

Mid Day Meal

If Uttar Pradesh reports highest numbers of school drop outs, one shall not get surprised. Despite incurring a huge expenditure under this centrally sponsored scheme aimed to provide nutritional support to primary education with a view to improve retention level, the state has failed to score well on performance audit carried out by audit watchdog, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India.

In its stand-alone report on the implementation of the scheme in the state, the CAG has pointed out on several leaks and slips between the children and the dish. Not only has the scheme turned out to be a huge window for diversions and undue favors to vested interests, in non-compliance with Supreme Court directives [April 2004], the state has failed to provide nutritional support to 1.63 crore children of drought affected areas during summer vacations of 2005 and 2007.

Baseline survey during 2004-'05 to determine the enrolment of children as directed by Government of India was not conducted. Reliable data relating to enrolment, attendance and retention of children was not collected. Records of food grains and conversion cost were not maintained by the implementing agencies. Basic Shiksha Adhikaris also did not call for these records from implementing agencies for verification.

The quality of food grains was not ensured at any stage. Inspection of food grains revealed broken grains in excess of permissible limit, foreign matter and damaged/ discoloured in 224 schools [i.e. 76 percent] out of 320 schools and NGOs inspected. Quantity of food grains *shown as consumed* did not conform to its conversion cost. The conversion cost was in excess by 1 to 37 percent 5 to 7 districts out of 18 test checked districts and in six other districts excess conversion cost paid ranged between 3 to 70 percent. Non-distribution of the required quantity of Mid Day Meal with the prescribed norms of nutrients and dishes as per menu resulted in failure to ensure adequate nutritional support to children during 2004-'07. Improvement in nutritional status of children was not ensured by providing micro nutrient supplements and de-worming medicines. Periodical health check ups were also not ensured.

Loss of food grains during three years [2004-'07] valuing Rs 30.82 lakh during storage and transportation was reported in 5 of 16 test checked districts, although no such losses were permissible as per guidelines. Not only was there such non permissible leaks, audit scrutiny revealed that food grains valuing Rs 121.98 crore remained with the transporting agencies [2002-'07] and fair price shops [2002-'07] which indicated poor transportation of food grains. And believe it or not, transporting agencies were minting money despite ensuring immobility of food grains. Audit scrutiny found that during the same period [2002-'07] the Finance Controller, Basic Shiksha Parishad carried out an excess reimbursement of Rs 81.88 crore [upto December 2007] to the transporting agencies due to *deficient scrutiny of transportation claims*. One may find it hard to agree with this simplified version of performance audit reporting, as this might have resulted from a major fraudulent practice and not just from deficient scrutiny of transportation claims.

The performance audit also pointed out that the authorities didn't use the programme funds to provide and improvise upon the basic facilities to schools but rather relied on outsourcing solutions. Kitchen sheds were not provided in 36, 489 schools [out of 96, 457] as of March 2007. Out of 253 kitchen sheds in 320 test checked schools, as many as 169 [i.e. 66.79 percent] were non-functional due to their dilapidated condition, even as authorities entrusted Mid Day Meal from centralized kitchen run by NGOs. Provision of funds for maintenance and repair of kitchens were also not made. Sufficient kitchen devices and arrangement for potable water were not available in 61 schools [i.e. close to 20 percent] out of 320 test-checked schools.

Audit scrutiny also revealed that NGOs were engaged without ascertaining their capability and infrastructure, which resulted in their unsatisfactory performance and unauthorized occupation of space/ classrooms of school buildings. NGOs had also failed to submit their accounts and annual reports along with audited statements for the period of 2004-'07 to government.

Task force constituted for adequate and effective monitoring also didn't perform its job well, as they had just visited merely 65 to 69 percent of the targeted schools between October 2006 and March 2007. Thus monitoring of the scheme by state appointed task force was inadequate and state didn't also get the performance of the scheme evaluated by external agencies.

So, in the euphoric moments of election campaign if a candidate or a political party promises UP electorate a kilogram of rice for a rupee, one would need to ask back whether that would be what could have been served to children at school this last five years.

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[800 words]