Hot food, cold junk

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By proposing to serve pre-packaged cold meals and biscuits in preference to freshly cooked hot food to children across 11 lakh anganwadis in the country, the women and child development minister, Ms Renuka Chowdhary, is clearly taking the escapist route to overcome a challenge facing her ministry. The challenge is to ensure that the free mid-day meal scheme for school children meets effectively with the Supreme Court's stipulation to provide a freshly cooked hot meal that contains 300 calories and 12 gms of protein per day for a minimum of 200 days. The mid-day meal project is run under the state-funded Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) targeted to benefit pre-school children in the 3-6 age group. Confronted by a situation in which the anganwadis lack adequate infrastructure to prepare and serve hot food, Ms Chowdhary is taking the easy way out. Nutritionists and experts like the Nobel Laureate, Dr Amartya Sen, are naturally appalled at the minister's patent evasion of responsibility in conveniently ignoring the children's interests and recommending instead the replacement of hot food by cold junk, a step that can only enrich the pre-packaged and biscuit-manufacturing commercial interests.

The flip side of her proposal would have struck the minister had she devoted some serious thought to the issue before being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenge and succumbing to it. Had the sponsors of the mid-day meal scheme buckled down to similar challenges initially, the scheme would have remained a non-starter. The Hyderabad-based National Institute of Nutrition has warned of the danger to children's health from the use of chemicals and preservatives in the pre-packaged food. Other sources have emphasised the caloric abundance in freshly cooked hot meals and of the harmful ingredients in pre-packaged "junk". Funds are obviously not a constraint — the 11th Plan has allocated Rs 51,400 crore, up from the 10th Plan provision of only Rs 13,000 crore. As it is, every second child in India is under-nourished. Let us not add to their number, but ensure that the children get hot, healthy and nutritious food. Come on, Renuka, you can do it!