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“A Place for the Grassroots”: Examining the Role of Community Participation and Local Governance in Providing Mid-Day Meals in Lucknow District, Uttar Pradesh

Anderson Tuggle
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“A Place for the Grassroots”:

Examining the role of community participation and local governance in providing Mid-Day Meals in Lucknow District, Uttar Pradesh

Anderson Tuggle

Tara Devi Dhakal, SIT Academic Director

Dr. C.S. Verma, Professor and Head of Economics Department, M.B.P Government Post-Graduate Degree College

School for International Training India: Sustainable Development and Social Change Program

Fall 2012

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Abstract

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)—the world’s largest school lunch program—was launched by India’s central government in August 1995 with the lofty goals of “enhancing enrollment, retention, and attendance while simultaneously improving nutritional levels among children.”¹ 17 years later, particularly following prominent Supreme Court orders in November 2001 and April 2004, MDMS has become a key program for the government, now serving about 105 million primary and upper-primary schoolchildren in 1.2 million schools.² When implemented properly, MDMS has had a noticeable positive impact on student attendance and enrollment, alongside a reduction in teacher absenteeism. Yet grave disparities in application nonetheless persist in MDMS between states. For this project, I examined MDMS in the underachieving state of Uttar Pradesh; a 2010 report by the UP Advisor to the Supreme Court Commissioners called the overall performance of MDMS in the state “far from satisfactory.”³ Specifically, I analyzed the role of parents, teachers, and local institutions in providing MDMs. While the meals are funded by the central and state governments, implementation responsibilities lie with the locality and consistent local participation is requisite for high-quality lunches. After a month of interviews, schools visits, and community observations in Lucknow District, UP, I learned that, while UP’s MDMS has improved in recent years, both community participation and local institutions remain quite weak, especially in urban schools. Although there were many reasons for this weakness, a disconnect between distribution NGOs and schools and the slow progress of building School Management Committees (as required by the 2010 Right-to-Education Act) were two key factors. By the end of this essay, I conclude that giving parents opportunities to meaningfully participate and making school data more accessible will be necessary for not only the betterment of MDMS, but for the improvement of India’s public education system writ large.

¹ India. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Department of School Education and Literacy, Mid-Day Meal Scheme. *National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (Mid-Day Meal Scheme), 2006, GUIDELINES*. P. 2

² India. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Department of School Education and Literacy. *Working Group Report on Elementary Education and Literacy*. P 171

³ Dhuru, Arundhati. *Status of Implementation of Food Schemes in Uttar Pradesh* P 38

Introduction

When I first conceived this independent study project, back before I had even set foot in India, I thought I was just going to be writing about a school lunch program. I planned to examine how nutritious the meals were, if students were satisfied with the food, and if the program was having a positive effect on Indian society. As I began to plan my project, however, I realized I had to narrow my focus on the mid-day meal scheme; it was such a large and multi-faceted program that doing more could easily result in getting lost in a complex array of program and policy issues. So I focused in on the amount of community participation and local governance, asking if parents were involved in the meal and if local institutions (*panchayats*, Parent Teacher Associations, etc) were actively monitoring the program to ensure quality. From what I read, it seemed clear the mid-day meals would work, but, in order for them to work, parental involvement and effective local governments were requisite. That idea seemed manageable enough for a month-long study. After all, I was still writing about *just* a school lunch program.

After visiting five different schools and interviewing over 40 parents, teachers, NGO workers, and governments officials, however, I learned that I was not writing about just a school lunch program. I was writing about why many parents appear apathetic as well as the decentralization of governing power in recent years; about the Right-to-Education reforms and the belief that private schools are always better than public ones. So, to anyone reading this report, remember that there is a larger story going on here as well, beyond the realm of mid-day meals.

I also readily admit that there is so much I do not know (and will never know) about Indian society; even after three months, I acknowledge that I am still an American student in a foreign land. So, forgive me for any shortcomings in this research. I have only tried my best to capture what I have seen over the last month with my own eyes.

~~Anderson, December 2012

Background

For convenience, I have divided this background section into four focused discussions. I begin by examining the history of the mid-day meal scheme in India, providing some context for understanding the importance of this program in the present day. Next, I offer a quick snapshot of the difficulties of implementing Mid-day meals in Uttar Pradesh. Third, I step back and present a brief overview of India's recent focus on decentralizing governmental powers, particularly in education. Finally, I tie these two concepts together by explaining what the ideal role of community participation and local governance is in MDMS, according to various government regulations and guidelines. By knowing this ideal, one will be able to compare it to the reality I saw while out in the field.

History of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme

Of the Indian Government's many schemes, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) is one of the most prominent. Indeed, the recent five-year plan on Elementary Education and Literacy stated that MDMS is "a flagship programme of the Government of India."⁴ This Central program—buttressed by Supreme Court decisions such as the seminal November 2001 'right to food' case—guarantees each child in government-aided schools a fully-cooked and nutritious afternoon meal without payment, even during holidays if an area is in drought. The (admittedly-persuasive) logic behind this scheme, as conveyed by a popular story about MDM pioneer K Kamaraj, is as follows:

“When Tamil Nadu's former Chief Minister K. Kamaraj saw a boy near the town of Cheranmahadevi herding livestock he asked him, ‘What are you doing with these cows? Why didn't you go to school?’ The child immediately

⁴ India. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Department of School Education and Literacy. *Working Group Report on Elementary Education and Literacy*. P 207

retorted, ‘If I go to school, will you give me food to eat? I can learn only if I eat.’”⁵

Hence, India’s first modern school lunch scheme began in Madras, Tamil Nadu in 1923. Besides the effect of getting children to attend school regularly, moreover, the program purports to reduce the chronic problems of child malnutrition, teacher absenteeism, and caste and gender inequality.

As stated in my abstract, MDMS was first introduced as national legislation in August 1995 as the “National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education.” Yet, as Reetika Khara discusses in her overview of MDMS, for the first six years, “Most states failed to put the required arrangements in place and instead provided students with monthly dry rations (wheat or rice) based on their attendance in school.”⁶ This ‘dry ration’ implementation—while cheaper and easier—was also detrimental to the scheme’s goals, causing the Supreme Court to intervene in November 2001. They directed all state governments to “implement the Mid-Day Meal Scheme by providing every child in every government and government assisted primary school with a *prepared* mid-day meal with a minimum content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein each day of school for a minimum of 200 days.”⁷ After follow-up Supreme Court orders in April 2004 and a large public advocacy campaign, the government revised its national guidelines to meet the Court’s standards in September 2004. Since then, further legislative changes—from both the center and states—and greater public awareness have resulted in more financial support for MDMS, higher nutrition standards, and expanded coverage into upper-primary schools. At present, the Scheme serves about 105 million primary and upper-primary schoolchildren in 1.2 million

⁵ Story courtesy of *Akshaya Patra* website, a NGO that provides MDM to over one million children: <http://www.akshayapatra.org/indias-mid-day-meal-scheme>

⁶ Khara, Reetika. "Mid-Day Meals in Primary Schools." P 4742

⁷ Ibid p 4742, originally cited from: Bhatia, Vandana, Jean Dreze, and Vandana Prasad. *Midday Meals: A Primer*

schools, according to Government statistics.⁸ Even better, when implemented well (which is by no means a given), MDMS has come to accomplish many of the very goals I enumerated at the end of the first paragraph: higher school enrollments and attendance, alongside reduced classroom hunger and increased socialization of disenfranchised groups.⁹

Mid-day Meals in Uttar Pradesh

Like much else in India, though, broad generalizations of success often turn out to be mirages. In some northern states—Uttar Pradesh particularly stands out—MDMS has not been as effective as it has in the southern states where it originated (Kerala and Tamil Nadu chief among them.) There are a multitude of reasons as to why this divide exists, including contrasting geographies and divergent histories concerning land ownership and caste.¹⁰ Programs attempting to increase education and fight poverty in UP face an uphill battle: it has the third-lowest life expectancy in India, the highest under-five mortality rate, and the second-lowest GDP per capita.¹¹ While UP government has many positive goals and guidelines for the MDMS—along with recent increases in funding—the results remain below expectations.¹² (In all fairness, though, other reports have argued that UP has improved its MDMS in recent years.¹³) Thus, I chose to study in Uttar Pradesh for this ISP because national progress on MDMS should be measured by the poorest-performing states as much as it is by the ‘best-practice’ states. Moreover, if UP does manage to implement MDMS better, it stands the most to gain in terms of achieving core program outcomes. Admittedly, while I found no straight-forward data on how effective MDMS has been in Lucknow District in particular, it is safe to assume it is better-performing than most of UP due to its higher-than-

⁸ India. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Department of School Education and Literacy. *Working Group Report on Elementary Education and Literacy*. P 171

⁹ For studies showing these positive effects of MDMS, see in my bibliography: Goyal & Dreze (2003); Si and Sharma (2008); Prachti Report (2010).

¹⁰ For a more complete discussion of this history, see Nilekani, Nandan. "S Is for Schools." *Imagining India: Ideas for the New Century*.

¹¹ Wizarat, Dr. Kausar. *Study of Best Practices Adopted in Mid-Day-Meal Scheme in Uttar Pradesh*. P 2

¹² For studies showing the shortcomings of MDMs in UP, see in my bibliography: Dhuru (2010) and Rai (2011).

¹³ See: Wizarat, Dr. Kausar. *Study of Best Practices Adopted in Mid-Day-Meal Scheme in Uttar Pradesh*

state-average literacy rate and per-capita income.¹⁴ That being said, the ability to observe both urban and rural schools—along with myriad connections to government officials and scholars—made Lucknow District a unique and worthwhile study location.

Decentralization of Governmental Powers in Contemporary India

The importance of the locality—particularly symbolized by the village—has long been a theme in India. Perhaps the most well-known advocate of this ‘small is beautiful’ philosophy was Mahatma Gandhi. In one of his seminal works, *Hind Swaraj* (1908), Gandhi calls an English-esque central Parliament “a costly toy” and, instead, prefers that problems are solved in a localized fashion in villages.¹⁵

Despite this much-adored rhetoric, however, many substantive powers were withheld from local governments—either village *panchayats* or city municipalities—until the 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendments of 1991. These amendments, nick-named the *Panchayat Raj* amendments, devolved governing decisions to localities, made mandatory local elections, and reserved local leadership spots for disenfranchised groups. According to a 2010 Oxfam working paper by Richa Kapoor, these two pieces of legislation “created a key paradigm shift in governance models by invoking decentralization, paving the way for the participation of local communities and institutions in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of government programs.”¹⁶ Indian businessman Nandan Nilekani, too, in his 2008 book *Imagining India* called these amendments “revolutionary,” especially in their ability to give urban areas more autonomous rule.¹⁷ Following down the path of these amendments, later legislation in the 2000s like the *Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA/Education for All) programme and the 2010 Right-to-Education Act made it clear that citizen participation and strong local

¹⁴ Kumar, Nomita. *Baseline Survey in the Minority Concentrated Districts of Uttar Pradesh (Lucknow District)*. For literacy rate, see p. iii. For per-capita income, see p. 15

¹⁵ Gandhi, Mahatma. *Hind Swaraj; Or, Indian Home Rule*. See Chapter V and XVII in particular.

¹⁶ Kapoor, Richa. *Essential Services: Community-based Management for Right to Education*. P 3

¹⁷ Nilekani, Nandan. *Imagining India: Ideas for the New Century*. P 209

bodies of power were requisite for a superior Indian education system. In particular, the School Management Committees (SMCs), which the RTE Act required and Uttar Pradesh began putting into place this year, will be critical for more community involvement in education in the future.¹⁸

Scholars Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, in their seminal work “India: Development and Practice”, also talk about how critical local democratic participation is as a force toward social change and as a basis for accountability. Citing the aforementioned *Panchayat Raj* amendments, Dreze and Sen furthermore describe how there has been a “sea change” over the course of the 1990s in public interest and involvement in local governance—“even in areas where apathy used to be widespread.”¹⁹ Yet, to air a final word of caution, when they bring up the murky distinction between ‘local democracy’ and ‘decentralization’, Dreze and Sen are careful to note that “decentralization is not necessarily conducive to local democracy.”²⁰ They point out that top-down decentralization sometimes has the effect of heightening traditional concentrations of power and leading to corruption due to lack of higher oversight.²¹ Hence, when thinking about these themes in my project, I have kept in mind that sometimes outside monitoring and assistance can actually allow more equitable community involvement to flourish.

Ideal Role of Community Participation and Local Governance in Providing Mid-Day Meals

For starters, when one reads the official government documents that outline goals and responsibilities for MDMS, ‘fostering community participation and accountability’ comes up quite frequently. The 2006 central guidelines claim to follow the Principle of Subsidiarity,

¹⁸ Per the RTE Act, SMCs are bodies of 15 individuals, including the teacher and 11 parents, that are supposed to be at every school in India, controlling school finances, making curriculum decisions, and overseeing schemes like MDMS. They are similar to school boards in the USA.

¹⁹ Drèze, Jean, and Amartya Kumar. Sen. "The Practice of Democracy" *India: Development and Participation*. p 361

²⁰ Ibid. P 359

²¹ Ibid.

which means “what can best be done at a particular level should be done at that level alone, and not at higher levels,” and envisage a “bottom-up approach, rather than a top-down approach to planning.”²² In the aforementioned five-year plan, the writers call for strengthening community participation and social accountability, as these attributes let “citizens directly participate in government processes to hold the government accountable.”²³ In Uttar Pradesh specifically, a 2012 PAB report calls for daily supervision of mid-day meals by parents and the Gram Pradhan, along with “capacity building” training programs at the block and panchayat levels.²⁴ Moreover, a comprehensive study on cooked mid-day meals done by the Programme Evaluation Organisation of India’s Planning Commission in May 2010 noted a correlation between involvement of PRI (*Panchayat Raj* Institutions) in schools and enhancement in enrollment rates.²⁵ From these documents and guidelines, it appears community participation is a key component of any mid-day meal plan that consistently delivers nutritious lunches to students and, more importantly, adapts to fit a locality in ways the higher-level government could not foresee.

To ground my research, I identified 16 indicators that capture what I believe I was looking for to demonstrate strong ‘community participation and local governance’ in providing mid-day meals (See Appendix A). Although tricky to measure, the items listed in Appendix A stemmed from my reading of official government guidelines—from both the state of Uttar Pradesh and the central government—about what the community and local governing structures were supposed to be responsible for in providing these daily school lunches. While I will not list out all of them here, some of the questions I was asking when I

²² India. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Department of School Education and Literacy, Mid-Day Meal Scheme. *National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (Mid-Day Meal Scheme), 2006, GUIDELINES*. P 19 and 26

²³ India. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Department of School Education and Literacy. *Working Group Report on Elementary Education and Literacy*. P 198

²⁴ India, Uttar Pradesh. Programme Approval Board. *Mid-Day Meal Programme (Annual Work Plan & Budget 2012-13)*.

²⁵ India. Programme Evaluation Organisation. Planning Commission. *Performance Evaluation of Cooked Mid-Day Meal (CMDM)*. PRI correlation from section 4.7.

spoke to teachers, parents, and government members were: Is there a committee of parents and the *Gram Pradhan* that supervises the MDM day-to-day? Are local mothers involved with cooking the meal? Are monitoring technologies like IVRS used to keep Mid-day Meals accountable to the community?²⁶ (Some of these questions were made more difficult by the fact that many urban schools use outside NGOs to deliver their food—rather than relying on an on-site kitchen—but that situation will be addressed later in the paper.)

By looking to see if these duties were being fulfilled, I would have a consistent and empirical basis to determine if MDMS was more than just a hand-out from the government to keep kids in school. I could see if the community, in true Gandhian fashion, took ownership of these meals and consistently sought to make improvements—even if they relied on the state and center for most of the funding. After all, to quote a widely-disseminated 2005 MDM Primer by the Right-to-Food Campaign, “there is a role for everyone: parents, teachers, journalists, concerned members of the community,” in ensuring quality mid-day meals.²⁷

²⁶ Started in 2010 in Uttar Pradesh, IVRS stands for ‘Interactive Voice Response System’ and is an IT system that involves teachers using mobile phones to report the number of meals served each day, which ends up in an online UP database. This information is then passed down from the District to the Block in order to hold schools accountable at the local level for failing to serve meals. It is akin to what Dreze and Sen had in mind when they talked about using outside monitoring to allow for more equitable local control. For more, see 2010 UNICEF report *Cloud Telephony and IVRS Based Daily Monitoring System (DMS) for Mid-day Meal Scheme*

²⁷ Bhatia, Vandana, Jean Dreze, and Vandana Prasad. *Midday Meals: A Primer* P 22-23

Methodology

The methods I used to collect field data on the amount of community participation and local governance in providing MDMs were fairly straightforward. My adviser, Professor C.S. Verma, chose five primary/upper-primary schools in Lucknow District: three urban and two rural to reflect the District's demographics.²⁸ At each of the schools, I—with the help of my wonderful translators—interviewed the teacher-in-charge, assistant teachers, cooks, and, then, we observed the process of the students eating their mid-day meals. These interviews and observations were guided by the indicators of performance discussed above and outlined in Appendix A. During my urban visits, we also went to an NGO to observe the meal being cooked for about 50 schools. After the school observations, the teachers randomly chose five students and the students led me to their households, where I interviewed the parent(s). As with the school interviews and observations, these interviews were also structured around a core set of activities others have suggested as how parents might be involved in MDMS (See Appendix B). Outside of these school and community visits, I spoke to both NGO and government officials who play a role in providing the mid-day meal: a Block Education Officer for the urban schools, the joint-director of the Uttar Pradesh Mid-Day Meal Authority, a state adviser on the implementation of Right-to-Education, and state adviser on the implementation of Right-to-Food schemes. While I did not use a highly structured survey instrument or quantitative analytic methods, my interviews with over 40 diverse individuals and observations in five schools provide a fair snapshot into the current state of community participation and local governance in providing MDMs.

²⁸ Lucknow District is 37% rural and 63% urban, according to Kumar, Nomita. *Baseline Survey in the Minority Concentrated Districts of Uttar Pradesh (Lucknow District)* P 5

Perspectives from the Field

In each of these sections, I first explain what I learned by talking to the teachers and observing the meal process. Then, I relate what I heard when I went out to speak to households. While I mix in some insights from government interviews throughout the five school sections, I report the majority of my findings from discussions with government officials in the final section.

Tendukheru Primary School

Location: Qila Mohammadi Nagar, Lucknow City (Urban)

In what would turn out to be a rather routine experience during my research, my team and I had to wade through a bit of bureaucracy in order to even speak to the teachers at Tendukheru about MDMS—despite the fact that we told the school we were coming a day in advance. My adviser needed to obtain signed permission for us from both the Block Education Officer (official in charge of 85 schools) and the CRC (more local official in charge of 12-15 schools within the block.) After an additional two day delay, we held a productive conversation with the teacher-in-charge, Ms. Jyoti Yadav. Meals are delivered everyday by an NGO (*Fairdeal Gramodyog Sewa Samiti*) and, in turn, Ms. Yadav feels there is no need for the community to come and help out. As long as the meals are made according to the menu (which was publicly displayed on a wall, per regulations) and arrive daily, she believes the parents do not care what happens.²⁹ She reported holding a PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) meeting each month and told us, “We’ve never talked about the mid-day meal before.” She only tells the parents: “Please send your child to school regularly, wear proper dress. We don’t expect anything from you.”³⁰ Also, when asked about the committee of parents and local government officials that should visit the school every other day to inspect

²⁹ See Section 6.3 (p 33) of 2006 Central MDMS guidelines, which state that the daily menu—among other relevant information—must be publicly displayed as “suo moto information under the RTI Act.”

³⁰ Yadav, J, Teacher-in-Charge, Tendukheru Primary, Personal interview. Lucknow, 8 Nov. 2012

the meal (again, per regulations), she looked confused and again repeated that parents are “too busy for that.”³¹ However, Ms. Yadav was quick to add that her CRC, Wasim Razi, was checking the school’s meal records weekly and that she used the IVRS mobile phone monitoring system every day. On the whole, Ms. Yadav stressed that there were no problems with the meals and that she felt MDMS was a very effective program—along with SSA—for reducing the drop-out rate.

When we observed the actual meal, many things went according to government guidelines: The children sat in an egalitarian line, the teacher tasted the food first to make sure it was OK, most of the children seemed satisfied with the meal, and the school even provided plates and spoons (Note: the caption with the picture below explains why that last point might not have reflected standard procedure.) However, as this study is on the amount of community participation and local governance, I was dismayed to see that there was absolutely no outside participation or monitoring; the daily menu was also dictated from above without any unique community input. Even worse, several children had been playing outside the school during class and only came back in to eat the meal before leaving again. Some of the other, more ambitious goals for mid-day meals—like a school garden and allowing the kids to serve each other—also were absent.

While, due to the time of day, we were unfortunately limited to speaking to parents that were not out working, the MDMS and PTA situations were nonetheless portrayed by households in a slightly different manner than Ms. Yadav’s rendering. For example, regarding the PTA meeting, many families described it as very asymmetrical in power (i.e. what Sherry Arnstein would call “token consultation”) and the parents were only used to

³¹ See Uttar Pradesh state MDMS guidelines, which say, “VECs/PTAs should make arrangements so that, as far as possible, at least two of their members are present every day at the time of the meal, to shoulder above responsibilities, along with the teacher.”

sign the piece of paper saying they were there.³² There did not appear to be any School Management Committee like the Right-to-Education guidelines required and, when we explained to the mother of the Dagra family that these governing bodies were supposed to already exist at every school in order give the parents more power, she remarked, “That’s a good idea, someone should try that.”³³ While the Dagra family in particular also had problems with the nutritional quality of the meals (watery *daal*, for example), ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ and ‘protesting is bad’ were the prevailing attitudes amongst all. Most of the families we spoke to were grateful any meal was provided to their children, given that the parents were often too poor to feed their child an afternoon meal. One overarching theme I did notice too was that mothers tended to be more involved and concerned about their child’s schooling than fathers; in a sad instance, one father was so drunk at 11 in the morning that he could not quite remember how many children he had, much less know that his children were receiving a meal at school.³⁴



Above: Picture of the students eating *daal* with *subzi* and wheat. Don’t be fooled by the shiny looking plates and spoons, though, as the teacher brought those out just because I was there with a camera. She claimed they provided these necessities for the students every day (as the government sends money to the school to do so), but, after the meal, we clandestinely asked a student and they said this was the first time she’d ever seen these plates and spoons. (Picture by Anderson Tuggle, 8/11)

³² Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." Section 3.4

³³ Dagra, Family, Parents of two Tendukheru Primary children, Personal interview. Lucknow, 6 Nov. 2012

³⁴ Ram, L, Father of three Tendukheru Primary children, Personal interview. Lucknow, 8 Nov. 2012

Pathmik Vidyalaya Primary and Upper-Primary School

Location: Qila Mohammadi Nagar, Lucknow City (Urban)

The second school I visited was also in Qila Mohammadi Nagar—and has its meals prepared for them by *Fairdeal Gramodyog Sewa Samiti* too—but it nonetheless offered a unique angle on mid-day meals and community participation. This school was a combined primary and upper-primary school (primary students in the morning, upper primary in the afternoon) and I first spoke to two assistant primary teachers: Aoti Singh and Suman Pandey. These teachers were quick to assert that the meal arrived every day and that there were no problems we should be looking for. (Oddly enough, after I later translated a picture of their MDM register book, it said a meal had not arrived three days earlier.)³⁵ They also said they were pleased with the IVRS mobile monitoring system, echoing a November 2010 *Hindustan Times* article that IVRS “provides them a direct link with the head office.”³⁶ The only issues they seemed to have, though the teachers tried to avoid talking about them, were that the parents are not involved with the school and that they did not have an effective grievance redressal system with the NGO.

To my disappointment, I was never able to witness a meal being served at this school. This was frustrating, given that the school serves two meals a day from the same food: one for the morning primary students and one for the afternoon upper-primary students. I tried to go on three different occasions to witness the meal—arriving at the time they had told me to—but each time they told me the meal had already been served by the time I got there. I did, however, see the food with my own eyes. Also, the upper-primary teacher-in-charge, Mr. Anil Kumar, noted that the school did indeed provide special treats on birthdays and holidays with the teacher’s own money, which is one of the UP government’s suggestions for

³⁵ Singh, A, and Pandey, S, Assistant Teachers at Pathmik Vidyalaya Primary, Personal interview. Lucknow, 7 Nov. 2012

³⁶ Quote from Vinita Puri, primary school principal in Chirodi, UP. Via Gupta, Anika. "Yes, Free Lunches." *Hindustan Times*

improving MDMs. He felt, though, that the NGO should provide special meals—without having to have the teachers pay—and not always stick so strictly to the menu. When asked why he did not go to the NGO or local government to try to make changes to the menu, Mr. Kumar shrugged and said it was not worth the effort.³⁷

One of the things I noticed most when I interviewed households in this community was that many parents had strained relations with the Pathmik Vidyalaya teachers. For example, Rain Milan Aswathi described how one of the teachers took a government computer meant for the school home with them and only brought it back to the school for inspections. Aswathi also talked about how she had problems with the quality of the MDM, but, when she talked to the teacher about it, they got into an argument and the teacher said, “I’m not your servant, this isn’t my responsibility.”³⁸ A father we talked to, Devi Prasand Yadav, told us that his children do not eat the meal at school, but, instead, bring it home to feed the whole family. “It’s not great,” Yadav said with a smile, “But how can I complain? If I do, they will expel my child and the whole family will lose food.”³⁹ Many of these parents also repeated earlier claims that the PTA meetings were meant only for their signature, reflecting a 2005 Farzana Afridi EPW paper that concluded “parents do not perceive PTAs as an effective forum for redressing their concerns.”⁴⁰ Moreover, for every parent we walked to that did care about the meal, at least three others were disinterested. In an oft-repeated sentiment, the head of the Sunder family told us, “I don’t really care about the meals...Even if I did approach the teacher or government, no one would listen to me, I am poor.”⁴¹

³⁷ Kumar, A, Teacher-in-charge at Pathmik Vidyalaya Upper-Primary, Personal interview. Lucknow, 7 Nov. 2012

³⁸ Aswathi, R.M., Mother of four Pathmik Vidyalaya children, Personal interview. Lucknow, 7 Nov. 2012

³⁹ Yadav, D.P., Father of three Pathmik Vidyalaya children, Personal interview. Lucknow, 7 Nov. 2012

⁴⁰ Afridi, Farzana. "Mid-day Meals in Two States: Comparing the Financial and Institutional Organisation of the Programme." *Economic and Political Weekly*

⁴¹ Sunder, Family, Parents of three Pathmik Vidyalaya children, Personal interview. Lucknow, 7 Nov. 2012

Baldi Kheda Primary School

Location: Bara Birwa, Lucknow City (Urban)

When I first entered the school grounds, I was impressed with Baldi Kehda: the school had multiple classrooms, there was a large yard in the front and a bathroom on-site, and the NGO cooking the school's MDMs was right across the street (*Nirmal Seva Sansthan*). Granted, it is likely these positive facets were due to the presence of the Block Education Office next door, but, compared to the previous two urban schools, it appeared quite impressive. (There was also an Upper Primary School of similar quality across the street.) When we spoke to two of the teachers, Neeraj Duivedi and Shushma Singh, about the MDMS and community participation, they had little bad to say about the meal and further told us that parents did not have any complaints. They used the IVRS system daily and even told us that they serve the students special sweets on holidays. However, one of the teachers did quietly tell us she had worries that MDMs "make students entitled to free food and encourages dependency," which is something she would never tell her superiors.⁴² While we were at the school we also had a chance to talk to the CRC, Mr. Suresh Tiwari, who is in charge of 12 schools and tries to visit his schools as regularly as he can, acting as a liaison between teachers and the Block Education Officer. He showed us the NGO's cook-site too (picture below) and explained that the NGO is responsible for picking cooks and obtaining food-grains from the FCI, so that was not his responsibility. Moreover, Mr. Tiwari said the media and parents keep the food accountable; "I mean, the food is very good though, since it's cooked so close," he said.⁴³ (We talked to the Block Education Officer here too, Mr. Kamlesh Singh, but I save those findings until the last section.)

⁴² Duivedi, N, and Singh, S, Assistant Teachers at Baldi Kheda Primary, Personal interview. Lucknow, 9 Nov. 2012

⁴³ Tiwari, S, CRC within Block One, Personal interview. Lucknow, 9 Nov. 2012

The mid-day meal itself was served out of a big tin—the day’s lunch was *chaval* and *mung*—and the students lined up in an orderly fashion to receive the *khanna*. Although the teachers had told us the school provides plates and spoons for everybody, it appeared the students had brought their own lunch boxes and mostly ate with their hands. Also, although a majority of the students took the meal, several others rushed out to buy snacks from a local food cart or ate the lunch they brought from home. Unfortunately, I did not see any parental or outside participation and the teachers tended to their own tasks while the students ate wherever they wanted (contra Tendukheru Primary, where the students sat in the egalitarian line as pictured in many MDMS documents.) Unlike the other schools, though, the students did serve each other, mimicking the state guidelines.⁴⁴ There was also no garden for fresh *subzi* at either the NGO or school and the menu—like every MDMS menu we saw in Lucknow—was a fixed 6-day schedule dictated sans community input.⁴⁵



Here is a quick picture I snapped of the cooking space at the NGO, *Nirmal Seva Sansthan*. They cook MDMs for about 50 schools in the area. Unfortunately there was nobody from the NGO there and I was unable to speak to the two cooks seen to the left. The CRC assured me he checks the food every day though. (Picture by Anderson Tuggle 9/11)

There were a number of contrasting opinions among the parents we spoke to, though most of them painted a less glamorous portrait of MDMs than either the teachers or the CRC. At the very worst end, Shayam Bihari and his family told us that his child had found bugs in his food, but, if he complained, the teacher would scold him. (The bugs were corroborated in

⁴⁴ The UP guidelines say that, “MDMs should be utilized for providing work experience to children. Older children should be involved in orderly distribution of MDMs.”

⁴⁵ The UP guidelines also read, “It is possible to plan an economical, yet varied and nutritious menu, and this must be done in consultation with the local community, mothers, PTA, and women’s SHG.”

Usha Shurla's interview.)⁴⁶ Moreover, he said the PTA meetings were actually one-on-one meetings and he would not feel comfortable making any complaints in that circumstance; a big group would make it much easier to address grievances, he told us.⁴⁷ Interestingly, that kind of mentality is why SMCs, with their groups of 11 parents, are supposed to be more effective. Yet, when we asked the Biharis and the other families, they had not heard of these School Management Committees (again, they are supposed to currently exist at every school in Uttar Pradesh.) Not all parents were as negative, though, as children from two separate families—the Rajus and the Mishras—claimed the meal had improved in recent years. Also, a separate problem seemed to be that there were no truancy checks and some parents did not mind if their children were not in school; we saw two boys who were enrolled in Baldi Kheda at home when we interviewed their families. If some parents did not care if their children were in school every day or not, how likely were they to involve themselves in the MDMS? Echoing a common sentiment about why they did not go to visit the school more, a vegetable seller and father, Mr. Kishan Gopal Verma told us, “We are poor. If we had money, we would've sent our children to private school, where the teachers are much better.”⁴⁸

Bijnaur II Primary School

Location: Bijnaur, Lucknow District (Rural)

Akin to Tendukheru, our visit to Bijnaur II also began with a long bout of bureaucracy, but after several phone calls and assurances from her superiors, my team and I were able to sit down for a good conversation with the teacher-in-charge, Ms. Gela Yadav. Unlike the urban schools, the mid-day meal was cooked in an on-site kitchen by a team of three local mothers and the school had to obtain everything needed to cook MDMs on its own. Thus, Ms. Yadav worked with the Gram Pradhan in order to bring cooking supplies,

⁴⁶ Shurla, Family, Parents of one Baldi Kheda child, Personal interview. Lucknow, 9 Nov. 2012

⁴⁷ Bihari, S. Parent of one Baldi Kheda child, Personal interview. Lucknow, 9 Nov. 2012

⁴⁸ Verma, K.G., Parent of one Baldi Kheda child, Personal interview. Lucknow, 22 Nov. 2012

food-grains, vegetables, and whatever else was needed for the meal to the school: Ms. Yadav received money in a joint-bank account from the District for MDMs and, in turn, she would give the money to the Gram Pradhan's nephew, Sandeep Saini, to procure the aforementioned resources. When we asked Ms. Yadav about the community participation, she said it was good, especially because mothers that everyone knows are the ones cooking the meal. She did admit, though, that there was no SMC and explained, "The problems at the school cannot be solved without a functioning SMC. Kids will keep dropping out of school once they reach farming age."⁴⁹ Ms. Yadav also had issues with the IVRS system—they call all the different teachers at separate times of the day—and the LPG cylinders for cooking—the recent subsidy cut had made the school switch back to the less efficient wood-cooking. Yadav had solutions to both of these problems—the government should give the school one permanent cell phone for IVRS and also give the school subsidized gas canisters like they do for households—but when she called the toll-free MDMS number to make suggestions, "they just laughed at her."⁵⁰

The food for the day's MDM was both warm and tasty: *kheer* with fresh coconut. (I know first-hand because the teachers insisted I eat the meal with the children.) Although, when we asked some of the children about the quality of the meal, they said *today's* food was very good, implying that my team's presence might have made this meal a slight departure from the norm. Besides that, while I witnessed no outside participation, it was nonetheless refreshing to see that the food was cooked so close to the children, in open sight, and that the mothers who cooked the meal were involved in the MDM process from start to finish.

Contrast this approach with that of the NGO, where the food is quickly dropped off in a bin

⁴⁹ Yadav, G. Teacher-in-Charge, Bijnaur II Primary, Personal Interview. Bijnaur, 21 Nov. 2012

⁵⁰ Although, it did appear the government was concerned about this gas problem: A November 23rd 2012 article in *The Hindu* mentioned, "The Petroleum Ministry has turned down a request of the HRD Ministry to allow supply of subsidised LPG cylinders for the mid-day meal programme... The cap on LPG cylinder will put an additional burden of Rs 653 crore on the scheme."

before the distributor moves on to the next school. When we talked to the cooks too, they said they enjoyed the work and were pleased with the supplemental income.⁵¹ The other individual we spoke to during the meal was Sandeep Saini, a university student who is in charge of getting the MDMS supplies on behalf of the Gram Panchayat (as said above, Sandeep also happens to be the Gram Pradhan's nephew and it was not clear if his sole motivation for this job was helping the community or if he was more driven by personal economic benefit.) The only problem he has is that sometimes the FCI does not reimburse him in a timely manner for the food-grains he procures; currently he is considering suing FCI over R50,000 he claims they owe him.⁵²

While Ms. Yadav had told us the community participation at this school was quite good, and that mothers frequently come to check the school, my team and I did not get the impression many parents (three cooks notwithstanding) cared much about MDMS or their child's education. For example, when we interviewed the Shri Phool Chandra household, only one of their eight children went to school—and that child (enrolled at Bijnaur II) was just sitting at home when we came by! His mother shrugged and told us that he goes to school when he feels like it, though “he has no interest in learning.”⁵³ His absence had nothing to do with MDMs, however, as his mother told us the meals seemed good enough. Another family we spoke with, the Rakesh family, said their child preferred to have *ghar ka khanna* over *school ka khanna*. The Rakesh family also seemed to have a limited relationship with the teacher, saying, “We don't go to the school even if the teacher calls, we went one time and

⁵¹ The cooks were each paid an honorarium of R1,000 a month, which is what the Central government prescribed in changes it made to the Scheme in December 2009. (See Mid-Day Meal Scheme webpage, “About MDM” section.)

⁵² Saini, S. Nephew of and Assistant to Bijnaur Gram Pradhan, Personal interview. Bijnaur, 21 Nov. 2012. In a further note on the problems with Uttar Pradesh's food-grain distribution system, a November 2012 *Bloomberg* editorial noted that “According to data compiled by *Bloomberg*, in the state of Uttar Pradesh alone, as much as \$14.5 billion in food aid went missing during the past decade. One whistle-blower pointed the finger at the state's food minister, Raja Bhaiya, who has separately been charged with (but never convicted of) attempted murder, kidnapping, armed robbery and electoral fraud.”

⁵³ Chandra, S.P., Parent of one Bijnaur II child, Personal interview. Bijnaur, 21 Nov. 2012

they yelled at us for our child not having the right books” and that “the school always prepares better food during inspections, but students can’t complain about that.”⁵⁴ In a telling moment, after we interviewed the third family in a row who did not have much to say about MDMS or community participation, my translator turned to me and said, “Face it, most people just don’t care about this program.”

Purva Madhamic Upper Primary School

Location: Bijnaur, Lucknow District (Rural)

As soon as we walked onto the premises of Purva Madhamic Upper Primary School, we could tell it was a (comparatively) high-quality school. Not only was the infrastructure in excellent shape—buildings had colorful murals and students had actual desks to sit at—but our presence did not disrupt the entire school-day. Unlike the other schools, where all the teachers basically stopped teaching and the students wandered around as they liked, the head-teacher spoke to us at her desk while her compatriots continued instructing students in their respective classrooms. Ms. Nasreen Bano, said head-teacher, told us the school’s MDMS was functioning quite well and that they ensured all necessary supplies were delivered to the school by using the same relationship to the Gram Pradhan as Bijnaur II Primary School. Unlike Ms. Yadav, however, Ms. Bano had no problems with the IVRS system and said she felt comfortable calling her CRC if there were any issues to report. In addition, while this school used the same fixed menu as all the other schools, they had the multiple school gardens around the building that the other schools had lacked. On the question of community participation, we were pleasantly surprised to learn that Purva Madhamic had formed a functioning Mid-day Meal Committee of five parents that regularly visited the school to check the food, par the 2012 Uttar Pradesh PAB report mentioned in the background

⁵⁴ Rakesh, Family, Parents of two Bijnaur II children, Personal interview. Bijnaur, 21 Nov. 2012

section.⁵⁵ “I am vigilant about calling all the parents and asking them to come to the school,” Ms. Bano said.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, however, there was no SMC up and running yet. The one key differentiating factor to note about Purva Madhamic, though, is that it was an *all-boys* upper primary school.⁵⁷ Thus, while the school was impressive, the gender situation adds a layer of complexity to the situation, given that one of the goals of the MDMS is “enhancing gender equality...women and girl children have a special stake in mid-day meals.”⁵⁸



The kitchen shed for Purva Madhamic is pictured here. Ms. Bano and the cooks proudly showed us how everything was kept in order and how hygienic it was for cooking. The artwork on the walls was notable too. As one of my translators, the ever-skeptical Rishal, remarked, “You know Anderson, even I’m impressed by this.” (Photo by Anderson Tuggle 21/11)

Unfortunately, the mid-day meal was finishing up just as I arrived at the school, but everything looked to be in good order. The students we spoke to expressed satisfaction with their food before returning to their classrooms (again, unlike the other schools, where several students would leave the premises after eating their meal.) Moreover, we spoke with the three cooks: two were mothers of Purva Madhamic children and the other was a 16 year old widow who was the sister of a student. They told us they were paid the government-declared wage of R1,000 a month and were selected jointly by the teacher and Gram Pradhan; the 16 year old was particularly grateful for this money, as she was facing difficulties in the community following her husband’s passing. While we did not see any of the parental monitors from the local committee on our visit, the cooks assured us there was regular parent participation at

⁵⁵ India, Uttar Pradesh. Programme Approval Board. *Mid-Day Meal Programme (Annual Work Plan & Budget 2012-13)*.

⁵⁶ Bano, N. Teacher-in-Charge at Purva Madhamic Upper Primary, Personal interview. Lucknow, 21 Nov. 2012

⁵⁷ As the law requires, there is a separate girls-only upper primary school in Bijnaur too. However, I did not get a chance to see it.

⁵⁸ Bhatia, Vandana, Jean Dreze, and Vandana Prasad. *Midday Meals: A Primer*. P 4

Purva Madhamic. Obviously Purva Madhamic was not perfect—the school was using cooking-wood instead of LPG for today’s meal, for example—but it was striking to note how schools with equivalent working-class communities could look so different.

Granted, there is no guarantee what my team and I saw was the norm, so our household interviews were crucial for triangulation purposes. Besides learning that not all of the households were aware of the five-parent MDM committee, however, most of the other good things we saw at the school were corroborated by the households. In fact, when we asked families why they thought this government school was better than some of the surrounding school, most everybody came to the same conclusion: “Madam.” (*Madam* is the title used for the head-teacher.) The mother of the Chetram family told us, in an oft-repeated line, “Madam is very strict, but also very good about talking to the parents.”⁵⁹ Muruwat Ali agreed, saying, “Madam makes a supportive environment where all students want to get higher education.”⁶⁰ A few parents also mentioned the good food as a reason for Purva Madhamic’s success; we even met one of the mothers, Ms. Jayer, who is on the school’s MDM monitoring committee. Ms. Jayer even went so far as to say she “considers Madam like a good friend.”⁶¹ Besides the presence of a dedicated head teacher, the parents we spoke to were less apathetic about their child’s education and held better relations with teachers than the previous communities we visited. The reasons these parents were more involved, however, were not entirely selfless. First, since these were their boys, it seemed parents clearly felt they had a stronger stake in ensuring them a good job in the future.⁶² Many of the families we spoke to, sadly, had pulled their girls out of school at or before the 8th standard. Second, over half of the parents we spoke to aspired for their boys to reach a nearby private

⁵⁹ Chetram, Family, Parent of one Purva Madhamic child, Personal interview. Bijnaur. 21 Nov. 2012

⁶⁰ Ali, M. Father of one Purva Madhamic child, Personal interview. Bijnaur, 21 Nov. 2012

⁶¹ Jayer, M. Mother of one Purva Madhamic child, Personal interview. Bijnaur, 21 Nov. 2012

⁶² Ms. Jayer also said, “We are impressed that the girls are separated from the boys. The community supports it very much.”

secondary school (“J.B. Secondary School.”), thus showing how they might have viewed a good government upper-primary school as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. While an excellent teacher is a critical factor for improving community participation in MDMs, the lesson here may well be that a more complicated situation lurks beneath the surface of every success story.

Perspectives from Higher Government Officials:

A Block Education Officer and the Joint-Director of Uttar Pradesh MDM Authority

As mentioned above, one of the higher government officials I spoke with was Block Education Officer Kamlesh Singh, whose office was adjacent to Baldi Kheda Primary School.⁶³ Singh is responsible for 85 primary and upper-primary schools in his block and he must also watch over the 300 private schools within his jurisdiction.⁶⁴ When we asked Mr. Singh about the state of community participation and oversight in his block, he admitted it was lackluster. “Uttar Pradesh is a very impoverished state, clearly most parents, who are illiterate themselves, are not going to focus on education...it’s much better in other states” is the way he put it.⁶⁵ He further acknowledged that, although SMCs and PTAs exist on paper, they are rarely effective and that it was difficult to constantly monitor the four different NGOs delivering meals in his block. Yet, Mr. Singh told us there was little he could do to make a wider range of parties involved in MDMS; “I have no government car or subsidized petrol, how can I visit everywhere? And there’s so many schemes I have responsibility over, MDMS is just one of many. Besides, I don’t make the policy myself.”⁶⁶ On the bright side, he did say the IVRS system was improving accountability and that the money the government had put into MDMS in recent years had shown dividends.

⁶³ The level of responsibility in India goes: Village/urban locality < Block < District < State < Center. There are 75 Districts in UP and around 5-10 blocks in each District. Lucknow District has 10 blocks.

⁶⁴ Sidenote: The fact that there are so many private schools compared to government schools is indicative of how booming that industry is in urban areas. In *Imaging India*, Nilekani cites how two-thirds of Indian children in Hyderabad are enrolled in private schools. (P 188)

⁶⁵ Singh, K, Block Education Officer of Zone One, Personal interview. Lucknow, 9 Nov. 2012

⁶⁶ Ibid.

On a later date, my adviser accompanied me to meet with Mr. S.P. Jaiswal, the second-in-command for the Uttar Pradesh Mid-day Meal Authority, the agency which is responsible for overall monitoring efforts and coordination across the state's 145,000+ MDM-serving schools.⁶⁷ Like Mr. Singh, Mr. Jaiswal was frank in his assessment that community participation was lower than it should be, "particularly in urban areas where NGOs take over many of the scheme's responsibilities."⁶⁸ NGOs solve the one problem of getting food to schools that do not have enough room for a kitchen, but limit the avenues for community members and mothers to assist. Unlike Mr. Singh, however, Mr. Jaiswal had several policy ideas. He was keen to help improve community participation by giving more financial control over MDMS to parents on the SMCs via direct bank transfers, saying, "Without a good amount of awareness and control in the community, all of our initiatives go down the drain." While Mr. Jaiswal was very optimistic about the potential of SMCs and parental control, he also acknowledged an underlying problem that it has been very difficult to find "more than 4-5 committed parents" at any given governmental school (each SMC is supposed to have 11 parents.) The other area of policy that Mr. Jaiswal was particularly eager to show me was the MDMA's burgeoning use of Information Technology (IT.) In particular, Mr. Jaiswal demonstrated the powerful effect the IVRS system has had on accountability in Uttar Pradesh. Quickly pulling up an elegant webpage—a webpage that any bureaucrat involved in MDMs, from a Block Officer on up, could utilize in real-time—Jaiswal demonstrated how much progress has been made in schools reporting and serving meals (see below for a rough chart of what he showed me.) This data, thanks to the Right-to-Information Act, can be accessed by vigilant citizens as well, though not as readily as the bureaucrats. So even if teachers misrepresent their service numbers to the government, the community can

⁶⁷ Rough estimate gathered from Jaiswal interview, using numbers from IVRS website of "schools reporting serving MDMs."

⁶⁸ Jaiswal, S.P., Joint Director of Uttar Pradesh Mid-Day Meal Authority, Personal interview. Lucknow, 19 Nov. 2012. Mr. Singh further estimated that around 85-90% of urban schools in UP use NGOs for cooking meals.

hold them accountable at a local level.⁶⁹ From the commanding heights of the MDMA’s office in downtown Lucknow, one could not help but feel impressed with the Scheme’s improvement.

(Rounded Numbers)	October 2010	October 2012
Number of Reporting Schools	116,000	145,000
Number of Schools not Serving MDMs	43,000	10,000
% of Schools not Serving MDMs	37%	7%

Findings and Analysis

After completing my research, my overall impression of the state of community participation and local governance in Lucknow District’s MDMS is that it is *far below the ideal envisioned by the government*—despite a few exceptions like the 5-parent monitoring committee at Purva Madhamic or the Dagra family’s interest in utilizing a SMC at Tendukheru. In this section, however, I present my conclusions under three distinct themes, as a way to clarify the ‘why’ behind the low parent participation rate. First, I will note the problems ‘quick-delivery’ NGOs pose for developing excellent community participation in urban MDMS schools, even though they are currently fulfilling a vital function. Next, I will highlight what I learned about the connections between recent Right-to-Education reforms and a higher amount of participation in MDMS, while also acknowledging the difficulties Uttar Pradesh faces in putting together high-quality SMCs. Ending on a positive note, I point out what is going well about MDMS in Uttar Pradesh, offering hope for what could be an even better scheme in the future that involves a wider range of community actors.

⁶⁹ Although, at this point it is important to keep in mind Reetika Khera’s line from the aforementioned 2010 *Hindustan Times* article that, “You have the number of meals being reported, but what you do with that number is also important.”

The Problems of NGOs

I could not help but notice in my observations that communities where the MDM was cooked on-site involved more outside participation than those that used NGOs: NGOs often served around 50 schools, leaving them time to do no more than drop the food off. Granted, this observation does not mean that rural parents cared significantly more about their children's education and school food than urban parents; contrast concerned urban parents like R.M. Aswathi at Patmik Vidayala with apathetic rural parents like S.P. Chandra at Bijnaur II.⁷⁰ Rather, it means that cooking meals on-site inherently provided more opportunities for involvement, especially for the 3-4 cooks/mothers that were paid R1,000 a month for their efforts and the teacher working with the gram panchayat every day to bring food supplies to the school. Experts I spoke with noted this trend too. As stated above, the Joint-Director Mr. Jaiswal admitted the dearth of community participation at the urban, NGO schools, but when I interviewed Ms. Arundhati Dhuru, a state adviser on the implementation of Right-to-Food schemes, she took the argument one step further. "Too often NGOs are unaccountable and have no connection to the community—especially when they are large and have a monopoly on distribution. Some kind of local women's group or federation of women's groups would probably be preferable," she told me.⁷¹ So, does this unfortunate situation mean MDMS in Lucknow District should stop using NGOs and force all urban schools to build on-site kitchens? Absolutely not. To quote an observation from the 2010 Prachti Report on MDMS in Kolkata that I noticed too: "As most of the primary schools in [urban areas] suffered from severe space constraint, the central kitchen proved to be very useful in avoiding this difficulty...Despite its disadvantages, the compromise was, perhaps,

⁷⁰ For the Aswathi interview, see p. 18 of this paper and for the Chandra interview see p. 23-24.

⁷¹ Dhuru, A. State Adviser to the Supreme Court Commissioners on Implementation of Right-to-Food Schemes, Personal interview. Lucknow, 24 Nov. 2012

unavoidable.”⁷² What this situation does mean, however, is that urban school governing bodies will have to be especially vigilant in finding ways to involve the community in MDMS and that NGOs will have to focus on the quality of their overall interactions with the school in terms of achieving the program’s core outcomes, not simply to quantify the schools they serve or number of meals they deliver.

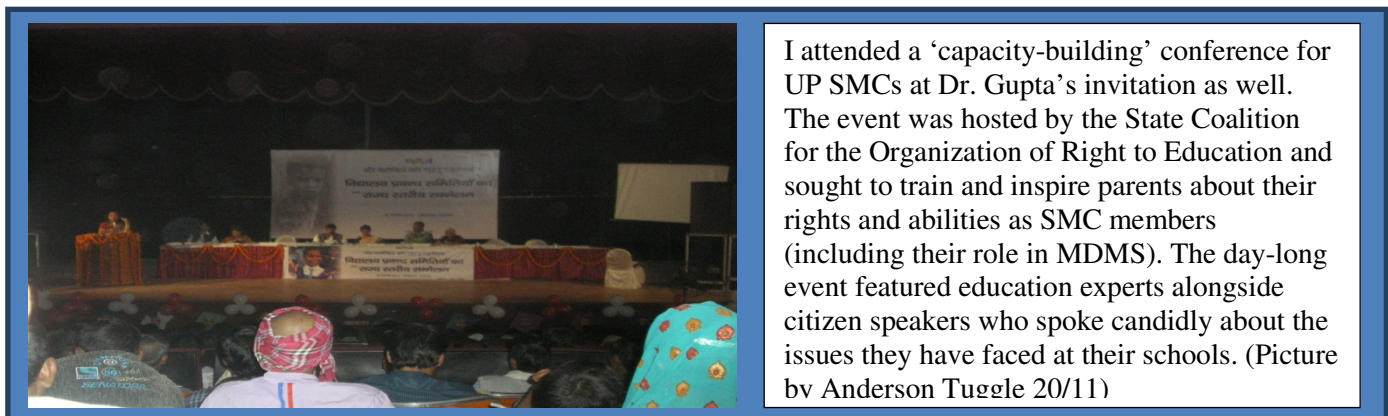
The Importance of the Right-to-Education Reforms for MDMS

Before I did my research, I did not fully grasp how endemic the recent decentralization of the Indian education system was to improving participation in MDMS (as noted in my Background section with RTE, SMCs, etc). I knew about PTAs beforehand, but it was only when I went out into the field that I learned how limited those associations were—and how uninterested parents were about getting involved in them.⁷³ Besides the one-off example of the five-parent MDM monitoring committee at Purva Madhamic—which came more from a highly-involved individual teacher than a strong institution anyway—no other PTAs seemed to be operating. Despite the best intentions of the higher government, there were no local institutions with power that offered parents who wanted to help at the school opportunities for engagement and leadership. If UP continues to form SMCs under the Right-to-Education Act, however, that could actually give the (few) concerned parents these opportunities. In my interview with Dr. Veena Gupta, a state adviser on RTE, she also helped me make the connection between what the SMCs could do for giving parents meaningful roles that token institutions could not. She explained to me that, while this has not yet happened in UP, SMCs (and, thus, parents) will be given substantial financial control over expenses like uniforms, books, scholarships, and mid-day meals in the future. The problem is that these SMCs take away traditional power from the Gram Pradhans and landlords, who do

⁷² *The Prachiti Report on Mid-Day Meal: The Mid-Day Meal Programme in Urban Primary and Rural Upper Primary Schools in West Bengal*. P 22

⁷³ See p. 18 and p. 21 of this paper for examples from the field of the apathy surrounding PTAs.

not qualify as ‘school parents’ given that their children often attend private schools. “This has been a problem, [poor parents] are scared of having authority and the old powerholders resist,” Dr. Gupta said, “But we will have to continue developing capacities over the traditional caste, class, and gender barriers.”⁷⁴ As seen in the picture below, capacity-training sessions will be important in order for parents to acquire the skills and knowledge needed for effective SMC participation: what a high-quality mid-day meal looks like, how to make a budget, what the responsibilities of the Block vs the District are, etc. To use a Richa Kapoor insight from her 2010 Oxfam working paper: “A community does not ipso facto become aware of issues concerning rights to education. This is where civil society organizations come in.”⁷⁵ Moreover, as many of the parents I met had very limited educations and knew little about what was happening at schools, this capacity-building would be necessary to prevent Dreze and Sen’s corrupt ‘undemocratic decentralization’ that I wrote about in the background section.⁷⁶



The Progress That Has Been Made

Despite the fact that what I saw out in the field was far below what the official guidelines envisioned for MDMS, I would be dishonest if I said that the MDMS was not improving in Lucknow District, UP. Given the difficulties UP faces in implementing *any*

⁷⁴ Gupta, Dr. V, State Adviser on Right to Education and National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, Personal interview. Lucknow, 12 Nov. 2012

⁷⁵ Kapoor, Richa. Essential Services: Community-based Management for Right to Education. P 6 ‘Learning from Experience’ Section

⁷⁶ See p. 10 of this paper.

social programs (as noted in my Background section), it should come as some comfort that Ms. Dhuru calls MDMS “certainly one of the more successful food schemes in Uttar Pradesh.”⁷⁷ One must remember that Uttar Pradesh only began implementing MDMS in earnest a few years ago—compared to the multi-decade lunch schemes of the southern states. As such, it is impressive that it has come as far as it has already. Besides Mr. Jaiswal’s online database that showed exponentially more meals being served in October 2012 than in October 2010—numbers that might not be 100% accurate but are nonetheless the first attempt at having universally agreed-upon data for MDMS—and the aforementioned Purva Madhamic upper-primary school, I saw other instances in the field that gave me hope. At all of the schools I visited, for example, there was a large public board that displayed the weekly MDMS menu and all of the school’s obligations under the SSA program. While my research did not indicate a large swathe of parents were visiting schools frequently, the recent addition of these public information boards makes the general community more aware of the program and, hence, potentially more likely to participate in it. If Information Technology is further developed, hopefully even more data on the program will be readily accessible to parents, journalists, and concerned citizens. In a separate example, multiple parents and children at Baldi Kheda telling me that the meal had improved over the last two years was reassuring, reflecting Dr. Kausar Wizarat’s 2009 report that MDMs in Uttar Pradesh have gone through drastic changes for the better.⁷⁸ To close with a trenchant line from Dreze and Goyal’s 2003 paper on MDMS: “The experience so far clearly shows that mid-day meals have much to

⁷⁷ Dhuru, A. State Adviser to the Supreme Court Commissioners on Implementation of Right-to-Food Schemes, Personal interview. Lucknow, 24 Nov. 2012

⁷⁸ The positive statements from Baldi Kheda parents are on p. 21 of this paper. AND Wizarat, Dr. Kausar. *Study of Best Practices Adopted in Mid-Day-Meal Scheme in Uttar Pradesh*. P 27. He particularly cites new electronic information systems like IVRS.

contribute to the well-being and future of Indian children. As things stand, mid-day meal programs have many flaws, but the way to go is forward and not backward.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Goyal, Aparajita, and Jean Drèze. "Future of Mid-Day Meals." *Economic and Political Weekly* P 4681

Potential Policy Solutions

The following are a humble list of ideas—mostly taken from others more intelligent than myself—about how community participation and local government can be strengthened for MDMS in the future: In Lucknow District, Uttar Pradesh, and perhaps even across the country.

❖ **Enhanced use of IT**

- In the spirit of the Right-to-Information Act, make the IVRS database (from interview with Joint Director) more accessible to ordinary citizens and journalists.
- Use biometric (fingerprinting) attendance systems to hold teachers accountable for attendance, as a recent pilot program in Sarojini Nagar, Lucknow is attempting. This program “will also keep an eye on the Mid-day Meal Scheme.”⁸⁰ This information on teachers and MDMS should be transparent and accessible to the community as well.

❖ **Further development of high-quality SMCs**

- Either the government or NGOs should provide consistent capacity-building workshops to parents who join SMCs, going off what Dr. Gupta showed me on November 20th. This way, despite their own limited education, these parents and concerned citizens can learn about government policies, ways to improve Mid-day Meals, budget-making, and contracts.
- Discontinue PTAs and focus everything on SMCs. In the long-run, once SMCs are functioning in every part of UP, these bodies should be elected and have their own source of revenue (instead of all grants), akin to school boards in the USA. This system will incentivize more involved parents to send their children to government schools over private schools.

❖ **NGO Reforms**

- Unlike the current system, in which most of the powers of choosing and regulating delivery NGOs lies with the District, greater NGO authority should be devolved to the Block and more community-centric urban institutions. In the spirit of the *Panchayat Raj* amendments, this change will help forge closer ties between the schools, the parents, and the NGOs serving mid-day meals.

⁸⁰ "Biometric Attendance for Teachers in UP." *The Hindu Business Line*. Shown to me by Mr. Jaiswal.

Conclusion:

The Inherent Limits of Mid-day Meals

While I am hopeful that the state of community participation and local governance for MDMS will improve in Lucknow District and across UP in the future, it is important to remember that this admirable lunch program has limits. “The midday meal can only help in bringing kids to school. We haven’t done much in terms of keeping them there,” said education activist Madhav Chavan to Nandan Nilekani in Nilekani’s book *Imagining India*.⁸¹ Several of the families I spoke with implicitly said the same thing, in that they did not have a problem with their son or daughter skipping school—despite the fact that they said they appreciated their children having the food at school. To again return to Ms. Gela Yada, the head-teacher in Bijnaur II, she told us that, without strong parental participation in SMCs and beyond, the Mid-day meal in it of itself will not stop children from dropping out of school once they get to the 7th or 8th standard.⁸² After all, a surprising amount of the parents we spoke with thought of the government schools—ostensibly for the ‘public’—as a last resort; they admitted that if they had money, they would have enrolled their children in private schools.

Thus, the goals of strengthening local governing institutions and getting more parents involved in the day-to-day workings of their children’s school are great for MDMS, but they are of the utmost importance for the transformation of India’s impotent public education system. Unless communities in Uttar Pradesh take greater ownership of and responsibility for both the scheme *and* the schools as a whole, even an excellent Mid-day Meal Scheme will be merely a positive footnote in a sea of shortcomings.

⁸¹ Nilekani, Nandan. *Imagining India: Ideas for the New Century* P 186

⁸² Yadav, G. Teacher-in-Charge, Bijnaur II Primary, Personal Interview. Bijnaur, 21 Nov. 2012

Recommendations for Future Study

- A study on the implementation of SMCs—and other Right-to-Education reforms—across the state of Uttar Pradesh. One could focus on if parents are involving themselves in these new entities and how they are responding to receiving substantive powers.
- A study on the use of modern monitoring technology/IT on the quality of MDMS. Are the new developments in mobile phones and biometrics making a positive impact? Or are these developments limited because they ignore the political change that is needed on the ground level?
- A study on the reasons poorer families choose to send their children to questionable private schools over government schools. Could look to see if an even-better MDMS would encourage more children to go to government schools.
- A study on capacity-building programs done to improve citizen participation in government programs, as exemplified by SMC trainings for parents. Which programs work and which do not?

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: (one per school/community):⁸³

Role or Responsibility for Local Governments/Communities, as advised by national and state guidelines	Is this role being fulfilled?	To what degree? (Superior, moderate, lackluster, etc)	Additional Comments, per field visits or interviews
Cooking and serving the meal every day, with a focus on involving poor women in self-help groups.			
Appointing of cooks and helpers for the above purpose.			
Crafting economical, yet varied and nutritious menus. (Use input from various community groups)			
Designing and constructing a kitchen-cum-storage			
Lifting and transporting of food-grain from <i>kotedar/</i> fair price shop.			
Procuring of various consumables from market; vegetables, salt, and condiments for example.			
Performing additional information, education, and communication activities			
Procuring of kitchen devices, utensils, plates, and fuel.			
Reporting weekly menu and number of meals served on a publicly-visible board.			

⁸³ Roles and Responsibilities taken from: India, Uttar Pradesh. Mid-Day Meal Authority. *State/UT– Specific Guidelines to Ensure Regular, Un-interrupted Provision of Cooked Meal of Good Quality*. AND India. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Department of School Education and Literacy, Mid-Day Meal Scheme. *National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (Mid-Day Meal Scheme), 2006, GUIDELINES.*

Using technology to help monitor scheme and make daily reports (IVRS)			
Performing consistent social audits; every day, committee of Gram Pradhan and 1-2 parents should monitor the program for cleanliness, wholesomeness, and non-discrimination of weaker sections.			
Performing a taste-test—by teacher or school committee—before children eat to ensure quality of meal.			
Having an agreed-upon grievance redressal mechanism for reporting MDMS shortcomings.			
Community should be contributing special dishes for MDM on social occasions like holidays or weddings.			
Providing work experience for children by involving them in distribution of meal.			
Developing a kitchen garden or school farm to provide supplemental food.			

APPENDIX B: Sample Household question chart.

Question	Answer
Do your children receive the MDM? Are you satisfied with its quality?	
(if NGO is cooking) Are you aware of the organization that is cooking the meals every day?	
Have you—as a parent—been asked to help with this scheme at all?	
How often do you--or other parents you know--visit the school?	
What is the most important thing that needs to be improved about MDMs? Can you do anything to help make that happen?	