

# Mid-Day Meal Programme

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## **Why Mid-Day Meals?** ***Why Schools in the first Place?*** *(Paraphrased from Conversations)*

“Villagers had requested us to open schools near their villages so their little ones could go to school. Government schools, if not morbidly hopeless (no teachers, decaying buildings...) were often too far off from the remote settlements for the children to go on a day-to-day basis. In a desperate attempt to educate their children Venture Schools were organized, mostly by educated people from the village. These venture schools had a self managing village committee, and they existed in the hope that one day the government would recognize their efforts and assist them financially. Barring a few exceptions, the government did not assist them. Many venture schools sputtered and died out, others were staggering, barely running without any government assistance for years. The cash stripped Village Committees had been unable to run them.

‘We met with the villagers, our volunteers talked to them and organized meetings in villages to know their requirements. Schools were set up, but the enrolment and the attendance failed to reach our expectations. When we asked the villagers why they were not sending their children to school, they replied “What do we feed them to send them to school... they cannot go so far with an empty stomach.” This was depressing, when the children used to cry for want of food, their parents used to beat them, knowing they had no other option. We sent a proposal to ASHA to start a mid day meal program to solve this problem.

‘The Mid Day Meal Program was started on November 2005. The villagers were happy, there was an upsurge in both attendance and enrolment. However, the funds that we received were not timely, there were further problems- the money had to be spent on other immediate expenses, and the funds proved to be insufficient. As a result the mid day meal program was stopped after six months of operation in June, 2006.

‘The villagers used to ask us continually when the mid day meal program would be revived. The Mid Day Meal was a most vital accessory to school education, given the economic background of the students. We restarted the program on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February this year.”

## **Site Visit of Satyanarainpur Centre**

Angarkata, Baksa District (BTC) Assam

(5<sup>th</sup> March, 2007)

The attendance of the Satyanarainpur and Shantipur centre was low on the day I visited. Reason: seven marriages were being held in the Angarkata region. Attendance in Shantipur was despairingly low, in the satyanarainpur centre out of the 229 students, 90 were present (39% of total strength). In the Satyanarainpur School: on asking the ME students elementary questions in English and Mathematics, the students' responses were fairly adequate. However, the chief problem of the centre was lack of sanitation and drinking water. This was also the reason why the flattened rice was being served dry. There was no available source of potable water to wash it. The children brought with them their own bowls for the Mid Day Meals. There were a few children who were without their vessels; they were served dry flat rice and jaggery on pieces of paper. Later, milk was given to them separately when the others had finished. There was no pre-allocated cooking shed for boiling the milk, however, the firewood was lighted on the porch of a local hut. Nurmi Barman, a Bodo woman whose two children were also studying in the centre (one in class V and other in class III) had the job of boiling the milk, in return for nothing but a glass of milk and some jaggery. Such favour for simply a glass of milk is a most uncommon act... the teachers had literally pleaded her as the routine of the teachers would be disrupted if they left their teaching for the Mid Day Meal preparations. The teachers told us that whenever some milk was left the children were given a second helping. I and Pranab Saikia tasted the MDM and found it- personally- quite tasty and fulfilling. No case of sickness because of the Mid Day Meal has been reported. As the cook is herself a parent, hardly any questions can be raised regarding personal hygiene. Before leaving, the teachers, also presented their wish for having play material and a floor mat for children's recreational activities.

Going through the registers of a few schools, a brief cost analysis was done. A detailed list of how the enrolment has increased and the percentage attendances will be provided to you later by Bijju.

1. The Dansrang Primary School has effectively implemented its mid-day meal program. Judging by the attendance and the swift responses given by the students to the questions I asked from their textbooks (English and Maths only) it is also one of the best managed centres, serving as a model for other schools. On February 18, this centre had an enrolment of 101 students which went up to 120 in March and currently (25<sup>th</sup> March) records 126. The school had earlier been a venture school, in this remote village very close to the Bhutan border. It is in the heart of the erstwhile forest reserve Bogajuli. The Village Committee is considered to be very strong in the village, meetings are held regularly in a strict schedule and education is also monitored by the elders on a routine basis; being the reason for their effective management.
2. In the month of February, the attendance records show an average attendance of 89%. This includes Balwadi (nursery\crèche) and Classes I, II, III and IV. In the month of March this fell to 81% (In Nagapur Balwadi centres the figures were between seventy and eighty). Reasons cited for this was mainly the month of Holi and marriages taking place in the vicinity. In the budget proposal it is assumed that 1100 students out of the then 1165 would attend, which would be a strength of 94%. A revision of this figure is suggested.
3. Furthermore, the proposal assumes 270 working days. A better approximation would be to have about 215 working days, as this would exclude 52 Sundays, 52 Saturdays when MDM is not served, 15 days for Summer Vacations, 22 other Holidays, 5 days relaxation per year for teacher's leave, and 12 centre meetings every year (held once every month). Note: Sometimes Saturdays and centre meetings coincide.
4. The Distribution pattern was to serve 85 gm of Flat Rice, 35 gm of Jaggery and 10 gms of Milk Powder per student per day. A sample of the distribution pattern of foodstuff: In the first four days, 42 Kg of Flattened Rice, 5 Kg of Milk Powder and 12.5 Kg of Jaggery was supplied to the Dansrang Centre. Of this, by the end 35Kg of Flat Rice, 5 Kg (or 5 packets) Milk Powder, and 8.5Kg Jaggery was served as Mid-Day Meals. The surplus is adjusted as available foodstuff for the next week. As the average attendance over these four days was roughly 88%, each student, per day received 98 gm Flat Rice, 11gm Milk Powder and 24 gms of Jaggery, which is a fair and justifiable figure. It is advised that such similar surveys should be conducted in other centres also to get a complete picture of how the other centres fare in terms of distribution of Mid- Day Meals.
5. Cost of Foodstuff: Flat Rice – Rs 20/Kg. Milk – Rs 139/kg (inflated to Rs 144/Kg) Jaggery – Rs 13.50/Kg (inflated to 14.50/Kg). To calculate the expenditure on each student per day, for the first four days of distribution in the Dansrang Centre, we arrive at a figure of approx Rs 4. In addition each centre was provided with an aluminium vessel for boiling milk and serving mug with handle. Bucket for the schools which did not have potable water in their vicinity was also provided. Most of the foodstuff was bought in Guwahati, and transportation was also done by a hired vehicle with a trailer.

### **Suggestions\ Other Points of Observation:**

1. Asha members should make visits or at least send professionals to guide us. 10 gm of milk is served to a child every day, which amounts to 45 Kcal of energy (according to back leaf of packet). The nutritional content of other ingredients could not be found on the web... Is this sufficient for a child of 4-14 yrs? What additional improvements could be done in the menu for better variety within the prescribed budget limits? These are questions that only experts can and answer I sincerely suggest that some expert should make a site visit to give valuable suggestions.
2. Initially, flat rice, jaggery and milk powder was being served. A change has been introduced in the menu to bring in variety. Now, lentils, mung beans and salt is being served along with ginger for appetite.
3. In the Do's and Don'ts for the MDM programme in Chattisgarh, the govt has explicitly stated that cooking gas should be used for cooking. Mostly locally available firewood is used here for cooking.
4. Quality of rice: The quality of flattened rice being used is of sufficiently high standard made locally by the peasants. The rice obtained locally is of better quality than the mill produced rice available in the markets.
5. Drinking Water is not available in the premises of most schools, a separate cooking shed and a helping cook is also needed. Moreover, a soak pit should be provided. It is recommended that in centres where the number of students is more, bleaching powder should be spread around cooking area. Proper sanitation should also be maintained around the schools. (Suggestions taken from state guidelines for MDM programmes.)
6. The schools have been directed to provide for a room within the school premises for storage of foodstuff provided to them for the MDM programme. However this has not been implemented in all the school as the school buildings are not permanent brick structures in most cases. Only Satyanarainpur, Anthaibari, Lakhinarainpur, Nagapur and Dansrang are currently storing the foodstuff in their premises. It has been explicitly conveyed that if the foodstuff stored in the houses were found to be consumed for other purposes then the teachers and the centre committee will be held responsible for it.
7. Unlike that in most other states of India, there is no discrimination against tribal\ SC while distribution.
8. It is to be noted here that the quality of food is far superior compared to the government schemes. The Asha Darshan Trust Spends approximately Rs 5 per child per day compared to Rajasthan's Re 0.5, Chattisgarh's Re 0.75 and Karnataka's Rs 1.00. In these states the grain is provided free of cost by the central government, and the figures are the projected "conversion costs".
9. An extensive Survey of the Schools, where their attendance percentages are tallied with the amount of foodstuff given to them should be conducted by the Asha team.

**Note:** On 28 November 2001, the Supreme Court of India passed an order directing all state governments to introduce cooked mid-day meals in primary schools. The Order Reads : “Cooked mid-day meal is to be provided in all the government and government aided primary schools in all the states. In states, where the scheme is not operational, it is to be started in half the districts of the state (by order of poverty) by Feb 28th, 2002. By May 28, 2002, it is to be started in the rest of the districts too.” However, in none of the government schools here in Baksa district is the Mid Day Meal program running. In fact, a national survey on MDM shows no data for the state of Assam whereas in Tripura it indicates a complete implementation of the MDM programme.

In the midst of this, where the government of Assam has not been able to commence its MDM programme, the hard work and dedication of the Asha Darshan Trust for providing mid-day meal to its children studying in even the most remote and inaccessible villages, is commendable.

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