

Towards an effective meal scheme

IT IS HEARTNING to learn from the Union Minister for Human Resource Development, Mr. Madhavrao Scindia, that the Government of India has decided to launch a mid-day meal programme for school children from the next academic year. A committee has been already constituted by the Department of Education in the Ministry for working out the modalities such as the distribution system, agency for implementation and related matters. The example of two or three States where the noon meal scheme has been functioning in some form or the other will also be studied by this committee. What is particularly relevant to note in this context is that the concept of giving lunch to school pupils has now got fully accepted by the powers that be and rightly so. Tamil Nadu may justifiably be given the credit for operating such a project for the past few years and thus in a way considered a pioneer in this venture.

There are a few essential features associated with the noon meal scheme that go to strengthen the social polity. These include: the young ones from the socially disadvantaged and underprivileged sections must not be deprived of a wholesome diet merely because of the accident of birth. As future citizens of the country, they are entitled to the help of the governments concerned. Again, a crucial need to reduce the alarming dropout rates at the primary and upper primary stages of education exists. In spite of all the ongoing efforts of the Central and State Governments during the last two decades, this task has proved quite daunting and thus presented a challenge to successive teams of educational administrators.

There has been enough evidence to show that the mid-day meal schemes in the States where these were well administered have contributed in no small measure to the retention of pupils thereby cutting down the school dropout rate. No doubt in the initial stages certain deficiencies in the operation of the schemes became glaring. An instance is the pinning down the responsibility on the head of the institution making him do several things which were not at all expected of that person. In fact, the academic side of the school life became the poorer for it but then steps were taken to rectify the situation by appointing special staff and supplying the lunches from a central kitchen wherever possible. Similarly the nutritional value of the meals including the protein and calorie content was determined by consulting the experts in the field.

Perhaps one of the reasons which impelled the Union Government to get into this act is its resolve to achieve "Education for All" (EFA) as embodied in the Delhi Declaration of December last year. This document was the result of the deliberations of the nine high population countries — Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan — to ensure universal primary education by the year 2000 in their domains. The commitment of the leaders of these nine countries (having in their regions more than half the world's population) was total and unmistakable. Indeed the Delhi Declaration, in one of its clauses, pointed out "successful education programmes require complementary and convergent actions on adequate nutrition, effective health care and appropriate care and development of the young child in the context of the role of the family and the community. The right of the child to receive education has also been acknowledged by the world at large. By all accounts the attainment of the EFA goal is a challenging task and no effort can be considered too strenuous in this endeavour."