

# Hunger Pandemic

**Prof. (Dr.) K.S.Sarwani**

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, The Tamil Nadu Dr. Ambedkar Law University, Chennai-113

## Abstract

Food security is one of the basic needs of people in the society. Ensuring that for all is a vital , but difficult task for the Government. During the pandemic that became even more difficult especially for school children. Mid-day meals for children in anganwadis and Government schools in India is a policy measure of a welfare state that has tremendous implications, both short-term and long term to ensure social protection, healthier future citizens and more equal societies. The short-term benefits are education for all, food security for children, minimizing dropout rates etc. The long-term benefits include a huge literate population, more people getting high paid and secure jobs, healthier nation, etc. Many social evils like early marriage, early motherhood, child labour, beggary etc. can also be avoided when children go to schools, The New Education Policy, 2020, has included nutritious breakfast along with mid-day meals in schools. It will be hugely beneficial policy of the welfare state once implemented. At present around 120 million children in India are covered under Mid-Day Meal Scheme [MDMS]. At the global level, approximately 368.5 million children in 143 countries rely on meal programmes in schools. This paper deals with hunger pandemic during Covid-19 pandemic with special reference to the children covered under noon meal scheme in Schools and anganwadis in Tamil Nadu.

**Keywords:** Pandemic; lockdown; hunger pandemic; food security; welfare policy; Mid-day meals.

## Introduction

This welfare measure preceded the Constitution and owes its existence to the Dravidian ideology. The genesis of meals for school children can be traced to the ‘School Tiffin Programme’, adopted by the Madras Corporation Council on 17<sup>th</sup> of November 1920. It was passed as a policy resolution to provide breakfast to the students of a Corporation School located in Thousand Lights area, in the city of Madras, part of the erstwhile Madras Presidency.<sup>1</sup> It was introduced by a reluctant British Government due to the strong insistence of Sir Pitti Theagaraya Chetti. It cost one anna per day per student. Since it was well received by the students, the Madras Corporation extended this scheme to four other schools in Madras. Probably due to this, the combined student strength increased from 811 in the academic year 1922-23 to 1671 in 1924-25. Despite its success, the British Government stopped this scheme on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1925 since it did not want to spend for it from the Elementary Education Fund. After a lapse of two years, the breakfast scheme was once again revived benefitting 1000 odd poor students from 25 schools under Madras Corporation.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamilnadu/tracing-the-history-of-tamilnadu-mid-daumeal-scheme-article-30874858.ece>

<sup>2</sup> “Tracing the history of Tamil Nadu mid-day meal scheme”, T. Ramakrishnan, The Hindu, 21/2/2020

<sup>3</sup> “India’s first mid-day meal was served here, but now it is in lockdown’ , Times of India dt. 21/7/2020

### **Noon Meal Scheme in Tamil Nadu**

The credit for introducing mid-day meal scheme to poor school children once again goes to the State of Tamil Nadu. In the year 1956, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, K. Kamaraj initiated the mid-day meal programme for school children. This idea came to him in a casual conversation with some boys grazing livestock in Tirunelveli, when he realized that poverty drives parents to send their children for work and not to schools. In the budget of 1956-57, there was a provision for providing mid-day meals to school children for 200 days a year. 3 From 1300 feeding centres, around 65000 students were sought to be covered.

### **Flagship Programme**

The mid-day meal or noon-meal scheme in Tamil Nadu was made as a flagship programme of the Government of Tamil Nadu by the then Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran in 1982. He evinced personal interest in strengthening it. It was initially provided to Anganwadi children in the age group of 2-5 years in rural areas. Later it was extended to urban areas too. From September 1984, noon meal scheme was extended to students in the age group of 10-15 years. It was made as a nutritious meal programme. Acknowledging his contribution, the Government under the Chief Minister ship of J.Jayalalitha, renamed it as “Puratchi Thalivar MGR Nutritious Meal Programme”.

### **Noon-meal scheme under DMK**

The DMK party while in opposition criticized this scheme as waste of money. But the same DMK Government under the Chief Minister ship of Karunanidhi, actually strengthened it by adding eggs and bananas for those children who do not consume eggs in 1989-1990. In 2006, frequency of egg was increased to twice a week and in 2007, it was increased to thrice a week. Child nutritional development coupled with less dropouts and hike in literacy percentage were clearly visible. Impact from other not so obvious benefits like delay in child marriages and early pregnancies, child labor among other things made the DMK Government to turn from a critic to a strong supporter of the scheme.

### **Jayalalitha and noon meal scheme**

This policy measure got the next big boost under the Chief Minister ship of Madam J. Jayalalitha. She was particular that wholesome nutrition for different age groups has to be included in every meal. Under her direction, flour, variety meals and different side dishes including for eggs were included. The scheme covered all the children in anganwadis and all students in Government schools in Tamil Nadu. The meals are prepared as per the chart on nutritional needs of children in different age groups and daily menu as approved by the Government of Tamil Nadu is strictly followed in schools and anganwadis.<sup>4</sup>

The Tamil Nadu model of noon-meal scheme is considered rightly as a pioneering welfare policy in India. Inspired by this, experts from some foreign countries and other states in India visited noon meal centres in Tamil Nadu, so as to start similar schemes in their countries and states. The Government of India too joined in and now it provides noon-meal schemes across India.

### **Global Perspective**

Right to food and right to education are viewed as twin projects intertwined like two sides of a coin. Education is of great importance in bettering the socio-economic condition of the nation and the lives of

<sup>4</sup> Annual work plan & Budget 2020-2021, Mid Day Meal Scheme Tamil Nadu State

the individuals. At the global level, as early as 1953, right to education was declared as basic human right.<sup>5</sup> This was reiterated by the United Nations in 1966.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child also emphasizes on the need for State Parties to ensure free and Universal education.<sup>7</sup> It further states that, “To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter-alia, the application of readily available technology and through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking water.”<sup>8</sup> The Convention on the Rights of Child further states, “To ensure that all segments of society, in particular parents and children are informed, have access to education and are supported in the use of basic knowledge of child health and nutrition”<sup>9</sup>

### Indian Scenario

The genesis of this system stems from the erstwhile Madras Presidency and the present setup from the State of Tamil Nadu, which made food security a natural corollary of education in schools since 1960. It was christened as PuratchiThalivar MGR nutritious meal programme and it benefits 48.6 lakh students. The Government of India too made it its flagship programme and it is functioning for the past nearly 3 decades. Around 120 million children are served mid-day meals in schools and anganwadis. In Tamil Nadu, it is mostly cooked in the schools and teachers have to taste it before serving the hot food to the children. Variety meals, different types of egg gravies, sweets on special occasions etc. make the children enjoy the food served to them in schools in Tamil Nadu. In many other states, the making of food is outsourced to a private organisation “Akshaya Patra”.

In the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, “Akshaya Patra” prepares food in its centralized kitchens, and sends it to schools. Food habits and dietary preferences vary from state to state. There is a general complaint that children do not eat certain types of food served and it is wasted<sup>10</sup> because food is not hot and not eaten in their locality or region. In Tamil Nadu, hot food is prepared in schools, which naturally caters to the local preferences and children relish the food. This scheme is known as MDMS or Mid-Day Meals Scheme at the all-India level. The New Education Policy 2020, if implemented will be a boon to such children as it has strongly recommended for a nutritious breakfast in schools.

### Lockdown and Impact on Child Nutrition

The state partnership with parents in providing free education and nutritious mid-day meals has helped majority of children in building a strong future for themselves and the nation. But all this turned topsy-turvy in March 2020. The surging virus and sudden lockdown has had a cascading effect on many aspects on one’s normal life. Some of its repercussions were blatantly visible, while some slowly ate into the very fulcrum of the lives of majority of people. one’s lives. Normally when schools declare holidays, children are happy. But for those children who depended on the mid-day meals, the extended closure was devastating and they started craving for those meals. Malnutrition in India is already a major issue. India ranks 94 among 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index for 2020. The National Family

<sup>5</sup> Article 3, 1<sup>st</sup> Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights

<sup>6</sup> Article 10, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966

<sup>7</sup> Article 24, Convention on Rights of the Child adopted by UN General Assembly by General Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989, came into force on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1990 and has 54 articles

<sup>8</sup> Article 24(2)(c), Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Article 24(2)(e), Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ms. K. Prameela, Headmistress, Government High school, Nellore dt, Andhra Pradesh dt.6/6/2021

Health Survey-5 has pointed out that malnutrition affects many children in India.<sup>11</sup>

Mid-Day Meal Scheme is a legal right for anganwadi and school children after the passing of the National Food Security Act.<sup>12</sup> In 2015 the Central Government notified the “Mid-Day Meal Rules”<sup>13</sup> This rule mandated that every child from 6 to 14 years from classes I to VIII shall be provided hot cooked meal on all working days in the school premises.<sup>14</sup> It further stipulated that the proper working of this scheme shall be monitored by the School Management Committee formed as per Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009.<sup>15</sup>

Covid-19 Pandemic induced lockdown has affected school children in many ways. Most of the children depended on MDMS for fulfilling their nutritional needs and for many it was the only proper meal of that day. As early as April 2020, with schools shut down for nearly a month, the World Food Programme [WFP] warned of the threat of a “hunger pandemic worldwide looming large.” The United Nation’s Policy brief on “Impact of Covid-19 on children”, said that around 368.5 million children who depend on meal programmes in 143 countries will face malnutrition.<sup>16</sup>

### Policy Initiatives

With the Covid-19 Pandemic gripping the nation, the immediate reaction of the government was to shut down everything and concentrate on covid cases alone. Even the most essential day-to-day necessities were pushed to the background including MDM scheme. It was an all-out attack on the raging virus. Once the din subsided, the Government was pressurized from various quarters to feed the starving children. In April 2020, the Central Government sanctioned food security allowance or dry rations to the tune of around Rs. 2566.93 crores. Many streets in many areas were declared as containment zones and the State Governments found it difficult to distribute the dry rations to the students registered under MDM scheme. The centre gave 3 options to the states-

1. To serve hot meals at their doorsteps;
2. Provide them monthly ration kits;
3. Provide ‘Food Security Allowance’ according to their age group.

An additional amount of Rs. 1,700 crores were sanctioned to the States by the Central Government for distribution of mid-day meals.<sup>17</sup>

A G.O. was issued by the Government of Tamil Nadu on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020 directing the Social Welfare Department to supply dry rations to students through their schools. District collectors were entrusted with the job of making arrangements for that. This order was only for primary students from class I to VIII, benefitting 42.6 lakh students. The senior students were left out. Despite the claim of the Tamil Nadu Government of supplying dry rations since March 2020, it was revealed that more than 40% of the eligible children did not receive their kits during the initial lockdown. The ‘Save the Children’ Foundation’s assessment revealed this and also the fact that those children whose parents were either

<sup>11</sup>R. Gopinath, Bhavani R.V “Has Covid-19 taken the wind out of the sails of India’s school feeding programme, 25 January 2021, <https://www.down.to/earth.org.in>

<sup>12</sup>National Food Security Act, 2013

<sup>13</sup>Mid-Day Meal Rules 2015, Government of India, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2015

<sup>14</sup><http://mdm.nic.in>

<sup>15</sup><https://www-business-standard.com>

<sup>16</sup>B. Jayashree & R. Gopinath, “As India’s children miss mid-day meals due to anganwadi closures, how can nutrition be ensured, Times of India, October 5, 2020

<sup>17</sup>Aishwarya Upadhyay, “How are the children in India Receiving their Mid-Day Meals Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic, Times Of India, August 5, 2020

migrants or others not having ration cards were left in the lurch. Virgil D Sami, Executive Director of Arunodaya Centre for Street Children pointed out that children on streets were badly affected and the Government did not have any plan to help them.<sup>18</sup>

United Nations World Food Programme [WFP] was keenly monitoring the way State Governments were distributing meals/meal kits to registered children. It pointed out that not all children got it and it varied from state to state and district to district in a state. In some states, rural students were not so affected as urban area students. “Zero Hunger Target by 2030” is a major objective of the United Nations as part of its Sustainable Development goal. But Covid-19 has definitely hampered its program. WFP India office gave alarming pictures of children begging and collecting waste for survival. The children living in containment zones were unable to get food/food kits/cash. Reports of increase in child marriages and child labour were circulating.<sup>19</sup>

### Judicial Intervention

During lockdown, news or any reliable information was through the media, which reported about children suddenly denied their meal of the day. Reports showed an increase in child labour, child marriages, beggary, child abuse during this phase with many children orphaned or no jobs for their parents. A Public Interest Litigation was filed in the High Court of Madras by Advocate Sudha Ramalingam in June 2020 requesting the court to direct the state of Tamil Nadu to supply raw eggs along with dry rations children. A division bench of Justices M.M. Sundresh and R. Hemalatha in their judgment, directed the Government of Tamil Nadu to ensure distribution of eggs and sanitary napkins to girls along with dry rations for students enrolled under MDM scheme during the pandemic and lockdown.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020, the Government’s submission to the court its inability to distribute raw eggs brought the ire of the court which asked the state how lockdown comes in the way of not supplying eggs, but it has not affected the functioning of Tasmac.<sup>20</sup> Censuring the State for its attitude, the court directed that Government school teachers, anganwadi staff and village health nurses should be sent to assess the number of families and children who require raw eggs. The court further said, “We are a welfare state. The issue of revenue will definitely arise for the State, but children have to be provided with necessary nutrition as they are the future of the country.” It also suggested distribution of vitamin tablets to the children.<sup>21</sup>

The unrelenting Pandemic continued its macabre run into 2021 too and children suffered from hunger pandemic with no signs of reopening of schools and anganwadis. A Public Interest Litigation was moved by an NGO, “Citizen Consumer and Civil Action Group”, requesting to provide hot cooked meals for school children. A division bench headed by Chief Justice Sanjit Banerjee and Justice Senthil Kumar Ramamoorthy, hearing the petition said that despite logistic and practical difficulties, the state has to take aggressive steps to provide hot and nutritious meals to school children at a time when many bread winners have lost their lives, majority lost their jobs and those still in jobs were paid less. Directing the State to find ways to feed children under nutritious meal programme, the court said, “Though children may not be attending schools where mid-day meals were provided, the State has to be

<sup>18</sup>The Times of India, May 24, 2021

<sup>19</sup> “Lockdown, food insecurity force street children to beg, take up jobs, (The Times of India, Chennai, May 24, 2021

<sup>20</sup><https://www.newindianexpress.com>, August 4 2020

<sup>21</sup>Indian Express August 3 2020



proactive and almost ensure door delivery of meals to children across the State”.<sup>22</sup> On 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, the High Court of Madras, asked the State of Tamil Nadu and the Central Government to devise plans so as to ensure prompt distribution of hot cooked meals.

### **Conclusion**

Breakfast scheme for school children was started in 1920's in Madras to ensure that students do not sit in class on empty stomachs and also to lessen the dropout rates. After independence Tamil Nadu Government recommenced it in 1956 to attract children to schools. Later AIADMK and DMK Governments converted it into a nutritious meal programme. The Union Government and other States started providing mid-day meals in schools and Anganwadis. It has become a flagship programme of the Government. The State of TamilNadu is rightly hailed as the forerunner of this beneficial measure.

Covid-19 Pandemic and lockdown affected people across the globe in myriad ways. It stood between children and their nutritious meals for nearly one and a half years. It affected them physically and mentally. Dry rations were provided to the eligible students by the State Governments with ample funds received from the Union Government. But in many States, including Tamil Nadu, the day rations did not reach all the children registered under MDM Scheme. The High Court of Madras intervened when PILs were filed to direct the Government to give eggs, sanitary napkins and hot cooked food. The court continuously monitored the situation and many times rapped the Government for non-compliance. The court also requested the Government to open schools at the earliest and provide hot cooked food or better undertake home delivery. With schools and anganwadis opening by September 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, things started slowly coming to normalcy and the State took high care in supplying hot cooked food and hunger pandemic amongst school children was being erased.

### **Suggestions**

All Pandemics and calamities teach surviving civilizations many important lessons. Covid 19 Pandemic too taught many lessons. In the case of food security for children, all the stakeholders were jolted out of their complacency. From March 2020 to September 2021, the whole scheme became redundant. Dry rations given for the children, is used for the entire family. Tamil Nadu has a long coastline. Floods are common year after year. Even then schools and anganwadis would be closed and children will be affected.

In Chennai city there are 200 wards and 400 Amma canteens apart from many corporation community kitchens. They are open even during floods and pandemics, In fact free food is distributed from amma canteens during emergencies. Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Amma canteens come under Social Welfare Department. Even in temples coming under Religious Endowment Boards free food is served to many people. The Government of Tamil Nadu can link children to the nearest canteen/temple/community kitchens/NGOs. The name list of the beneficiaries can be sent to the nearest Amma canteens or temples. They can go there and partake of food or get their utensils after showing their identity. Separate counters can be kept to give food parcels/serve food to those registered children. The Social Welfare Department can allocate resources and groceries for each centre according to the requirement.

This scheme not only satiates hunger and nourishes the kids, but it also helps in fighting against many evil customs in the society. It increases literacy rate ensures stronger and healthier future citizens, higher

---

<sup>22</sup>The Times of India, July 3 2021.

paying job, reduces child labour etc. For girl children it is a boon as it empowers them, stops early marriage, early pregnancy and protects them from many other debilitating customs. With the Government partnering with parents, it makes life better for the marginalized and poor. Hence the State should never ever stop this scheme and should be prepared to provide food even in the face of adversities.

Napoleon Bonaparte's statement that "the army marches on its stomach" holds true in the case of countries also. By linking food security, nutritional needs and literacy, a nation can aspire to have stronger, healthier and educated future population. It is vital for the holistic development of individuals, societies and the nation at the micro, meso and macro levels respectively.