

Mid-Day Meal Scheme in Relation to Attendance of Primary School Children

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Abstract: *The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme is one of the most significant school-based welfare initiatives undertaken by the Government of India to promote universal elementary education, improve nutritional status, and increase school participation among children. Since its nationwide implementation, the scheme has served as an effective intervention in addressing classroom hunger, reducing dropout rates, improving attendance, and encouraging enrolment, particularly among children belonging to economically and socially disadvantaged communities. This research article examines the relationship between the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and the attendance of primary school children. It explores the historical evolution, objectives, implementation strategies, educational implications, nutritional benefits, and challenges associated with the scheme. The findings suggest that the Mid-Day Meal Scheme plays a vital role in promoting educational equity, enhancing student retention, and contributing to the overall development of children.*

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Introduction: Education is universally acknowledged as one of the most powerful instruments for social transformation, economic development, and human empowerment. However, in many developing countries, particularly India, poverty and malnutrition continue to hinder children's access to quality education. Children from economically weaker sections often attend school irregularly because of hunger, poor health, household responsibilities, and inadequate financial resources. These challenges directly affect enrolment, attendance, academic performance, and school completion rates.

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), introduced by the Government of India, represents an integrated approach to addressing both educational and nutritional challenges. By providing cooked meals to children studying in government and government-aided schools, the scheme seeks to reduce classroom hunger while simultaneously encouraging regular school attendance.

Attendance is one of the most important indicators of educational participation. A child who attends school regularly is more likely to achieve better learning outcomes, develop social skills, and complete primary education successfully. Conversely, irregular attendance often leads to poor academic performance and eventually increases the likelihood of school dropout.

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme has emerged as a major incentive encouraging parents to send their children to school regularly. Particularly in rural and economically backward regions, the assurance of a free nutritious

meal significantly influences parents' decisions regarding school attendance. Consequently, the scheme has become an important component of India's educational policy aimed at achieving universal elementary education.

Historical Background of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme: The concept of providing meals in schools is not entirely new. Several countries introduced school feeding programmes during the twentieth century to combat malnutrition and improve educational participation.

In India, the earliest school feeding programmes were initiated in the erstwhile Madras Presidency during the 1920s. After independence, several state governments, including Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Kerala, and Pondicherry, implemented school meal programmes independently.

A significant milestone occurred on 15 August 1995, when the Government of India launched the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE). Initially, children received dry food grains. Subsequently, following the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court of India in 2001, states were directed to provide cooked meals instead of dry rations.

Over time, the scheme expanded to include upper primary schools and educational institutions under the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS), Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE), and Madrasas supported under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

In 2021, the programme was renamed PM POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman) while retaining its core objectives of improving nutrition and educational participation.

Objectives of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme: The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), now known as **PM POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman)**, is one of India's most significant school-based welfare programmes, designed to achieve multiple educational, nutritional, and social objectives. The scheme extends beyond the provision of free meals by functioning as a comprehensive intervention that promotes child development, educational equity, and social inclusion (Government of India, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022).

One of the primary objectives of the scheme is to **increase enrolment** in government and government-aided primary schools, particularly among children from economically disadvantaged and marginalized communities. The provision of a free nutritious meal serves as an incentive for parents to enroll their children in school, thereby supporting the goal of universal elementary education (Dreze & Kingdon, 2001; Government of India, 2021).

Another important objective is to **improve regular school attendance**. By addressing classroom hunger and providing a daily meal, the programme motivates children to attend school consistently and remain in classrooms throughout the instructional day (Afridi, 2010; Singh & Fernandes, 2008). Closely associated with this objective is the reduction of **school dropout rates**, as the economic and nutritional support offered by the scheme encourages children to continue their education rather than leave school due to poverty or food insecurity (Dreze & Goyal, 2003).

The scheme also seeks to **combat classroom hunger**, which has long been recognized as a significant barrier to effective learning. Children who receive nutritious meals during school hours are better able to concentrate, participate actively in classroom activities, and engage in learning processes (Bundy et al., 2018). Simultaneously, the programme contributes to the **improvement of children's nutritional status** by supplying balanced meals containing essential nutrients required for healthy physical growth and cognitive development (World Food Programme, 2020; UNICEF, 2019).

An equally important social objective of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme is the **promotion of social equality and inclusion**. By encouraging children from different castes, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds to sit together and share meals, the programme helps reduce social discrimination and fosters values of equality, cooperation, and mutual respect (PROBE Team, 1999; Dreze & Goyal, 2003). Furthermore, improved nutrition contributes significantly to children's cognitive development by enhancing attention, memory, and learning capacity, thereby improving overall educational outcomes (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

Finally, the scheme supports the **universalization of elementary education**, which remains one of the central objectives of India's educational policy. Through its combined educational, nutritional, and social interventions, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme serves as a powerful instrument for promoting equitable access to quality education and holistic child development (Government of India, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022). These multiple objectives clearly demonstrate that the programme is far more than a food distribution initiative; it is a comprehensive educational and social development strategy.

Importance of Nutrition in Education: Nutrition is widely recognized as a fundamental determinant of children's physical health, cognitive development, emotional well-being, and educational achievement. Adequate nutrition during the primary school years is essential for proper brain development, physical growth, and the acquisition of learning skills. Conversely, malnutrition has serious consequences for children's academic performance, health, and school participation (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021; UNICEF, 2019).

Research has consistently shown that malnutrition adversely affects several cognitive functions, including **memory, attention span, concentration, problem-solving ability, learning capacity, and intellectual development** (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). In addition to impairing cognitive functioning, inadequate nutrition weakens the immune system, increases susceptibility to infectious diseases, delays physical growth, and contributes to chronic absenteeism among school-going children (WHO, 2021).

Children who attend school without adequate food often experience fatigue, low energy levels, reduced classroom participation, irritability, and diminished motivation to learn. Hunger interferes with children's ability to concentrate on lessons, complete academic tasks, and actively participate in classroom discussions, ultimately leading to poor educational outcomes (Bundy et al., 2018; Afridi, 2010).

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme directly addresses these nutritional deficiencies by providing cooked meals that contain appropriate quantities of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals, and calories required for healthy growth and development. The provision of balanced meals improves children's nutritional intake, enhances physical health, strengthens immunity, and supports cognitive functioning, thereby creating favourable conditions for effective learning (Government of India, 2021; World Food Programme, 2020).

Improved nutritional status also contributes significantly to higher school attendance. Healthy children are less likely to suffer from illness, possess greater physical stamina, and demonstrate improved learning readiness, resulting in more regular attendance and better academic performance (Singh & Fernandes, 2008; Bundy et al., 2018). Thus, nutrition and education are closely interconnected, and school feeding programmes such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme represent an effective strategy for simultaneously improving child health and educational participation.

Relationship Between the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and School Attendance: One of the principal objectives of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme is to improve the regular attendance of primary school children. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between the provision of school meals and increased student attendance, particularly among children from economically weaker and socially

marginalized households (Afridi, 2010; Dreze & Kingdon, 2001). This relationship can be understood through several interconnected mechanisms.

Reduction of Classroom Hunger: Children belonging to low-income families frequently attend school without consuming a nutritious breakfast, making it difficult for them to concentrate on classroom activities. The provision of freshly cooked meals during school hours reduces hunger, improves attention and concentration, enhances classroom participation, and encourages children to remain in school throughout the day (Bundy et al., 2018; Afridi, 2010). Consequently, absenteeism decreases while regular attendance improves significantly.

Economic Relief for Families: The Mid-Day Meal Scheme provides substantial economic assistance to poor households by reducing the daily cost of feeding school-age children. For families experiencing financial hardship, receiving one nutritious meal at school lowers household expenditure on food and increases the perceived value of education. As a result, parents become more willing to send their children to school regularly rather than engage them in domestic work or income-generating activities (Dreze & Goyal, 2003; Singh & Fernandes, 2008).

Increased Enrolment and Attendance: Several empirical investigations have reported a considerable increase in school enrolment following the implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. More importantly, children who enroll in school tend to attend more regularly because the provision of free meals serves as a continuous incentive for both students and parents. This positive effect is particularly evident among girls and children belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically disadvantaged communities (Afridi, 2010; Dreze & Kingdon, 2001).

Reduction in Dropout Rates: Poverty remains one of the major causes of school dropout in India. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme helps alleviate this problem by providing nutritional support while simultaneously reducing the economic burden on families. This dual benefit encourages children to remain in school for longer periods and contributes significantly to reducing dropout rates at the primary level (Government of India, 2021; Dreze & Goyal, 2003).

6.5 Improved Health: Regular consumption of nutritious meals improves children's overall health by reducing malnutrition, anaemia, and nutrient deficiencies. Better health reduces illness-related absenteeism and enables children to participate actively in classroom activities. Healthy children are naturally more capable of maintaining consistent school attendance and achieving better educational outcomes (WHO, 2021; World Food Programme, 2020).

Better Classroom Environment: The Mid-Day Meal Scheme contributes to a more positive learning environment by increasing children's energy levels, attentiveness, participation, and classroom discipline. Well-nourished students are generally more engaged in classroom activities, interact more effectively with teachers and peers, and exhibit improved behavioural outcomes. These positive educational experiences enhance students' interest in schooling and motivate them to attend regularly (Bundy et al., 2018; Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

Factors Influencing Attendance Beyond the Mid-Day Meal Scheme: Although the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has been widely acknowledged as an effective intervention for improving school attendance, regular attendance among primary school children is influenced by a complex interaction of family, school, community, and individual factors. Therefore, while the scheme serves as an important motivational incentive, it cannot be viewed as the sole determinant of children's participation in school (UNESCO, 2020; Government of India, 2021).

Family Factors: The family constitutes the primary social environment that shapes children's educational experiences. Parents' educational attainment significantly influences their awareness of the importance of schooling and their willingness to ensure regular attendance. Educated parents generally exhibit greater involvement in their children's education and are more likely to monitor school attendance consistently (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). Similarly, household income plays a crucial role, as economically disadvantaged families may struggle to meet educational expenses or may require children to contribute to household labour, thereby affecting attendance (PROBE Team, 1999).

Family size is another important determinant. Larger families often face financial constraints that limit educational investment for each child, sometimes resulting in irregular attendance or early school withdrawal. Likewise, parental occupation influences attendance patterns; children whose parents are engaged in seasonal agriculture, daily wage labour, or migratory employment frequently experience interruptions in their schooling due to economic necessity or family migration (UNESCO, 2020; Government of India, 2021).

School Factors: The quality of the school environment substantially affects children's willingness to attend school regularly. Teacher competence, commitment, and supportive classroom practices foster student engagement and encourage consistent attendance. Positive teacher–student relationships enhance children's motivation and create a welcoming learning environment (UNICEF, 2019).

Adequate school infrastructure—including well-maintained classrooms, sufficient seating arrangements, electricity, libraries, and teaching-learning materials—also contributes to improved attendance. Furthermore, access to clean drinking water, functional sanitation facilities, particularly separate toilets for girls, and safe playgrounds creates a child-friendly environment that encourages regular school participation (UNICEF, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2022). Schools with better physical facilities generally report lower absenteeism and higher student retention.

Community Factors: Community characteristics also exert a significant influence on children's attendance. Reliable transportation facilities and shorter travel distances reduce the physical burden of commuting, especially for young children residing in rural and remote areas. In contrast, long distances, poor road connectivity, and inadequate transportation often discourage regular attendance (UNESCO, 2020).

Socio-cultural attitudes toward education, particularly regarding girls' education, also shape attendance patterns. Communities that place high value on formal education tend to exhibit better enrolment and attendance rates. Conversely, traditional beliefs, child labour, early marriage, and seasonal migration of families frequently disrupt children's educational continuity and contribute to irregular attendance (PROBE Team, 1999; Government of India, 2021).

Overall, these findings indicate that school attendance is determined by multiple interacting socio-economic, institutional, and community-level factors. While the Mid-Day Meal Scheme substantially improves attendance by addressing hunger and providing economic incentives, its effectiveness is enhanced when supported by favourable family conditions, quality school environments, and positive community engagement.

Educational Benefits of Improved Attendance: Regular school attendance is widely recognized as one of the strongest predictors of children's academic success and overall educational development. Consistent attendance ensures uninterrupted exposure to classroom instruction, active participation in learning activities, and continuous interaction with teachers and peers. Consequently, children who attend school regularly demonstrate significantly better educational outcomes than those with irregular attendance (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

Improved attendance contributes directly to the development of **literacy and numeracy skills**, as continuous classroom instruction enables children to acquire foundational competencies in reading, writing, and mathematics. Regular participation also strengthens classroom engagement by encouraging students to ask questions, participate in discussions, complete assignments, and collaborate with classmates (UNICEF, 2019).

Beyond academic learning, regular attendance promotes children's self-confidence and communication skills. Frequent interaction with teachers and peers enhances verbal expression, interpersonal relationships, teamwork, and leadership qualities. Such experiences contribute to children's emotional and social development while fostering positive attitudes toward education and lifelong learning (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

Furthermore, consistent attendance is strongly associated with improved academic achievement, higher examination performance, better promotion rates, and successful progression to higher grades. Children who attend school regularly are less likely to repeat classes or discontinue their education prematurely, thereby contributing to the achievement of universal elementary education (Government of India, 2021; OECD, 2019).

Thus, regular attendance serves as a foundation for both cognitive and non-cognitive development, enabling children to realize their full educational potential and prepare for future academic and professional success.

Social Benefits of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme: In addition to its educational and nutritional objectives, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has generated significant social benefits by promoting equality, inclusion, and social cohesion within schools. The programme creates opportunities for children belonging to diverse social, economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds to interact in an environment characterized by equality and mutual respect (Dreze & Goyal, 2003).

One of the most remarkable features of the scheme is the practice of children from different **castes, religions, and socio-economic groups** sitting together and sharing a common meal. This simple yet meaningful activity challenges traditional social hierarchies and helps reduce discriminatory practices rooted in caste and social exclusion. By encouraging collective dining, the programme promotes values of dignity, cooperation, and social harmony among young learners (PROBE Team, 1999; Government of India, 2021).

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme also contributes to reducing **caste discrimination, untouchability, social exclusion, and educational inequality**. Shared meals foster interaction among children who might otherwise remain socially segregated, thereby strengthening mutual understanding and acceptance. Such experiences play an important role in nurturing democratic values, secularism, and respect for diversity from an early age (Dreze & Goyal, 2003).

Moreover, the programme supports **gender equality** by encouraging parents to send both boys and girls to school regularly. In many economically disadvantaged households, the assurance of a free nutritious meal increases girls' educational participation and reduces gender disparities in enrolment and attendance (Afridi, 2010).

By strengthening social inclusion, promoting equality, and fostering harmonious relationships among children from diverse backgrounds, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme contributes significantly to the broader objectives of **inclusive education, social justice, national integration, and sustainable human development**. Consequently, the programme represents not only a nutritional intervention but also a powerful instrument for building a more equitable and inclusive society (Bundy et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2020).

Conclusion: The Mid-Day Meal Scheme represents one of the world's largest school feeding programmes and serves as an effective instrument for promoting educational participation among primary school children. Its contribution extends beyond providing meals; it addresses classroom hunger, improves nutritional status, encourages enrolment, enhances attendance, reduces dropout rates, and promotes social equity.

Regular attendance is fundamental to educational success, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has demonstrated considerable effectiveness in motivating children—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—to attend school consistently. While challenges related to infrastructure, food quality, funding, and monitoring remain, the overall impact of the programme on educational development has been overwhelmingly positive.

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