

## **Don't serve biscuits in anganwadis: Amartya Sen**

**Sreelatha Menon / New Delhi March 17, 2008**

Pressure is building on the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the Ministry of Women and Child Development to ensure cooked meals in pre-school centres under the central programme of anganwadis.

The latest to take up the matter and join issue with the ministry is none other than Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, who sent a message from Kolkata to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last week, asking him not to allow a proposal to serve biscuits and pre-packaged food to pre-school children.

Sen also asked the PM to prevent the move to replace cooked food with packaged food as part of the mid-day meal scheme in elementary schools.

The message followed a meeting of the Kolkata Group chaired by Sen under the sponsorship of his Pratiche Trust and Harvard's Global Equity Initiative.

The meeting, which included 40 people from different fields, expressed shock over a proposal of the Ministry of Women and Child Development "to serve pre-packaged food and biscuits under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme and possibly in the mid-day meal programme in elementary schools".

The proposal by the ministry headed by Renuka Chowdhury has been facing criticism from various quarters with the minister supporting processed food sourced from contractors in anganwadis.

Participants took note of the efforts and positive outcomes across the country to provide cooked mid-day meals. They felt that any change, especially under pressure from commercial interests, would be a regressive step against the best interests of children.

The resistance of the ministry to having cooked meals served locally by anganwadis has led to a reduced allocation to the scheme in the Budget, as against what has been allocated in the Eleventh Plan.

The minister's sympathy for packaged food and a centralised distribution system has been a source of conflict with the Planning Commission as well as with some officials in her own ministry.

Incidentally, Secretary Chaman Kumar and Joint Secretary Deepa Jain Singh (of the ministry) were removed overnight last year.

Speaking at a seminar on nutrition last year, organised by the steering committee of the government-backed Coalition for Nutritional Security in India, Renuka Chowdhury publicly expressed her stand on not having cooked food in anganwadis.

She said it was not feasible for the anganwadi centres to provide hot cooked meals as the centres are not equipped for this. Thus, these meals would become a "substitute" and not a "supplement" for the family meals.