

## Mid-Day Meals and Children's Rights

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In a spirited rejoinder, Shashi Bhushan Singh ('Future of Mid-Day Meals', *EPW*, February 28, 2004) pours cold water on our case for universal mid-day meals in primary schools ('Future of Mid-Day Meals', by Jean Drèze and Aparajita Goyal, *EPW*, November 1, 2003). His response raises many interesting issues, and I have no hope of doing justice to them in this brief response. Instead, let me try to address S B Singh's main concern, namely, that mid-day meals are a distraction from the central purpose of improving the quality of education.

In the original article, Aparajita Goyal and I focused on three distinct arguments for mid-day meals: the nutrition argument, the equity argument and the schooling argument. S B Singh's rejoinder is concerned mainly with the last argument, and in his haste to take it on, he presents a rather superficial critique of the other two. For instance, he disputes the nutrition argument on the grounds that, in practice, the nutritional content of mid-day meals is quite low (even in Delhi University hostels, where "the suppliers try to dump the rotten groceries and vegetables"). This is a pertinent observation, and we had indeed made it ourselves in the original article. However, the low nutritional content of existing mid-day meals does not detract from the possibility of using mid-day meals to enhance the nutrition of children. The nutrition argument is concerned primarily with the potential of mid-day meals as a means of nutrition intervention, not with their present achievements in this respect. Several states have already made good use of this potential, and much more can be done in this respect, at relatively low cost.

There are similar flaws in Singh's critique of the equity argument. For instance, he disputes the claim that mid-day meals help to break caste barriers by teaching children to sit together and share a common meal, on the grounds that "even if the

students share meals together in school it does not mean that they will share food together at home". This is like saying that there is no point teaching children to be sociable at school because there is no guarantee that they will also be sociable at home. Further, whatever happens at home, the act of breaking traditional caste taboos at school is quite significant in its own right. Restrictions on commensality (eating together) play a crucial role in the perpetuation of the caste system, and breaking these restrictions anywhere is a contribution to social equity.

Turning to the education argument (Singh's main concern), our claim was that mid-day meals contribute in various ways to the advancement of education, e.g. by fostering higher school enrolment, more regular attendance, and better learning achievements. The crux of Singh's rejoinder, as I understand it, is that (1) the real issue is the quality of education, and (2) mid-day meals detract from the quality of education.

The quality of education is indeed very important and I have emphasised it myself in various writings, some of which are generously quoted by Singh (it is a little unusual, but perfectly legitimate, to quote one person's writings on a particular subject to debunk the same person's writings on another subject). I think that we are on the same wavelength in this respect. However, in using the stick of quality education to beat mid-day meals, Singh overlooks two crucial points.

First, the importance of quality education does not alter the fact that many other circumstances also affect children's educational opportunities. To illustrate, even in a village with a relatively good school, some children may be out of school because their parents cannot afford to bear the costs of schooling, or because children dislike going to school, or because hunger undermines their learning abilities. Nutritious mid-day meals would help in all these respects. Second, and more importantly, the notion that mid-day meals detract from

the quality of education is based on a narrow view of what school education is about. This outlook is apparent in the dramatic question posed by Singh at the beginning of his article: "By allocating a totally different role to an institution other than for which it has been created, how it will affect the well-being of that institution?" [sic] To this I would respond that the purpose for which schools have been created is not just imparting formal knowledge, but the wholesome upbringing of the child. Viewed from that perspective, the role that mid-day meals can play in promoting regular school attendance, eliminating classroom hunger, fostering egalitarian values, etc. is also a contribution to the quality of education in the broad sense of the term. Further, a well-organised school meal can be regarded as a very useful educational activity in its own right.

This is not to deny that ramshackle mid-day meals can disrupt classroom activity and adversely affect the quality of education. We share this concern, and discussed it extensively in our article. However, we argued that the way to go is not to dismantle mid-day meals but to ensure that adequate arrangements in place (as they have been in, say, Tamil Nadu for more than 20 years). We stand by this assessment.

Reading between the lines, Singh's view that mid-day meals detract from the quality of education seems to be rooted in an implicit assumption that more money for mid-day meals implies less money for teacher appointments. In other words, he is arguing that the cause of quality education is better served by appointing more teachers than by providing mid-day meals. This may or may not be the case, but why should we entertain this trade-off in the first place? The whole idea of the fundamental right to education is that all children are entitled to whatever it takes to make quality education genuinely available to them free of cost. The problem is not to choose between teachers and mid-day meals, or for that matter between teachers and blackboards, but to identify the critical facilities that are needed to realise the fundamental right to education. We have argued that mid-day meals are among these critical facilities, and Singh's well-taken concern for higher teacher-pupil ratios does not affect this argument.

It may help to look at the issue from another angle. All children have fundamental rights to education, health and nutrition. These needs are so closely inter-linked that it does not make sense to look at them in isolation. Singh seems to take the view that the mandate of a school is to educate children, and that the health and nutrition of the pupils is someone else's responsibility. But who else? The family is not a reliable arrangement for this purpose, given the circumstances in which most people live, and India's health system has virtually nothing to offer. In these circumstances, there is a case for looking at the school as the best institutional means

of protecting the rights of the child. This calls not only for the provision of nutritious mid-day meals in all primary schools, but also for effective 'school health services'. Perhaps Singh will cringe at this further encroachment on traditional classroom activity. But if we are serious about the fact that all children have a fundamental right to education, health and nutrition, we need an institutional medium for protecting these rights. The best option is to insist that all children should be at school (or in an anganwadi, if they are aged below six), and to integrate the relevant health and nutrition facilities with other aspects of school education. **EPW**