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The success of the mid-day meal scheme in states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka should be proof enough that this programme can be a winner. So it is puzzling as to why Minister for Women and Child Development Renuka Choudhary should balk at the 'impracticality' of the scheme and propose that pre-cooked packaged food should replace hot meals for children. Amartya Sen, who certainly knows his onions about food security, has expressed his reservations over the minister's proposal. While there is no doubt that the government must withdraw from many parts of administration, nutrition for children — linked as it is to primary education — is one 'sector' that it cannot abdicate from.

But let's not dismiss the minister's proposal outright. She may have a point when she says that it is more feasible to have pre-packaged food for mid-day meals. The point, however, remains that our track record of leasing out such issues to contractors has, to put it gently, not been successful. Ms Choudhury cannot be unaware that malnutrition among children has decreased by a paltry 1 per cent in the last eight years. The mid-day meal is a sure shot way of combating this. There are several reasons why the hot meal scheme must not be scrapped. For one, it provides an incentive for children who would otherwise be not in school and be put to work to be sent to school. It also gives women in the area a source of employment and, therefore, encourages them to send their children to school. The Planning Commission has found that the mid-day meal scheme is a method of strengthening the panchayati raj system, which again translates into empowerment for women. It is no secret that lack of nutrition is a major problem for children in the age group of 3 to 6. This is precisely why the mid-day meal programme was instituted. The UPA government assumed office on the promise that it would take care of the aam aadmi. The mid-day meal scheme is one way of developing infrastructure at the grassroots while fulfilling the needs of the people who are overlooked by the State.

While privatisation is welcome, the State must have fool-proof systems in place to ensure that something as crucial as meals for children are not tampered with. To cite Tamil Nadu again, the state not only provides hot meals for children but also gives a small stipend for parents to send their children to school. The results have been encouraging. These are things the minister needs to ponder over before making such sweeping changes in a scheme that seems to work so well in many states.