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# Plates for slates: The impact of a school feeding programme on community representations of schools

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### ABSTRACT

Using the nationwide school-feeding programme—the Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)—in India as its anchor, this paper critically evaluates the use of schools as sites for discharging social policies. Data from semi structured interviews ( $N = 26$ ) and focus groups ( $N = 8$ ) conducted in a north Indian village provide evidence that the community distrusts the central and the regional governments and regards state run schools as deficient institutions. In such a social climate, the community perceived the MDMS as an evil governmental design to distract poor people from education. Such representations, the paper argues, further erode the faith of the community in state run schools. Crucially, data from the study indicate that the MDMS has contributed to a shift in community representations of schools from being a site for imparting education to that of an institution providing free meals. It is argued that such a shift in community representations of schools may hinder the agenda of promoting education in disadvantaged settings. The paper concludes by identifying two critical considerations in using schools as the site of social policy: (a) the symbolic environments of meaning making which inform local interpretations of policies; and (b) the local meaning making and representations that communities develop of new or existing social policies. The theory of social representation informs the arguments made in this paper.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, schools have been institutions responsible for imparting academic and social skills to pupils. However, as Jones (2006) notes, several national and international agencies like the United Nations Children's Emergency Funds (UNICEF) have a well-documented history of using schools for policy initiatives. At the present time, schools around the world have become integral to planning and delivery of policy initiatives that target children and young adults with an increasing range of policies being designed around schools (social and emotional learning, Durlak et al., 2011; preventing smoking, Thomas and Perera, 2013).

The state run schools in India are currently the prime sites of a centrally supported feeding programme called the Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) which aims to improve the nutrition of children by providing free meals to pupils during the lunch hour. The MDMS in Indian school is unlike any other policy in terms of its size and outreach. It is the world's largest school feeding programme and

operates through more than one million schools to reach 120 million children across the country every day (MHRD, 2013). This paper takes a constructivist turn in evaluating the impact of the MDMS in a rural community in India and seeks to critically examine the use of schools as the sites of social policies.

The paper comes out of a project that sought to understand the meaning making activities among a poor village community in Bihar, northern India. The goal of the project was not to evaluate or study the MDMS in particular but to understand how the community makes sense of the widespread poverty and the healthcare and educational facilities available to them locally. It was in this process that MDMS emerged as a major anchor that defined how the participants negotiated their understanding of the state run schools in the village. Without questioning the relevance of policies like the MDMS, the paper argues that using schools as a site of social policy presents a problematic in environments marked with high levels of mistrust towards the government and where schools are considered to be poorly functioning. The paper presents an example where the MDMS policy contributed to the shifting of the community's perception of schools from being a site of learning to one that provides free meals—a participant eloquently summarised what many in the community believe to

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be the case with MDMS: 'the government has given us plates for slates'. The paper does not embody an essentialist critique of involving schools with social policies—it does hope, however, to initiate a critical discussion on the unintended consequence that some policies administered through schools can present.

## 2. A cook's tour of MDMS

MDMS was launched in 1995 with the official stated purpose as "enhancing enrollment, retention and attendance and simultaneously improving nutritional levels among children" (MHRD, 2013). The implementation of the scheme was slow in the first six years until 2001 when it gained momentum through the intervention of the Supreme Court of India. In 2001, a Supreme Court of India directive sought to implement the scheme across all state schools by February 28, 2002. However, very few states could manage to introduce the provisions for cooked meals by the end of February 2002 and the Supreme Court revised its deadline to January 2005. However, a major impetus to MDMS came through mass mobilisation and the launch of a significant protest campaign. April 9, 2002 was designated as the 'day of action' (Right to Food Campaign, 2005, p. 29) when public resentment over disdainful treatment of the Supreme Court's directive took the form of protests across several states. Khera (2013) argues this to be a major catalyst in the subsequent implementation of Mid Day Meals in schools across India.<sup>1</sup> As of this date, all 28 states and seven union territories in India have provisions for MDMS in place.

The MDMS has been argued to have several positive outcomes for the target group of school going children and the local communities. Dreze and Goyal (2003) consider the programme to be a 'nutritionist's dream' (p. 4673). The Supreme Court directive on the meals served at schools makes clear recommendations regarding the calorific and protein content of the food (Khera, 2013). Research evidence from randomised evaluation of nutritional benefits of the programme in Madhya Pradesh, India indicates that the programme has indeed helped reduce calorie, protein and iron deficiencies among children (Afridi, 2010). Such positive impact of school feeding has also been observed outside India in quasi-experimental studies which show improvements in the nutritional intake of children receiving meals at schools (Jacoby, 2002). However, with a prominent concern with the Indian MDMS remains about the quality of meals served in the schools. Several works in past have observed that the food provided by the schools does not meet the recommended nutritional levels prescribed by the Supreme court and children have taken ill after consuming the meals (see Khera, 2013). What is more, at the time of writing this paper, the MDMS has received widespread attention following the death of many children after consuming the mid-day meal at their school in Bihar (BBC, 2013).

The direct impact of the scheme on the educational attainment of the pupils is hard to ascertain. Research indicates that the MDMS has improved the enrolment and participation of children in schools, especially among girls that were out of school (Drèze et al., 2001). However, the evidence of improvements in learning through school feeding programmes is mixed. Vermeersch and Kremer (2005) suggest that such gains can be noticed, yet they are more intimately linked to the availability of good teachers. Similarly, other works have noted such improvements only in children 11–14 years in age (Adelman et al., 2008). Critics of the scheme also argue that serving meals at schools disrupts teaching

(Khera, 2013) and Blue (2005) reports from his work in Rajasthan, India that older students often help in cooking. Despite such observations, it would be incorrect to label this scheme as disruptive because it has been argued that the provision of afternoon meals within schools can prevent the often-noted phenomenon of students not returning to schools when they go home for their lunch (Drèze and Vivek, 2002).

In essence, the MDMS has grown steadily in the last few years to achieve a near universal presence across the country. A systematic review of its performance is not the aim of this article. Using the MDMS as an anchor, the present work seeks to illustrate the importance of considering the impact social policies can have on the representations of schools in communities and how these representational dynamics may influence the very outcome the said policies.

## 3. Background to the study

The research was conducted in the village of Bholi<sup>2</sup> in the state of Bihar, India. Bihar is a landlocked state divided into 38 districts and shares the international border with Nepal. Bholi is a flood stricken village along the international border with Nepal, about 150 kilometres from the state capital Patna, in a region which is recognised as the most underdeveloped part of Bihar (Mehta et al., 2003). The most recent national poverty assessment exercise gives Bihar the unfortunate distinction of being one of the poorest Indian state: more than half of its population (53.5%) lives under the official national poverty line (Government of India, 2012). It is also among the poorest faring state of India on the Human Development Index (Ghosh, 2011). Compared to the national average, the state has higher infant mortality rates, lower average life expectancy at birth, and lower literacy rates for both males and females (Government of Bihar, 2012). It has an average literacy rate of 63.82 percent—male literacy at 73.39 percent is better than female literacy rate of 53.33 percent. Table 1 clearly indicates how far Bihar lags from the rest of India with respect to basic school provisions.

Given the high levels of poverty, thriving educational institutions and well-functioning schools are critical to the development of Bihar. Education is vital in the fight against poverty as it enhances the capabilities of the individual and allows an increasing assertion of basic rights among the poor (Govinda, 2003). Despite the tremendous role that education can play in extinguishing poverty, research indicates that the poor remain the most marginalised group with regards to education (IIEP, 1999). Clearly, the MDMS can be a boon for poverty-ridden villages in Bihar. The promise of a free meal served to all children attending schools may reduce the burden on poor families. By making staying in school rewarding, the MDMS can make incremental additions to the incomes of graduating students—evidence suggests that primary education increases earnings by 75% and a secondary education enhances earning by 163% as compared to an individual with no education, even when factors such as experience, location, and gender are controlled for (World Bank, 2004). Further still, education also has tertiary advantages for the poor and is associated with several positive social and health outcomes for the poor (for e.g. see Gounder and Xing, 2012; Wedgwood, 2007; Friedman, 2002). In essence, it may not be incorrect to regard the MDMS as a promising policy for poor families as it has the potential to improve both educational and nutritional attainment of children.

In recent years, India has made tremendous strides in making education a priority area of developmental thrust. In April 2010,

<sup>1</sup> A detailed account of the campaign towards the implementation of the MDMS and the Right to Food Act can be accessed at [http://www.righttofoodindia.org/links/articles\\_home.html](http://www.righttofoodindia.org/links/articles_home.html).

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym adopted for the village for the rest of the paper. A majority of informants expressed their desire for personal as well as village's anonymity.

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