



CHILD WELFARE CONTROVERSY

Biscuit Lunch

Rs 5,000 crore—that's a lot to snack on. Renuka's plan gets more flak.

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The fortified packaged snacks vs hot cooked meals fight between Union minister of women and child development Renuka Chowdhury and the Planning Commission has taken a new turn. It was *Outlook* that first reported the rift—in its [December 10, 2007, issue](#). Now, at least two of Renuka's colleagues in the UPA cabinet are critical of her proposal to serve centrally procured packaged food to malnourished children in anganwadis—or government creches. More crucially, a source close to the prime minister told *Outlook* that Dr Manmohan Singh is all for the Planning Commission's prescription of cooked meals prepared locally by communities.



"Often rats and lizards are found in cooked food—they are cooked in unhygienic conditions." Renuka Chowdhury, Union WCD minister

He also wants Renuka's WCD ministry to sort out its differences with the commission.

That there is considerable opposition to Renuka's scheme is now very clear. *Outlook* has learnt that Union hrd minister Arjun Singh had to step in to check biscuit manufacturers from pushing their fortified biscuits in the mid-day meal scheme. Arjun struck down the proposal to introduce packaged snacks.

Jairam Ramesh, minister of state for commerce, who is also on the steering committee for sustainable nutrition security in India, is equally disapproving. "Renuka is barking up the wrong tree. There can be no substitute for hot meals," he told *Outlook*. According to him, states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh have successfully served nutritious cooked meals to children. "There is no reason why their model can't be replicated in other states," adds Jairam.

The critics of the WCD ministry's scheme have the following key objections:

- Centralised procurement could lead to high levels of corruption since it will involve contractors.
- Packaged food often fares poorly on the quality front—as was observed in the case of panjiri (a fortified snack) in UP.
- It is vital to tackle the issue of hunger first by providing balanced meals.
- Single-source packaged food fortified with micronutrients is not easily digested or absorbed by a malnourished child.

Notwithstanding all these criticisms, Renuka remains unfazed.

"I'm not against this or that, but hot cooked meals are not a one-stop solution," she told *Outlook*. As for objections from the Planning Commission (whose chairman is none other than the PM), the WCD minister has this to offer: "The commission's role is to advise. It can make recommendations, but at the end of the day, we are the constitutional authority."



"There is no substitute for hot meals. It has worked well in Tamil Nadu and Andhra." Jairam Ramesh MoS, Commerce

The Integrated Child Development Scheme under Renuka's ministry had got a boost when its allocation under the 11th plan was upped to Rs 51,400 crore from Rs 14,000 crore. Of this, the Supplementary Nutrition Scheme (SNS), which has 50 per cent funding from the Centre, has been allocated Rs 5,000 crore. It is the implementation of the SNS that is being discussed in the highest circles of the government with even the PMO stepping in to monitor it.

As reported earlier in *Outlook*, the PMO is in favour of a decentralised approach to tackle malnutrition. This is in keeping with the recommendations of the steering committee on nutrition and food security which underscored the importance of providing locally available and freshly cooked food to children—a view approved by the Planning Commission.