

A Study on Mid- Day Meal Scheme in Lower Primary Schools of Kamrup (M) District, Assam:
An Empirical Investigation

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**A Study on Mid- Day Meal Scheme in Lower Primary Schools of Kamrup
(M) District, Assam: An Empirical Investigation**

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Abstract:

1995 saw the beginning of the National Program for Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NPNSPE). The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), which was also known as the Mid-Day Meal Program (MDP), was restricted to delivering only dry food. It was the year 2001 that the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision mandating all states to begin delivering prepared midday meals within six months of the court's decision. By March 2004, all elementary schools in all states of the country, including Assam, were delivering cooked midday meals to their students. Later, it was expanded to include children in upper primary (classes VI to VIII) schools. As of now, MDMS is the world's largest feeding programme, serving up to 12 million children per month. The goal of the MDMS was to increase the number of children who enrolled, stayed enrolled, and attended school, as well as improve their nutritional status.

Additionally, the MDMS is expected to take use of the chance to instil a spirit of equality among and sharing among students from a variety of social backgrounds. A large number of studies have revealed that in India, the concept of the government giving a cooked noon lunch to students in its schools has a long history.

It was the goal of this study to collect opinions on perceived benefits by beneficiaries on the operation of the Mid-day Meal Scheme in Kamrup, Assam, with the ultimate goal of assessing the perception, belief, opinion, and acceptance of parents on the Mid-day Meal Scheme in the area.

The findings demonstrated that both the children and their parents were pleased with the way the programme was run, the quality of the food served, and the menu. The sharing of food with apparent social interaction was found to be enjoyable by all of the youngsters, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

The impoverished parents had a very positive opinion of the Scheme, and they recommended that it be continued with the addition of newer food items to raise the nutritional level of the children. Few, on the other hand, saw the programme as an impediment to teaching, and as a result, there has been no significant improvement in the learning achievement of pupils.

Keywords: Lower Primary Schools, Mid Day Meal Scheme, Enrolment, Drop-outs

INTRODUCTION

Since independence, the Government of India has worked to increase the availability of primary education in order to achieve the aim of Universalization Education for all children.

The Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) was introduced in India by the Madras Corporation as part of a school lunch programme with the goal of increasing the enrolment, attendance, and retention of children in school by alleviating their class room hunger and boosting nutritional status.

A feeding programme was established in 1956 by K. Kamaraj, the then Chief Minister of Madras, with the goal of distributing food to impoverished children from rural areas.

As Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1982, M. G. Ramachandran instituted a broad programme known as the Nutritious Meal Programme, which was funded by the state government.

Some states, such as Gujarat, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, as well as the Union Territories of Pondicherry, had universalized a cooked Mid Day Meal Program for students learning at the elementary level, using their own resources.

According to a study conducted by Babu and Hallam (1989), school nutrition was associated with a statistically significant increase in school enrollment.

Gradually, by 1990-1991, the number of states that were operating the midday meal programme on a wide scale with their own resources had climbed to twelve.

The initiative was executed by the three states of Karnataka, Odisha, and West Bengal, using state resources as well as foreign aid.

Investing on direct nutrition has been a long-standing tradition in Tamil Nadu, which is the only state in India to have formally begun the process of becoming a "malnutrition-free state."

The Tamil Nadu government has a strong political commitment to the feeding programme, which is classified as one of the state's major items of public expenditure (Government of Tamil Nadu, 1993).

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The Mid Day Meals (MDM) programme, which was the first of its kind in India, was established in 1925 and delivered to the lowest parts of society in districts controlled by the Madras Corporation. It was the first programme of its kind in the world to be established in India.

When Rajan and Jayakumar (1992) looked into the school lunch programme in Tamil Nadu during the early 1980s, they found that it was ineffective.

The findings revealed an increase in the number of students enrolled and a higher rate of attendance among children from lower socioeconomic groups, including Muslim and other backward classes.

Following it, a slew of other states implemented programmes along the same lines.

The long-standing success of school meal schemes in states such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala resulted in the formal launch of mid-day meals by the Government of India in August 1995, as part of the Nutritional Programme for Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NPNSPE), which was a centrally sponsored programme.

With the dual objectives of improving nutritional status and promoting primary education, this programme was launched with the hope of influencing the decision of economically disadvantaged people to enrol their children in school and keep them there until they completed the primary school education cycle (Government of India, 2005).

In November 2001, the Supreme Court declared that all government and government-aided elementary schools in all states were legally required to provide cooked mid-day meals.

The mid-day meal programme has proven to be a successful tool in reducing the high dropout rates among children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in our society.

Furthermore, it attends to the nutritional requirements of the youngsters.

Midday meal programmes are seen as a way to encourage increased enrollment, school attendance and retention, as well as social contact among students from various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

Children from diverse social backgrounds are expected to benefit from MDMS's opportunity to instill a spirit of equality and cooperation among them. The MDMS is also envisioned as an avenue for the promotion of friendship and a sense of brotherhood among children of different castes, colours, and creeds.

This was also discovered by Dreze and Goyal in a 2003 field survey conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies in rural Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Karnataka. Dreze and Goyal also observed that

The introduction of the cooked mid-day meal has resulted in a rise in enrollment, particularly among female students.

Parents also indicated that attendance had improved as a result of their children's increased desire to attend school.

According to the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (2003), studies conducted in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh found that 37 percent of respondents reported caste discrimination in MDMs and 48 percent reported opposition to Dalit cooks, which are diametrically opposed to each other.

After doing research on access to mid-day meals among Dalits in Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, Thorat and Lee (2005) came to the conclusion that the fact that the meals are served predominantly in dominant caste hamlets makes it difficult for Dalit youngsters to get their hands on them.

Segregated seating and serving different cuisine to children of various castes are also examples of prejudice against children of different races.

In Bihar, plates were labelled with the initials of the child's caste, whereas in Rajasthan, children from lower castes were required to be served water by other children, whereas the other children were permitted to help themselves to the water.

The Mid Day Meal Scheme of Karnataka was examined by Naik in 2005, and the results revealed that 34% of students in Karnataka went to school without having eaten breakfast.

Cuts (2007) conducted a study on the implementation of the Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) in Rajasthan and discovered that, initially, pupils were given boiling wheat with groundnut and jaggery (Gur) as part of the Mid Day Meal Scheme, which was later changed.

Parents and students expressed satisfaction with the Midday Meal Scheme in greater numbers than 90 percent.

In a survey of 12 Mid Day Meal schools conducted in Delhi, Noronha and Samson (2007) discovered that 53 percent of the parents expressed satisfaction with the quality of the meal.

The impact on attendance is most likely to be felt by girls who do not eat breakfast before coming to school.

Vineeta (2007) discovered in her study conducted in Andhra Pradesh that a midday meal not only filled children's empty bellies, but it also prevented them from becoming starved or malnourished.

For many youngsters, it was the only meal they received throughout the day.

As noted in Kumar (2008)'s study paper, the majority of instructors teaching in government elementary schools in Himachal Pradesh were opposed to the adoption of the prepared Midday Meal Scheme.

Gupta (2009) conducted a study on the perceptions of teachers and students toward the Mid Day Meal Scheme in the Himachal Pradesh district of Mandi and concluded that the Mid Day Meal Scheme is effective in encouraging poor children from disadvantaged sections of society to attend school more regularly.

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According to Deodhar et al (2010), there is a potential for a general improvement in hygiene and cleanliness in schools and food preparation areas.

In their study, Ashwini et al (2013) found that recipient mothers as well as teachers were satisfied with the operation of the programme, the quality of the food, and the menu, and they recommended that it be continued with the inclusion of novel recipes to the repertoire.

As compared to southern states such as Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the concept of a government-provided cooked noon lunch in schools is not well-established in northern India.

Noronha is a small island off the coast of Brazil (2007).

On the hunt for research that examined the possible benefits of a system that achieved all of the goals set out in the plan, there were a number of attempts.

Numerous other studies undertaken in rural areas of Bihar, Punjab, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa have shown results that are comparable to those reported in the present study.

The current study, on the other hand, was aimed to collect opinions and evaluate perceptions regarding the mid-day meal scheme from parents of schools in Kamrup, Assam, through focus groups.

The researcher was able to make essential enhancements and alterations as a result of the empirical examination.

As a result, an attempt was made with the goal of determining the opinions of parents regarding the Midday Meal Scheme.

This paper presents the outcomes of a study that was conducted to analyse and determine the perception of MDMS, to investigate acceptance and opinion about midday meals, and to obtain some insight into the issues and ideas related to MDMS, among other objectives.

Materials and Methods:

The research was conducted out in the Kamrup (M) district of Assam.

For the study, a total of 100 homes were contacted and interviewed.

In total, 100 parents were chosen from among the schools whose students are eligible for the Mid Day Meal Scheme.

Parents' opinions on the school food programme were recorded using semi-structured schedules, which were employed to collect data.

The primary goal of the study is to discover and evaluate the general public's impression of the midday meal programme in schools, with a special emphasis on how parents perceive the program's benefits for children.

In order to enhance the findings of the study, various procedures were used, such as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and home visits, to gather additional information.

It contained questions about caste, religion, working status of both parents, family income, the number of children in the household, the number of children in school, the number of children not in school and the reason for this, as well as other topics.

If not, what is the rationale for not use MDM? If not, what is the number of children that are utilising MDM?

The students were asked if they had any objections to the caste of the person who cooked and distributed MDM; the benefits, negative and positive impact of MDM; and any suggestions pertaining to MDM. They were also asked about their likes and dislikes of the menu, the frequency of the meal; the quantity of the food; any health problems they had experienced as a result of eating school lunch; their thoughts on the continuation of the programme; the benefits of the programme; the inclusion of additional foods to the existing menu; and

The responses were recorded, collated, and reported as a proportion of the total number of responses.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION:

The parent survey schedule contains item which deals with the gender, age, category, and education level, occupation, working status, income and the number of children in the family of the respondent parent of the two communities under the study.

Table 1: Specific Information collected from parents (n=100)

Gender	No. of parents	%
Male	60	60%
Female	40	40%
Religion		
Hindu	62	62%
Muslim	38	38%
Age Group		
20-30	14	14%
31-40	42	42%
41-50	44	44%
Social Category		
General	16	16%

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OBC	34	34%
SC	50	50%
ST	0	0%
Education Level		
Illiterate	4	4%
Primary	52	52%
Secondary/Sr. Secondary	38	38%
Graduation	6	6%
Post Graduation	0	0%
Working Parents		
Single parent working	90	90%
Both parent working	10	10%
Income Level		
<10,000	58	58%
10,000 – 15,000	32	32%
15,000 – 20,000	8	8%
>20,000	2	2%
No. of children in a household		
1 child	24	24%
2 child	42	42%
3-4 child	28	28%
>4 child	6	6%

Information was collected from the parents regarding their opinion about MDMS and benefits expressed were analyzed. Information and opinion collected from beneficiary parents is tabulated in Table-2. It is evident from the table that higher per cent of parents (95%) reported that the child consumes school lunch every day and about 85 per cent (85%) parents felt that MDMS is beneficial to children especially from underprivileged backgrounds. children consumes breakfast before going to school. Only few parents (10%) reported that they are not satisfied with the quality of meals served in mid day meal in the school do not encourage their children to eat school food as they feel that it may lead to sickness any day. The table also shows that majority parents (100%) have shown positive response to the question of whether they ask for the caste and religion of the cook and serving person during the mid day lunch

given in the schools. All responding that they have not asked for the caste and religion of the cook or the server.

Table 2: Specific Information and opinion collected from parents regarding mid day meal scheme (n=100)

Information	Yes		No	
	Number	%	Number	%
Children go to school daily	94	94%	6	6%
Information about MDMS in the school	100	100%	0	0%
Eat MDM	95	95%	5	5%
Eat breakfast regularly	56	56%	44	44%
Beneficial to children	85	85%	15	15%
Disturb classroom teaching	33	33%	67	67%
Satisfied with the quality of MDM	90	90%	10	10%
Continuation of the program	95	95%	5	5%
Need improvement in the meal items	98	98%	2	2%

The majority of parents (95%) believe that their children consume a midday meal (95%), that their children's nutritional demands alter with the menu (98%), and that their children are satisfied (90%) by the MDMS. 44% of parents (44%) stated that their children attend school without breakfast and that they send their children to school because lunch is given.

Additionally, the figure demonstrates that the majority of beneficiary parents (85%) felt that the implementation of the midday meal programme enhanced children's enrollment and attendance. Thirty-three percent of parents (33%) agreed that teachers' time should be spent as efficiently as possible on teaching-learning activities and that no teaching time should be wasted in school. 90% of parents indicated that the food served at their child's school is of high quality, while

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10% reported that the food served at their child's school is of below-average quality. Additionally, the table found that practically all parents (100%) believe the school meal programme should continue. Numerous parents have observed their children developing positive habits such as cleaning their hands before eating at home and eating their meals properly.

Table 3: Benefits and negative effects expressed and changes suggested by beneficiary parents regarding MDMS

Benefits of Mid Day Meal	No. of Parents	%
Enhanced enrolment	100	100%
Beneficial for weaker sections	85	85%
Nutrition improved	40	40%
Learning good habits	90	90%
Children concentration improves in the classroom	40	40%
Social interaction improves	76	76%
Learning outcomes improved	48	48%
Negative effects of MDMS		
Teachers time is wasted	33	33%
Disturbs teaching activity	40	40%
Classroom and Class become messy or spoilt	32	32%
News of sickness by MDMS	10	10%
Changes suggested		
Include fruits and vegetables	90	90%
Include eggs and milk	56	56%
Provision of packaged dry food	20	20%
Maintain hygiene	30	30%

Table-3

The benefits of the Mid Day Meal Scheme, as articulated by the parents of children who are beneficiaries, are depicted.

According to the data in the table, 100 percent of parents believe that the school lunch programme has increased the enrollment and attendance of their children.

Parents (40%) stated that the nutritional level of their children has also increased as a result of the midday meal, which is an additional food source in addition to what they receive at home, and that this has benefited the health and nutritional status of children.

The table also found that ninety percent (76%) of parents believe that eating together at the same meal has increased social interaction among children as well as a sense of belonging within the family.

When asked if the mid-day meal programme has contributed to their children's academic improvement, just 48 percent of parents said that the programme had assisted them in improving their children's learning outcomes.

33 percent believe that the mid-day meal has disrupted the instructional activities in the school and that teachers are preoccupied with overseeing students throughout the lunch period.

Parents also expressed concern that the school grounds became dirtier and more chaotic during the midday meal period (32%).

Only a small percentage of parents (10%) voiced concern about their children becoming ill, which has negatively impacted the reputation of the midday meal, but only to a limited level; otherwise, parents have indicated support for the programme.

The table below summarises the changes suggested by parents of beneficiaries' children in relation to the existing menu.

For the mid-day meal to be more nutritious, the vast majority of parents interviewed advocated for the inclusion of fruits and vegetables (90%), as well as eggs and milk (56%).

In order to make midday meal more nutritious and safe, twenty percent (20%) of parents believe that cooked meals should be substituted by packaged dry food because they believe that these foods are easier to serve and that children love eating them.

Despite the fact that both children and parents were pleased with the way the programme was run, thirty percent (30%) of those polled believe that sanitary standards should be maintained in addition to the quality of food.

The programme is currently being implemented successfully at the school level.

They were pleased with the way the programme was run by the central kitchen and have recommended certain changes to ensure the program's continued success in the future.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

Many Indian youngsters arrive at school on an empty stomach in the morning because both parents are at work or because an early-morning breakfast is not part of the family's daily routine in their homes.

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In the absence of a mid-day meal, students frequently become hungry after a few hours and struggle to maintain concentration.

In the end, this results in low performance, which in turn leads to dropout.

Parents also do not believe it is necessary to send their children to school after a certain number of grades because the youngster can be added to the family's income-generating activities.

When the Government of India implemented the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, a long-standing problem was substantially resolved in its entirety.

The Mid-Day Meal Program, often known as the school lunch programme, is designed to provide one of the three meals required by a child enrolled in a school setting.

Children fed on cooked meals at school and stayed for longer periods of time as a result of the midday meal programme.

MDMS was put into effect.

Children aged 6-11 years were the first to benefit from MDMS, which was designed to increase enrolment and decrease school dropout rates, both of which were important from the standpoint of universalization of elementary/primary education as well as the achievement of higher literacy rates in the country. MDMS has since been expanded to include children aged 12-17 years.

Mid-day meals have proven to be effective in not only attracting children to primary school, but also in providing nutritional support for generating the necessary interest in both the physical and psychological well-being of the children, thereby ensuring that they remain in school for a longer period of time.

Not only has the mid-day meal given a boost to the precarious schooling of children in both rural and urban settings, but it has also contributed to the attainment and fulfilment of the goal of universalization of elementary education for children between the ages of 6 and 14 years.

The data give proof that MDM has had a good impact at the very least on enrolment and attendance, if not on academic attainment level as well.

Many positive habits have been instilled in children, such as washing their hands before eating their food, increased social values, and equity, as children from all castes, classes, and religions sit together at one table and eat their meal at the same time.

Children from affluent homes, on the other hand, are more likely to skip the midday meal and have their home-cooked lunch on the go, according to research.

There is a disparate opinion of the midday meal scheme and its function in promoting social fairness among children among different groups and communities.

However, there have been instances where upper caste parents are still hesitant to allow their children to sit at the same table as lower caste youngsters and eat together.

The impact of a midday meal on enrolment, attendance, and the development of good habits in children has been met with a similar level of agreement.

It seems likely that school meals have increased enrolment and attendance among the youngest primary school kids, but it is unclear if they will have an impact on the attendance and retention of older students.

Parents have also shown a preference for dry packets of food rather than cooked meals for their children.

This may be due to the fact that many parents would not want their children to eat food prepared by a lower caste cook, yet no parent has come up publicly to inquire about the cook's caste and express an objection.

Raju (2009) investigated the best practices in the implementation of the mid-day meal scheme in Assam and discovered the following findings: School Management Committee members/community leaders taking a keen interest in supervising mid day meal activities such as conducting monthly meetings, involving mothers in the development of the school, the head teacher maintaining all the records regarding MDM (Mid Day Meal), providing quality food under the MDM (Mid Day Meal) programme, maintaining the school's reputation as a safe environment for children

As observed by community leaders, children were attending school on a daily basis because they enjoyed studying and having fun with their classmates, as well as sharing a midday meal together, which could be a contributing factor to the improvement in nutritional status and attendance of the children.

As indicated in their study, Nath and Nath (2015) discovered that community leaders have expressed their support for the introduction of a mid-day meal programme at the primary level. The Mid-Day Meals programme assists in enhancing the attendance and enrolment of low-income students at educational institutions.

The mid-day meal programme has received unanimous support from the community leaders who have spoken out in support.

In response to community leaders' reports, the midday meal programme was frequently inspected for quality and nutrition, and a variety of menu options were provided for school children to make the midday meal more entertaining. The quantity of food served was also deemed adequate.

The most likely reason is that, in the case of supervision, food is sampled first by one of the teachers or community leaders, and only after it has been determined that the meal is safe is it offered to the children.

Changing the menu on a regular basis helps state governments make it more nutritious while also breaking up the monotony of the menu so that youngsters are more interested in eating the meal they are served.

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It is because children do not feel hungry after eating their meal that classroom learning becomes more exciting. They are also more able to concentrate in class because they are not thinking about the food.

Children are offered a sufficient quantity of food since it is not required that they consume the food with only one spoon or only for a single serving. If they are still hungry, they can consume the food with more than one spoon and consume it properly.

On the same lines, Pinisetty (2015), in his study on Community Participation in Mid Day Meal Scheme: Exclusion and Inclusion in Andhra Pradesh, concluded that "all the active community leaders who were involved in the participation of MDM(Mid Day Meal) programme in schools were satisfied with the quality and quantity of cooked MDM" (Mid Day Meal).

With the participation of children, teachers, and members of the community in schools where kitchen gardens have been established, the meal is complemented with vegetables and fruits that are readily available in the area.

The mid-day meal programme, it can be inferred, contributes to the transformation of children's mentalities, which in turn leads to the transformation of parents' and therefore community's attitudes toward education and nutritious aspects of children's nutrition.

For kids in this age group, the food given in the school as part of this programme becomes one of the extrinsic incentive factors, increasing their passion for the subject matter they are studying.

As a result, this programme should be continued.

As a child's hunger is satisfied, his or her attentiveness, memory, and learning are improved, which is especially beneficial in a situation where many children arrive at school on an empty stomach in the morning, as is the case today.

As the most important factor to consider, the opinions of rural school children, parents, teachers, and community leaders should be considered because they will undoubtedly assist the government in improving the policies and guidelines of the midday meal programme for the betterment of the children in terms of nutritional and educational benefits.

Healthy eating habits can also be taught to children, including personal hygiene and the need of maintaining the cleanliness of the surrounding environment.

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