

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 c. T

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.

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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.

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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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