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MIDDAY MEALS: WELFARE BY ROTE, NOT REASON.....Mrinal Pande

As the general election comes closer, pressure is mounting on the government to ensure that the numerically larger poor are happy and well fed. In this context, recently a fiery debate ensued between minister of state for women and child development Renuka Chowdhury and the Planning Commission over the government's midday meal scheme.

The Integrated Child Development Scheme provides for one anganwadi centre for every 1,000 people. Besides maintaining up-to-date registers on the growth and well-being of all young mothers and nursery-age children, the anganwadi workers (mostly female) are also expected to cook and distribute meals, specially fortified with proteins, carbohydrates and vitamins to the children in the area between three months and six years of age, as also to pregnant and lactating mothers. Each month, an anganwadi gets 13 bags, each with 25kg food supplements from block headquarters.

The genesis of this particular clash of opinion between the minister and the Planning Commission (the latter also roped in Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's support), was what constitutes the best midday meal. In a speech by the minister at a function (of the steering committee of the Coalition for Nutritional Security in India), she made it clear that it was not feasible for the already overworked workers of anganwadis to also provide hot, cooked meals for children in the childcare centres. She said she had also frequently found the meals were being cooked in unhygienic conditions using substandard ingredients, so she felt the children would fare better if given ready-cooked, pre-packaged food sourced from contractors instead.

The Kolkata group chaired by Sen that has been monitoring rural development projects in West Bengal joined the Planning Commission in totally opposing this. In their joint view, any change in the prescribed pattern of providing the rural poor with freshly cooked hot meals would be a regressive step and against the best interests of the beneficiaries. At present, they were not only getting hot, freshly cooked meals, but the practice of eating together was also helping destroy several age-old caste taboos that forbade children of some castes from eating with the children of other castes.

It was interesting to note that the debate chose to overlook the need to remove flaws in implementing the scheme. And ironically, the entire discussion was in English largely incomprehensible to both the actual beneficiaries and the anganwadi workers. This method of deciding vital policy issues in a language that segregates the actual stakeholders may seem somewhat strange to outsiders. But most important concepts about rural development that form the basis of governmental policymaking in India have been largely forged either in some poverty research lab funded by the United Nations, or a department of developmental studies in some university in the US or Europe.

True, the academic analysts working on major status reports have excellent credentials. They also collect and analyse the data from India painstakingly, and all of them take care

to use locally recruited researchers. But their own knowledge of Indian dialects is sketchy at best. Also, the methodologies used to create the questionnaires and the analytical tools used remain largely incomprehensible to most of these local footsoldiers who speak English haltingly and little understand it. After the research is done, the draft is debated in New Delhi or some state capital among the academe and the bureaucracy, research recommendations are tweaked marginally, and a new policy formulation for another poverty alleviation scheme is born. Welfare schemes involve large sums and are mostly announced with a flourish from the ramparts of Red Fort in Delhi on Independence Day or at a national forum at the elegant Vigyan Bhavan.

Given this background, it comes as no great surprise to hear that food ingredients for the scheme are frequently being diverted to the market. Villagers in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana had repeatedly complained to Hindustan correspondents about such misappropriation, alleging that most of the stuff meant for malnourished children and their mothers was selling as cattle feed. The going rate for a bag, we were told, varies from Rs25 to Rs250 per bag. These bags of fortified food are in great demand, as mixed with the usual cattle feed, the ingredients have been found to increase milk yields considerably.

To check this out, one Hindustan correspondent was sent to the block headquarters in village Machhera. Machhera has 192 distribution centres that allocate 2,500 bags of fortified materials each month to villages such as Govindpuri, Mundali, Meghrajpur, Hasanpur, etc. Our correspondent was able to buy a bag for Rs200 quite easily, without any paperwork. The local community development project officer, when contacted, said she was unaware of any irregularities. Then the buck-passing began.

Clear ethical considerations may have been the basis of all proposals for our rural poor, but at the time of actually implementing such schemes, standards of ethical behaviour are neither defined nor regularly monitored. This makes it easy for village-level politicians and functionaries to desensitize the functionaries and make a quick buck.

In national or state capitals, duels are usually good photo-ops and excellent branding exercises. They may even generate some touching human interest anchor stories for the media, but frankly, are they anything more than a show of generosity by a salesman to his regular customers?

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