

Impact of Free Mid-day Meal and Breakfast Schemes on Education with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu

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As education is a powerful tool for breaking the poverty cycle, enhancing child survival, favouring growth and development and closing social inequality and even reducing human right violations national and international conventions and summits emphasized on the universalization of primary education. However, globally there are nearly 69 million children who have not been enrolled in schools. Of these children nearly half of them are from Sub-Saharan Africa and almost a quarter from South Asia including India. The main reason for this state of affair is poor economic status of their parents, who are compelled to go for some manual works early in the morning without giving proper care to their children. Hence a scheme that provides some relief in the form of food is the most necessity to enhance enrolment and to reduce dropout rates and to help governments achieve the universalization of primary education. To attain these goals the mid-day meal scheme was introduced in many countries including India. The government of India has introduced the mid-day meal scheme in the name of National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education on the 15th of August 1995. In Tamil Nadu, it stands the highest in enrolment of students in higher education; the scheme was introduced in 1956, the oldest in the country. The latest on this line is the 'free breakfast scheme' introduced in Tamil Nadu in two phases, the first phase in 2022 and the second in 2023. It was proved beyond doubt by many studies that both the schemes have much positive impact on education, particularly enrolment.

Keywords: Universalization of primary education, Enrolment, Attendance, Social security, Economic security, Food security, Freebies.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a game-changer. It changes the quality of human wealth and also the lives of people. Because of education many of the poor become rich by getting good jobs and thereby a good income. Education is a powerful tool for breaking the poverty cycle, enhancing child survival, favouring growth and development and closing social inequality and even reducing human right violations. United Nations Report 2011 says that one year of education enhances one's earning by 10%. Through education one is able to get ideas on hygiene, environment and other measures to prevent ill-health and infections of communicable diseases. Hence national and international conventions and summits give importance to education, particularly primary education. In this context it is better to highlight the idea emphasized in the United Nations Millennium Summit held in 2000. The Summit emphasized on the universalization of primary education (United Nations, 2011) to ensure every child to get a basic foundation

of knowledge. It means that it is the bounden duty of each government to provide facilities to impart education at least primary education to all children irrespective caste, sex and status. However, it is indicated that globally nearly 69 million children have not been enrolled in educational institutions meant for them, i.e., primary schools. Of these children nearly half of them are from Sub-Saharan Africa and almost a quarter from South Asia including India (United Nations, 2010). The main reason for this state of affair is poor economic status of their parents, who are compelled to go for some manual works early in the morning without giving proper care to their children. Hence a scheme that provides some relief in the form of food is the most necessity to enhance enrolment and to reduce dropout rates and to help governments achieve the universalization of primary education.

On this line of thinking mid-day meal scheme was introduced in many countries. India is one among them. It is told that India failed significantly in terms of poverty, human development, hunger and education. It is ranked 71 on the Food Security Index out of 113 countries compared. In Human Development Index, India is placed at 132 out of 191 countries compared and in hunger, on the basis of Global Hunger Index; India is positioned at 101 out 119 countries taken for analysis in 2020-21. The country's mean years of schooling is just 6.7 years in 2020-21 and the inequality existing in education is also very high (Jose, 2022). Hence it is very important to introduce a novel scheme that helps India reduce the unwanted discrepancies existing in the factors mentioned above. In India, the mid-day meal scheme was introduced by the government of India on the 15th of August 1995 in the name of National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NPNSPE). In 2002 after understanding the importance of mid-day meal scheme the Supreme Court of India directed the Government of India to provide cooked mid-day meals in all government and government-aided primary schools. A full-fledged noon-meal scheme was introduced in 2006 after a modification was made in the NPNSPE in 2004. The cost of the scheme was shared between the centre and states at a ratio of 75:25. As per the data available it is the largest scheme at the global level covering 110 million children in about 1.2 million schools (Deka 2021).

Mid-day meal scheme is in reality a social security scheme aiming at the reduction of socio-economic inequalities. Social security schemes are launched throughout the world aiming at improving the social and economic security of targeted groups of people. They are introduced mainly for the benefit of the most disadvantaged people on the assumption that they not only increase the welfare of them but also contribute to the economy. Assistance is given to the disadvantaged people/targeted groups of people, who actually need some amenities but they cannot afford them. But it is also argued that these social

security schemes are announced and implemented by political parties to buy the confidence of voters. Some others argued that they become the cause of financial problems encountered by many state governments. The Reserve Bank of India states that many social welfare schemes announced by states are a source of fiscal risk as the share of subsidies in the total revenue expenditure is continuously rising. As a social welfare scheme, the mid-day meal scheme was introduced in India only in the 1990s (Deka, 2021). But in Tamil Nadu it was introduced a while back, in the 1950s. Of the social security schemes introduced in Tamil Nadu targeting the poor primary school-going children the two major schemes are: 1) The free mid-day meal scheme and 2) The free breakfast scheme. Tamil Nadu state's mid-day-meal scheme was introduced by late K. Kamaraj, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, which is the oldest one (Kannan, 2023). The latest is the 'Free breakfast' scheme introduced in the 2020s by the present Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M. K. Stalin. After Kamaraj, some additions were made by the then rulers of Tamil Nadu to make the mid-day scheme very lucrative. In terms of money, millions of rupees are spent on these schemes. The main aims of these schemes are at increasing the attendance and the enrolment of students in government schools and enhancing their educational attainments. Further, they also pave the way for protecting poor students from starvation, at least two meals in a day, both breakfast and lunch.

A brief profile of Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu stands the highest among the states in enrolment of students in higher education. The Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in higher education stood at 45.65% for female and 48.2% for male, highest among all states and Union Territories (UTs). At the national level the GER was only 25.2%. The lowest is in Bihar with 14.4% (Javadekar, 2018). The literacy rate in the state is 82.9% against the national average of 77.7% in 2021¹. In the state, Kanniyakumari district occupies the first place in literacy rates with 92.61% in 2021. It is followed by Chennai, 91%². The national Human Development Index (HDI) also shows the glowing performance of Tamil Nadu. In comparison with the national average the state in a better position, but in comparison with Kerala it is a lower performing state. According to the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2016-18 in the state only 10% of children aged between 5 – 9 were stunted against the national average of 22%, 23% are underweight against the national average of 35% and 19% are malnourished against the national average of 23%. The concerned rates in Kerala are 11%, 21% and 16%. Further, about 10% are anaemic in the state. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned the state is relatively good in aspects like

¹ <http://www.literacy.rate.in/ndian-states>

² <http://www.literacy.rate.in/kanniyakumari>

nutritional and micro-nutritional attainments. However, the state's performance is very poor among children from the marginalised and the poor (Jose, 2022) and in providing quality education the state stands 27th (Mohamed, 2022). To attain a state of quality education and a high level of nutrition and food security it is necessary to have schemes that can reduce these rates to a zero level. Hence the mid-day meal scheme was introduced long before now and the breakfast scheme, as a first-of-its-kind, was launched very recently. At this juncture it is worthwhile to consider these two novel schemes focussing on the twin objectives of attaining a hunger-free student community and of improving both their nutritional and educational statuses, enhancement of enrolment and learning and listening ability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mid-day meal scheme

No one can refute the statement that Tamil Nadu is the first and the foremost in the introduction of mid-day meal scheme in India. The first government scheme to provide free food for school students was launched in 1920. However it was stopped for two years and then revived. It had not covered the entire Madras Presidency, the present Tamil Nadu, but only a part of the present day Chennai, only in Thousand Light area³. A resolution was passed in Chennai Corporation on the 16th September 1920 to provide free mid-day meal for children in a corporation school in Thousand Light (Kannan, 2023). The present mid-day meal scheme was a brain child of K. Kamaraj, the then the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. It was launched throughout the state in 1956. In 1971 M. Karunanidhi, the then Chief Minister of the state made the mid-day meal scheme a grand movement by providing nutritious meals both to school students and pregnant mothers. An Integrated Nutritional Programme was also introduced across the state by him in 1975 (Stalin, 2022). Innovations and additions were made by Chief Ministers, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) and J. Jayalalitha. With some additions, the mid-day meal scheme was renamed by MGR as Nutritious Noon-Meal Scheme and rolled out in 1982. Under this scheme poor school students were provided with nutritious food. Manmohan Singh, the then Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, was against the scheme, but in 2013 as the Prime Minister of India he accepted the mid-day meal scheme and supported the introduction of the scheme throughout India. It was also enshrined in the National Food Security Act 2013 by his government (Subramanian, 2022). Some additions like egg, chickpeas, green gram and boiled potatoes were made to the scheme by Karunanidhi in 1989 and in 2010 a provision was made to give eggs for five days

a week and banana for those who are not ready to eat eggs. It was Jayalalitha, who ordered for adding variety rice in the mid-day meal in 2013 in one block in each district and in the next year, 2014, it was extended to the entire state of Tamil Nadu. Due to the success of the scheme it has become popular throughout India as of today. To assess the positive impact of this scheme a number of studies have been conducted in various parts of India or covering the entire nation and a few of them are discussed herewith.

A study conducted by Deka (2021) reports that the percentage of good attendance (60% and above) increased very much after the launching of mid-day meal scheme. The percentage of good attendance was only 16.26% before the introduction of the scheme. But after the introduction it was 89.77%. Further the author indicated that the scheme had wider acceptability by both the children and their parents as they belong to rural areas and their economic conditions were very poor. Their parents had to go for work early in the morning and so they had given less importance to their wards' diets, both breakfast and mid-day meal. Children had usually attended classes with light breakfast or with empty stomach, skipped even the lunch and so once the dropout rate was very high and the attendance was very poor. Now it is not so.

The study conducted by Sahai (2014) infers that apart from an increase in the attendance of students in primary schools, the scheme helps them in getting awareness regarding washing of hands before and after every meal, drinking of safe water and maintaining good environment. However, the teachers have to spend two to three hours every working day for making arrangements for mid-day meals. It adversely affects children's education. Yawar and Hamid (2012) conducted a study to assess the impact of mid-day meal scheme on education. They conclude that the impact is impressive in terms of enrolment, attendance and in avoiding unnecessary drop outs. It was upheld by Tiwari (2022) and Mondal (2017). Further Tiwari highlighted that the scheme has also enhanced nutrition and social equity status of children. Bond's (2012) study also asserts that the school-feeding scheme in India is very successful in improving the enrolment of children coming from the poor and the marginalised. Poonam (2013) conducted a study to assess the impact of the mid-day meal scheme on the enrolment and attendance of girl children in primary schools. The study proved that their achievement in terms of enrolment and attendance is highly encouraging and supportive.

Porter et al., (2010) reported that both the groups, a younger group (4-5 age) and an older group (11-12 age), that have been taken for analysis show a high standard deviation (Raven's test, a multiple choice intelligence test), younger group with a value of 0.78 and the older group with a value of 0.79. It means that in comparison with the prediction the value is very high and so the impact is very positive in terms of nutrition, higher score than otherwise predicted. Further

³ A town area (a portion) in Madras Presidency (In Tamil it is called Ayiram Vilakku).

they also assert that there are two factors, which affect children's nutritional standard. They are droughts and the mid-day meal that they have been taking. During droughts their intake is less and so there is a nutritional deficiency among children, there is negative correlation between drought and nutritional status, change in weight to age and change in height to age, the two factors taken for analysis of nutritional status. The other is the meals taken under the mid-day meal or noon-meal scheme. It was highlighted that there is positive relationship between mid-day meal and factors deciding nutritious status of students. The values of 'r', correlation coefficient, between drought and the first factor, weight to age is -0.59 and between drought and the second factor, height to age, is -0.63. Against these two negative values the effects of mid-day meal on these factors are positive: 0.48 and 0.58. On the same line there is an indication of better learning, due to the introduction of the mid-day meal scheme. Better learning is due to many factors such as improved school attendance to get mid-day meal and better nutrition and concentration in studies due to absence of hunger.

Though all these studies are related to some other states or the entire India and not related to Tamil Nadu they proved beyond doubt that the mid-day meal scheme has created a positive impact on the attendance of children from primary schools. As the scheme was introduced in Tamil Nadu in 1956 it is not possible to compare data related to pre-mid-day meal scheme period with that of the post-mid-day meal scheme period. Hence no attempt is made to collect primary data and assess the impact of the mid-day meal scheme on attendance.

Breakfast scheme

It is a scheme introduced for students of government primary schools, 1st standard to 5th standard by Tamil Nadu government in two phases, first phase in 1,545 primary schools, covering 114,095 students on the 14th September 2022 with an outlay of 33.5 crore rupees (Jose, 2022), second phase in all the remaining schools in 15th August 2023. In total the free breakfast scheme covers 1.7 million students studying in 31,008 government primary schools in Tamil Nadu. The total amount allotted for this scheme for the year 2022-23 is 5,000-odd million rupees (Kannan, 2023). This scheme is not a new scheme in the world. It was in active practice in the United States of America and some other European countries like France. Researches highlight that the impact of the breakfast scheme is positive in terms of both attendance and learning ability of students (Stalin, 2022). According to Jose (2022) the scheme stands at the confluence of three socio-political developments. They are: 1. Political debate on freebies, 2. Falling human development performance and 3. Educational disturbance caused by COVID-19. To the government of Tamil Nadu, the scheme is a novel one. It is told that the scheme is not a freebie, charity

or incentive. According to Stalin (2022) as cited in Jose (2022), it is a welfare-promoting and human development-enhancing scheme. In Tamil Nadu it helps students stay hunger-free and attend classes without distraction. It fulfils the constitutional obligations (Article 38 of the Indian Constitution) of promoting social welfare and minimising inequalities in income, facilities and opportunities among individuals and groups. Certainly its impact is positive on nutritional status. However the impact of this scheme on attendance is measurable rather than in terms of enhancement of nutritional status of students as it covers only a limited period between the period of rolling out of the scheme and the study period (December 2023).

It is reported that earlier primary school children get only lunch, mid-day meal, but now they get both the lunch and breakfast. Furthermore, from the point of view of nutritionists breakfast is more important, prime meal, than other meals and so they feel that certainly this scheme improves the nutritional status of children studying in government primary schools. In this context this question therefore arises: What is the reason for introducing it in government schools only but not in government-aided and private schools? The apt reply from the government is that the poorest of poor are attending classes only in government schools but not in others. It was further stated that the scheme was launched not in a haphazard and hurry-burry manner. It was launched after conducting a baseline study. The baseline study was conducted among children of 9-12 years old on the assumption that their younger siblings are in the same situation. The study reports that 43% did not take breakfast daily or took occasionally and 17% never eat breakfast before going to school. This also proved that the parents, particularly mothers, are working as sanitary workers or construction workers or farm workers. It is necessary to be in the working sites in time, early morning and so mothers are not able to prepare breakfast for their children (Stalin, 2023 as cited in Kannan, 2023). Hence it is a very urgent matter for government intervention, to make the school-going children better nourished and better suited for education.

By getting nutritious breakfast and noon meal children are able to enjoy some health benefits such as reduction in stunting, underweight and wasting. Though these are measurable factors measurement of them requires a long period between the introduction of the scheme and the period of study. In the short-run measurement or counting is possible only in terms of education, attendance and enrolment. A few studies have also been undertaken to assess the impact of breakfast scheme on the attendance. It is reported that attendance of students increased in government primary schools in which the scheme was introduced in the first phase. A comparison of attendance is made between June-July 2022 with that of January-February 2023. The increase in attendance is 10% to 50%. Among schools where the scheme was rolled out in the first phase,

Table 1. Percentage of Good Attendance in Government Primary Schools in KK District.

Class/Attendance	Pre-Breakfast Period	Post-Breakfast Period
I	67	69
II	72	75
III	79	81
IV	68	71
V	69	73

Source: Primary data collected from Kanniyakumari District.

77% of schools experienced an improvement in attendance in comparison with the schools in neighbouring areas (Elambahavath, 2023 in Kannan, 2023). In some schools, specifically in hilly areas, the attendance is 100% after the introduction of the scheme (Sulaiman, 2023 in Kannan, 2023). Kandavel (2023) by taking data from an analysis of attendance done by State Planning Commission, points out that out of the 1,543 government schools where the free breakfast scheme was introduced in the first phase, 1,319 schools showed an increase in attendance in January-February 2023 in comparison with that of June-July 2022. The increase in attendance is between 0% and 40%, in 1,086 schools it is up to 20% and in 22 schools it is 40%. In 217 schools there was no change in attendance.

To verify these results among schools where the scheme was rolled out in the second phase a study was conducted in Kanniyakumari (KK) district, a fully literate district in the state of Tamil Nadu. For the purpose of assessing the attendance between two periods, pre- and post-breakfast scheme periods, 20 government primary schools have been selected and attendance of students has been compared, attendance for the month of both November 2022 is compared with that of November 2023. (Schools, in which the scheme was rolled out in the first phase, are not included in the survey). Only the percentage of attendance exceeding 75%, good attendance, is taken for analysis. Table 1 shows the attendance during both the pre-breakfast and the post-breakfast periods.

From Table 1 it is clear that there is an increase in attendance only to the tune of only 2% to 4%. In the first standard and in the third standard the increase is only 2% and in the second and fourth standards the increase is 3%, but in the fifth standard the increase of 4%. In comparison with the state average, it is very low. It may be due to two reasons. The first one is that the district is already a fully literate district and so people are highly interested and making all efforts in sending their wards to schools. The second is that the district is with high economic background and so very limited number of children attends schools with empty stomach and so the attendance is good even during the pre-breakfast scheme period.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis it is very clear that the free mid-day meal scheme has not only increased attendance and enrolment but also the nutritional standard of primary school children. The primary school children are able to get education without any distraction. Stomachs of primary school children are filled with some food and so they are free from starvation also. After introducing the free breakfast scheme they are now enjoying two meals, the breakfast, the prime meal and the noon meal. Hence it is certain that because of these schemes the state is moving towards a hunger-free student community with high nutritional and educational statuses and enrolment, attendance and learning and listening ability. The schemes are development oriented as they improve the standard of human capital and so they cannot be considered as freebie schemes. But they can be considered as welfare promoting and human development-enhancing schemes. As impacts of both schemes are significantly positive in improving educational attainment and in attaining social equality of government primary school children, particularly the economically backward children from the rural areas of Tamil Nadu these schemes can be taken as model schemes for other states and countries.

Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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