

The next good meal

The southern state of India, Tamil Nadu is the second most literate state in the country. One of its districts, Kanyakumari is not only fully literate, but also has a greater percentage of persons who are graduates. Complementing this are developmental achievements such as a decrease in infant mortality rate, maternal mortality rate and crude birth date. While many reasons are postulated for this phenomenon, it is generally believed that the state has been successful in not only increasing the enrolment of children into schools, but also effectively preventing dropouts by providing a midday meal at school. Central to the success of this programme has been fact that when families are assured of a meal to their child, the diffidence to send the child to school rather than work is decreased. Further, when supported by a programme that addresses care of children who are less than 3 years of age, the girl child is freed from her role of being a caretaker. There are of course a good number of studies that have highlighted the drawbacks in the programme, of which flaws in implementation and the shortfall in meeting the recommended one-third of the total nutrient intake are of concern. The Tamil Nadu mid-day meal programme in its present form was conceived in the eighties at the behest of the then Chief Minister, M. G. Ramachandran. The Chief Minister, ably supported by his officers started the programme with a target of 8000 centres, which soon expanded to cover all the schools in the state¹.

The precursor to this programme was the mid-day meal programme that was introduced for disadvantaged children in the erstwhile Madras Municipal Corporation in 1925, which was later reinvented in the early sixties, wherein school children were given some bread and milk. Other states, that followed the Tamil

Nadu example were Gujarat, Kerala and Puducherry. By 1990, eight other states notably from the Northeast, started the programme with their own resources. Some states like Karnataka, Orissa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh were supported with international funding.

The initiative was made a unified programme called the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) in 1995, with a two-pronged mandate of enhancing enrolment and retention, and mitigating chronic hunger amongst preschoolers of Government and aided schools in 2408 administrative blocks of the country. It consisted of providing 100 g of cooked food per child, for which subsidies and infrastructure were provided. By 2004, the programme was revised to provide 300 calories and 8–12 g of protein. The revised scheme also took into consideration issues such as providing food even during vacation in drought-prone areas of the country. Currently, NP-NSPE is the world's largest school feeding programme covering about 12 crore children in about 950,000 schools.

In view of the continued problems of infrastructure and escalating costs, and also the inability to meet the benchmark of the meal providing for one-third of the day's dietary requirement, the NP-NSPE was further revised in June 2006. The meal thus had to provide 450 calories, 12 g of protein and a recommended dosage of micronutrients. This was to be supported by the supply of foodgrains from the granaries of the Food Corporation of India. The programme was also linked to other ongoing programmes, such as the universal literacy programme, viz. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the accelerated rural water supply programme, 'Swajaldhara' and the National Rural Health Mission.

The Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India has been entrusted with the mandate of firming up science and technology application in mid-day meal by the Prime Minister's Office (Thrust Area item TA24). The overall objective under the identified thrust area is to develop appropriate technologies and operational models that will improve the administration of the mid-day meal scheme. Proposals have been sought from interested parties to intervene at any of the implementation points in the areas of developing nutritious recipes, improved and energy efficient techniques of cooking, use of local products for fortification and optimizing the availability of foodstuff². The Rashtriya Vigyan Evam Prodyogiki Sanchar Parishad (RVSP) of DST, which is an apex body set up with the objectives of communicating science and technology and stimulating scientific temper amongst the people, has been entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing this initiative. A seven-member committee headed by Sarala Gopalan has been constituted to further the process. If on schedule, the revised NP-NSPE may coincide with the beginning of the academic year in 2008. And fortunately, this does not seem to be all that remote.

1. Antony, T. V., Former Chief Secretary, Govt of Tamil Nadu, pers. commun.
2. Webpage, Department of Science and Technology, Government of India.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. I thank the officials of RVSP for providing information.

Jayshree Vencatesan (*S. Ramaseshan Fellow*), 5, Shri Nivas, 21st Street, Thil-laiganganagar, Chennai 600 061, India. e-mail: jvencatesan@gmail.com