

HARD LESSON TO DIGEST

The mid-day meal scheme, which seeks to promote primary-level literacy by providing food to needy children, has not quite succeeded in its noble objectives

THE SUNDAY OBSERVER *team investigates*

Hunger and illiteracy in India are so closely related that universalisation of primary education will continue to remain an elusive goal until this fundamental factor is realistically reckoned with. No school in the world can attract a child with an empty stomach.

Over the years, our educational planners and administrators have missed this crucial point while announcing time-bound schemes to eradicate illiteracy. The latest project — the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (education for all) — seeks to ensure that every child in the 6-14 age group is either in a school, education guarantee centre or a 'back to school camp,' by 2003.

From recent experience, it is obvious that the scheme can survive and succeed only if it acknowledges and gives due weight to the inextricable link between pangs of hunger and a desire to learn. The positive, though patchy, impact of the mid-day meal scheme proves the point. The mid-day meal scheme has managed to arrest dropouts from and attract new kids to school. But its value has been undermined by shoddy implementation.

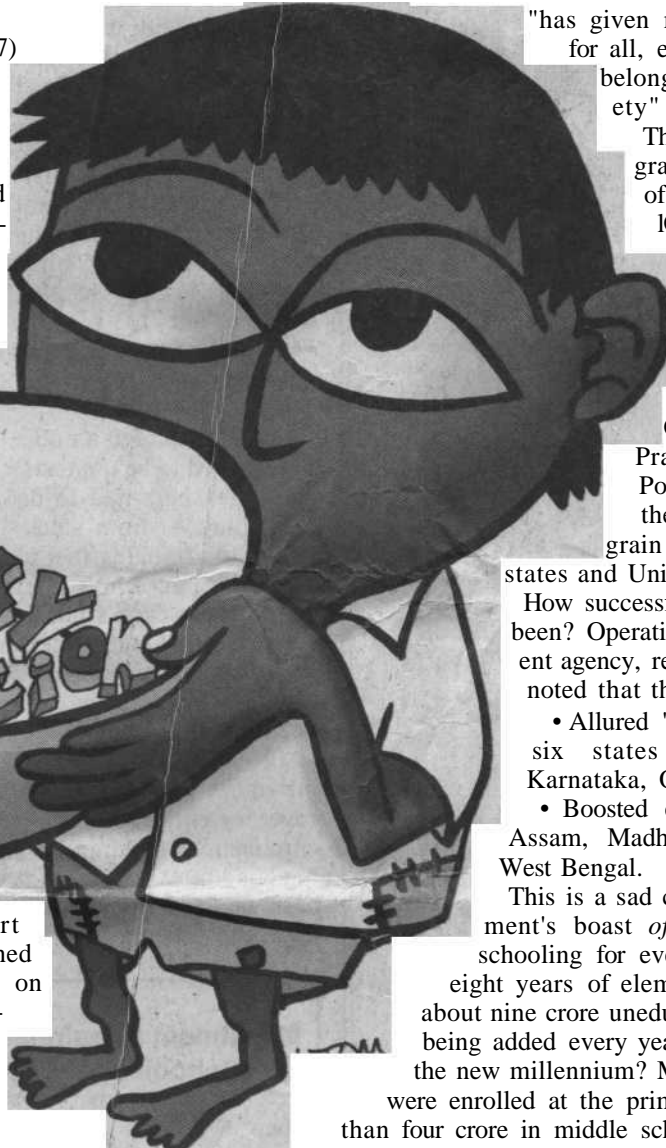
Despite several thousand crores spent over the past decade or so, the rate of primary literacy shows no sign of improvement. How do you force one of the 32 crore BPL parents (those below the poverty line) to send their children to school when that kid could as well be put to gainful use either at home or on the farms?

In 1995-96, the country required Rs 28,129.9 crore as investment for five years of universal schooling' of children in the 6-11 (primary) age group. The situation has not changed much since, with more than 50 million children in that age group not attending school even today. This directly translates into 50 million uneducated voters in 2018 AD!

What's the remedy? "Combine the right to education with the mid-day meal scheme — and you have a surefire recipe for success," claims a section of the intelligentsia that has successfully sold the concept to the education department in the Human Resources Development (HRD) ministry. Their formula is simple: Bring out the cold-stored 83rd Constitution Amendment Bill (dumped after the United Front government failed to

muster sufficient strength in 1997) and make the right to education a fundamental right (it is at present one of the directive principles).

After a successful start in Tamil Nadu in the 1970s (*see box*), and later adoption by the state governments of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, the mid-day meal scheme (officially termed the National Programme of Nutritional



Support to Primary Education) was launched by the central government on 15 August, 1995, to cover all government, local body and government-aided schools.

The mid-day meal scheme is designed, says a senior official in the HRD ministry's education department, to give "a boost to the universalisation of

primary education by impacting upon enrolment, attendance, retention and the nutritional needs of children in primary classes."

Union HRD Minister Dr Murli Manohar Joshi told THE SUNDAY OBSERVER that his government

"has given maximum priority to ensure food for all, especially to school-going children belonging to the weaker sections of society"

The central support under this programme is to provide foodgrain free of cost to the children — at a rate of 100gm per student per school per day in states where cooked meals are provided, and a bulk supply of 3kg per child every month where only foodgrains are being distributed. While Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh (174 tribal blocks) and Pondicherry provide cooked food for the school children, uncooked foodgrain is distributed in the rest of the

states and Union Territories.

How successful has the mid-day meal scheme been? Operation Research Group, an independent agency, recently conducted a field study and noted that the food-cum-study scheme has:

- Allured "attendance and retention" in just six states — Gujarat, Haryana, J&K, Karnataka, Orissa and Rajasthan;
- Boosted enrolment in just four states — Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

This is a sad comment on the education department's boast of ensuring *five years of primary schooling for every child in India by 2007*, and *eight years of elementary schooling by 2010*. With about nine crore uneducated/semi-literate boys and girls being added every year, can India confidently roll into the new millennium? More than 11 crore boys and girls were enrolled at the primary level (classes I-V) and more than four crore in middle school (classes VI-VIII) in 1998-99. But the dropout rate for the same year is about 57% in classes I-VIII. And this is the average ratio every year.

What are the causes of the food for study' programme not working out well? Apart from the irregularities in supply of mid-day meals, field studies have revealed that:

- Students' attendance is high during distribution of meals but slumps off immediately after classes resume.
- Local politicians put pressure on school authorities to fill the bellies of children who are not on the rolls at all, or have dropped out of school for various reasons — thereby cutting into the intake of regular students for whom the scheme has actually been devised.

The scheme, which seems fine on paper, presumes total

involvement of the teachers as well. "If you are a teacher in a zilla parishad (ZP) school, you also need to be a cook," says Sadashiv More, a teacher in Thane's tribal belt. School premises in rural Maharashtra acquired the look of kitchens after teachers in ZP schools were asked to prepare *khichri* (a stew of rice and pulses) for primary students.

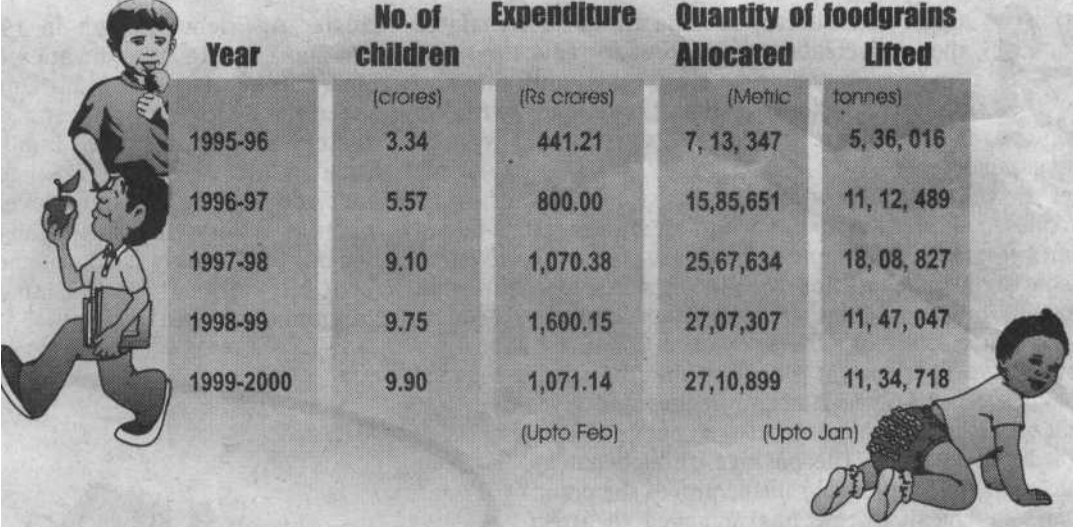
The idea, though a noble one, proved to be impracticable. Teachers had to do everything — from stock-taking to arranging fuel to balancing accounts and diets! While each student was given a daily meal of *khichri*, comprising 46gm rice and 15gm pulses, the culinary preparations consumed a major portion of the teachers' working time. Children were then allowed to take home their quota of rice.

The state government claims that the scheme, originally introduced in tribal areas in 1975 and gradually expanded to cover the entire state, has contributed greatly to the increasing enrolment of children for primary schooling even in backward regions like Marathwada. There, attendance in ZP schools has been *boosted from* around 73% (1993-94) to 93% (1998-99) after the scheme was launched. Says Minister of State for

Mid-day Meal Scheme

| Year | No. of children | Expenditure | Quantity of foodgrains | |
|-----------|-----------------|-------------|------------------------------|-------------|
| | (crores) | (Rs crores) | Allocated (Metric tonnes) | Lifted |
| 1995-96 | 3.34 | 441.21 | 7, 13, 347 | 5, 36, 016 |
| 1996-97 | 5.57 | 800.00 | 15,85,651 | 11, 12, 489 |
| 1997-98 | 9.10 | 1,070.38 | 25,67,634 | 18, 08, 827 |
| 1998-99 | 9.75 | 1,600.15 | 27,07,307 | 11, 47, 047 |
| 1999-2000 | 9.90 | 1,071.14 | 27,10,899 | 11, 34, 718 |

(Upto Feb) (Upto Jan)



Education Anil Deshmukh, "The feedback to the scheme is positive. Even the numbers of girls joining primary schools has greatly improved. It may not be owing to the mid-day meals only, but that's certainly a factor."

However, Vyankappa Patki, a senior MLC from western Maharashtra, while agreeing that the scheme has provided a boost to rural education, feels that its benefits haven't percolated down to the really needy children. He says, "Either the beneficiaries are not aware of it, or they are deprived of it by the agencies and the personnel involved. There is lack of coordination between the revenue, education and supplies ministries and the Food Corporation of India. A separate cell should be formed considering the vastness of the task." He also alleges that contractors working in collusion with local government officials indulge in corruption.

In fact, corruption is endemic in almost all the states. Contractors are in collusion with the authorities to supply inferior quality foodgrain and there have been cases of students coming to grief after asking, *a la* Oliver Twist: Please Sir, can I have some more?"

While we argue that governments — central as well as states (as education is on the concurrent list of the Constitution) — must be held responsible for providing schooling to every child, should we not ask as to what role society has played so far to make this a reality? Yes, widespread illiteracy prevails. But is it because of not making education (at least till primary level) compulsory? Will it help by merely amending the Constitution and making the right to education a fundamental right? When will we learn our lessons?

Mid-day meals are a primary means of attracting deprived kids to school. But maintaining a consistent supply of food of good quality will alone ensure that the child sticks on in school and spreads the word around. There's obviously plenty of food for thought out there.

Inputs from ABHIJIT SINHA in DELHI, PRASHANT DHAVAN in MUMBAI, AMBARISH MUKHERJEE in CALCUTTA and K SREEDHAR RAO in HYDERABAD

Investment Requirements for Five Years for Universal Schooling of Children in the Age Group 6-11

| State | Yearly investment required for five years | Yearly investment as a percentage of SDP, 1995-6 |
|---------------------|---|--|
| ■ figures in crores | | |
| Andhra Pradesh | 2,137 | 3.32 |
| Assam | 788 | 5.07 |
| Bihar | 3,129 | 9.31 |
| Gujarat | 1,199 | 2.23 |
| Haryana | 528 | 2.15 |
| Himachal Pradesh | 140 | 2.84 |
| Karnataka | 1,338 | 2.96 |
| Kerala | 645 | 2.50 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 2,365 | 5.01 |
| Maharashtra | 2,261 | 1.69 |
| Orissa | 921 | 4.32 |
| Punjab | 564 | 1.59 |
| Rajasthan | 1,581 | 4.69 |
| Tamil Nadu | 1,403 | 2.43 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 4,729 | 5.34 |
| West Bengal | 2,145 | 3.47 |
| ■ All-India | 28,130 | 2.85 (GDP) |

ED1 MIDDAY MEAL SCHEME