

## **Cold Comfort (Times of India, Lead Edit)**

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The world is increasingly veering away from including processed, packaged food as a regular dietary feature — unless it is an emergency or serves as a temporary convenience. There are many reasons for this.

Processed and packaged foods tend to have high salt content and they contain preservatives. Simple, freshly-cooked meals are considered a healthier, less-expensive option, particularly for growing children.

It is therefore puzzling why the ministry of women and child development is pushing for pre-cooked meals for schoolchildren at Anganwadi centres, and that too for the three-to-six-year-olds who come under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS).

Besides the need to provide wholesome, fresh food to children, another aspect could make a shift to packaged food problematic. The ICDS allocation in the Eleventh Plan has gone up to Rs 51,400 crore from the Tenth Plan allocation of Rs 13,000 crore.

Recommendation by others to centralise supply of packaged food to schools under the ICDS might actually encourage contractors and suppliers to hike prices, provide substandard food and create a monopoly situation. The losers would be children who are the focus of the mid-day meal scheme, instituted to encourage attendance and promote child health.

In its enthusiasm to issue guidelines and allocate funds, the Centre should not end up pressuring state governments to take orders on the logistics and content of the mid-day meal scheme, giving in to commercial interests.

The mid-day meal scheme is being implemented successfully in southern states, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where it was first introduced in the 1960s to incentivise classroom attendance and improve child nutrition. Providing hot, fresh food to schoolchildren has been institutionalised since through an alert administration and community networks. Centralised distribution of pre-cooked, pre-packed food would not encourage social interaction among students; neither would it contribute to greater social equality or attract attendance.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's letter to the prime minister opposing the proposal to switch to packaged food is to be welcomed. He and the Kolkata Group have expressed concern over allowing any change that is driven by commercial interests rather than by the welfare and health of children.

The mid-day meal scheme's very inception was premised on this.