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Pandemic and the Missing Midday Meals (/journal/2021/36/letters/pandemic-and-missing-midday-meals.html)

In addition to widening the already existing socio-economic gap in the education system of the country, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation by affecting the Midday Meal scheme (MDMS).

The central government had, however, issued guidelines following the pandemic in March 2020 advising the states and union territories to provide hot cooked meals or corresponding allowances to all eligible children. Even though the authorities at the central level have taken steps such as guidelines implementation and budget enhancement, the ground reality shows that the benefits of these steps are yet to reach a considerable share of beneficiaries. However, different states have approached the matter in different ways. Andhra Pradesh addressed the midday meal crisis by distributing dry rations, including rice and egg to the beneficiaries through the grama sachivalayam workers and other volunteers. West Bengal is also distributing dry rations constituting rice and potato to the students, whereas Karnataka is ensuring the timely distribution of midday meals to beneficiaries by tapping the Anganwadi workers. The Bihar government, on the other hand, has initiated cash transfers of `358 and `536 to bank accounts of parents of primary and upper primary school students, respectively. The Government of Kerala is addressing the pandemic by distributing rice kits to all beneficiaries up to Class 8. The Chhattisgarh government continued to ensure the benefits of the scheme to the students by providing dry rations.

The pandemic has also ruptured other welfare schemes of the government, such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme. Children are clearly losing out on their early childhood care and education provided through the Anganwadi centres. The pandemic has forced the ICDS workers, mainly the Anganwadi workers, to work in Covid-19-response activities rather than utilising their services in the ICDS programme. They are, hence, no longer available for giving special focus on the educational and nutritional requirement of children.

The Odisha government has started the Ghare Ghare Arunima programme in coordination with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to provide home-based curriculum for Anganwadi-going children who remain in houses due to the pandemic. State governments of Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh have announced insurance schemes for the Anganwadi workers. UNICEF along with the Chhattisgarh government has started Sajag Abhiyan and Chakmak Abhiyan to ensure the learning of children in home environment.

A scheme such as the MDMS is crucial to a country like India for multiple reasons. Various studies have shown that a well-structured school-feeding programme enables the students to catch up in their growth and acts as an incentive for the parents to send their children to school, especially the girl children. The scheme is also critical considering that the country still faces acute conditions of malnutrition and undernourishment. As the latest released phase I data of National Family Health Survey 5 suggests, the under-five stunting or chronic malnutrition has not shown any improvement over the last half a decade.

The ramification of poor or non-implementation of a pivotal scheme like the MDMS is multifaceted. A scheme essentially envisaged for ending the classroom hunger, improving the nutritional standards of children and their retention in schools, providing employment opportunities for people and aspiring for the mingling of various castes is indispensable for a country like India that is yet to achieve the highest attainable standards. In the wake of the alarming data on the prevalence of nutritional deprivation in the country among the children, utmost efforts to address the issue by strengthening the existing, well-structured schemes are an imperative to ensure their physical and cognitive development. Successful continuation of the MDMS is the need of the hour. Learning from the ways some states have creatively addressed the issue, a national approach on similar lines is needed.

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