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Reaching Out of Noon Meal Scheme in India

Motkuri Venkatanarayana*

I Introduction

The school meal programme popularly known as the 'Mid-day/Noon Meal Scheme' under the National Programme for Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NSPE) in India, involves with provision of lunch at free of cost to school-children on all working days. The government of India introduced a nation-wide mid-day meal scheme in 1995 following a Supreme Court judgement. In all government and government-aided primary schools, cooked mid-day meals were to be introduced under this programme within two years. Meanwhile, in the intervening period, state governments were allowed to distribute monthly grain rations (known as 'dry rations') to schoolchildren (see Dreze and Goyal, 2003). The experience varies however across states. It was expanded to all parts of India with another landmark direction by the Supreme Court of India on November 28, 2001. The key objectives of the programme are: protecting children from classroom hunger, increasing school enrolment and attendance, improved socialisation among children belonging to all castes, addressing malnutrition, and social empowerment through provision of employment to women.

In fact the scheme was first implemented in India during pre-independence time in the erstwhile Madras Presidency and princely state of Travancore. The Madras Presidency started providing cooked meals to children in Corporation schools in the Madras city in 1923. In the Travancore state it took place in the early 1940's (Tharakan, 1985). In the Independent India, the programme was introduced initially as early as 1956 on a trial basis. In a large scale such programme was initiated in 1960s in Tamil Nadu by Shri. K. Kamaraj, the then Chief Minister of the state. But in 1982, Dr. M. G. Ramachandran the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, universalised the scheme for all children of primary classes in government schools (Rajan and Jayakumar, 1992). Later on, many other states of India have introduced the mid-day meal programmes. The most notable among them are: Andhra Pradesh which has

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introduced it in the early 1980's¹ and Gujarat which had introduced it since the late 1980s. The state of Kerala restarted providing cooked meals in schools since 1995. Then the states like Madhya Pradesh and Orissa also followed the scheme. At present most of the states in India are implementing the scheme.

There are three arguments for the noon-meal scheme. *Firstly*, it motivates poor parents to send their children to school and the children to stay in schools. It is expected thereby to improve the levels enrolment and retention. *Secondly*, it improves the nutrition level of school children provided the food supplied has high nutrient value. The resultant good health status of children enables them to attend school regularly and enhances their capacity to understand teaching. *Thirdly*, there is the socialisation argument that sitting together and sharing meals may help in eroding class barriers which are inherent in the Indian social structure (see PROBE, 1999).

In terms of spread, the scheme applies to government, government-aided and local-body primary schools and also covers parallel streams, such as the ones through the education guarantee schemes. The implementing agencies range from local bodies such as gram panchayats, parent-teacher bodies, local women's self-help groups, and to NGOs. As it is centrally sponsored scheme, the central government of India is the main stakeholder. The central government provides free foodgrain from Food Corporation of India (FCI) and the allotment is based on enrolment figures obtained from states and Union territories. FCI is reimbursed by the (Union) department of education. The Union offers a transport subsidy of Rs 50 a quintal to state governments². Costs of infrastructure (including wages of cooks) are borne by the Union government through the rural development ministry. For example, the annual school grant of Rs 2,000 per year, per school, under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) can be used to buy kitchen utensils and build kitchen sheds. In case of NGOs, the Centre will only bear running expenses, not infrastructure costs.

While assessing the impact of the mid-day meal scheme, there are two types of assessment; one is based on the data reported by government organisation with respect to number of children benefited from the scheme at school/district/region/state level, and another is field

¹ In AP, it was planned to introduce and financial allocations are made in 1982 but it was materialized in 1983. However the scheme was abruptly suspended in 1985 (see Shatrugna, 1985).

² There is also the hill transport subsidy scheme.

level studies based on primary surveys collecting information from households, children and schools. From field studies it is observed that it had a positive effect on increasing the enrolment rate³ (see Rajan and Jayakumar, 1992; Dreze and Kingdon, 2001; Dreze and Goyal, 2003). Nevertheless most of the impact studies have been primary survey based and restricted to particularly locality/region/school but unable to give whole state or India level picture of beneficiaries. In this context the present paper examines the performance of mid-day meal/noon meal scheme in India with respect to its coverage using a national level sample survey.

II Data Source

The present paper utilizes the information collected through household questionnaire for NSS 61st (2004-05) round on consumer expenditure survey (CES). In this survey there are two questions related to mid-day meals; one is about whether any member (most probably school age children) of the household at any point of time during the last 365 days had benefited from the mid-day meals scheme (MMS), and the other is about for each and every member (like earlier question, most probably school age children) whether they had meals at school during the last 30 days before interview, if so number the number of meals each member had taken. But with the first one (households benefited from MMS) we are not sure about who (household member) is actual beneficiary of scheme and whether the benefit is actually related to the eligible age group members.

If we consider another query of the survey (CES) on number of school meals taken by each eligible (school or pre-school age) member of the household, we would get exactly the beneficiary ratio among the eligible age children (for school meals). In this query it covers benefited from the school meals in both the formal schools and nutrition supplementation programme in the pre-school system like *Balawadi* or *Anganwadi*. Given the information, in the following analysis we have considered 0 to 14 age children and categorized them into two age groups; one is *balawadi* age group (0-4 years) and the other is formal school age group (5-14 years).

³ There is a difference in the enrolment rate before and after the implementation of the scheme where the presence of scheme found to have increased the enrolment in those schools/areas/region where the scheme is implemented

III Observations

Based on the NSS 61st (2004-05) round of consumer expenditure survey (CES) data related to mid-day/school meals information, the following observation can be made. When we consider the information related to the question whether any member (eligible age for mid-day meals) of the household in question has benefited from the mid-day meals programme, it is observed that about merely 18.7 per cent of the total household in India have benefited. In rural and urban areas it is only 22.8 and 8.1 per cent respectively. The contribution of rural with respect to total households and total beneficiary household is respectively 72.5 and 88.2 per cent⁴. In terms of population, about 23.1 per cent (27.4% and 10.4%) of the total (rural and urban) population in India is residing among the beneficiary households. It is important to note that the beneficiary ratio is distinctively high among the rural household when compared to their urban counterparts. This phenomena is contrasting one when compared to many other socio-economic aspects where urban is better than rural.

On the other hand, if we consider the other query of the survey (CES) on number of school meals taken by each eligible (school or pre-school age) member of the household, it is observed that of the total number of eligible children under pre-school system (i.e. 0-4 age group children) in India, only 4.7 per cent had benefited in the sense that they had at least one school meal during the last 30 days before the survey, from noon-meal programme. Of the total elementary school age (5-14 years) children in India, those who have benefited would form around 20.7 per cent.

Interestingly, unlike in many socio-economic phenomenon in India, the gender gap indicating disadvantage of females in mid-day meal scheme beneficiaries appears to be negligible. In fact the beneficiary rate is marginally higher among the female children (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

⁴ In terms of population the rural share in the total population of India is 74.7 per cent and its share in the population living beneficiary household is 88.6 per cent.

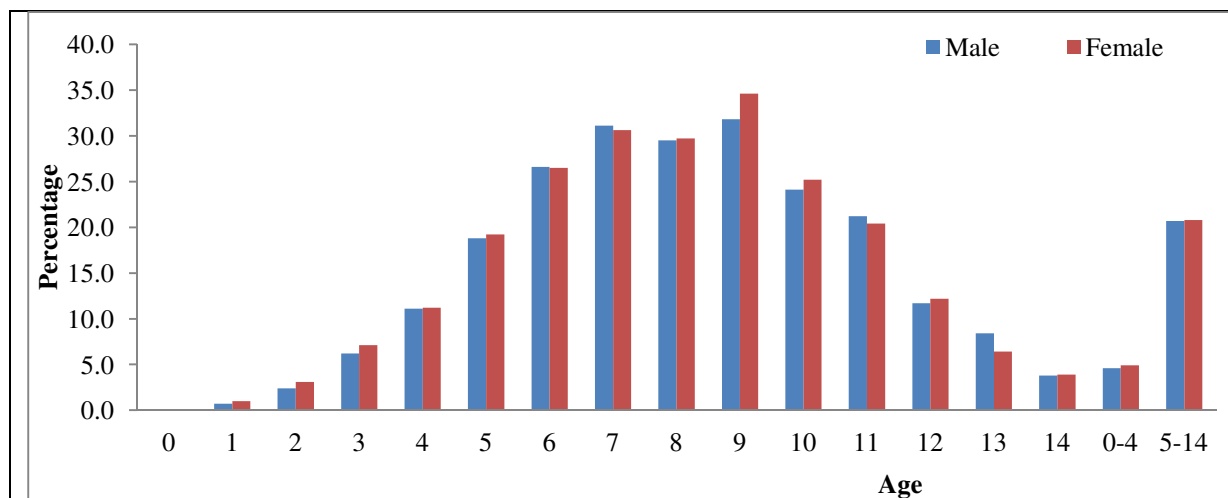
Table 1: Percentage of Children who had at least one School Meal during the last 30 Days, India (2004-05)

Age	Rural			Urban			Rural and Urban		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>
0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0
1	0.9	1.2	1.0	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.7	1.0	0.8
2	2.7	3.7	3.2	1.0	0.6	0.8	2.4	3.1	2.7
3	6.9	7.8	7.3	3.1	4.2	3.6	6.2	7.1	6.6
4	12.7	12.6	12.6	4.8	6.0	5.4	11.1	11.2	11.2
5	21.1	21.9	21.5	9.9	8.9	9.5	18.8	19.2	19.0
6	29.8	28.2	29.0	14.1	18.9	16.3	26.6	26.5	26.6
7	35.1	33.3	34.2	16.9	20.4	18.5	31.1	30.6	30.9
8	32.3	32.4	32.4	17.3	19.1	18.2	29.5	29.7	29.6
9	36.8	39.2	37.9	15.1	17.8	16.3	31.8	34.6	33.1
10	27.0	27.9	27.4	12.5	14.8	13.6	24.1	25.2	24.6
11	25.1	23.8	24.5	9.4	10.3	9.9	21.2	20.4	20.8
12	13.4	13.3	13.3	6.1	8.4	7.1	11.7	12.2	11.9
13	9.4	7.2	8.4	5.1	3.9	4.5	8.4	6.4	7.4
14	4.1	4.2	4.1	2.6	2.9	2.8	3.8	3.9	3.8
Below 5	5.2	5.6	5.4	2.0	2.4	2.2	4.6	4.9	4.7
5 to 14	23.4	23.2	23.3	10.8	12.2	11.4	20.7	20.8	20.7

Note: Beneficiary percentage.

Source: NSS 61st (2004-05) Round Consumer Expenditure Survey.

Figure 1: Percentage of Children who had School meals by Gender, India (2004-05)



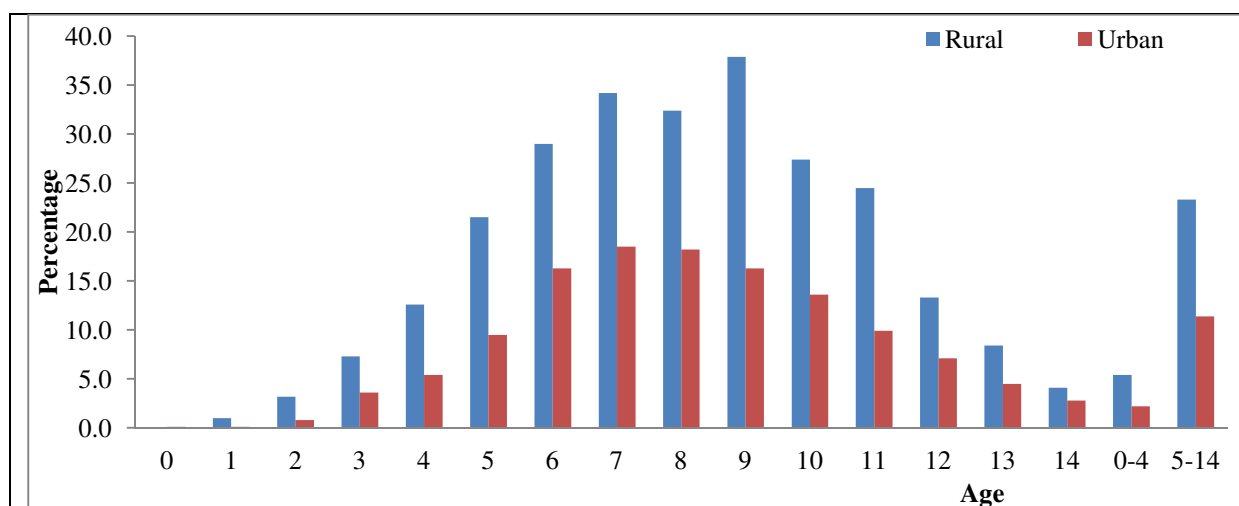
Note: Beneficiary percentage.

Source: NSS 61st (2004-05) Round Consumer Expenditure Survey.

More interestingly, again unlike in many socio-economic phenomenon in India, the rural urban gap indicating disadvantage of rural residents in mid-day meal scheme beneficiaries turned other way round wherein the beneficiary rate is the highest among the rural children

when compared to that of their urban counterparts (see Table 1 and Figure 2). One of the reasons could be due to the fact that for the most of the rural children in India, the available schools are mostly public ones and for the urban children it is other way round, private school. It is known fact that the mid-day meals scheme is limited to public schools (government and private aided) not yet getting implemented in private school especially urban areas.

Figure 2: Percentage of Children who had School meals by Sector, India (2004-05)



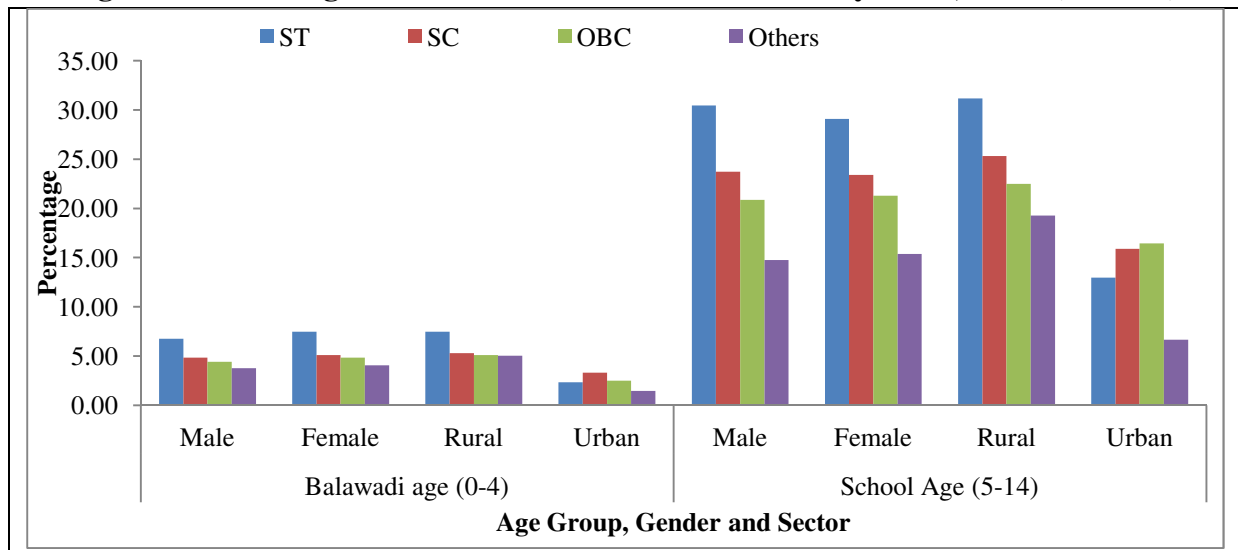
Note: Beneficiary percentage.

Source: NSS 61st (2004-05) Round Consumer Expenditure Survey.

The social group disparity across children belonging to different caste groups is observed but the situation unlike the many socio-economic phenomenon, the highest beneficiary rate is observed for children belonging to socially backward communities such as ST and SC particularly in rural areas (see Figure 3). The constitutional provision of positive discrimination for these socially backward groups is well observed in practice.

Across different religious groups, there is wide variation in beneficiary rate with respect to non-meal scheme in India. As usual, among the *Balwadi* age group very least percentage of the children benefited from the *Anganwadi/Balwadi* meal scheme across the religious groups (see Figure 4). Whereas for school going children aged between 5 to 14 years, the percentage who had at least one meal in school under noon-meal scheme was the lowest among the Muslim children.

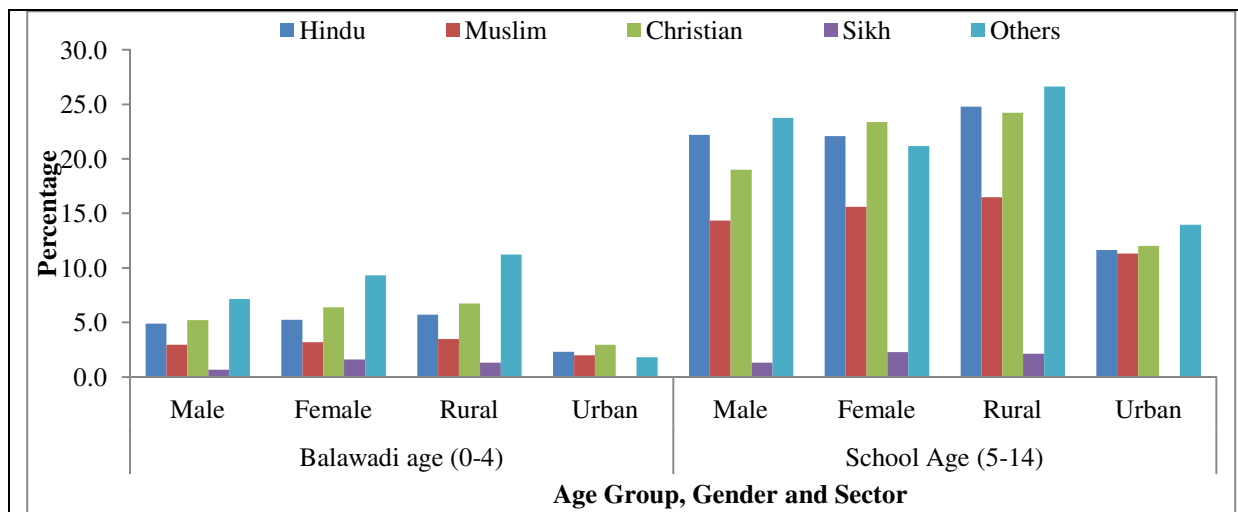
Figure 3: Percentage of Children who had School meals by Caste, India (2004-05)



Note:

Source: NSS 61st (2004-05) Round Consumer Expenditure Survey.

Figure 4: Percentage of Children who had School meals by Religion, India (2004-05)



Note:

Source: NSS 61st (2004-05) Round Consumer Expenditure Survey.

Mean number of Meals

Although the percentage of beneficiaries with respect to the noon meal scheme appears to be not so high even in the rural India, the average number meals taken under the scheme in a month for those who had benefited from the scheme is appreciably high. Such observation is made for both the *balawadi* and formal school-going children. Among the beneficiary one

cannot find any significant difference in average number of meals taken under the noon meals scheme in India by age, gender, caste and religion of the children (see Table 2). The only exception to the pattern is children belonging to Sikh religion.

Table 2: Mean Number of School Meals under Noon-Meal Scheme in India in a Month among those Benefited

Age/Caste/Religion		Rural			Urban			Total		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1		2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age in Single Years	1	19.1	19.0	19.0	20.2	25.3	21.1	19.2	19.0	19.1
	2	20.4	19.5	19.9	20.0	18.3	19.4	20.3	19.4	19.8
	3	20.3	21.0	20.7	20.7	19.9	20.3	20.3	20.9	20.6
	4	20.6	20.4	20.5	21.2	21.1	21.1	20.7	20.5	20.6
	5	19.5	20.4	19.9	19.4	19.5	19.4	19.5	20.3	19.9
	6	19.6	19.7	19.7	19.4	20.0	19.7	19.6	19.7	19.7
	7	19.7	20.2	20.0	20.1	19.2	19.7	19.8	20.1	19.9
	8	20.2	19.8	20.0	20.2	19.9	20.0	20.2	19.8	20.0
	9	19.9	20.9	20.4	20.3	20.0	20.2	20.0	20.8	20.4
	10	19.6	20.0	19.8	20.5	19.4	19.9	19.7	19.9	19.8
	11	20.0	19.9	20.0	19.3	18.2	18.8	20.0	19.6	19.8
	12	19.7	19.7	19.7	19.5	20.4	20.0	19.7	19.8	19.8
	13	19.8	19.9	19.8	21.0	18.9	20.1	20.0	19.7	19.9
	14	18.7	20.0	19.3	23.7	19.3	21.4	19.5	19.9	19.7
Balawadi age (0-4)		20.4	20.4	20.4	20.9	20.5	20.7	20.5	20.4	20.5
School Age (5-14)		19.8	20.1	19.9	20.1	19.6	19.8	19.8	20.0	19.9
Total		19.8	20.1	20.0	20.1	19.6	19.9	19.9	20.0	20.0
Caste Groups										
Balawadi age (0-4)	ST	20.7	20.1	20.4	20.7	21.0	20.9	20.7	20.1	20.4
	SC	20.1	20.7	20.4	21.1	20.7	20.9	20.2	20.7	20.4
	OBC	20.3	20.4	20.4	21.0	20.5	20.7	20.4	20.5	20.4
	Others	20.9	20.4	20.6	20.3	20.3	20.3	20.8	20.4	20.6
School Age (5-14)	ST	21.3	22.1	21.6	22.1	19.4	20.9	21.3	22.0	21.6
	SC	19.9	19.6	19.7	19.3	19.4	19.3	19.8	19.6	19.7
	OBC	19.5	19.9	19.7	20.3	19.7	20.0	19.6	19.9	19.8
	Others	19.2	19.5	19.3	20.1	19.5	19.8	19.3	19.5	19.4
Religious Groups										
Balawadi age (0-4)	Hindu	20.4	20.6	20.5	20.7	20.2	20.5	20.4	20.6	20.5
	Muslim	21.8	18.5	20.1	21.2	21.6	21.4	21.7	19.1	20.4
	Christian	19.5	19.5	19.5	17.1	19.2	18.4	19.3	19.5	19.4
	Sikh	9.7	17.4	14.7	-	-	-	9.7	17.4	14.7
	Others	21.4	23.3	22.5	26.8	24.0	25.8	22.0	23.3	22.7
School Age (5-14)	Hindu	19.9	20.2	20.1	20.2	19.8	20.0	20.0	20.2	20.1
	Muslim	18.0	18.7	18.4	19.7	19.1	19.4	18.4	18.8	18.6
	Christian	19.6	19.4	19.5	17.9	18.3	18.1	19.4	19.2	19.3
	Sikh	12.8	15.5	14.4	30.0	-	30.0	12.9	15.5	14.4
	Others	22.6	22.4	22.5	22.3	18.7	20.7	22.6	21.7	22.1

Note: Mean number of meals in a Month.

Source: NSS 61st (2004-05) Round Consumer Expenditure Survey unit record data.

On the whole, one may say that though the overall beneficiary rates are at a lower level, especially among the *balwadi* age group (0-4 years) it is very low. However, the children

belonging socially and economic disadvantage groups are disproportionately getting benefited from the mid-day meal scheme in India when compared to the children of the better off. But by religion, the beneficiary rate is the lowest among the Muslim children even in rural areas. Notwithstanding the coverage problem, among the beneficiary children the average number of meals taken is appreciably high. Again, one cannot find any significant difference in average number of meals taken under the noon meals scheme in India by age, gender, caste and religion of the children; the only exception of the pattern is children belonging to Sikh religion.

V Concluding Remarks

The government of India introduced a nation-wide mid-day meal scheme in 1995 following a Supreme Court judgement with the key objectives: protecting children from classroom hunger, increasing school enrolment and attendance, improved socialization among children belonging to all castes, addressing malnutrition, and social empowerment through provision of employment to women. Accordingly, most of the states in India implement the scheme. Although the scheme is universal in nature, the coverage of the scheme appears to be not so. The beneficiary rate for the noon-meal scheme among the *balawadi* age children (0-4 years) is very low at mere 5%, among the formal school going children (5-14 years) it little less than one-fourth of them. Whatever extent the beneficiary rate may be low, the children belonging socially and economic disadvantage groups are disproportionately getting benefited from the mid-day meal scheme. Nevertheless, among the beneficiaries mean number of meals taken is almost equal to average number of working days. Again, one cannot find any significant difference in average number of meals taken under the noon meals scheme in India by age, gender, caste and religion of the children. On these observations made from above analysis what one can say is that there is coverage problem of noon-meals scheme. It could be due to many factors; one of which could be the quality of meal served.

* * *

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