

Panel says nexus between officials and contractors eats away meal scheme

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MUMBAI: The estimates committee of the Maharashtra legislative assembly has unearthed a nexus between unscrupulous government officials and contractors which deprives school students of their nutrition under the Centrally-sponsored Midday Meal Scheme (MMS).

The committee's report, which laid the large-scale fraud threadbare, was submitted to the House during the recently concluded budget session by the committee's chairman Prasad Tanpure. The report said, "The committee sadly notes how a socially relevant **FOOD FOR THOUGHT** scheme has been moth-eaten by corruption and fraud, thereby wasting state and Central fundings."

The MMS supplies superfine variety rice worth around Rs 300 crore to Maharashtra along with a grant of Rs 50 per quintal for transportation of the rice to schools across the state. Launched in 1995-96 by the Centre to reduce the number of school dropouts, students from the 1st to 5th standards and having 80 per cent attendance is entitled to receive three kg of rice per month under the scheme. It is applicable to schools run by the government, local bodies and aided institutions. However, the committee's finding has shown that most students were unable to obtain additional nutrition since the rice meant for them vanished midway.

The committee recorded its shock when it was told by the civil supplies department and the school

education department "that no detailed information about the frauds committed in 1996-97, 1997-98 and 1998-99 were available.

Expressing the view that such an excuse could not be justified if corruption was prevented, the committee said, "The department must exercise tight administrative control over the scheme. The committee wants the department to secure in a fortnight details about non-official and cooperative bodies involved in the frauds and their modus operandi. The department should initiate action accordingly and should inform the committee about it."

The panel described certain frauds and dwelt specially upon a case from Sangli. This case had rocked the legislature and was then entrusted to the state CID for investigation. Within one year (1998-99), 6,265 quintals of rice was misappropriated in the district. Its price was Rs 72 lakh. In all 37 officials, belonging to rural development, revenue and school education departments were ordered to be investigated. Several officials were arrested for the alleged fraud.

Describing another case, the committee said the president of Pune zilla parishad had complained in writing to the Pune district collector about the fact that rice allocated under the scheme was found to be full of rat droppings, glass fragments and stones.

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MID DAY MEAL SCHEME