us that they were instructed by their parents not to eat the school meal. Many of the parents were also quite explicit in saying that they did not want their children eating a meal cooked by a lowborn cook. Also they did not want their children to take the meal sitting on the same line with the other lowborn children.

The caste or religious bias also has a very strong class nature. The resistance to the programme by some parents was not only originated from feudal social relations but also from the existing class relations. As many of the caste Hindu parents reasoned their animosity towards the programme:

The cooked mid-day meal programme is doing more harm than good. After the implementation of the programme children of the lower caste and class are pouring into the classrooms. Hence, the teacher does not find any time to teach.

The statement bore some subtle meaning. They meant to say that before the launching of the programme children of lower caste and class background did not attend the school in much number, and the teacher could take special care of their (upper caste and class) children.

Some short field trip to North 24 Pargana and South 24 Pargana districts of the state also corroborate the above observations – caste and class bias were found to appear interwoven.

However, as mentioned above, this was not the case everywhere. In many villages we have found children of all socio-economic background sharing the

food sitting on a single line. As it happened, in these schools the food was found to be of a much better quality with a variation in the menu.

Less scope for parents' participation in the programme

As pointed out by many of the parents, the scope for involving them in the process of implementation of the programme was very limited. Only in few cases parents were reportedly invited or informed by the authorities about the programme and sought their help. Again, in the schools where parents' participation was assured the programme was also found to be running very well. But unfortunately in most of the cases the possibility and potential of parents' participation was not even considered to realise by the authorities.

Being closely transaction-intensive in nature the success of the programme depends upon the local community, particularly upon the parents. The stories of successful implementation of the programme from different parts of the country are at the same time suggestive of the active participation of the local communities. Not involving the communities has proved to be a great barrier for the execution of the scheme.

A correlation between higher level of participation and higher level of success in the implementation of the programme (see table below) add importance to the issue of public participation in a vigorous way.

Table 14. Correlation between public participation and success of MDM programme

	Food with varying menu	Public participation	Improvement in teaching and learning	Overall response of the villagers
Hatrasulganj Santal Primary School	Yes	Excellent	Yes	Strongly Satisfied
Srichandrapur M.G.J.B School	Yes	Good	Yes	Satisfied
Kalikapur G.S.F. Primary School	Yes	Average	No	Mixed
Ikshudhara Primary School	Yes	Good	Yes	Satisfied
Patharghata Primary School	No	Bad	No	Dissatisfied
Digha No.1 Primary School	No	Bad	No	Mixed
Melanpur Primary School	No	Average	No	Dissatisfied
Velian Primary School	No	Bad	No	Mixed
BeliaKagas P.B School	No	Bad	No	Mixed
Pargram Primary School	No	Good	Yes	Satisfied
Bedaipur Primary School	No	Bad	No	Dissatisfied
Ikra Primary School	No	Bad	No	Mixed
Chotokustikuri Primary School	No	Bad	No	Mixed
Sikarpur Primary School	No	Excellent	Yes	Strongly satisfied
Damdama Primary School	No	Bad	No	Mixed

Many teachers and some of the parents from the wealthy section complained that as the cooked Mid-day Meal programme demanded a lot of time, particularly in the schools with high enrolment of students, it disturbed the teaching activity itself. In describing the different negative implications of the cooked Mid-day meal programme, some of the concerned teachers underlined that they had to devote a lot of time in the programme, which disrupted “the teaching and learning process” that resulted in the falling quality of education^{xxii}. Some of the teachers were also appeared to be indifferent towards the programme and “took it as a mere routine work”. Significant as it is, in four out of 15 schools under survey where the programme was running very successfully, inclination of the teachers towards associating themselves with programme wholeheartedly was also found to be very high. This inclination had also led them to involve the parents in the process. As a teachers said, “ *ma baba der lagate na parle habena* – the programme won’t sustain without the involvement of the parents”. Some of the above problems were also well corroborated by the responses of the children. Although children, barring few exceptions, wanted that the programme continued, they also raised some specific points like the quality of food and the menu served.

5. A CONCLUDING REMARK

The cooked Mid-day Meal programme, however limited the coverage so far, has yielded some very positive results. It has clearly been reported that the programme is playing a definitive role in combating the problem of attendance of the children. Apart from influencing the rate of attendance in a positive manner, the programme has also shown some other important impacts, which include, combating malnutrition, reducing absenteeism of the teachers, improvement in teaching and learning, and above all creating larger scope for peoples' participation in primary education.

The rate of enhancement in the attendance of children would surely be proved to be very significant in the near future. Firstly, this would enable the parents of lower economic and social background to fulfil their desire to acquire primary education by their children. Secondly, the ensuring of attendance would bring forth a change in the level of learning, particularly for the children of poor parents, who generally depend upon the school for education (as they cannot afford private tuition)^{xxiii}. Thirdly, the enhanced rate of attendance would have particular bearing on the teaching activities, as it would be an added incentive as well as responsibility upon the teacher to ensure their attendance and teaching. Mention may here be made that many teachers complain that it is the absenteeism of the children that disrupt the teaching activity.

The other important aspect of the programme is the potential to involve the parents and other local people in the running of the primary schools lying in it. The inescapable role of public participation in the implementation of the cooked meal programme has largely been acknowledged not only by parents, teachers and other local people but also by many government officials concerned with the programme. The realisation of this acknowledged role could bring forth a major change in the primary education sector as a whole; as such participation would surely encompass the other areas of primary education besides the programme of cooked meal.

Pregnant with many different positive outcomes, the programme needs greater care and attention in its implementation as it also has many different constraints in its way, which we have discussed at length in the previous section. The major difficulty, it seems, is the deep-rooted class barrier that sprinkles out in many different form - occupation, caste, religion, ethnicity, officialdom, and so on and so forth. For example, a section of the public including parents, teachers, media, government and non-government functionaries, and so on are quite sceptic about the programme from its very beginning. Even a large section of them come out to be clearly hostile to the implementation of the programme. All the different disruptive activities, corruption, caste and religious hatred, bureaucratic way of implementing the programme (that results in making the meal lacklustre and sometime unpalatable), etc. reported in this study and elsewhere, point out towards a strong discriminatory arrangement in the distribution of opportunities, where a powerful section of the society fight tooth and nail to keep the population of the lower social and economic from accessing them.

However, the preliminary indications that we found in this study and also from other sources strongly suggest that notwithstanding the constraints and deliberate hindrances, the programme has witnessed many different achievements and is gradually getting popular at the grass root level. The major intervention that programme needs to be successful is a strong political will, supported by an even stronger public discussion and involvement. People at the grass root level are, as seen during the study, ready to accept responsibility and challenges. There is no reason why cannot they be devolved the operational responsibility of the programme. Of course it needs greater transparency. The local community have to be given the opportunity to participate in the programme, which would include the right to information concerning the programme as well as other matters with relevance to the primary school and education. Also there cannot be a single operational modality, since situation varies greatly from region to region. It is the local community that has to be given the right to take a decision on the operational matters at he local level.

Also some major policy changes are needed in the direction of assuring the quality and attractiveness of the food. The conversion cost of Re 1 per child has to be increased and the present remuneration of the cook (a pittance of Rs 400 per month) cannot but be enhanced to a substantial scale. In addition the obstacles created by the socially and economically powerful section of the society (in terms of caste, religion, ethnicity and so on) have to be fully understood and eradicated.

The cooked Mid-day Meal programme has enormous opportunity in offering – the bus cannot be missed.

Notes

Census of India (2001), Primary Census Abstract, West Bengal, Compact Disk (CD) No. PCA 7

Devraj Ranjit (2004), "Development India: Free Meals for Children Less than Palatable", in www.ipsnews.net/interna.asp?idnews=23520

Dreze Jean and Aparajita Goel (2003), "Future of Mid-Day Meals", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XXXVIII, No. 44, November 1

Govt. of West Bengal & UNICEF (2003), A Report on the Cooked Mid-day Meal Programme in West Bengal, UNICEF, Kolkata (mimeo)

Govt. of West Bengal (2003), Impact of the Cooked Mid-day Meal Programme in Murshidabad District: A study by District Administration, Murshidabad, Office of the District Magistrate, Murshidabad

Pratichi (India) Trust, Santiniketan (2004), Report of the Workshop on the "Role of Parents and Teachers in the Governance of Primary Schools and the Mid-day Meal Programme" on 15th & 16th July 2004, Bolpur, West Bengal (mimeo)

PROBE Team (1999), Public Report on Basic Education, Oxford University Press, New Delhi

Rana K. et al (2004), Pratichi Siksha Pratibedan (Bangla), Deys Publishing, Kolkata

Rana Kumar, Abdur Rafique and Amrita Sengupta (2002) The Pratichi Education Report I, with an Introduction by Amartya Sen, TLM Books, Delhi.

Sethi Bishnupada (2003) Mid-day Meal Programme and Its Impact in Improving Enrolment: A study in respect of Rayagada district of Orissa; Office of the District Magistrate, Raygada

The Economist (2004), "Food for Thought", The Economist, July 31, 2004

w ww.db.idpproject.org/Sites'idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/0387223BDB9B8E47C1256C83004A4267

www.parents.org.uk/index.html?health_school-meals.htm&2

www.wales.gov.uk/assemblydata