

## States Drag their Feet

The government of Maharashtra spends a meagre 32 paise per child to give primary students in Mumbai 100 gm of 'khichdi' as their mid-day meal. The scheme is restricted to some 5,000 state and municipal corporation schools in 16 of the 24 city wards. This is the government's tardy response to the Supreme Court's directive of November 2001 to state governments to implement mid-day meals schemes to provide children in government and government-assisted primary schools with prepared meals with a minimum of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein for at least 200 days in the year.

Linking the provision of meals with primary education has a dual purpose: it helps retain children in school while providing them valuable nutrition. This is especially relevant in light of the very high school dropout rates. According to the central government's decadal review of the status of children, the percentage of children reaching the fifth grade increased by just a couple of decimal points, from 57.2 to 57.4, between 1990 and 2000. Also, half of India's children are malnourished, with India alone accounting for 40 per cent of all malnourished children in the world, in spite of adequate food production and public foodgrain stocks of over 60 million tonnes. It was to correct this tragic anomaly that the Supreme Court ordered that the large grain stocks of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) warehouses be released for the school meals programme. However, the state governments without exception have proved unequal to the task of implementing the Supreme Court's landmark order asking them to introduce cooked mid-day meals in primary schools in at least half their districts by February 2002.

The state governments have pleaded lack of financial resources as the reason for their failure to comply with the Supreme Court's order. The states were to supplement the central efforts by providing the conversion costs for serving cooked meals for which assistance is available to them out of JRY/EAS funds. Most states, however, have reported severe financial constraint, inadequate cooking arrangements and resentment among teachers. The effort has also suffered from disruption of supply of grains due to non-reconciliation of lifting figures between state governments and the FCI often resulting in the latter suspending supplies.

Most state governments have been reluctant to make allocations for the cost of converting foodgrains into cooked meals. Some of them have chosen to deliver the grain entitlement in the form of dry provisions which has, not surprisingly, often found their way to the local market or the homes of the school authorities. The quality of food served has also emerged as an issue of concern. The inauguration of the mid-day meals scheme in Andhra Pradesh was marred by outbreaks of food poisoning in Anantpur, Nizamabad, Guntur, Kurnool and Prakasam districts, leading to the state government having to send trained cooks to schools in a bid to rectify the situation.

The Supreme Court has appointed a commissioner to monitor the implementation of its orders relating to the right to food. The commissioner is to be assisted by an advisor in every state who is expected to watch the implementation of the programme in the state, foster the development of suitable accountability procedures and liaise with the state government. The Supreme Court has also ordered that all food security schemes be subject to social audit by citizens in gramsabhas and gram panchayats. **EW**