

8

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM AND GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS IN INDIA

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The Indian Supreme Court (SC) ordered government and government-aided schools to provide cooked food to children in 2001. The following year, when the deadline for implementation had passed unheeded in multiple states, civil society groups across the country called for a day of action on April 9. People from more than one thousand villages and slums in over one hundred districts of nine states took part. In Jharkhand, a local group named Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti organized an awareness campaign in the weeks before what the group called “Dhanbad appeal.” It consisted of wall paintings, posters, leaflets, and street plays.¹ As a form of direct action, policy protagonists including several civil society bodies like the *Panchayats* (grassroots body of governance)², *Gram Sabha* (village assembly),³ teachers, and the public, prepared a “people’s school meal.” Later, on July 11, 2002, hundreds of students marched to the chief minister’s residence to present him with a petition. As government inaction continued, the group mobilized to raise awareness on government policy around the school lunch program. In November 2003, they prepared another people’s school meal, held a children’s parliament, and organized a sit-in at the Secretariat (central government office). Owing to the persistent public campaign, the government finally took heed of the citizens’ demands, and midday meals were introduced in government schools starting in December 2003. This campaign is an example of the constant struggle

by grassroots civil society actors to operationalize existing legislation and make the school lunch program in India a reality.

The school lunch program of India, popularly known as the midday meal scheme (MDMS), is aimed at improving the daily nutritional intake and overall educational outcomes of children. The MDMS also plays a key role in achieving the collective objectives of the Right to Food campaign, a civil society initiative that started in 2001, and the Right to Education Act,⁴ passed in 2009. The scheme covers children studying in classes 1–8 in government and government-aided schools, Special Training Centers (STCs), and *Madrasas* and *Maktabs* under the government education program *Samagra Shiksha*. According to government data, nearly 2.6 million cook-cum-helpers served 91.1 million school children in 2018–2019, making it the largest school lunch program in the world.⁵

Several assessments and evaluations of the program have been conducted over the years, showing positive outcomes in educational advancement, child nutrition, and equity.⁶ The program has led to a notable increase in the enrollment of children in primary schools. According to a survey conducted by the Center for Equity Studies, there was a 14.5 percent increase in enrollment in class one.⁷ The results were even better for girls. In most studies, girls' enrollment was much higher than the overall increase in enrollment. There are gender disparities in the education sector especially in more rural and remote regions of the country. The provision of midday meals at school is an extra incentive for parents to send their children, regardless of gender, to school every day—and it helps students stay for the full day, too. Before the midday meal program came into being, many children would leave for their homes during lunch break to eat at home, and some who lived a few kilometers from the school premises would not come back for the remainder of the school day.

As long as the menus offer the recommended variety, the nutritional and health impact of MDMS is also positive.⁸ One study provides evidence that the daily nutrient intake of the children participating in MDMS increased notably, and for a cost as low as 3 cents per child per school day, the daily protein deficiency was reduced by 100 percent.⁹ Providing cooked meals at school also reduces the problem of “classroom hunger,” which manifests as lower levels of energy and lack of attentiveness because the body demands nourishment. When children are fed, they are not only

more likely to stay in school for the full day but also more engaged and able to learn while they are there.¹⁰

While these studies focus largely on measurable outcomes, there is limited discussion in academic and public discourse of the politics required for the program to become a reality: the role of civil society actors, the voices of community members, the accountability of state machinery, as well as the underlying factors that drive the final outcomes. The MDMS, in its present form, is the result of the active involvement of various civil society actors who continue to play a key role in influencing school food policy. These actors exist in a complex ecosystem of school food politics, supporting each other and, at times, coming into conflict over how best to achieve the shared goal of food security.

A HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZING

On August 15, 1995, the country launched the MDMS, officially called the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE). The aim of this scheme was to enhance enrollment, retention, and attendance as well as improve nutrition among children. The assistance provided by the central government was twofold. They were to provide one hundred grams of food grains per child per school day, free of cost, to children studying in classes 1–5 in all government, local body, and government-aided primary schools. They were also to provide a subsidy on transportation of food grains up to a maximum of Rs. 50 per quintal (per 100 kg). Two other major expenses, the cost of cooking and provision of essential infrastructure, were to be provided by the state government/local bodies. The cost of cooking was to include cost of ingredients, cost of fuel, and wages/remuneration payable to cooking personnel, whereas the infrastructure needed was a kitchen-cum-store,¹¹ adequate water supply, cooking devices, utensils, and containers for storage. The state governments were given two years to put these systems in place to provide cooked meals. However, even after six years, many states were only providing students with the dry government rations to be cooked at home, rather than using them as part of a cooked meal service in school as required.

Consequently, on November 28, 2001, the Supreme Court (the top judicial body of the country) directed the state governments and union territories to implement the midday meal scheme in all government and government-assisted primary schools by providing prepared meals constituting a minimum of three hundred calories and eight to twelve grams of protein for every day of school for a minimum of two hundred days. The cooked meals were to be provided within three months, by February 28, 2002, in half of the districts of the state (based on poverty levels), with cooked meals provision extended to the rest of the state within another three months, by May 28, 2002.¹²

The 2001 Supreme Court order that directed significant nationwide changes to the midday meal scheme was brought about by the active push from civil society organizations involved in the Right to Food (RTF) campaign. The RTF campaign advocates for the recognition of the right to food as a necessary component to fulfill the fundamental right to life enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution.¹³ As part of this campaign, in 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (Rajasthan) approached the Supreme Court with public interest litigation regarding the "right to food." The catalyst for this litigation was the occurrence of starvation deaths in the state of Rajasthan.¹⁴ These deaths occurred despite availability of excess grains in government *godowns* (government storage units), an event that highlighted the accessibility issues in food security schemes due to the country's inefficient food distribution system. This litigation was the start of an ongoing movement to improve government policies and ensure compliance by state and local governments through judicial intervention.

Even after the 2001 Supreme Court order and continued civil society pressure, some states failed to provide cooked meals to students. When the February 28, 2002, SC deadline for implementation of midday meals in half of the districts in states had passed unheeded, civil society groups continued their efforts. They organized an April 9 day of action that included midday meals prepared not just in the state of Jharkhand but in communities across the country, as a form of public demonstration. The meals were prepared at strategic locations to make a stronger statement: for example, in front of the tax collector's offices, the chief minister's residence, village schools, and public parks. In Patna, five thousand students participated in the midday meal prepared at Miller school. And

in Bhopal, four hundred students took their meal to the chief minister's residence and demanded the implementation of the lunch program.¹⁵ Apart from the central event held in Patna, all districts of Bihar participated in this campaign. In Dhanbad district, sixty villages participated. An important feature was that in many places, events were organized by the Gram Sabhas themselves to demand answers from the respective district governments. There were also other forms of mass demonstrations. Children in Bangalore protested by standing with empty plates at the prominent MG Road.

In 2002, the Supreme Court issued an interim order that explicitly defined the responsibilities of people and institutions to implement the SC orders regarding the MDMS, with specific lines of accountability and grievance procedures for various levels of governance. The court appointed two commissioners to monitor the implementation of these orders and empowered them to inquire into any violations of the interim orders and demand redress.¹⁶

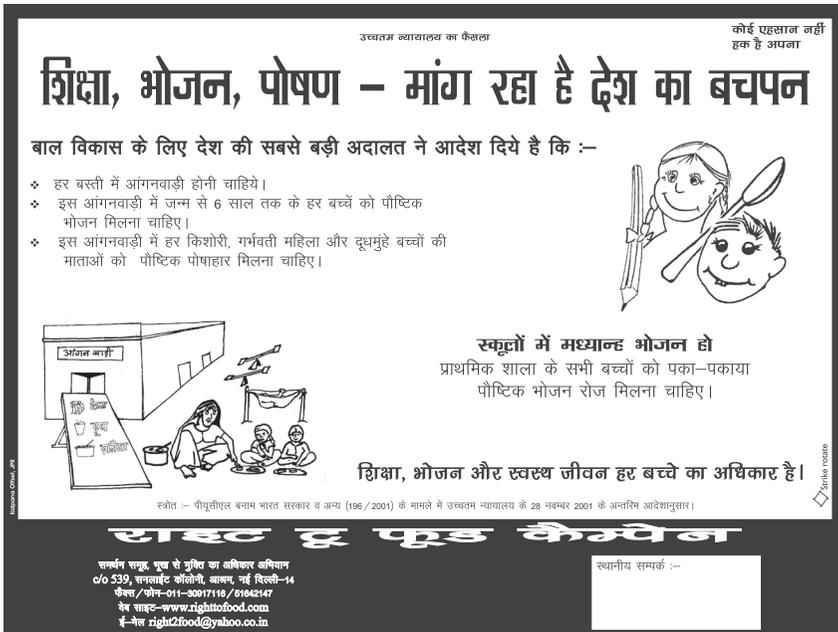
An interim court order dated May 2, 2003, cited the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh for failing to even start the lunch program in any capacity. In a 2004 court order, the provisions of the 2001 court order were reiterated, and all states not implementing the scheme were given a final deadline of September 1, 2004, to fully implement the lunch program in all eligible schools. There were additional directives in this court order: schools in drought-affected regions were to provide midday meals even during summer vacations; hiring preference for cooks and helpers was to be given to Dalits, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes; and it was suggested that the scheme be extended to cover students up to the tenth standard.

In 2005, the court-appointed commissioners prepared a report recommending that chief secretaries of the states that were not fully implementing the midday meal scheme be issued a notice that contempt proceedings could be instituted against them. The report further urged them to develop a time frame for full coverage of every child in every school and explain why they had failed to comply with the Supreme Court orders thus far. Several warnings later and with the consistent efforts of a nationwide civil society campaign, the coverage of MDMS grew and is now near universal, with many states and union territories registering a coverage of more than

90 percent.¹⁷ The efforts of civil society activists in mobilizing public action coupled with routine judicial intervention ensured that state and central government stayed accountable to and upheld their responsibility to the citizens.

Civil society was involved in events that put pressure not just on state authorities to implement food security schemes but on district and local authorities as well. In Uttar Pradesh, Allahabad district and Jalaun district witnessed active community engagement. In forty villages around Jalaun, community members served midday meals to children and shared posters and pamphlets. A delegation met with the *tehsildar* (land revenue officer) with their demand to implement the scheme. The tehsildar expressed ignorance about the SC order in the absence of communication from the district authorities. On the other hand, in Shakargarh (Allahabad district), a public hearing on the right to food was organized. It was attended by laborers from neighboring villages as well as government functionaries from the district administration. The hearing uncovered several cases of corruption in food-related programs due to which poor households had not received food grains for years. The participants passed a resolution at the end of the hearing that included a list of demands to the district administration. One of these demands was the immediate introduction of the midday meal scheme in all primary schools.

These demonstrations were highlighted extensively in the media with press conferences being held in nine states that had regional coverage as well to reach a wider audience. This was complemented with the translation of the Supreme Court order in various regional languages and its distribution to engage a wider section of the community in dialogue. In 2005, the RTF campaign came out with a “Tools for Action” primer on the Supreme Court orders related to food security schemes. A section titled “What We Can Do” detailed ways in which the public could be involved in creating pressure necessary to implement the SC orders. The primer emphasized the importance of public engagement at various levels, from the villages up to the national capital, and the role that every individual can play in their capacity whether they are teachers, activists, parents, or simply concerned citizens. The primer provides several suggestions for public action like mobilizing local community institutions to conduct



8.1 A poster prepared by the RTF campaign to create awareness. Credit: Right to Food campaign.

social audits or check corruption in government programs; filing a complaint with local authorities or making an appeal to the commissioners of the SC regarding shoddy implementation or non-implementation of the MDMS; seeking legal redress by filing an interim application in the SC or a petition in the High Court; or the role of media and research in advocacy.

Figure 8.1 specifically highlights the midday meal scheme and the right of children to a meal in their schools. The title of the poster translates to “The Country’s Childhood Demands—Education, Food, Nutrition.” It is one of many posters created about various issues like deaths by starvation, legal rights pertaining to employment guarantee, subsidized food grain provision, and so on. These posters were to be used in public spaces to spread awareness of the rights granted to all citizens and action that can be taken by them if these rights are not being met.

The campaign led to the National Food Security Act (2013), which includes several government programs like the Midday Meal Scheme,

the Integrated Child Development Services scheme (covering children under the age of six years and their mothers), and the Public Distribution Scheme (responsible for distribution of essential food grains and fuel to the poor at subsidized rates). The act marks a shift from a welfare-based approach to a rights-based approach that recognizes access to and availability of food at affordable rates as a legal right of individuals.

Overall, the RTF campaign has taken up a range of topics related to the right to food, including employment guarantee, social security for those unable to work, equitable land and forest rights, and food and nutrition security demands. The campaign has been funded through individual contributions and is run by a secretariat that mostly constitutes volunteers. An advisory group guides the work of the secretariat and comprises activists, practitioners, and researchers from different civil society organizations.

THE POLITICS OF IMPLEMENTING THE MIDDAY MEAL SCHEME

The original law and the subsequent Supreme Court orders have shaped the requirements of the MDMS as it exists today. The midday meals are jointly funded by the central government and the respective state governments. The central government is responsible for providing food grains free of cost as well as transport allowance, and it also contributes Rs. 2.98 (US\$ 0.041) and Rs. 4.47 (US\$ 0.061) per child per day for cooking costs for primary and upper primary levels, respectively.¹⁸ The central and state governments are supposed to share the cooking costs in a 60:40 ratio according to government guidelines, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development has revised the cooking cost frequently in the last few years. The cooking cost fixed by the government presents a minimum mandatory contribution from state governments, but states are free to contribute more if they so desire, and there are states who are contributing more than the minimum contribution. The difference in state contribution is reflected in the quality of meals that are provided in schools. Activists have noted that richer states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Telangana are implementing the scheme well, but poorer states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh continue to struggle and have not really made the scheme a political priority.¹⁹

The earliest guidelines on the midday meal program that came out in 2006 emphasized that the responsibility of cooking supply of the cooked

midday meal should be assigned to local women's mother's self-help groups, local youth clubs, voluntary organizations, or personnel engaged directly by local bodies like the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), School Management and Development Committee, Village Education Committee (VEC), or Gram Panchayats (village councils).²⁰ The guidelines introduced the idea of centralized kitchens in urban areas that can provide cooked meals to a cluster of schools. And the cook and helper should be appointed with full community participation. Parents and other villagers are meant to elect VECs and PTAs, which then choose cooks and helpers from the community. The Supreme Court order dated April 20, 2004, states that preference should be given to "Dalits, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" This was an attempt to mainstream vulnerable populations by providing them employment in a nationwide government program.

The MDMS has the potential to overcome deeply ingrained cultural prejudices and differences that are threats to communal living. It offers an opportunity to not only ensure better nutritional and educational outcomes for children but also to promote socialization by bringing children together to share a meal irrespective of their caste and class differences. Unfortunately, the program has had mixed success eroding these caste barriers. While there are cases in which communities have been able to effectively overcome their prejudices toward lower-caste individuals and have let go of discriminatory practices like keeping separate utensils, there are also cases where upper-caste parents adamantly resist the appointment of lower-caste cooks.²¹ In the states of Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, for example, most of the appointed lower-caste cooks were working in schools with no upper-caste children.²²

Subtle forms of caste prejudice and social discrimination are prevalent. For example, upper-caste members have resisted the scheme because it encourages their children eating meals with children from lower-caste households. In such cases, they either send prepacked lunch with their children or children return home during lunch time to eat at home. Also, in a 2014 study across seven Indian states, it was found that Dalit children were given a significantly less amount of food compared to upper-caste children.²³ This discrimination was reinforced by differential treatment meted out to Dalit children in the form of separate seating for meals, separate meals being cooked and served for Dalit and non-Dalit children,

higher-caste children eating first, and so on. The consequences of these discriminatory practices are that Dalit children were reportedly uninterested in attending school due to the discrimination they faced, and their attendance was irregular. These findings highlight that failing to create inclusive spaces for all children prevents the achievement of the midday meal scheme's objective of increasing educational outcomes for all. Such studies also shed light on the nuanced ways in which we need to understand the outcomes of government programs and policies. While several quantitative surveys have shown an overall increase in the enrollment and attendance of students due to the midday meal being offered at schools, focusing on the politics of implementation reveals the finer sociocultural context, which aids in expanding our knowledge by looking beyond simple metrics to personal experiences of individuals.

CURRENT ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

With the enactment of the Right to Food Act and the rollout of the midday meal scheme nationwide, civil society organizations (CSOs) have changed the focus of their organizing to ensure that nutritious, hygienic, and timely meals are provided for all children, without exception. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been stepping in to fulfill the role of service delivery, and the government has encouraged their involvement to implement MDMS effectively and with reduced costs than might otherwise be possible. Yet there has been much confusion and indecisiveness regarding the role of NGOs and privatized bodies in preparing and distributing midday meals.

In 2010, the revised guidelines reiterated the importance of community participation in the effective implementation and monitoring of the midday meals at schools and the desirability of local community institutions being engaged to increase community ownership. There was also a more detailed mention of centralized kitchens that can be operated by NGOs under the public private partnership model. The role of centralized kitchens was deemed necessary for urban-area schools that might be struggling with space constraints.²⁴ In 2014, the Ministry of Human Resource Development asked states to not involve NGOs in implementing the midday meal scheme as it was anticipated that the involvement

of NGOs would reduce opportunity for community participation.²⁵ While an NGO's mission can revolve around community development, in many cases, NGOs are not truly representative of the communities they work with. Many NGOs are not based in local communities and have development professionals, who are community outsiders, handle the operation side of community work. This setup hinders authentic community participation in which community members are at the forefront of planning, leading, and implementing action. According to the midday meal rules that came out in 2015, the central government restricted the role of NGOs more decisively by barring state governments from engaging NGOs in preparing meals in rural areas. In urban areas, NGOs were to be allowed to operate centralized kitchens only when schools did not have adequate kitchen and cooking components.²⁶

The involvement of local CSOs/NGOs might be helpful to combat issues of hygiene. One of the major critiques of the midday meal scheme has been the quality of food being served at schools due to poor sanitation and hygiene conditions in school kitchens. There have been several reported instances of food poisoning and unpalatable food being served, leading to children being hospitalized and, in some cases, even dying. Having a centralized kitchen run by a CSO or NGO can in part help address this problem for schools that do not have adequate infrastructure for the preparation of meals in hygienic and healthy circumstances. According to revised guidelines that came out in 2017, states should constitute a committee to select CSOs or NGOs to supply cooked midday meals on a "no-profit" basis. The operation of the centralized kitchens as opposed to school-level kitchens will be entrusted to the selected CSO/NGO under the public private partnership model and only to such an organization that has "local presence and familiarity with the needs and culture of the State." This partnership will be formalized through a memorandum of understanding between the CSO/NGO and the respective state that clearly delineates the duration of the agreement, an evaluation system, stipulated food and nutrition norms, monthly reporting system, and so on.

At present, Akshaya Patra Foundation (APF), a philanthropic organization, runs centralized kitchens in twelve states and two union territories in the country that provide midday meals to more than nineteen thousand schools and approximately 1.8 million children.²⁷ APF's centralized kitchens

have a sophisticated infrastructure that combines innovative technology and efficient management to prepare hygienic meals every day to be supplied to various schools. The preprocessing of vegetables, rice, and lentils is done with special attention to the cleaning process. Although much of the cooking process is automated and does not require close human contact, for whatever stages that workers come in touch with the food, very strict hygiene standards are in place with everyone dressed in clean overalls, gloves, head caps, and special footwear. In remote areas that APF is unable to reach directly, decentralized kitchens are set up and local women are trained as cooks.²⁸ These kitchens follow the hygiene and nutrition norms as set down by APF to ensure that there are no inconsistencies in the quality of food being served at schools. The food prepared in the centralized kitchen is packaged in large steel containers that are then dispatched to the schools through APF's vehicles every morning. Food is served to the children directly from these containers to their personal eating utensils, which are provided by the school.

The downside of the centralized kitchen model is that it has entrusted the implementation of midday meals to bigger foundations, thereby reducing community participation at the local level in decentralized school kitchens. The latest guidelines that came out in 2017 instructed that the centralized kitchen model can be used to supply cooked meals to identified rural areas as well. Still, community participation continues to be a key component of the midday meal program.²⁹ States are encouraged to roll out mass mobilization campaigns to involve students' mothers by giving preference to women for the roles of cook-cum-helpers, involving mothers in the supervision of the preparation of the meals, and including mothers in supervision committees to monitor the implementation of the program. While states are expected to take these steps, the centralized kitchen model can reduce opportunities for community participation with community members not being able to oversee the operations that do not take place in their local surroundings.

There is growing discontent among community members with the expansion of the centralized kitchen model. Some state governments and civil society actors prefer awarding MDMS contracts to grassroots organizations instead of large NGOs like APF. In Odisha, for example, the state government has consistently entrusted meal preparation to women's self-help

groups (SHGs), which are made up of local women whose children might be studying in the schools for which they are preparing midday meals. In 2008, women's SHGs ran the MDMS in more than thirty-two thousand primary schools.³⁰ In 2019, the Odisha state government approved the guidelines for management of the scheme in schools by women's SHGs, thereby formalizing the role of grassroots civil society organizations in implementing the midday meal.³¹

Meanwhile, a growing number of women workers and members of left-leaning trade unions are protesting the privatization of the MDMS. In 2019, when the state of Assam outsourced the cooking and distribution of meals to nonprofit organizations in seventeen districts, midday meal workers protested this decision because they feared they might lose their jobs and believed that local school-based kitchens were a better alternative in rural areas.³² Their apprehension is fueled by the fact that when APF was first contracted in Assam in 2010, they allegedly reduced the honorarium of existing cooks and helpers from Rs. 1,000 to Rs. 500.³³ Since government guidelines explain that the cook-cum-helpers are expected to perform all activities related to cooking, serving, and washing the utensils, in the event of a centralized kitchen preparing the meals, the honorarium of the existing cooks gets reduced since they are serving pre-cooked meals.³⁴ Monjura Begum, a midday meal worker in Morigaon district, shares that contracting the lunch program to bigger foundations can never replace the close relationship between the children and local community workers:

They (the children) lovingly call me *baideo* (elder sister) though I am not their teacher, and it is this respect and love that makes my back breaking work easy. Will any foundation be able to provide fresh and hot food like I do? Do they know their names or care for their likes/dislikes? The Government says we will not lose our jobs, but we will be kept only for food distribution. There will be a cut on our already meager pay, 500 rupees will go to the foundation and 500 rupees will be paid to us. But my main concern is for the children, what will be the food value in a meal cooked at dawn? And will my children eat the food they provide? Here, we use fresh vegetables sourced from the Matri Gut (mother's club) grown by the mothers in their kitchen gardens.³⁵

Another recent criticism of the food prepared by APF is related to the religious beliefs of its parent organization, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. APF does not include onion, garlic, and eggs in the

meals it prepares, citing religious reasons.³⁶ In Karnataka, several activists including those from the RTF campaign and the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (People's Health Movement) have criticized this policy of the foundation stating that "religious diktats cannot supersede the application of established principles of the right to food to midday meal schemes."³⁷ During a field visit in 2018, the Karnataka Food Commission found that children were not enjoying their meals and were eating less than they should as they found the food unpalatable. It was concluded that the exclusion of garlic and onion altered the taste of the meals being prepared, thereby not appealing to the students' taste buds. On being questioned by the state government on not following the state-prescribed menu, APF submitted necessary documents to prove that they are meeting all the nutritional requirements through their prepared meals and providing adequate substitutes for onion and garlic. The government sent these documents for review to the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) and the Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI). The NIN approved the APF's menu stating that it met the nutritional guidelines set forth by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Following the NIN's decision, activists have expressed their dissatisfaction toward the unscientific evaluation of the foundation's menu but more importantly have highlighted the non-inclusion of testimonies from stakeholders, particularly the children eating the food. The main concern of activists is the nonrepresentation of the local food culture of the community in the midday meals being served, and since the aim of the scheme is to address hunger issues among children, a culturally appropriate meal that students enjoy should be given priority. From the government's perspective, this is not an easy decision to make since APF has the infrastructure to provide hygienic meals to a large population in the state. According to the principal secretary of education in Karnataka, "Who is going to serve such a huge number of children if we cancel this contract? There are logistical issues; overnight, we cannot build kitchens and hire cooks."³⁸ The case of APF in Karnataka brings forth the inherent tensions as well as challenges in a space that is populated by unique civil society actors. While national-level NGOs have the infrastructure to efficiently realize the objectives of the midday meal scheme, their inability to provide more local, culturally appropriate

services has made other activists question whether they are fit for implementing this scheme.

At the grass roots, innovations by community members are strengthening midday meals in their own ways. Since the food grains for school meals are provided through a centralized structure, the vegetables for meals can be provided through more local means.³⁹ Creating kitchen gardens on school premises that are maintained by school-going children is an innovative way to not just diversify the diet but also ensure clean, pesticide-free food on one's plate. To augment the nutritional content of midday meals while creating awareness among children regarding healthy food habits, the central government of the country has come up with guidelines for setting up school nutrition (kitchen) gardens. The 2019 guidelines seek to create behavioral change among students by engaging them in meaningful activities that create awareness around issues of rapid urbanization as well as environmental needs. The guidelines also address children's malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies by augmenting their consumption of freshly grown fruits and vegetables. The guidelines include practices that address the harmful effects of climate change with emphasis on using organic methods like composting to grow fresh produce and incorporating water management practices like drip irrigation to optimize the water consumption.

There are states in northeast India that are setting stellar examples. In Nagaland, school children in Viswema village decided to cultivate organic vegetables in a school kitchen garden to complement their lunch food.⁴⁰ This has not only helped them diversify the school menu but also encourages consumption of local foods like Naga lentils. Organic farming was introduced in the school's curriculum so that students are not just engaged firsthand in the process of cultivation but are also involved in holistic ecological practices like waste management. A similar endeavor is also underway in Mizoram where schools across the state are to demarcate 100 sq ft of land as a nutrition garden to provide fresh, local produce for the midday meals.⁴¹ This idea is especially inspired by the accessibility issues faced by many smaller towns and villages. Instead of relying on shipments from nearby cities, the community could become self-reliant by growing their own organic produce. The latest government guidelines encourage the

creation of kitchen gardens at the school level, which can lead to the institutionalization of this practice.⁴² Decentralized decision-making and local sourcing of vegetables and grains is also being advocated by food activists belonging to various nonprofits. Local procurement has multiple benefits: contributing to the local economy by supporting livelihoods; increasing community participation and ownership; and providing safe and higher-quality food, a better alternative than the introduction of prepackaged fortified foods, a potential threat to the program.⁴³

The current tensions among different civil society actors over the implementation of the midday meal program are indicative of the expansion of neoliberal ideals. Bigger civil society organizations are stepping in to replace grassroots community initiatives by promising higher levels of efficiency. This might come at the cost of thousands of local women losing their jobs and the community not being actively involved in preparing food for children they care both for and about. While initial guidelines had encouraged involvement of CSOs and NGOs to overcome the issues of shoddy infrastructure in urban schools, the expansion of such CSOs and NGOs to rural areas is a concern as it marginalizes community participation that is imperative to making such entitlement schemes successful. It took immense community efforts to make midday meals in schools a reality, and further community-organizing efforts are needed to keep India's lunch program a community-led initiative and to overcome deeply ingrained cultural prejudices and inequities.

NOTES

1. Jean Dreze, Vandana Bhatia, and Vandana Prasad, "Midday Meals: A Primer" (unpublished document of the Right to Food Campaign, New Delhi, India, 2005). Retrieve from <https://www.righttofoodcampaign.in/campaign-material/primers>.
2. Panchayats are institutions of self-governance constituted in rural areas under article 243B of the Indian Constitution.
3. The Gram Sabha consists of all the people above eighteen years old belonging to and registered in the electoral rolls of a village.
4. The RTE Act states that all children between the ages of six and fourteen have the right to free and compulsory education, and it is a fundamental right in the Indian constitution.
5. Tarun Krishna, "Mid-Day Meal Coverage Sees a Dip, Govt Says Students Are Shifting to Private Schools," *The Print*, December 12, 2019, <https://theprint.in/india/mid-day>

-meal-coverage-sees-a-dip-govt-says-students-are-shifting-to-private-schools/333210;/ Global Nutrition Foundation, *State Survey of School Meal Programs: India 2020* (GNF, 2021), <https://gcnf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/State-Survey-of-School-Meal-Programs-in-India-Report-with-Annexes.pdf>.

6. Jean Drèze and Aparajita Goyal, "Future of Mid-Day Meals," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 44 (2003): 4673–4683.

7. Drèze and Goyal, "Future of Mid-Day Meals."

8. Farzana Afridi, "Midday Meals in Two States: Comparing the Financial and Institutional Organisation of the Programme," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 15 (2005): 1528–1535.

9. Farzana Afridi, "Child Welfare Programs and Child Nutrition: Evidence from a Mandated School Meal Program in India," *Journal of Development Economics* 92, no. 2 (July 1, 2010): 152–165, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2009.02.002>.

10. Drèze and Goyal, "Future of Mid-Day Meals"; Rana Kumar, "The Possibilities of Mid-Day Meal Programme in West Bengal," paper presented at the workshop "West Bengal: Challenges and Choices," organized by the Centre for Social Services, Calcutta, July 27–28, 2004.

11. Kitchen-cum-store refers to a space on school premises that includes the kitchen and a storage area for food and other supplies necessary to prepare meals.

12. People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India & Ors, In the Supreme Court of India, Civil Original Jurisdiction, Writ Petition (Civil) No.196 of 2001," ESCR-Net, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.escr-net.org/caselaw/2006/peoples-union-civil-liberties-v-union-india-ors-supreme-court-india-civil-original>.

13. As per Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law."

14. See People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India & Ors.

15. "Right to Food Campaign," Right to Food Campaign India, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/right-food-campaign-india>.

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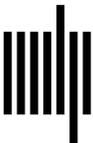
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