

Synopsis of the thesis entitled:

Impact of Mid Day Meal Programme on School Participation,

Nutritional Status and Educational Attainments

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Introduction

Education is one of the important elements of the societal fabric of a country. With an average literacy rate of 80 percent, the developing countries still lag behind on this crucial parameter. The common denominator for low literacy rates in developing countries is the prevalence of poverty. Due to poverty, one-third of school children are malnourished in developing countries. Malnourished children are underdeveloped both physically and cognitively, which makes schooling difficult for them.

To mitigate the impacts of poverty and improve school participation among these children, various interventions have been introduced across the globe. School participation includes enrolment, attendance, and retention of the beneficiary children. The provision of free school meals is the most popular and widely followed intervention for improving school participation. School meals help to subsidise school costs and mitigate classroom hunger. These two factors are the two basic reasons for low attendance and learning in schools. However, the impact of school meals on the improvement of primary education and nutritional status is still debated. This research

study will examine the role of the Mid Day Meal (MDM) programme in improving primary education and nutritional status in India.

The Problem

The Government of India introduced the Mid Day Meal programme (MDM) for increasing school participation and improving the nutritional status among primary school-aged children. It has been assumed that these improvements would lead to enhanced learning outcomes for the children. However, some recent studies depict a downward trend in rural primary school participation (GoR, 2010b; Mehta, 2011). Studies have also indicated a poor performance of children in reading, writing, and mathematical skills (ASER, 2010, 2011). This has occurred in spite of the fact that the MDM is served regularly in these schools. This calls for a further probe into the role of Mid Day Meal programme for increasing school participation, improving the nutritional status, and learning outcomes for the beneficiary children.

Objectives

In the above context, this study looks into the utility and effectiveness of Mid Day Meal scheme for achieving ‘Universalisation of Primary Education’ in rural India.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the role of Mid Day Meal in increasing school participation among rural primary school children
2. To analyse the contribution of Mid Day Meal in improving educational attainments among rural primary school children

3. To probe the role of Mid Day Meal in improving nutritional status among rural primary school children

Methodology

The study involved collecting primary as well as secondary data. An account of primary and secondary data collection is presented below.

Primary Data

Primary data for the study was collected through survey research. A cross-sectional survey was conducted in the north-western state of Rajasthan, India. Data were collected from students, their parents, and their teachers. Survey questionnaires were developed for collecting primary data.

Rajasthan was chosen for this study because it is one of the best performers for Mid Day Meal programme. However, Rajasthan is one of the lowest in terms of learning outcomes. It has been assumed that the MDM will help in improving learning outcomes of the children. Therefore, this paradox calls for a probe regarding the implementation and impact of MDM scheme on the primary school children. Out of 33 districts of Rajasthan, Jaipur district was chosen. This district was one of the first districts of Rajasthan to implement the Mid Day Meal scheme. Eight years of MDM implementation would have had a significant impact on the enrolment, attendance, and learning outcomes of rural primary school children in this region. To get a representative picture of the district, by giving representation to the variation in various developmental indices of the thesils, Chomun, Sanganer, Bassi, and Chaksu thesils were chosen. Two schools from

each of these four thesils were selected. This selection was done in consultation with Block Development Officers and school teachers. It helped to capture the variability in the Mid Day Meal scheme. From each of the eight selected schools, 22 children were selected for the study. Stratified random sampling method was used to select the children. Two girls and two boys were selected from classes 2 and 3. Four girls and four boys were selected from class 4; three girls and three boys were selected from class 5. In this selection, one girl and one boy were from Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste or Other Backward Castes group; one boy and one girl were from the general category. This was done to have a representative picture of gender and socio-economic variability among the study sample.

Data were collected through questionnaires at three levels: teachers, individual students, and their parents. School Questionnaire collected data on school and teachers details. It also included questions regarding enrolment, attendance, and retention numbers of children.

Data on student detail and consumption of Mid Day Meal were collected through Student Questionnaire. Individual student tests were conducted to know about the educational attainments, that is, numeracy, reading, and writing skills of the sample children. The tests were administered to selected students of classes II, III, IV, and V. These tests tested the reading and writing skills in English and Hindi languages.

Household Questionnaires were administered to the parents of the children, who had taken the learning test in their respective schools. Mothers of the sample children were asked to fill a food consumption survey. This survey collected data for a school day

and a holiday, which was in immediate precedence to the randomly chosen interview day.

Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected, primarily, from School Registers. This data informed the researcher about school enrolments, attendance, and retention numbers of children.

Findings

Focusing on the objectives of the study, data were analysed for impact of Mid Day Meal on school participation, nutritional status, and educational attainments of the beneficiary children. Role of social structural variables like class, caste, and gender were an important focus of our analysis on the Mid Day Meal programme.

School participation

Rural families, particularly belonging to lower economic status, consider free school meals as an incentive to send their children to school. Since Mid Day Meal is provided only to enrolled and attending children, parents get them enrolled and send all of their school-going children, sons as well as daughters, to government schools covered by Mid Day Meal. Most of these families belong to SC and ST categories. Thus, provision of MDM encourages girls as well as children from disadvantaged groups, specially belonging to lower economic status, to participate in primary schooling.

Free meals attract younger children from age groups of 2 to 5 years to school. Most of these children come with their elder sisters and after eating return home. This trend helps to decrease enrolment ages from 8-10 years to 5-6 years. Mid Day Meal encourages parents to enrol children early. Since, over-age enrolments are one of the key reasons for early drop-outs in primary school, the decrease in enrolment age is likely to improve school retention rates.

Household work, illness, poor schooling, and failure to learn are some of the reasons for poor attendance in schools. Parents, especially those who are economically better-off do not find any incentive in sending their children regularly to poor quality government schools. This is particularly true with boys. They prefer to send their children, particularly boys, to fee paying private schools which are perceived as better.

On the other hand, school attendance for girls and SC, ST children, particularly from lower economic classes, has improved. This happened on two fronts. Firstly, parents of these children try to send them to school regularly to avail themselves of free meals. Even if these children are required for household help, parents send them to school at least until lunch time. Since the majority of the study happens before lunch, these children benefit because of Mid Day Meal. Secondly, many of the parents send their younger children with elder children, specifically daughters, for MDM. Since this benefits at least two of their children, parents try to send their elder children to school regularly.

It is commonly assumed that rural parents do not bother much about the education of their children. However, with the changing economic and social scenarios, rural

parents consider education a means to move up the social hierarchy and thus increasingly focus on the quality of education. Government schools with poor infrastructure, regular absence of teachers and vernacular medium, are considered to be of poor quality by these parents.

Private schools, which are owned and run by non-government agencies, mostly individual entrepreneurs, are perceived as providing better education than government schools. These schools are not free and parents are required to pay fees, buy books, and uniform for their children. Moreover, there is no Mid Day Meal in these schools. Persistent demand for these schools from these parents has seen mushrooming low-cost private schools in rural vicinities.

Although the schooling costs in these private schools are not very high, they are still higher than the government schools. Therefore, mostly better-off parents send their children here. So, most of the children enrolled in these low-cost private schools are from economically better-off families belonging to general and OBC caste groups.

Since gender disparity is a common social norm in Rajasthan, and sons' education is preferred over daughters' education, very few girls are enrolled in these fee-charging private schools. Thus, the majority of the attendees in private schools are boys from general and OBC categories belonging specifically to the upper economic strata. Whereas in government schools, girls and children from disadvantaged groups, especially those of lower economic status are higher in number. This has resulted in a new form of social stratification.

Mid Day Meal does not play a significant role in schooling decisions of the families with better economic status. Free meals help girls and disadvantaged children, specially, from lower economic status families to enrol and attend the school more regularly. Keeping this in view, it can be said that benefits of Mid Day Meal programme, for school participation, nutritional status, and educational outcomes, are mostly accrued by girls and children from disadvantaged families with lower economic status.

Nutritional status

Adequate quantity and improved quality of food should be ensured to children for improving their nutritional status. Mid Day Meal provides one meal to school-attending children. However, this meal is inadequate in quantity and inferior in quality. This results in ‘poor substitution’ of home meal for children belonging to economically better off families because these children get adequate food of better quality in their homes. Thus, Mid Day Meal could adversely impact the nutritional status of these children.

The ‘poor substitution’ effect is also observed for boys, particularly, from general and OBC categories of lower economic strata. Parents of these boys provide them with food which is more in quantity and better in quality than the food given to the girls. This disparity is due to the practice of gender bias. The home meal of boys, which is ‘better’ both quantitatively and qualitatively, is poorly substituted by the Mid Day Meal.

On the other hand, there are many children enrolled in government schools, who come to school empty stomach in the morning. These children belong to lower economic

strata and disadvantaged groups. Mid Day Meal is beneficiary for these children because it helps them to stay longer in the school.

Gender disparity is commonly observed in rural families. Sons are provided 'better' food, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than the daughters. This is prominent among families who have lower economic status and limited food resources. MDM benefits the girls from these families. It 'partially supplements' the daily diet of these girls.

Most of the rural children do not wash their hands before eating, therefore, these children suffer from worm infestations and repeated diarrhea. Rural children have low intake of micronutrients because they do not take adequate amount of seasonal vegetables in their daily diets. Lack of hygiene habits and limited intake of micronutrients contribute towards poor nutritional status of these children. Mid Day Meal guidelines recommend for implementation of hand washing before and after meals and provision of seasonal vegetables. Some schools follow these guidelines. They have introduced hand washing with soap before meals. They have also made eating of seasonal vegetables compulsory. Cases of diarrhea, vomiting, and fever have reduced among these children. These improvements are the ancillary effects of MDM.

Educational attainments

It has been assumed that, the increase in school participation and improvement of nutritional status among the rural children will help to enhance the learning outcomes of these children. Since Mid Day Meal is inadequate for improving nutritional status of

children, enhancement of learning outcomes, if any, would come through regular school participation only.

Girls do not get equal opportunity for education as compared to boys because of gender disparity. However, Mid Day Meal offers these girls an opportunity to get enrolled and attend school regularly. These girls try to make most of this opportunity by studying regularly and sincerely. This is reflected through the better performance of girls in English and mathematics. These girls are from classes 3, 4 and 5.

Caste discrimination has kept away disadvantaged groups from accessing schooling facilities. Therefore most of the children, who attend school from these families, are first generation learners. Parents of these children are unable to help them in their studies. These children lag behind other children in educational performance. However, some of the children from disadvantaged background, specifically girls, attend school regularly and work hard. Regular guidance from their teachers also helps these children to perform well.

Pedagogy, teachers' attitude, and socio-cultural factors play an important role in determining the educational outcomes for the children. In schools where teachers teach in a stimulative manner and do not discriminate among children of various caste groups, the learning outcomes for the children are better. Community participation also contributes towards improved educational outcomes.

On the whole, Mid Day Meal plays a facilitative role for the girls. It helps them to attend school regularly. These girls perform better because of their regular studies.

Secondly, free meals bring the first generations of SC and ST children, from lower economic background, to school. This has initiated a positive transformation.

Conclusion

Policy interventions are channelled through the social structures. Resilience of these social structures ensures that, social disparities are maintained and benefits are accrued according to one's position in the social hierarchy. This is how all policy interventions took shape.

The picture is interestingly different in the case of Mid Day Meal. Resilience of social structure is observed in the fact that in rural Rajasthan, better off section are able to provide better education to their children due to the emergence of private schools. It is interesting to note that the policy intervention of MDM is not a part of that assertion of social structure.

Rather it has countered the influence of an inegalitarian social structure by enabling the disadvantaged students belonging to SC and ST categories along with girl students, particularly from lower economic backgrounds, to continue education.

This is an important contribution of this study as continuation of Mid Day Meal could lead to mitigation of gender and caste disparities on the educational front. Further, improvements in girls' education may lead to enhancements of social development, as continued education delays marriage age and increases the participation of women in family decisions.

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