

# Tamil Nadu's Midday Meal Scheme

## Where Assumed Benefits Score over Hard Data

*Tamil Nadu's noon-cum-nutritious meal scheme is the country's largest in terms of the number of beneficiaries covered. There is little doubt that enrolment and retention of children, including girl children, in schools have shown significant improvement. Besides, drop-out rates have shown a decline. However, as this paper analyses, there is now a need to seriously re-examine the original rationale for the scheme, namely, getting children to school and retaining them. In the two decades of the scheme's existence, the educational profile as well as the nature of problems at the ground level have changed significantly. Much of this is not reflected in the data presented and available with the government. On the other hand, the scheme has not been able to bring all children to school. If the midday meal is to retain its effectiveness and relevance, it may have to be modified in the light of these changes.*

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Beginning July 1982 and till date, the Tamil Nadu government is managing, what could easily be the largest school and pre-school feeding programme in the country. Christened, the Puratchi Thalaivar MGR Nutritious Meal Programme (PTMGR NMP), the programme was initially introduced in rural areas for pre-school children in the age-group 2-5 years and for primary school children in the age group of 5-9 years. Subsequently, from September of 1982, this scheme was extended to urban areas. Old age pensioners were covered under the scheme from January 1983. From September 1984, the scheme covered school students of 10-15 years of age. With effect from December 1995, pregnant women were brought under the scheme.

The main objective of the scheme, as reiterated in 'Policy Note 2002-2003', of the Tamil Nadu government's department of social welfare and nutritious meal programme, is, "to provide adequate nutrition to economically disadvantaged children to improve the health and nutritional status of children, to develop their mental and physical ability and to increase the enrolment in schools and reduce dropouts" (emphasis added).

Our study has concentrated on the provision of noon meal to school children in the noon meal centres of government schools given our major objective, namely, that of understanding the interface between noon meal and education, particularly, girl's education. The study is organised in three parts. In Section I we begin with an examination of what can broadly be termed as 'public intervention' measures aimed at addressing simultaneously the move towards achieving universal primary education and enhancement of nutritional levels. We then go on to examine in as detailed a manner as possible the universal scheme of noon meal programme launched in 1982-83 by the then chief minister of the state, M G Ramachandran. Apart from describing the administrative details of the scheme, this section also explores the spatial and social aspects of the coverage of the scheme, the composition of the menu making up the meals and the changes in this composition over time, and the financial aspects including budgetary allocations for the scheme.

Section II of the paper provides a glimpse of the actual functioning of the scheme; it is based on visits to a few urban and rural noon meal centres. While observations based on these visits cannot be used to pronounce a definitive judgment on the operation of the scheme across the state, at the same time, it is our submission that these observations cannot be ignored altogether. While all relevant institutions are seemingly in place, and also functioning in such a manner to ensure that some kind of meal is made available at noon, there is very little information made available by government on the two crucial planks on which the scheme is anchored and justified, namely, increasing school enrolment/retaining children in schools and enhancing nutritional levels. In Section III we have brought together the main findings of our report besides providing recommendations based on these findings.

### I Tamil Nadu Tryst with Universalising Primary Education

The concept of 'midday meal' has a long history in India and particularly in Tamil Nadu. Way back in 1925, a midday meal programme was introduced for children belonging to poor socio-economic strata in the Madras Corporation area [GoI 1995:2]. The dovetailing of meal with education also has a long history in that, along with the introduction of the 'midday meal' programme, the Madras government also introduced in 1926 the 'Scheme of Compulsory Elementary Education' in 26 municipal areas including the corporation of Madras, with the aim of universalising primary education [GOTN, State Administration Report (henceforth SAR) various years]. Post-independence, and till 1982-83, when the present universally applicable scheme was launched, the state of Tamil Nadu experimented with a whole range of schemes (educational and nutritional) to address simultaneously the problems associated with enhancing enrolment, curtailing drop-outs, improving nutritional levels of children,

combating malnutrition, etc. A reading of the state administration reports through the years is revealing for the sheer number of schemes put in place by the state (at least on paper), the allocations made and the achievements that it records. The purpose of referring to these schemes is more to highlight the fact that the midday meal scheme is only one among a number of schemes aimed at enhancing enrolment and progressing towards the objective of universalising primary education. These schemes to a large extent have been distinct and unique in terms of their administrative set up and funding pattern, while at the same time overlapping in terms of their coverage.

There is hardly any 'official'<sup>1</sup> assessment on how exactly the above schemes have contributed to the realisation of the multiple objectives with which each of them were brought into being. That these schemes did not go far in enabling the state to achieve its objective of universalising primary school enrolment and/or in retaining children in schools is however clear from the renewed emphasis and reiteration of the original objectives (namely, addressing hunger and getting children to school) as rationale provided by the government while launching the 1882-83 midday meal programme.

### PTMGR NMP of 1982-83

On July 1, 1982, the Tamil Nadu government under the chief ministership of M G Ramachandran (MGR) launched one of the largest expansions of feeding through the 'Chief Minister's Nutritious Noon-Meals Programme', a programme ostensibly targeted to combat hunger and get children to school.

This scheme is an outcome of my experience of extreme starvation at an age when I knew only to cry when I was hungry. But for the munificence of a woman next door who extended a bowl of rice gruel to us and saved us from the cruel hand of death, we would have departed this world long ago. Such merciful womenfolk, having great faith in me, elected me as chief minister of Tamil Nadu. To wipe the tears of these women I have taken up this project...To picture lakhs and lakhs of poor children who gather to partake of nutritious meals in the thousands of hamlets and villages all over Tamil Nadu, and blessing us in their childish prattle, will be a glorious event [MGR quoted in Harriss 1986:16].

Harriss (1986) lists seven types of justification for the scheme, namely, political, nutritional, employment, welfarist, health, education and social. This paper will focus on the theme of education wherein the scheme is expected to increase enrolment of children at the age of five and of non-starters, especially girls above this age. At various times it was also stated that the scheme would regularise school attendance, reduce rate of dropping out, inspire nutrition education, contribute to nutritionally valuable practical activities such as the planting of food trees, educate about environmental sanitation, the latter in turn enabling diffusion of such messages to other members of the 'beneficiaries' families [ibid:17].

Over the years, the NMP has become the most prestigious programme of the government despite all noises made about it (i) being a drain on government resources, (ii) diverting resources that could have otherwise been used for 'hard' development activities and (iii) not having really tackled the issue of 'nutrition' since Tamil Nadu continues to show poor nutritional<sup>2</sup> status. The sheer visibility of the scheme detracts attention from the fact that there are, as in the period prior to 1982-83, any number of government schemes apart from NMP, started and/or expanded

at various points in time, all aimed at facilitating enrolment and retention of children, particularly girls, in schools. Nevertheless, this particular scheme of the TN government has made a mark internationally and nationally; the government of India is now supporting similar efforts in several states while urging all states to learn from TN's experience.

By the government's own admission, data on number of NMP centres and individuals covered vary at different counts as they are based on attendance figures taken at varying time points in the numerous centres. Taking all pre-school as well as school centres together, it is estimated that in all there are nearly 71,138 NMP centres feeding over 77 lakh children and 5.35 lakh adults (Table 1) [GoTN, 2002-03].

### Food Composition of the Noon-Meal Programme

A reading of the government's state administration reports and other publicity materials gives an idea of the protein rich fare (at least on paper) provided to various categories of noon-meal beneficiaries across the noon-meal centres in the state. What follows is a summary based on these various government documents.

Initially, that is, prior to 1982-83, the programme had started with a simple menu of 12 ounces of cooked rice, eight ounces of sambar and one vegetable. The notion then had been to combat hunger specifically among children that could lead to lack of concentration in studies and other possible chawbacks. However with a dramatic reformulation of the programme in 1982, there is now an emphasis on provision of nutritious noon meal rather than just midday meal. Since then nutritive ingredients have been included in the menu; more important the scheme itself is now more known as a nutritious meal programme rather than just a noon-meal programme.

To combat the problem of 'goitre' prevailing in the districts of the Nilgiris, Coimbatore, Salem and Trichy, double fortified salt with iron and iodine was introduced from April 1996 onwards. Egg as a nutritive intake was included in the menu from 1989. One boiled egg was supplied to children along with nutritious meal once in a fortnight the frequency of which was reduced to one boiled egg once a week from June 1, 1998. Children who do not eat eggs were given a portion of 'sathu' (energy food made of wheat flour and jaggery) food, an item actually meant as supplementary for children below three years old [Rajivan 2001].

**Table 1: Noon Meal Programme Coverage in Tamil Nadu, 2002-03**

Scheme	No of Centres Covered	No of Children Covered	No of Adults Covered	Total Covered
<i>Pre-school</i>				
ICDS	10482	449295	140782	590077
WB ICDS III	19500	878241	391040	1269281
PTMGR urban	719	29309	3977	33286
Total	30701	1356845	535799	1892644
<i>School centres</i>				
Rural	38378	5916829	Nil	5916829
Urban	2059	472760	Nil	472760
Total	40437	6389589	Nil	6389589
Total all centres	71138	7746434	535799	8282233

*Source:* Tamil Nadu, Government of, Directorate of Rural Development, 2003. 'Origin and Growth of the Nutritious Noon Meal Programme in Tamil Nadu', paper presented at workshop conducted by Nutrition Foundation of India, New Delhi, on July 31, 2003, mimeo.

From November 1, 2001 onwards a new scheme of protein rich food, viz, 20 gms each of potato, green gram (full form) and black Bengal gram (full form) per beneficiary in a week instead of egg was introduced by the present chief minister Jayalalitha. As per this new scheme, it is estimated that, children are now getting 158.2 calories of energy and 8.54 grams of protein instead of the earlier 79.6 calories of energy and 6.5 gram of protein [ibid].

The ingredients of nutritious noon-meal with quantity stipulations and calorific additions along with cost estimates are detailed in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

### Finances of Noon-Meal Programme in Schools in Tamil Nadu

Here we attempt an analysis of the financial sustainability of the school meal programme – a subset of the larger nutrition programme – and the various components of this expenditure, to understand the effectiveness of this public programme. But before we turn to an examination of the trends in expenditure on the scheme, we take a brief look at the ‘nutrition’ expenditure of the state government relative to expenditure on social services (of which nutrition forms a part). Rajivan (2001) provides a synoptic view of these expenditures for the decade of the 1990s.

As pointed out by Rajivan (2001), over the past nine years the state’s budgetary commitment to nutrition has increased significantly in absolute terms. From Rs 27,231 lakh in 1992-93, it has increased to as much as Rs 58,118 lakh in 2000-01.

Relative to all social service expenditure it has ranged between 6.5 per cent and 7.8 per cent though a percentage decline is seen over the last three years due to a higher growth in total social services expenditure. Relative to all revenue expenditure the percentage on nutrition has been clearly above 3 per cent up to 1995-96, with a decline in the last three years. Expenditure on the ‘nutrition’ head of account ranks number three, after education followed by medical and public health (except for the year 1993-94 when water supply and sanitation overtook nutrition). Water supply and sanitation has been a close fourth [Rajivan 2001].

The department of rural development and department of municipal administration run the rural and urban NMCs respectively. The two departments spend on salaries and other allowances to the members of staff involved in the implementation of the PTMGR NMP, honorarium for the workers in the NMC, vessels and other provisions needed for cooking and serving for food, other office and travel expenses and the capital expenditure for the construction of noon-meal centres. Thus the total expenditure for the implementation of the PTMGR NMP is allocated in the budgets of the departments of rural development, municipal administration and civil supplies. Since 1995 the union government has been providing free rice for 10 months a year at the rate of 100 gms per day for every student in the classes 1 to 5 under the scheme ‘National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education’. The state government places request for free supply of rice from the Food Corporation of India under this scheme through the civil supplies department. For this the state government should provide to the union government details relating to the total enrolment in government primary schools. As the union government provides the assistance in kind, and since the budget of the state government is exclusive of the cost of this supply, naturally the actual cost of providing noon-meal to school children should include the imputed cost of union

**Table 2: Agewise and Standardwise Per Capita Cost of Food**

Items	Age 2+ to 4+		Std I to VIII		Std IX-X		Adults	
	Q	V	Q	V	Q	V	Q	V
Rice	80 gms	0.55p	100 gm	0.69	120	0.83	200	1.38
Pulses	10	0.19	15	0.28	15	0.28	15	0.28
Oil	2	0.10	1	0.05	1	0.05	1	0.05
Condiments, fuel and vegetables		0.23		0.23		0.23		0.23
Total noon-meal cost		1.07		1.25		1.39		1.94
Egg (weekly)								
Rs 1.30 x 7		0.18		0.18		0.18		0.18
Transport charges @ 1.8 per cent		0.01		0.02		0.02		0.02
Total food cost		1.26		1.45		1.59		2.14

Source: Tamil Nadu, Government of, Department of Social Welfare, Noon Meal Programme in Tamil Nadu, undated.

**Table 3: Ingredients and Their Nutritive Values (Agewise Break-up)**

Ingredients	2-5 Years			5 to 15 years (Std I to III)			Std IX and X		
	Scale of Diet (grams)	Calorie Value	Protein Value	Scale of Diet (grams)	Calorie Value	Protein Value	Scale of Diet (grams)	Calorie Value	Protein Value
	Rice	80	276.0	5.12	100	346	6.4	120	415
Pulses	10	34.2	2.50	15	50	3.2	15	50	3.2
Oil	2	18.0	0	1.0	9	–	1	9	–
Vegetable condiments	50	30.0	1.00	50	30	1	50	30	1
Total		358.2	8.62		435	10.6		504	11.9

Source: Tamil Nadu, Government of Social Welfare and Nutritious Meal Programme Department (undated).

**Table 4: Energy Supplement and Additional Calories under NMP**

Items	Weight (gms)	Cost	Supply Day	Energy in Calories	Protein in Grams
Potato	20	.16p	Monday	19.4	.32
Green gram	20	.54p	Wednesday	72.0	3.42
Black gram	20	.54p	Friday	66.8	4.80
Total		1.24p		158.2	8.54

Source: Government of Tamil Nadu, Department of Social Welfare, Noon Meal Programme in Tamil Nadu, undated.

**Table 5: Budgetary Revenue Expenditures on Nutrition, Social Services and Total 1992-93 to 2000-01**

Year	Total Revenue Expenditure on Nutrition	Total Expenditure on Social Services	Total Revenue Expenditure	Percentage of Nutrition Expenditure to Social Expenditure (2/3)	Percentage of Nutrition Expenditure to Total Revenue Expenditure (2/4)
	(Rs In Lakhs)				
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1992-93	27,231	3,16,095	8,54,253	8.61	3.18
1993-94	28,251	3,58,607	8,75,801	7.88	3.23
1994-95	36,518	3,84,762	9,63,465	9.49	3.79
1995-96	35,656	4,33,290	10,91,057	8.23	3.27
1996-97	37,719	5,12,134	13,06,488	7.37	2.89
1997-98	40,576	5,61,256	14,95,085	7.23	2.71
1998-99	48,677	7,10,134	17,69,740	6.85	2.75
1999-00	52,389	7,68,115	20,70,280	6.82	2.53
2000-01 (BE)	58,118	8,16,042	21,56,487	7.12	2.70

Computed from (1) Statistical Handbooks of Tamil Nadu, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997. (2) Finance Department, Government of Tamil Nadu.

Source: Rajivan (2001).

government's supply of free rice for this programme. In the absence of any information regarding whether the state government has conducted such a financial exercise, the present analysis of the finances of PTMGR NMP is confined to only the direct expenditure of the state government for the programme through the three departments, namely, rural development, municipal administration and civil supplies. The department of social welfare and secretariat spend a very insignificant amount of money for supervising the implementation of the scheme and it is not included in the analysis.

### Trends in Financing of Nutritious Noon Meal

The expenditure for the provision of noon meal to school children consists of (a) capital expenditure on buildings of NMCs, vessels and other fixed asset requirements, (b) current expenditure on foodgrains, vegetables, salaries for the staff. Different departments and local governments at different points of time have spent the capital expenditure and other expenditure on maintenance of buildings. As it is difficult to calculate the total expenditure expended so far and to analyse its impact, this analysis is only with reference to current account expenditure on noon meal programme for school children.

The current revenue of the state government increased by about 52 per cent from Rs 13,587 crore in 1997-98 to Rs 20,686.86 crore in 2002-03, whereas the current account expenditure increased by 77.9 per cent during the same period from Rs 14,950.90 crore to 26,604.17 crore (vide Table 5). As such the current account deficit as a proportion of the current account revenue increased from 10.04 per cent to 28.60 per cent. The matter of particular interest to us is the total outlay for the PTMGR NMP for school children, which has increased only by 42.13 per cent during 1997-98 and 2002-03, and this is less than the percentage increase of the current account revenue of the state government. Moreover, the increase in expenditure on PTMGR NMP for school children is quite less than the increase of 63.88 per cent increase in the state's own revenue during the period of study. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the increasing expenditure on PTMGR NMP could be a reason for the increasing current account deficit. As can be seen from Table 7, the expenditure on PTMGR NMP as proportion to the state's own revenue has been quite less than 2 per cent (except in 1997-98 and 1998-99) and it is slightly above 1 per cent of the total current account expenditure. It is heartening to note that it forms only around 0.2 per cent of the net state domestic product. Considering these facts we can conclude that the PTMGR NMP—a programme that gives noon meal to more than 65 lakh school children, is sustainable in the long run, given the insignificant size of the expenditure on it in relation to size of expenditure on other programmes and schemes, and also considering that the growth rate of expenditure on this scheme is less than the growth rates of state's own revenue, total revenue and total expenditure in the current account of the state budget.

### Components of Expenditure on PTMGR NMP

Though the financial sustainability of the PTMGR NMP is assured for some time to come, the financial prudence of spending depends on the allocation of expenditure among the various components of expenditure. The expenditures are booked under several heads of account as shown in the demand for grants for

this programme. For convenience of analysis, we have grouped them under four broad functional heads – (a) the expenditure for payment towards salaries, wages, honorarium, dearness allowances, loans to employees and repayment of these are grouped under the head 'salary and other allowances'; (b) 'office expenses' includes expenditure related to maintenance of office such as stationery, travel expenses, petroleum and other such items; (c) the total money spent on purchase of rice (excluding the free supply of rice by the union government), oil, pulses, condiments, vegetables, salt, and fuel are grouped under 'feeding and dietary charges'; and (d) other miscellaneous expenditure is grouped under 'other expenses'. For a programme of this type, which is a nutrition intervention with an explicit focus on increasing the nutritional status of children and of ensuring their attendance in schools, it is expected that the overhead costs are kept as low as possible while increasing the component of materials that reach children directly, which in turn ensures that the stated objectives are achieved.

From Tables 8 and 9 it can be discerned that the total expenditure on PTMGR NMP increased from around Rs 205.42 crore in 1997-98 to Rs 291.98 crore in 2002-03 though there has been a decline in the number of beneficiaries from 65,68,403 in 1997-98 to 65,04,642 in 2002-03. Thus, per beneficiary expenditure has been increasing, part of which could be due to inflation. The increase in expenditure on 'salary and other allowances' increased from Rs 39.38 crore in 1997-98 to Rs 133.54 crore in 1998-99 mainly due to sudden increase in the salary and honorarium component due to the implementation of the Fifth Pay Commission.

**Table 6: Trend in Revenue and Expenditure in Revenue Account of Tamil Nadu Budget**  
(Rupees in thousand)

Particulars	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
Total revenue	135870000	142608000	163275290	183166670	188180318	206868620
Own revenue	98075000	107820000	122757776	139930236	171564229	160721414
Revenue expenditure	149509000	176974000	207278312	217524426	215569725	266041667
PTMGR NMP	2054271	2578887	2060432	2703290	2389859	2919782

Note: Figures for 2002-03 represent revised estimates.

Source: Tamil Nadu, Government of, Annual Financial Statement, various years.

**Table 7: Expenditure on PTMGR NMP as Percentage of Various Indicators**

Particulars (As per cent of)	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
Own revenue	2.09	2.4	1.68	1.93	1.39	1.82
Total revenue	1.51	1.67	1.26	1.48	1.27	1.41
Total expenditure	1.37	1.34	0.99	1.24	1.11	1.10
NSDP	0.22	0.24	0.17	0.2	0.3	

Source: Same as Table 7.

**Table 8: Expenditure on PTMGR NMP 1997-98 to 1999-2000**  
(Accounts) (Rupees in thousands)

Departments	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03*
Rural development	974970	1970015	1484036	1634365	1488078	1537804
Municipal administration	47883	65368	78296	79465	69064	86423
Civil supplies	1031466	343504	498100	989430	832717	1295555
Total	2054271	2378887	2060432	2703290	2389859	2919782

Note: \* Figures for the year 2002-03 are revised estimates.

Source: Tamil Nadu, Government of Demand for Grants (various years).

It is to be noted that the expenditure on salary declined after 1998-99 but not to the 1997-98 level, and it has been increasing because of the increase in the number of NMCs and the workers thereupon. Thus one of the main recurring expenditures, namely, salary has been increasing though the number of children being fed has increased either very marginally and/or is stagnant. Similarly, the expenditure due to 'feeding and dietary charges' declined from around Rs 127.86 crore in 1997-98 to Rs 66.81 crore in 1998-99 and thereafter has been steadily increasing. The initial decline is partial because the state government did not avail itself of the supply of free rice by the union government and it did not provide the union government with the total enrolment in government primary schools and let the expenditure on feeding and dietary charges in 1997-98 was higher than in subsequent years. This fact is noted in the CAG's report for the year 1997-98. We have to probe further for the actual decline of this expenditure on supply of groceries to schools by the department of civil supplies in 1998-99. The replacement of provision of egg once a week by boiled potatoes, black and green grams thrice a week from 2001, increase in the allocation for purchase of vegetables, condiments and fuel from 18 paise per student to 23 paise in 2001 to 35 paise in 2003 are reasons for the continuous increase in this expenditure. Because of continuous increase in the minimum support price for paddy the expenditure due to purchase of rice is also increasing in spite of stagnation or just marginal increases in number of beneficiaries, and without any increase in per student consumption.

### Beneficiary Analysis of the Programme: An Exercise in Futility?

Most of the centres (nearly 95 per cent) are located in rural areas and nearly 93 per cent of the beneficiaries are from rural areas. We do not see much of a change in this pattern over the past six years (Table 10). The average number of children fed in the noon-meal centre for the year 2003-04 works out to 158. The average number of children fed in the noon-meal centres in urban areas is much higher (around 228) as compared to the centres located in rural areas (around 154). This pattern again is consistent over time.

Data available from published sources on noon-meal programme is not amenable for any further analysis. We accessed data from other sources like the department of elementary education and department of school education. Though the concerned officials who are in charge of handling the data and the programme at the state level gave us some clues as to how to arrive at the overall picture from disparate sources, they were unable to explain any inconsistencies.

First of all, the overall number of beneficiaries arrived at by combining various figures available with these departments did not add up to the overall figure provided in the policy note presented in the assembly. The number of beneficiaries as per the aggregation of various data sources was lower than the total provided in the policy note. More seriously, there was discrepancy in the number of students enrolled in schools and the number of beneficiaries of the noon-meal programme. In some cases, beneficiaries exceeded the number of students enrolled. Importantly and ironically, the same department provides data on both these variables. Another drawback that we faced in compiling an overall picture was that the concerned departments were unable to provide the number of beneficiaries for the high schools

and higher secondary schools. The limitation of the data therefore confines our analysis only up to the primary school level. In a way it is not a serious limitation as the prime objective of the noon-meal programme is to attract children to school and retain them. Having stated the limitations of the data, let us now look into various characteristics of the noon-meal programme in elementary schools as evident from the data provided by various government departments of Tamil Nadu. For want of space we have limited the number of tables to the barest minimum.

During the year 2002-03, there were about 54.12 lakh students enrolled in primary classes (from classes I to V). They were more or less evenly spread across the five classes. Proportion of boys enrolled in schools out of total students enrolled was slightly higher at 51.2 per cent as compared to girls (who constituted 48.7 per cent). This overall pattern held good across the five classes that are under consideration in this paper (Table 11).

**Table 9: Distribution of Expenditure on PTMGR NMP  
1997-98 to 1999-2000  
(Accounts) (in Rupees)**

Departments	1997-98	1998-99	1999- 2000	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03*
Salary and other	393772 (19.17)	1335436 (56.14)	615240 (44.42)	951209 (35.20)	986838 (41.29)	1212746 (41.54)
allowances		[239.14]	(-31.47)	(3.93)	(3.74)	(22.89)
Office expenses	50197 (2.44)	76863 (3.23)	34941 (1.70)	47306 (1.75)	86205 (3.61)	37169 (1.27)
Feeding and dietary charges	1278652 (62.24)	668190 (28.09)	730805 (35.47)	1336202 (49.45)	1316351 (55.08)	1669848 (57.19)
Other expenses	331650 (16.14)	298398 (12.54)	379446 (18.42)	367573 (13.60)	4.59 (0.02)	19 (0.00)
		[-10.03]	(27.16)	(-3.13)	(-100)	(-100)
Total	2054271	2378887	2060432	2702290	2389859	2919782
		[15.80]	(-23.39)	(31.15)	(-11.56)	(22.17)

*Notes:* \*Amounts for the year 2002-03 are revised estimates. Figures in ( ) are percentage of the total expenditure. Figures in [ ] are percentage of increase (+) or decrease (-) over the previous year.

*Source:* Tamil Nadu, Government of Demand for Grants (various years).

**Table 10: Distribution of Centres and Beneficiaries by Habitat, Various Years**

Year	No of Centres				No of Beneficiaries			
	Rural	Per Cent	Urban	Per Cent	Rural	Per Cent	Urban	Per Cent
1998-99	37480	94.9	1978	5.1	5869510	92.7	456206	7.3
1999-2000	37748	94.8	2059	5.2	6002690	92.8	461267	7.2
2000-01	38378	94.9	2059	5.1	5916829	92.6	472760	7.4
2001-02	38970	94.9	2087	5.1	5983813	92.6	476410	7.4
2002-03	38925	94.9	2087	5.1	6015252	92.6	476410	7.4
2003-04	39036	94.9	2082	5.1	6029035	92.6	475607	7.4

*Source:* Tamil Nadu, Government of, Policy Note, Department of Social Welfare and NMP, various years.

**Table 11: Enrolment in Classes I-V across Gender, Tamil Nadu, 2002-03**

Class	Boys	Per Cent	Girls	Per Cent	Total	Per Cent
I Std	575745	51.2	548284	48.7	1124029	100
II Std	540267	51.1	516124	48.8	1056391	100
III Std	544698	51.1	521758	48.9	1066456	100
IV Std	578133	51.5	543501	48.4	1121634	100
V Std	533363	51.1	510379	48.9	1043742	100
Total	2772206	51.2	2640046	48.8	5412252	100

*Source:* Data provided by the Department of Elementary Education, Government of Tamil Nadu.

The department of elementary education classifies elementary schools in the state into seven categories, depending on who owns infrastructure, who pays the teachers, to whom teachers report, etc. Despite this wide range, panchayat union schools account for more than half the students enrolled at the primary level in the state, while about one third of the students are enrolled in aided schools. Together, these two types of schools account for nearly nine-tenth of students enrolled in primary classes in the state. We do not observe much of a difference in terms of preferences for particular types of schools across gender.

The noon-meal programme benefits 38.24 lakh students in the primary classes amounting to about 71 per cent of the children enrolled in classes I to V. Boy students benefit marginally more as compared to girl students. If we look into the percentage of children benefited in each class, we find a wide variation. While only 68 per cent of children in fourth standard have benefited by the noon-meal programme, about 75 per cent of the children in third standard have benefited by the programme. This variation is wider among boys. Eighty per cent of boys in third standard are beneficiaries whereas only 68 per cent of the fourth standard boys are beneficiaries of the noon-meal programme (Table 12). Our efforts to understand these variations proved futile.

Children in government schools access the noon-meal programme quite intensely. Nearly about 93 per cent of them, as per the data provided by the department, have benefited. Only about one third of the children in corporation schools are reported to have accessed the programme. In the latter, only 35 per cent of the children eat food prepared under NMP. It is well known that the corporation schools cater mainly to the urban poor in Tamil Nadu. How could the beneficiary percentage be so low in corporation schools, is difficult for us to comprehend. Similarly, percentage of students covered by NMP in welfare schools is also low. Welfare schools are meant for scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and most backward caste students. Only about 40 per cent of students in these institutions are covered by the NMP. Coverage in aided schools is lower at about 63 per cent as compared to about 79 per cent in panchayat union schools (Table 13). Noon-meal is not provided in unaided schools.

If we look into the differences across gender, we find no difference in the predominantly rural panchayat union schools. On the other hand, in the aided schools, there is some variation as only about 60 per cent of enrolled girls take noon-meal

compared to 65 per cent of boys in the aided schools. The difference is sharper in corporation schools as only about 30 per cent of enrolled girl children take noon meal whereas among boys, it is around 40 per cent (Table 13).

Our attempts to assess the benefits of noon-meal programme across social classes are hampered by errors in the data provided by the department. The number of beneficiaries of noon-meal by social classes far outnumbers the number of students enrolled. Our efforts to source the correct data was futile as the department was unable to reconcile the differences in the data provided by them.

### Impact of Noon-Meal Programme: Secondary Data Observations

There could be several outcomes of the noon-meal programme given that the programme has been under implementation for slightly over two decades. The nutritional intake of the children could have improved; many of them could have been saved from starvation. However, since we do not have any benchmark, it is difficult to gauge the impact on these aspects. One major objective of the programme was to attract children to school and to retain them. The drop-out rate (the closest that one can come to, in assessing this phenomenon) in Tamil Nadu has been on a steady decline at the primary level. During 1987-88, the drop-out rate for students at the primary level was 21.78 and by 2000-01, the rate had come down to 14.4 (Table 14).

**Table 14: Drop-Out Rate in Tamil Nadu**

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
1987-88	19.44	24.45	21.78
1988-89	19.17	24.01	21.42
1989-90	18.78	23.64	21.05
1990-91	18.27	22.68	20.32
1991-92	17.71	21.16	19.31
1992-93	17.11	19.62	18.27
1993-94	16.39	18.35	17.30
1994-95	15.58	17.65	16.54
1995-96	14.88	16.97	15.85
1996-97	14.05	16.20	15.06
1997-98	13.99	16.18	15.05
1998-99	12.98	16.15	14.52
1999-2000	12.93	16.07	14.41
2000-01	12.86	16.03	14.40

Source: Tamil Nadu, Government of, Policy Note, Department of Education, various years.

**Table 12: Beneficiaries of Noon-Meal Programme among Primary School Children, Tamil Nadu, 2002-03**

Standard	Boys			Girls			Total		
	Enrolled	Beneficiary	Per Cent	Enrolled	Beneficiary	Per Cent	Enrolled	Beneficiary	Per Cent
I	575745	394534	68.53	548284	378133	68.97	1124029	772667	68.74
II	540267	390412	72.26	516124	367814	71.26	1056391	758226	71.78
III	544698	433381	79.56	521758	361364	69.26	1066456	794745	74.52
IV	578133	300404	67.53	543501	378029	69.55	1121634	768433	68.51
V	533363	374105	70.14	510379	356383	69.83	1043742	730488	69.99
Total	2772206	1982836	71.53	2640046	1841723	69.76	5412252	3824559	70.66

Source: Same as Table 11.

**Table 13: Beneficiaries of NMP across Various Types of Schools, Tamil Nadu, 2002-03**

School Type	Boys			Girls			Total		
	Enrolled	Beneficiary	Per Cent	Enrolled	Beneficiary	Per Cent	Enrolled	Beneficiary	Per Cent
Aided	852231	554164	65.03	818552	490039	59.87	1670783	1044203	62.50
Panchayat union	1601868	1262984	78.84	1520996	1193116	78.44	3122864	2456100	78.65
Corporation	80008	31900	39.87	82046	25214	30.73	162054	57114	35.24
Government	49209	43888	89.19	46461	44872	96.58	95670	88760	92.78
Municipal	84740	55822	65.87	86206	56460	65.49	170946	112282	65.68
Welfare	91970	34078	37.05	75727	32022	42.29	167697	66100	39.42

Source: Same as Table 11.

The decline in drop-out rate could be due to the noon-meal programme. Fewer children of schoolgoing age in Tamil Nadu refrain from schools as compared to most other states in the country. Less than 10 per cent of them refrain from schools as compared to 24 per cent of children who are out of school in the country as a whole (Table 15).

Though the drop-out rate is on the decline and fewer children are out of school, providing noon-meal has not resulted in attracting all the children in the schoolgoing age to the schools. Besides, even among those enrolled, what could be the reason behind dropping out of school? The NSSO data provide some clues but not an explicit answer for children dropping out from schools.

The NSSO provide sample data for a very broad age group, i.e., 5-24 years; unfortunately, the NSSO data on the level at which the sample population has dropped out and the reasons for it are provided separately. We cannot infer, for instance, the reason why children have dropped out at a certain level. Because of this constraint, we can infer reasons for drop-out only at a very general level.

Inability to cope with or failure is the single largest reason cited by sample respondents in Tamil Nadu for dropping out (273 out of 1,000) (Table 16). Another response that comes almost close is that the child was not interested in studies (267 out of 1,000). Only 90 out of 1,000 respondents cited financial constraints as a reason for dropping out of school. Thus, providing noon-meal may have helped to bring down the drop-out rate to some extent. But the reasons for this continued drop-out has to be negotiated (if NSSO data are to be believed) by focusing on making schools and teaching more interesting as well as enabling children to cope with their studies.

## II Notes Based on Field Visits

In order to understand the actual functioning of the noon-meal programme at the grass roots level and to record first-hand such observations that noon-meal centre authorities may have, we undertook field visits, both in urban and rural areas. Our urban visit was confined to Chennai. Chennai is also the headquarters of the All Tamil Nadu Noon-Meal Workers' Union who not only spoke to us at length on how they perceived the functioning of the scheme but also facilitated our visits to noon-meal centres in the city. For our rural visit, we chose the noon-meal centres located in the southern most district of Tamil Nadu. The choice of centres did not follow any sampling technique; the purpose of these visits was more to get a 'view from below' and an understanding of how far the operationalisation of the scheme on the ground corroborated with official descriptions of its functioning, its administrative set-up, its physical infrastructure and personnel involved. Given the more comprehensive visits that were made to the rural centres and also given the fact that, officially, the beneficiaries are concentrated in rural areas, our discussion is based largely on our findings from the rural centres.

The various functionaries involved in administering the scheme in rural noon-meal centres provided us with detailed descriptions of the organisational and administrative aspects of the scheme. There is remarkable corroboration between what we have been able to put together from sources collected at the secretariat in Chennai and what we documented from listening to functionaries at the ground level. While there is no variance in listing the

institutional aspects of the administration of the scheme, where the scheme fails to convince is not just in the realm of its physical infrastructure and environment that are abysmal to say the least, but more important, we found an almost across-the-board collusion to reveal very little hard data relating to how this very prestigious scheme (of every government) that has been in operation for over two decades has actually impacted on enrolment, retention of children in schools and/or curbed drop-out from schools. For the uninitiated, it takes time to realise that the figures given – even those emanating from the same department – are hard to tally; beneficiary figures very often exceed enrolment figures; whole districts sometimes return zero beneficiaries for the lowest economic and social segments of the population in particular, etc. It was simply not possible to extract anything meaningful on the more crucial aspects of the scheme that one was looking for, namely, gender differentials in enrolment, retention and drop-outs.

For want of space we go straight into a discussion of the actual findings on the ground.

### Day-to-Day Functioning of NMP

We did a quick field visit in Tirunelveli district to understand the functioning of the noon-meal programme at the local level. We visited 11 noon-meal centres (most of them located in primary

**Table 15: Percentage of Children (of Schoolgoing Age) Out of School, 1999-2000**

State	Percentage 6-14 Years Old Out of School			Percentage Contribution of State/UT to Total Out of School Children		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
India	26.9	14.4	24.0	100	100	100
Bihar	48.4	29.0	45.9	22.6	12.5	21.2
Madhya Pradesh	31.6	13.8	27.9	10.7	7.6	10.3
Andhra Pradesh	26.3	14.9	22.9	6.8	10.1	7.2
Orissa	29.9	16.8	27.7	4.4	3.1	4.2
Rajasthan	30.6	14.7	27.4	6.5	4.9	6.3
West Bengal	26.4	18.2	25.1	8.7	7.1	8.5
Gujarat	23.0	11.6	19.6	3.4	4.5	3.6
Karnataka	22.6	10.2	19.8	4.1	3.5	4.0
Maharashtra	14.0	6.8	11.4	3.9	6.7	4.3
Tamil Nadu	10.1	7.8	9.3	1.5	4.0	1.9
Delhi	1.7	13.5	10.6	0	3.6	0.5
Kerala	2.5	1.9	2.4	0.2	0.3	0.2

Source: Srivastava, Ravi, 2002.

**Table 16: Per 1,000 Distribution of Drop-Outs (Age 5-24 Years) by Reason for Dropping Out (Person/Rural)**

Reasons	No of Respondents
No tradition in the family	5
Child not interested in studies	267
Parents not interested in studies	151
Inability to cope with or failure in studies	273
Unfriendly atmosphere in school	3
Education not considered useful	19
Schooling/higher education facilities not convenient	3
Has to work for wage/salary	52
Has to participated in other economic activities	55
Has to look after younger siblings	13
Has to attend to other domestic activities	26
Financial constraints	90
Completed the desired level	-
Awaiting admission to the next level	-
Others	34

Source: India, Government of, Department of Statistics, 1998.

or middle schools) in the district. The district level rural development department officer (in the rank of deputy director) accompanied us during these visits. The visits were unannounced and were a surprise ones.

Apart from interviewing noon-meal organisers and verifying the register and the actual number of children fed on the day of our visit, we also interviewed the schoolteachers, noon-meal managers at the block level and the cooks. We also spoke to some of the villagers at these noon-meal centres. What we present below is a gist of the problems that the programme copes with, in its day-to-day functioning.

(i) *Inflated number of beneficiaries*: One common and endemic problem of the noon-meal programme is the inflated number of beneficiaries. It is pretty well known in government circles as well as among researchers that the enrolment figures particularly for lower classes often exceeds the number of children in the particular age-group. Primary schoolteachers inflating the number of children is one important reason, among others, for such impossible ratios. Similarly, the number of beneficiaries recorded is systematically inflated. This directly translates into larger quantities of ration than actually required. The safety mechanisms built into the system to avoid such problems often fails due to various reasons. Estimates about the actual number of beneficiaries in each centre have to be arrived at by surprise checks by panchayat union officers during the months of June and July. The noon-meal centres are spread over 50-60 villages in each block. The numbers of officials who can conduct these checks are few in number. They are burdened with a number of tasks and they also lack transportation facility. The workload of officers has increased manifold during the past decade mainly due to two reasons. The numbers of persons manning panchayat unions are on the decline as the state government has frozen recruitment of new persons. With each person retiring from service, the workload of the others increase. More importantly, the panchayat system of governance has experienced phenomenal transformation since the 73rd constitutional amendment. The financial flow to these institutions has increased manifold as have the number of programmes that are sought to be implemented through these institutions. The block level officials are thus entrusted with a number of tasks – the priority of work changing every other day if not by hours as a torrent of instructions flow from the district office. The state and the union governments (apart from other agencies) in turn continually instruct the district offices to update them with a variety of information – plans, reports, targets, compliance and so on. The entire system, it seems, appears to be working on an ad hoc basis in terms of priorities. Given this, we were not surprised that the process of validation of the number of beneficiaries for each centre was nowhere on anybody's agenda.

The officials candidly admitted that the number of beneficiaries is always overstated to a certain extent in each of the centres involved in the programme. We hazarded a guess regarding the extent of overestimation in the number of beneficiaries; when the officials were cross-checked for a figure of 30 per cent of overestimates, they responded that it would not be to that extent and that they would not allow it. But what was not denied is that there is padding up of figures, which consequently enabled a portion of the dry ration to be siphoned off.

(ii) *Supply of less than stipulated ration*: Another problem that the system suffers from is the supply of less than stipulated quantity of ration. The Civil Supplies Corporation is entrusted

with the task of supplying dry ration to the noon-meal centres based on the approved indents. The delivery challans mention the specific quantities of ration of each item that has been supplied to the centre. However, the actual quantum delivered is lower than what is mentioned in the delivery challan. The noon-meal organiser takes delivery of this reduced ration but enters the stock register as if the full ration has been received. The loss is spread over the next month or so by allocating lesser ration to cook the meal. For instance, a 100 kg rice allocation per centre will result in the delivery of 93 to 95 kgs of rice. While allocating the daily ration, the organiser is forced to reduce the ration proportionately from the stipulated 100 grams per child.

(iii) *Leakage of rations at the local level*: Apart from padding up figures in terms of numbers of beneficiaries, the per capita allocation per child is also reduced by the organisers and cooks. This is clearly evident particularly in the case of preparation of 'sambar'. As far as rice is concerned, some quantity of cooked rice is served in all plates. The sambar that is cooked and served in these centres is a rare breed indeed. It is a yellowish hot water with hardly any pulses and vegetable in it. Further, when we entered a few centres where they were about to cook the sambar, we found stale vegetables being used to prepare sambar. Even otherwise, we were informed that the quantity of vegetables used in sambar, regardless of the number of beneficiaries, never exceeded 100 grams. The tasteless sambar, we found, had prompted many beneficiaries of the noon-meal centre to bring their own side dishes. Some bring curry from home; some others buy a packet of pickle from the nearby shop.

When we discussed the issue of inadequate quantity of vegetables and indifferent quality of the preparation with the noon-meal organisers, they explained it away by citing the scale factor. According to them, the larger the centre, better will be the quantity of food. However, the opinions of teachers in the schools where the noon-meal centres are located differed. According to them, it is true that bigger centres are better equipped to provide a good sambar, but it is not true that smaller centres cannot provide a good sambar. The pie is small but the problem is that it is not fully utilised for the intended purpose. The size of the pie gets reduced further (when it has to cater to the needs of the organiser, cook and helpers) which often result in the poor quality of the sambar. Their pleas to provide the full ration fall on deaf ears and the only way out, according to the teachers, is an active interest of civil society in the noon-meal centres. The fall back on civil society to retrieve the situation is problematic; the noon-meal centre organiser also comes from the same civil society while the constellations that are also at work also include the identity of the organiser. If the organiser is part of the powerful party or caste network, civil society miserably fails and this is what we found in some of the centres that we visited, namely, the inability of the noon-meal organiser to function outside independent of the caste and/or caste-based political party network.

(iv) *Poor quality of the ration*: The dry ration supplied to the centres by the Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation is extremely poor in quality. A major problem with the rice supplied by the corporation is that it often smells of decay. Repeated and thorough rinsing often does not help. This in turn results in a bad odour and children find the rice difficult to eat. But more problematic is the quality of pulses. Inferior quality pulses often supplied by the corporation takes a much longer time to cook. But the cooks complained that the available fuel and its quality are not amenable to cooking pulses for the required period. We

found in many schools that whatever little pulses that are used in the sambar is half-cooked.

The supply chain for these rations is organised at the state level; more importantly the chain is so impersonal that improving the quality and enforcing its continuity would be a difficult task. We also do not know whether any such attempt was made earlier and the outcome, if any, of such attempts.

(v) *Condition of kitchen and vessels:* Most of the centres have their own kitchen. These small buildings have been built over time under various schemes. Unfortunately, there is no system or scheme under which buildings are maintained. Many kitchens were never whitewashed for a second time. The use of locally available firewood emits abundant smoke. As a result, the kitchens are pitch-dark inside. The broken doors and windows enable free entry for men and cattle alike; floors are often broken. Inadequate ventilation adds to the woes of the workers and their helpers. The old vessels (that were supplied at the time of the introduction of the programme in the early 1980s) are still in use now but in some schools, the vessels have been replaced by local initiative. Most of the students carry their own plates to the school. Though the government reports point out that the state had ordered the supply of stainless steel vessels, it is yet to be distributed to the centres, at least to the ones we visited. The reason behind the stipulated change from aluminum to stainless steel as stressed in official sources, is for health consideration, i.e., cooking in a stainless steel vessel is less hazardous than in aluminium vessels, which may at times lead to food poisoning but the government is obviously in no hurry to act. The innumerable dents in the cooking vessels as well as the pitch-dark environs of the kitchen are serious threats towards provision of safe cooked food. Instances of food poisoning among the noon-meal beneficiaries are not infrequent. But the onus of providing safe cooked food lies with the cooks and the noon meal organisers. As part of their job, the cooks are expected to sweep the floor as well as clean the walls of the centre before they start cooking. However, these instructions have been followed in the centres we visited.

(vi) *Non-payment of fuelwood cost:* Though there is provision for fuel wood, cooks were not paid money for this and were asked to collect firewood on their own during their spare time. Even if they had been provided the allocated cash for the purchase of fuelwood, they might not be able to buy it as fuelwood markets now rarely exist in rural areas. Nevertheless, the cash would compensate, at least partly, for the labour that they put in to collect the firewood. Though this non-payment of the budgeted and allocated money for fuel wood may not hinder the functioning of the system directly, nevertheless this aspect signifies how, all along the way, leakages have become part of the overall system of administration of the programme.

(vii) *Inadequate washing facilities:* The provision of drinking water in rural schools in particular has improved in the recent past. Special programmes have been executed exclusively to provide drinking water by constructing a tank, which in turn is fed with supplies from the overhead tank in the village. Most of the schools that we visited in Tirunelveli district have benefited from the scheme. However, as in the case of kitchens, there are no plans for maintenance of these tanks. We found many taps leaking. There was hardly any arrangement for the drainage of surplus water. Health hazards due to stagnant water (that we came across during our visits) have not prompted any one concerned to take necessary steps. Small initiatives in better water

management can lead to enormous improvements in terms of hygiene. However, these measures do not form part of the agenda for any of the bodies involved in the administration of the noon-meal programme.

The free flowing discussions that we had with the centre organisers brought home to us the fact that, while it is maintained all around, that the Tamil Nadu noon-meal programme functions all through the year, different centres have worked out their own methods of working around this year-round scheme in such a way that the organisers and helpers not only take their weekly holidays but also enjoy the designated state government holidays. Thus for example the children are treated to 'double meals/special meals' to mark important occasions like Independence Day, Republic Day, Christmas, Deepavali, Pongal, Ramzan, Telugu New Year's Day, etc. So as not to lose out on these 'national holidays', the organisers ensure that a special and extra meal is served on the day prior to a national holiday. For instance, the school remained closed on Christmas, but on the previous day, that is, the December 24, the children were served a special kind of rice like tamarind rice, lemon rice, etc., at around 3.00-3.30 pm. This 3.30 pm meal is in addition to their regular meal at noon. (It is called a 'double meals' because it is an additional meal on a particular day; it is also referred to as a 'special meals' since the menu is different from the usual meal which they partake everyday.)

Another aspect on which the organisers, union members in particular, dwelt at length was their employment 'status'; the noon-meal personnel are not treated on par with other government employees, they are not entitled to monetary and miscellaneous benefits to which the government employees are eligible. The eligibility norms based on which noon-meal functionaries are appointed are not made apparent, thereby making it difficult to decipher the basis on which appointments and remunerations are arrived at. The noon-meal functionaries are equally unconvinced about the sum allotted per child, viz., 35 paise, which according to them is inadequate for the purchase of vegetables, condiments and fuel. Though the government has made periodical revisions, yet they opine that fund allocation for the meal must be worked out taking into account the market prices of the commodities. Overall, according to the noon-meal functionaries at the centres we visited, they have to grapple with the day-to-day task of producing a meal at noon; many of their grievances (relating to, both, their employment status as well as to allotment for purchase of fuel, vegetables and condiments) have gone unnoticed though they had staged several demonstrations through their union.

### III Observations and Recommendations

On the positive side, (1) There is no doubt that this particular programme of the government of Tamil Nadu is the country's largest in terms of the number of beneficiaries. An equally large system of logistics has been instituted to cover the length and breadth of the state. There is also no doubt that enrolment and retention of children (including that of girl children) in schools show significant improvement; data do also indicate that the dropout rates among primary children in schools have come down. (2) The composition of the meal is not ad hoc; considerable research has gone into making the composition nutritious, cost effective and locally rooted. (3) Our analysis of the financial

aspects of the scheme point out that the scheme is indeed financially sustainable even while the emphasis needs to shift to a more careful analysis of the heads of expenditure of the scheme. (4) Over the years, this being the most prestigious programme of the state government, the latter has successfully institutionalised the programme by bringing together four major departments of the government with the social welfare department acting as the nodal point. (5) The scheme is also a large employer, particularly of women. As on May 31, 2003 the number of staff employed under this scheme is as follows: organisers – 39,073, cooks – 39,773, and helpers – 39,771. While earlier state administration reports of the government provided information on the number of SCs/STs, widows/destitute, etc, employed in the above categories (see for example SAR 1983-84, 1984-85 and 1985-86), such information is not made available at present.

On the negative side, however, (1) the bureaucracy is reluctant to share information on very many aspects related to the scheme, most important being reports (if any) produced by its own monitoring bodies. (2) Over the years, the functional segregation of tasks between the departments has resulted in rigidities; for example, the education department will simply not talk of the noon-meal programme. Hence, while enrolment figures show increases, there is no way one can adduce increases in enrolment specifically to the noon meal programme. The government on its part simply assumes that increases in enrolment are because of its noon-meal programme. (3) We have at several places alluded to the inconsistencies in data provided by the government. The problem of reconciliation exists not just because data was culled from different departments; it persists with data from the same department. The seriousness of this problem lies in the fact that it makes it impossible to provide any meaningful analysis either from a spatial angle (the state as a whole for instance), or across different segments of the population using certain standard parameters such as gender, caste or class. Researchers are forced to fall back on studies conducted at the micro-level, which by definition can neither be generalised nor can be usefully deployed to evaluate policies from an overall perspective. (4) The institutionalisation of the programme with the bureaucracy controlling the institutions has, in our understanding, completely masked happenings behind these institutions. While formally all institutions are in place and seemingly functioning effectively, the leakages all along the route (from the nodal agency at the state capital to the remotest noon-meal centre) are difficult to discern till one begins from questioning concepts and figures relating to enrolment, dropout, allocation, beneficiary, actual number of days meals are served, etc. This paper has provided details at appropriate places. (5) An important aspect that our limited financial analysis of the programme has pointed out is the increasing expenditure on the scheme despite stagnant or just marginally increasing beneficiary numbers. This implies that the component going directly to children (which in fact is the rationale for the whole programme) is not what is contributing to the increase but salaries and other 'non-dietary' items. For want of more disaggregated data we have not been able to analyse this aspect further. But this is clearly a matter of concern. (6) The noon-meal personnel form a parallel bureaucracy, as it were, with no regular scale and with very little security. There has been very little engagement thus far by the government regarding how it intends to deal with these personnel. The financial implications of absorbing them as regular government employees are prohibi-

tive; at the same time without their deployment the scheme cannot be run on a day-to-day basis.

## Recommendations

Academically there is urgent need to grapple with the many concepts that are being used by the different departments, namely, enrolment, beneficiaries, allocation, etc. The precise connotation of these terms and the manner in which they are applied on the ground is important since budget provisions for meals, personnel, infrastructure, etc, are based on the figures generated using these concepts. This paper has barely scratched the surface as far as this issue is concerned.

Academically, again, there is need to re-examine seriously the original rationale for the scheme, namely, getting children to school and retaining them. Between the time the present universal scheme was launched in 1982-83 and now (2002-03), the educational profile as well as the nature of problems being encountered at the ground level have undergone tremendous changes, even if the terms, dropouts, no-where children, gender and caste gaps and discriminations, etc, are still relevant. We have pointed out that among the more important reasons for children dropping out of schools in Tamil Nadu has more to do with the way schools and teaching within schools are structured than with the phenomenon of poverty of households. We have also pointed out,

that despite the existence of the noon meal programme for slightly over two decades, it has not been able to bring all children to schools. There are many more such learnings that several other studies (see, for example, Aggarwal 2002) have pointed out. If the midday meal programme has to retain its effectiveness and relevance it may have to be modified in the light of these learnings. How exactly the scheme needs to be modified will depend crucially on (a) how the learnings from different studies are integrated, (b) how serious the government is in engaging itself with issues emanating from these learnings, and (c) whether the government's seriousness translates into collecting and collating such data that do not suffer from the inconsistencies that we have pointed out. As of now data has been collected merely to present a rosy picture of increasing numbers of beneficiaries, increasing numbers of noon meal centres, more financial allocation for the programme, etc.

Academically, also, a subject germane to this paper but not discussed for want of space, is situating this study in the theoretical framework of 'public policy discourse' [Shaffer and Clay 1984; Wood 1985], that is concerned equally with processes and methods (rather than only outcomes) by which relationships between class/caste/gender interests and institutional processes occur.

We have merely alluded to the minimal impact the programme seems to have had on nutritional levels of children, a fact that we have culled out from the Tamil Nadu state's own *Human Development Report, 2003*. This is an area that needs enormous research input, since, as of now, our understanding of why even direct nutrition intervention programmes are not showing significant impact levels are very poor. The nature of research input that we have in mind stems from observations such as that made by Gopalan way back in 1981. To quote Gopalan at some length: "A school lunch programme in a school that has no access to safe water supply, and in which a high proportion of children suffer from chronic infections like septic tonsils or middle-ear disease, cannot be expected to work wonders. Indeed it will be a waste of precious resources. On the other hand a purposeful and well monitored midday meal programme adapted to suit the local needs, based on locally available food ingredients, integrated with a school health programme and used as a means of nutrition education of the school community can prove rewarding" [Gopalan 1981, quoted Government of India, 1995:22]. The emphasis on nutrition in the noon-meal programme and what impact, if any, it has had on the beneficiaries still needs to be researched.

At a more general level, institutions, funding agencies, and other civil society bodies need to apply more pressure on governments to release relevant and meaningful information. For example, the Tamil Nadu government simply refuses to part with districtwise information on the number of noon-meal centres, districtwise information on dropouts, and/or gender disaggregated data pertaining to a number of variables. (We were asked to collect these from each district office). A larger issue here is the public's right to information. With respect to this scheme, the single largest welfare scheme of the government of Tamil Nadu, the public has a right to know more concretely the educational and nutritional 'impacts' of the scheme; hitherto the beneficial impacts are simply assumed to accrue because of the scheme, by the government. **EPW**

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## Notes

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1 We stress on the word 'official' only to highlight the fact that governments of the day felt compelled to periodically enunciate schemes even if they belonged to the same genre, notwithstanding non-official critical assessments pointing out the failure of earlier schemes to move towards the objectives that justified their enunciation in the first place.

2 For details, refer, for instance, the *Tamil Nadu Human Development Report, 2003*, Government of Tamil Nadu publication, Chapter (IV) on Demography, Health and Nutrition.

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