

Mid-Day Meal for the Poor, Privatised Education for the Non-Poor

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The mid-day meal programme was introduced to mitigate social inequalities inherited through the hierarchical division of society, or what is called “resilience of social structures”. This structural discrimination directly impedes equal access to benefits of development by excluding the poor and marginalised. A study of the MDM programme in rural Rajasthan probes this aspect of the “resilience of social structure”. In particular, the article asks under what type of situation do iniquitous social structures allow marginalised sections to benefit from programmes of social development.

One common finding encountered by researchers studying the shaping of social policy in India is that the social structure ensures that benefits of social development are distributed according to inequality of status, i.e., those who are in relatively higher status get the maximum benefit of social development and the vice versa (e.g., Govinda and Bandyopadhyay 2010; PROBE 1999; Sedwal and Kamat 2008). As a result, there exists a marked widening of the gap, for instance, in educational and nutritional development among various social groups. Thus, we find that as per the Census 2001, literacy rates for the scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) are 54.69% and 47.1%, respectively, as compared to 68.81% for higher castes (GOI 2007). The prevalence of underweight for general category children is 33.7%, whereas for SC and ST children, it is higher, at 47.9% and 54.5%, respectively (NFHS-3 2005-06).

One of the important reasons for this developmental gap is “resilience of social structures” (D’Souza 1990). Social structure, here, refers to the hierarchical division of society based on caste, class and gender of individuals. “Resilience of social structures” refers to the perpetuation of social inequalities inherited through the hierarchical division of society. This structural discrimination directly impedes an equal access to benefits of development by the way of exclusion. Thus, programmes for social development always end up in benefiting privileged sections of the society, and therefore, perpetuate inequality. This has resulted in poverty, high levels of malnutrition and low levels of education among the socially excluded groups. The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education or the mid-day meal (MDM) programme was introduced in our country to mitigate this problem.

While addressing this issue of resilience of social structure, D’Souza (1975) observed,

For a fuller understanding of the nature of inequalities we would yet need to know *what are the conditions under which the social structure would respond to changes aimed at reducing inequalities* (emphasis added).

While studying the shaping of MDM programme in rural Rajasthan, we probed into this aspect of resilience of social structure. In particular we probed the so far unanswered question, under what type of situation does the iniquitous social structure allow marginalised sections to benefit from programmes of social development. In the following sections of this paper we first present the context of this

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study, followed by a discussion of the findings of the study and conclusion.

MDM Programme

The Government of India (GoI) initiated the national scheme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education or the MDM on 15 August 1995. The objectives of the scheme are to give a boost to universalisation of primary education by mitigating classroom hunger and improving nutritional status of primary-schoolchildren. Initially, the scheme was implemented in 2,408 blocks of the country to provide food to students in classes I-V of government, government-aided and local body-run schools. By the year 1997-98, the scheme was universalised across all blocks of the country. Under this programme, a cooked mid-day meal with 300 calories and 12 gram of proteins is provided to all children enrolled in classes I to V. In 2007, the scheme included students in upper primary classes of VI to VIII in 3,479 educationally backward blocks. Presently, MDM scheme in India is the world's largest school lunch programme, reaching to about 113 million children in over 1.26 million schools across the country, with an investment of more than Rs 100 billion (GoI 2012).

Data

The study was undertaken in the context of MDM programme in the state of Rajasthan. Rajasthan was one of the few states to implement the MDM scheme in July 2002, when the scheme was initially started. Rajasthan is also one of the best performers for MDM programme. Out of 33 districts of Rajasthan, Jaipur district was selected for the study. Jaipur is one of the first districts of Rajasthan to implement the MDM scheme. At the time of data collection for this study, MDM was in operation in Jaipur district for more than eight years. It was thus assumed that the impact of MDM, if any, would be reflected on the enrolment, attendance, academic performance and nutritional status of rural primary schoolchildren in that region. Out of 13 tehsils of Jaipur, four tehsils, namely, Chomun (most developed), Sanganer, Bassi (in the medium range of development) and Chaksu (least developed), covering the variations in the development spectrum of tehsils of the district, were selected for the purpose of the present study. This was done to capture a representative picture of the performance of the MDM in the district. Two schools from each of these four tehsils were selected in such a way that the infrastructural and socio-economic variability of the MDM schools is covered in our sample schools. From each of the eight such selected schools, 22 children were selected for the study. Thus, we selected 176 (8 × 22) children for our study. A stratified random sampling method covering caste and gender was used for selecting schoolchildren in our sample.

Data were collected through interview schedules from following three types of respondents: individual students, their teachers and their parents. The total number of interview schedules was 360 with 176 students, 176 households and eight schools. Data for students' details and consumption of MDM were collected through student questionnaire. Household

questionnaires were administered to the parents of the sample children. Mothers of these children were asked to fill a food consumption survey. This survey collected data on food consumption for a school day, and a holiday immediately preceding the interview day. Besides, a school schedule was used to collect data on school and teachers details. It also recorded data on enrolment, attendance and retention numbers of children. These data were collected primarily from school registers.

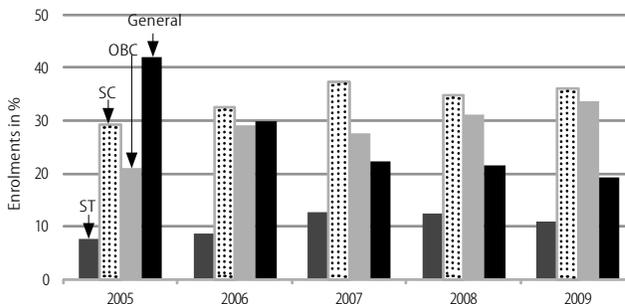
Findings and Discussion

Caste and Enrolment under MDM

Enrolment in school is the foremost criterion for school participation. Low enrolments for disadvantaged groups result in their dismal representation at all levels of education. Figure 1 presents data on enrolment rates of children from the various caste groups, over a period of five years in our study area in the schools covered under MDM programme.

As Figure 1 depicts, enrolments of children belonging to SCs and STs have increased since 2005, when the new cooked MDM was implemented in all the eight sample schools of our study. Before 2005 (not shown in the figure), many of the children from these disadvantaged sections did not participate in primary schooling. From 2008 onwards, almost all the children from the disadvantaged groups, in the age group of 6-10 years, were attending primary schools in the sample villages.

Figure 1: Caste and Enrolment in Schools Covered by MDM



Source: School registers.

Parents of most of these children cited MDM as an important influential factor for their schooling decisions. These parents considered MDM as a subsidy for the schooling costs, which they incur to send their children to school regularly. The common assumption is that education in government school is free, but in reality, although no tuition fee is charged, often parents are required to spend on uniform, stationery and sometimes travel (PROBE 1999). Added to this is the opportunity cost of sending the children to school, when they could have helped in household work or in fields in agricultural activities. These high overhead costs dissuade poor parents from sending their children to school (NFHS 1998-99; PROBE 1999). This is more pronounced in the case of socially disadvantaged groups, as majority of them belong to lower income strata. Free meal is considered as a subsidy for these schooling costs, and hence, MDM has increased school participation for children from marginalised households, in particular.

After 2005, the provision of hot cooked meal, which included staple diet of roti, vegetable and pulse, improved the situation. Parents appreciate this initiative and consider it as a subsidy for schooling costs. Most of the children relish this hot cooked food, which is much similar to their home food. All the eight schools serve different food items on a daily basis. This has prompted many of these parents to send their children regularly to school. The economically disadvantaged groups consider MDM as an economic incentive for sending their children to school.

Another interesting practice we observed in the field was that in addition to sending their school-age children to school, most of the parents send their younger children of pre-school age for getting a free meal under MDM. One positive fallout of this practice is that this has brought down the enrolment age to five-six years from the previous average of 8-10 years. This also contributed to retention rate.

Surprisingly, Figure 1 shows that while the enrolment of children belonging to marginalised sections has increased under MDM between 2005 and 2009, during the same period, enrolment of children belonging to general category declined steadily. Why this has happened? Probing further we found an interesting explanation of the same which is discussed here.

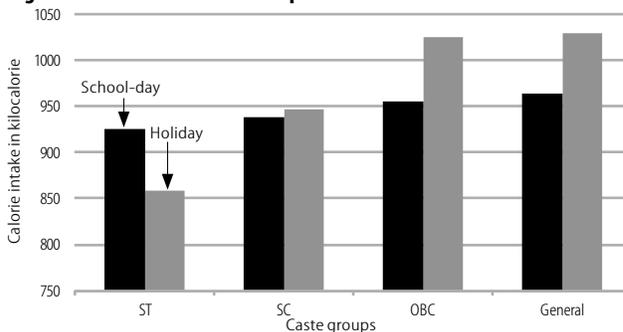
Ever since the process of reform involving liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation started in our country in 1990, following the dictum of structural reform of the economy, a process of privatisation was initiated in the education sector also. In the initial years under reform, primary education did not attract private capital. It was thought that primary education, which is available free of cost in government-run schools in rural and urban areas, may not have many takers in schools charging a fee. However, as the quality of education provided in the free government schools was poor and as even the poor parents became keen to provide better quality education to their children, they were prepared to opt for fee-charging private schools for better quality education. Many state governments liberalised the policy for establishment of rural private schools (GOR 2009, 2010). Thus, we witness that during 1978-86, only 2.8% of total rural growth in primary enrolments was absorbed by private schools, whereas, in the 1993-2002 period this absorption was 24.4% (Kingdon 2007). Thus emerged fee-charging private schools offering primary education in the rural areas. For catering a wide clientele of population, these were also low cost schools. Once such schools emerged, it was found that those who could afford, withdrew their children from free government schools and admitted them to fee-paying relatively better quality private schools. They did this forgoing free MDM, schooling and textbooks to fulfil their aspiration of providing better education to their children. This phenomenon of migration of children from better-off sections, also belonging to higher castes, to private schools explains the drop in the enrolment of children from the general category in government schools covered by MDM in Figure 1. Thus, unlike other programmes of social development, whose

benefits are cornered by the better-off sections of society, MDM serves the children belonging to marginalised sections. In a way this is a feather on the MDM cap. But ironically, the same process also shows how the better-off sections, belonging to higher castes, were able to provide better education for their children due to the emergence of fee-charging private schools. This illustrates the resilience of social structure as pointed out by D'Souza.

Caste and Nutritional Impact of MDM

The benefits of MDM are not limited to enrolments only. MDM programme also provides nutritional benefits particularly to the children from disadvantaged sections. High rates of malnutrition are found particularly among the children of disadvantaged sections of our society. Malnutrition, as commonly known, can adversely affect physical, cognitive, and social capability aspects of child health (Leslie and Jamison 1990; Scrimshaw 1998; Wilson 1983; Worobey and Worobey 1999). Thus, Figure 2 examines the impact of MDM on the nutritional intake of the children across caste groups.

Figure 2: Caste and Nutritional Impact of MDM



Source: Field survey.

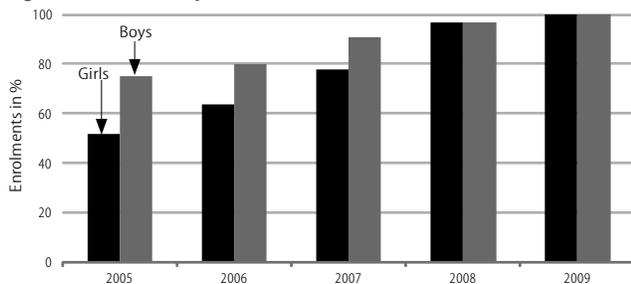
Figure 2 compares caste-groupwise nutritional intake of children on a school day and a holiday. School day intake is inclusive of MDM food. It shows that on a school day children belonging to all caste groups, except those belonging to ST, had less intake of food in comparison to a day when they have food only at home (on a holiday). There is a pattern in food intake on a holiday. Higher is the social status of the household better is the intake of food at home. Food intake of children belonging to general castes and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) is better on a holiday. But food intake on a school day which replaces home meal by a MDM is less on holiday, indicating MDM is a deficient substitution of home meal for those households. On the other hand, food intake at home of the children belonging to ST families is so less that in a comparative perspective that intake is lower than the food intake on a school day. Thus, the nutritional intake of ST children was better on a school day, i.e., when they had MDM in the school. Whereas, on a holiday, these children consumed food much less, in quantity as well in quality, than that recommended for their age group. In the SC group, the intake on a holiday was better, but the difference was insignificant. Thus, it is heartening to note, in Figure 2, unlike students belonging to other caste groups, the students belonging to most marginalised group, i.e., STs get some nutritional benefit

due to the operation of the MDM. This is an encouraging finding about MDM.

Gender and Benefit Distribution from MDM

Gender differences in labour market opportunities and incentives of returns to schooling influence male and female enrolment rates. In resource-constrained families, parents prefer sons to daughters for schooling decisions. The anticipation of future benefits pushes these parents to maximise the utility of their resources. Considering their sons as an “economic benefit” and daughters as “economic liability”, these parents choose to invest in the education of their sons. This form of social disparity has resulted in the skewed ratios of literate men to women across castes and classes. MDM intervention has proved to be helpful in increasing the school participation of girls, thus, challenging the iniquitous hold of social structures. Figure 3 demonstrates the beneficial impact of MDM on the school participation of girls.

Figure 3: Beneficial Impact of MDM on Enrolment of Girls



Source: School registers.

Overall, the comparison of attendance rates across gender depicted a better participation of girls than that of boys. As seen, in 2005, the number of girls (as a per cent of total primary school-aged girls), enrolled in the sample schools was around 50%, whereas boys were represented at 75%. The difference between the enrolments of girls and boys (from 2005 to 2007) was found to be significant at 0.001 level from 2005 to 2007 (calculated using Pearson chi square test). Over a period of five years, the rate of increase in enrolment of girls is higher than that of boys. The schools reported that from 2008 all the primary-school-aged children in their villages attended school. This is inclusive of girls from these villages.

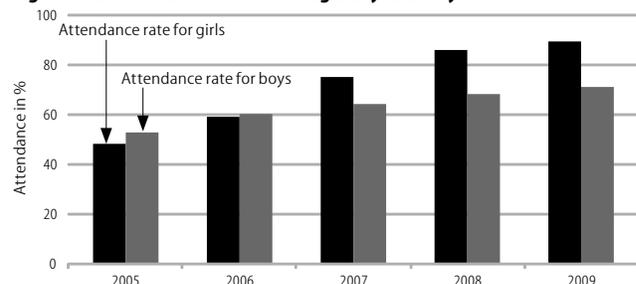
Until 2005, the girls who were not enrolled in the schools belonged, mostly, to SC and ST families, specifically, from poorer sections. After 2005, these girls got enrolled and started attending school. Parents of these girls said that they did not send their daughters to school primarily because they could not afford the economic cost of sending their daughters to schools. Parents regarded their schooling as economically futile. Calculating the investment on schooling and the returns from this investment, parents considered themselves being in total loss. But at the same time, in case of sons, these parents considered their investment profitable. They also regarded better-educated sons as an assurance of their financial security in the future.

For most of the rural parents, education is synonymous to economic returns. Arguments of education as a means to social development hold no water for them. Therefore, efforts

to improve school participation of girls brought in mediocre results. After 2005, the scenario has changed with increasing participation of girls, and in some areas, almost all the girls attend school. Parents, specifically from vulnerable groups, attribute this improvement to the provision of school lunch. They consider MDM as a subsidy for schooling costs. In schools, where the meals are of better quality and are served regularly, participation of girls has increased. Drèze and Goyal (2003) focus on the quality of meals and its implication in bringing about desired results. They argue, “These achievements depend a great deal on the quality aspects of Mid Day Meals. Ramshackle Mid Day Meal programmes can do more harm than good”. Parents are keen to enrol their daughters in government schools mostly for free food. Education for itself is still not the reason for increasing enrolments of these girls.

MDM has not only improved school enrolments of girls, but it has also helped in improving the attendance of these girls. Figure 4 depicts the comparatively better attendance of girls in all the sample schools.

Figure 4: Girls Attend School More Regularly than Boys



Source: School registers.

As seen in Figure 4, attendance of girls has improved at a higher rate than that of boys. Initially in 2005, girls were less regular than boys were and lagged behind in attendance rate. From 2007 onwards, the trend has changed with girls being more regular than boys. The improvements in the attendance rates of girls are (as compared from 2005 to 2009 and 2008) significant at 0.001 level (calculated using Pearson chi square test). Moreover, the rate of improvement is higher in case of girls. Teachers and parents attribute this improvement to the provision of free hot meal.

In the rural areas, the practice of gender disparity curbs the school participation of girls to a great extent. Even if the girls are enrolled in schools, they have an irregular attendance. This is one of the major reasons responsible for poor performance of girls in school. Many of the girls drop out in between the primary schooling, and thus, remain illiterate. Irregular attendance, as commonly observed, is due to the household burden of girls. Most of the girls help their parents in household work like taking care of elders, sick and infants; cooking food; cleaning of house and carrying water; feeding animals; helping at farms; and such other responsibilities. In other words, these girls perform “unpaid labour” within family networks (Bibi et al 2009). This relationship of schooling and work depends on social structural factors that determine the range of options available to families as they take schooling decisions (Buchmann and Hannum 2001). Most of this

“unpaid labour” of girls is found in families with low socio-economic status.

MDM has helped in improving the attendance of girls particularly belonging to vulnerable groups. Before 2002, MDM programme was a dry ration scheme. Most of the girls, enrolled in school, went once a month to collect the sanctioned ration. The programme was not of much help in improving the attendance of these girls. However, after 2005, when the hot cooked meal was introduced, attendance improved. To avail the benefits of the programme, girls required to attend school regularly. Absence means missing the MDM. Therefore, parents try to send their daughters to school regularly. This ensures that these girls could avail the benefit of one free meal on a school day.

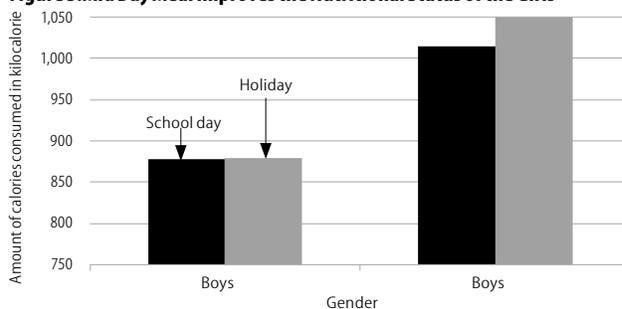
As mentioned earlier, most of these parents send their preschool children to school for free meals. This preschool children mostly accompany their elder sisters to school. Therefore, regular attendance of these girls benefits in two ways: first, they have a free meal and second, their younger siblings have a free meal. Thus, free cooked lunch helps bring girls, specifically from disadvantaged groups to school regularly.

An interesting observation is that MDM has not helped improve the attendance rates for boys, significantly. The reason for the same is not very clear but has to be seen within the context of gender disparity. A partial explanation may be found in the prevailing practice that it was primarily seen as the responsibility of the girls to take their younger siblings to school. So, if a girl does not go to school and if she has younger siblings, they also miss the school meal. Hence, in those cases it was more pressing for the girls not to miss school. Boys are free of this type of social bindings. Besides from a gender discrimination perspective, a free meal is a more important reason for enrolling a girl in the school than a boy. Thus, a girl missing a school meal by not going to school is considered more crucial than in the case of a boy. Thus, it can be said that the provision of hot cooked MDM has helped improve the enrolments and attendance of girls, specially, belonging to families with lower socio-economic status. Furthermore, this provision has also benefited these girls on the nutritional front.

The practice of gender disparity in food allocations is well known in the Indian context. As Sen (2001) observes, “At the time of birth, girls are obviously no more nutritionally deprived than boys, but this situation changes as society’s unequal treatment takes over from the non-discrimination of nature”. This disparity is one of the major reasons for the vicious cycle of malnutrition, disease and poverty which entraps, specifically, the vulnerable social groups. Keeping in view the impact of this cycle on the school participation of rural children, one of the objectives of MDM programme is to enhance the nutritional status of these children. As Figure 5 depicts, girls accrue the policy benefits more than the boys do.

Figure 5 compares the average calories consumed by girls and boys on a holiday and a school day (inclusive of MDM). Gender discrimination observed for consumption of food has been captured very clearly in our data. Although, gender discrimination was not practised in any of the sample schools, still the average consumption of food was less for girls than

Figure 5: Mid Day Meal Improves the Nutritional Status of the Girls



Source: Field survey.

that for boys. This was more of a reflection of gender discrimination practised at family level.

In many of the families, specifically those belonging to disadvantaged groups with low income, boys were given preference during food distribution at home. This discrimination was observed for both quantity and quality of food. Boys were served first and were given the “best” food available at home. Women and girls of the family ate at last and sometimes compromised both in terms of quantity and quality of food. Girls “carried” this habit to the school also. Most of the elder girls preferred eating their MDM at last. It was also observed that girls “habitually” ate less food than boys.

Point of importance is that if gender discrimination was not practised at home, and girls were given equal preference in terms of food distribution, the spillover effect of this might be seen in terms of increased food consumption during school lunch. This was observed in the case of young girls from better-off families. Since these girls were given similar food (in terms of quantity and quality) as that provided to their brothers, these girls had better intake in schools also.

As shown in Figure 5, the difference between the total calorie consumed, on a holiday and a school day, for boys is more than that for the girls. Most of the boys were provided better food at home, but in schools gender equality was observed. Due to this, the boys depicted a higher consumption of calories at home than in schools. Whereas, in case of girls, the comparison of average consumption shows that holiday food is very marginally better than the food taken on a school day. Although, on an average, this difference is insignificant, analysing this difference across socio-economic groups provides us with a better picture (Figure 7, p 160).

Class, Caste, Gender and Calorie Intake

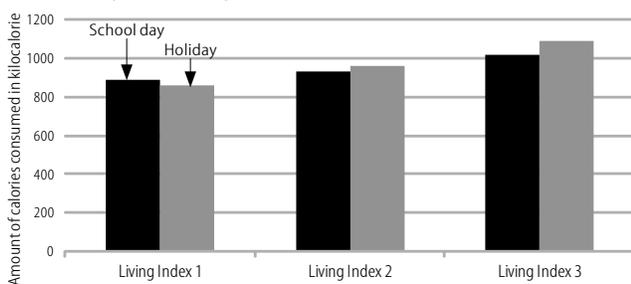
In this section we intend to analyse the impact of MDM in terms of calorie intake on class, caste and gender. Here we have taken living index as a proxy of class. To overcome the problem of missing income and expenditure data, Filmer and Pritchett (2001) along with Sahn and Stifel (2001) have proposed a one-dimensional index based on household assets and other household characteristics as a proxy of long-term material welfare. The so-called “asset index” or “living index” is often used for poverty and inequality analysis as a proxy variable for household income.

As is commonly known, available field data on rural income and expenditure is not reliable. Most of these families have

more than one source of income and income from these sources is not fixed throughout the year. Seasonal variations along with other factors render these incomes as highly fluctuating. Therefore, in the absence of reliable income data we adopted the Standard of Living Index (SLI) method. The SLI used in this paper was adapted from the tool used for the National Family and Health Surveys. This index adopts an asset-based estimation of household wealth. Interviewees are asked about dwelling characteristics and ownership of a range of household goods. Each household asset is assigned a weightage and grouped under LSI-1, LSI-2 and LSI-3.

Figure 6 presents data on calorie intake inclusive of school meal (on a school day) of our sample across classes or living index groups. This figure depicts an interesting picture. It shows that the calorie intake of students belonging to the most needy section (Living Index 1), is comparatively higher on a school day than a holiday. But, for the relatively better-off sections belonging to Living Indices 2 and 3, the situation is other way round, i.e., for them calorie intake is higher on a holiday. This means MDM is a deficient substitute for those relatively better-off groups on school days. Reverse is true for the most needy section belonging to the Living Index 1. For them MDM is a better substitute of home meal. Children belonging to the most needy section get to eat better food on school days due to MDM. Thus, Figure 6 shows that MDM is particularly beneficial in terms of calorie intake for the needy children if not so for the children belonging to relatively better-off sections.

Figure 6: Comparison of Total Calorie Intake of Children for a School Day and a Holiday across Living Indices



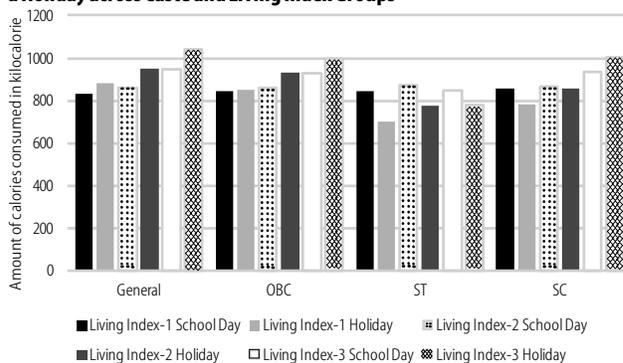
MDM has proved to be beneficial for the disadvantaged children, specifically those from lower economic status families. Their parents provide them with two meals a day, but the daily nutritional intake of these children is lower than the recommended intake. In our field survey it was found that most of these children have a routine meal comprising roti with vegetable or buttermilk or tea. Vegetable when consumed is less in quantity. Pulses and milk are taken occasionally. Quantity of oil consumed is also below the recommended allowance. Together, this meal is deficient in calories and essential nutrients. Therefore, in spite of having two meals a day, these children had a deficient intake. The nutritional content of the school meal was better than that of the food consumed at home, in lunch. School meals comprised roti and vegetable or dal, on daily basis. The quantity served was more than what these children had at home. Although, the quantity and the nutritional content of the food provided in MDM was not according to the suggested

allowance,¹ yet the food was better than what the children from the vulnerable groups had for their lunch at home.

Point of consideration is, most of the children who eat MDM in school do not have lunch at home. This means that MDM substitutes their afternoon meal. Children who belong to poor families do not get sufficient food, quantitatively as well as qualitatively, at home. In school, these children are provided with hot cooked MDM which is better than their home food. Therefore, substituting their “inadequate” home food with relatively better school lunch proves to be beneficial for them. Although, the intended role of MDM was that of a “supplement”, but even as a substitute it benefits the socially disadvantaged group. In light of this, it can be well-assumed that improving the quality and quantity of MDM would definitely benefit many of these beneficiary children, specifically the most vulnerable groups and girls from lower socio-economic and disadvantaged groups.

Figure 7 presents living index wise difference in calorie intake of girls across caste groups on a school day and on a holiday.

Figure 7: Comparison of Average Calorie Intake of Girls for a School Day and a Holiday across Caste and Living Index Groups



Source: Field survey.

Figure 7 presents calories consumed by girl students on a holiday and school day, across socio-economic groups. It shows an interesting interplay of social and economic status in benefit distribution of MDM for girls. For girls from general and obc category, holiday food is better, as these girls were provided with milk and better food at home, both in terms of quantity and quality. Even sc girls from relatively better-off families get better food at home than what they get under MDM. Girls from lower economic status families, specifically from socially disadvantaged group belonging to scheduled tribes, benefit the most from MDM as MDM food is better than what they can afford at home. This, as Ueyama (2007) explains, is due to the fact that with improvements in income level of families, specifically rural families, gender bias slowly decreases. This has been observed in case of societies, which have high gender bias originally, as seen in south Asia. Better-off families had equal provisions for their sons as well as daughters, whereas in poorer families, sons were provided with the “better” food. This may be due to “maximum utility” of “scarce resources” (Fuwa 1998). However, in case of st families, economic status did not play a significant role as gender disparity was practised across the economic classes. In this context, MDM played a significant role. For all the girls from st families, school meal was

better than their home lunch. In most of these families, gender disparity was observed, as males were served first with better food and females ate at last. Many a times these girls and women only had roti with salt or tea.

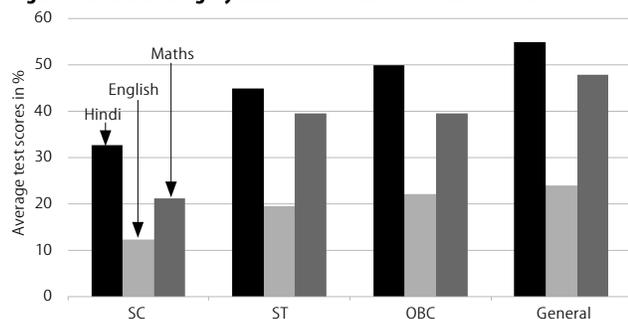
In yet another way, MDM helps in bridging down this much prevalent gender disparity. During the distribution of school meals, boys and girls get equal preference and there is no gender discrimination to be seen. The girls eat as much as they want, moreover, they are served similar food as that given to boys. Thus, school meals help these girls by supplementing their daily diet.

Increasing enrolments of SC and ST girls indicate a significant contribution of MDM programme. As described before, in India, there are multiple socio-economic disadvantages that members of particular groups experience which limits their access to education and nutrition. The vulnerable groups that face discrimination include girls, children from SCs and STs, and those from lower economic background. Members of these groups face structural discrimination that influences their access to development resources like education and nutrition. Girls face double discrimination, being members of specific caste or class, apart from experiencing gendered vulnerabilities (Chatterjee and Sheoran 2007). MDM programme has defeated this iniquitous hold of social structures, with benefits of the social policy being accrued by the disadvantaged sections.

Educational Attainments and MDM

As seen in the previous section, MDM is helping the disadvantaged children on the two fronts: school participation and nutritional status. Going by the policy arguments, these improvements should then lead towards better educational attainments. However, in reality these arguments do not hold much water. As seen in Figure 8, children from SC and ST groups still lag behind the children from other categories.

Figure 8: General Category Children Perform Better on Test Scores



Source: Survey data.

All the sample children were administered a test for assessing their skills in Hindi, English and Mathematics. It was assumed that since MDM has helped in improving the school participation and nutritional status of the disadvantaged children, the educational attainments of the children will also improve. But as Figure 8 depicts, these children still lag behind the children from other groups. Children belonging to SC group were worst with their scores in English and Mathematics being below the lowest passing limit and scores in Hindi were just

above this limit. Performance in English was similar across all the caste groups with the average scores being below 33%. The difference in scores across the caste groups was significant at 0.01 levels. Although the data set was small, yet this indicates the role of caste affiliations in determining educational outcomes. A similar finding has been reported by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in its National Achievement Survey, 2012. The report (NCERT 2012) says, "...students from the General category outperformed their peers in the SC, ST and OBC categories by a statistically significant margin".

These differences are better explained by the variables of family background and school quality. As observed, parental education, a factor much acknowledged (Filmer and Pritchett 2001), was one of the mediating factor for this difference. This is because most of the SC group children were first generation learners, whereas most of the general and the OBC group children had literate fathers and some had literate mothers. In addition, some of these children had older siblings who helped them in studies. Besides, caste-based social stigma is itself a hurdle for achieving improvements in educational attainments (Drèze and Kingdon 2001; Hunt 2008; UNESCO 2010). Impact of economic status also reflects a number of factors, including an income effect on the demand for education and the association of wealth with inputs such as early childhood nutrition or school supplies that improve school achievement and performance (Pritchett and Filmer 1999). So does this mean that children from disadvantaged backgrounds will always lag behind due to these structural differences?

A whole body of literature argues that in such cases school quality, specifically, the teaching quality can help into improve the educational attainments. "Heyneman-Loxley" effect specifies that family environment is important in developed countries, but in developing countries where parents themselves are not educated, the impact of school and teacher quality is greater than family background on children's performance (Heyneman and Loxley 1983). But, in reality as ASER (2005) and Kremer et al (2005) have pointed out, teacher absence is very common in rural India. Even among teachers who are present, only about half are found engaged in teaching (ibid: 2005). A similar result was found in our study also. Schools which performed very well on MDM but lagged behind on teaching quality had comparatively poor scores. On the other hand, in schools which did not do well on MDM quality scale but where the teachers were regular and used interactive teaching methods, the children performed better on test scores. Thus, it can be argued that a well-performing MDM programme along with regular and effective teaching can together help achieve the goal of improved educational attainments among all children, inclusive of disadvantaged sections.

Conclusions

We found in our study that MDM as a policy intervention has benefited the disadvantaged groups through increasing enrolments, attendance and improved nutrition. This is very

significant finding, given the fact that most policy interventions for social development benefit the better-off sections of the society. Paradoxically, in spite of such operation of MDM, there is no bridging of the prevailing educational inequalities, rather that is on the rise. This is explained below.

(i) Assertion of Iniquitous Hold of Social Structure

Lucas (2001) proposed a theory of Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI), which says that:

...socio-economically advantaged actors secure for themselves and their children some degree of advantage wherever advantages are commonly possible. On the one hand, if quantitative differences are common, the socio-economically advantaged will obtain quantitative advantage; on the other hand, if qualitative differences are common the socio-economically advantaged will obtain qualitative advantage.

In the educational context this means, as long as a particular level of schooling is not universal, the socio-economically advantaged use their advantages to secure that level of schooling. Once that level of schooling becomes nearly universal, however, the socio-economically advantaged seek out whatever qualitative differences there are at that level, and use their advantages to secure quantitatively similar, but qualitatively better education. This argument suggests that the focus of activity may change over time as qualitative differences supplant quantitative differences in importance (ibid). Viewing the educational scenario of rural India through the lens of EMI, we can see how the benefits of development has been distributed on the basis of class, caste and gender. Those belong to relatively better-off sections, belonging to higher caste, and boys could corner the benefit from the process of development. This illustrates the “resilience of social structure” pointed out by Victor D’Souza.

Better-off sections belonging to higher castes are able to send their children to the fee-charging private school, which they can afford, for better quality of education. The poor belonging to lower castes, not being able to afford private school, are destined to send their children to inferior quality government schools. Studies indicate that first, most of the children enrolled in private schools are from general caste group, whereas most of the SC and ST children attend government schools (Aggarwal 2000; Kumar et al 2005; Mehta 2005; PROBE 1999). Second, since “return on investment” is better for boys’ education, sons are sent to private schools and daughters are enrolled in government schools (Aggarwal 2001; Lloyd et al 2002). Analysing these facts, we argue that, on the one hand, MDM benefits the disadvantaged groups, and works towards universalisation of primary education in rural India, but on the other hand, low-cost private schooling brings in another form of educational inequality. Thus, as proposed by Lucas, once the level of schooling becomes universal, the socio-economically advantaged maintain the level of social inequality through qualitative differences. This group uses its advantages to secure quantitatively similar but qualitatively better education for their children. Therefore, on the macro front, inequality is maintained through private schools,

perceived as of imparting better quality education than the government schools.

However, the other part of the story as discussed above is that MDM could benefit the disadvantaged groups in terms of school attendance and nutrition in a limited way, in spite of the iniquitous hold of the social structure. How was it possible? Below we make an attempt to answer this question.

(ii) Conditions Necessary for Defeating Inequity

To answer the above question, it is imperative to look at possible reasons responsible for failure of government policies and programmes. As explained by Bandopadhyay and Von Eschen (1991), “The failures of government policies and practices are, in fact, partly reducible to the steep system of stratification and fragmentation itself”. They have further explained that how those at the top of the social hierarchy deliberately prevent those lower down to accrue the benefits of the policies. This is done to ensure that the benefits do not enable the disadvantaged to undermine the “power” of advantaged. Bandopadhyay and Von Eschen add further, “Most fundamental of all, this concentration of power is heavily responsible for the failures in government policies...”. This is what was witnessed when MDM was revamped, after 2002.

Many studies reported about prevalence of caste discrimination in MDM (Macwan 2010; Menon 2003; Nambissan 2009; Thorat and Lee 2005). Students from SC and ST groups were made to sit away from upper castes; in some cases, they were not given food or they were served leftover food. Other examples depict discrimination against SC and ST cooks and throwing away of food when cooked by women of these groups. All these and others depict the hegemony of better-off sections, and their continuous efforts to disable the policy structures. Interestingly, we did not find such instances in our study area. Does it mean that the iniquitous hold of the social structure was absent in our study area? Probably no. Rather the iniquitous hold of the social structure is diverted towards availing the opportunity of better education for children created by the emergence of fee-charging private schools. This development resulted in a void for the privileged group in free government schools. However, it worked as a fortune for the needy as they could get the benefit of MDM by default. What lesson do we derive from these findings? If and only if social development programmes offer something which is not envied by the better-off sections, social structure would respond to changes that would reduce inequality.

Of course, this may only marginally overcome the resilience of iniquitous social structure. As evident in our findings that although, MDM programme has benefited children from marginalised sections by bringing them to the school and in terms of nutritional intake (even if modestly), but in terms of the most substantial goal of benefiting the educationally marginalised, the achievements of MDM are marginal. The iniquitous hold of social structure prevailed ultimately by keeping relatively better education a prerogative for the privileged.

NOTE

- 1 MDM guidelines suggest a serving of 100 gm of wheat/rice, 20 gm of pulses, 50 gm of vegetables and 5 gm of oil, per child per day in a primary class. The recommended nutritional content of this serving is a minimum of 450 kcal and 12 gm of proteins.

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Survey

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Revisiting Communalism and Fundamentalism in India

by

Surya Prakash Upadhyay, Rowena Robinson

This comprehensive review of the literature on communalism – and its virulent offshoot, fundamentalism – in India considers the various perspectives from which the issue has sought to be understood, from precolonial and colonial times to the post-Independence period. The writings indicate that communalism is an outcome of the competitive aspirations of domination and counterdomination that began in colonial times. Cynical distortions of the democratic process and the politicisation of religion in the early decades of Independence intensified it. In recent years, economic liberalisation, the growth of opportunities and a multiplying middle class have further aggravated it. More alarmingly, since the 1980s, Hindu communalism has morphed into fundamentalism, with the Sangh parivar and its cultural politics of Hindutva playing ominous roles.

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