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HARMONIZING GROWTH: THE TRANSFORMATIVE INFLUENCE OF INDIA'S MID-DAY MEAL PROGRAMME ON NUTRITION, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Programme in India traces its roots back to the 1960s when certain states initiated school meal schemes to address malnutrition and boost attendance. It was officially launched as a national scheme in 1995, aiming to provide free cooked meals to children in government and government-aided schools. Over time, the programme has evolved to expand its coverage, improve meal quality, and incorporate nutritional guidelines, becoming one of the world's largest school feeding initiatives. It plays a crucial role in addressing socio-economic challenges by providing free and nutritious meals, promoting educational participation, improving health outcomes, and fostering social inclusion among vulnerable populations. About tens of millions of children receive daily meals through the MDM Programme in government and government-aided schools nationwide. This study seeks to evaluate how the Mid-Day Meal Programme influences nutritional status, educational outcomes, and social empowerment among schoolchildren in India This research is motivated by the pressing need to assess the Mid-Day Meal Programme's impact on crucial aspects of child development amidst India's social welfare agenda. The paper is structured to examine nutritional development, educational outcomes, social empowerment and conclude with key findings.

Keywords: *Mid-Day Meal Programme, Nutritional Development, Educational Outcomes, Enrollment and Dropout Rates, Community Development*

1. Introduction:

The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Programme in India traces its roots back to the 1960s when certain states-initiated school meal schemes to address malnutrition and boost attendance. It was officially launched as a national scheme in 1995, aiming to provide free cooked meals to children in government and government-aided schools. Over time, the programme has evolved to expand its coverage, improve meal quality, and incorporate nutritional guidelines, becoming one of the world's largest school feeding initiatives. It plays a crucial role in addressing socio-economic challenges by providing free and nutritious meals, promoting educational participation, improving health outcomes, and fostering social inclusion among vulnerable populations. About tens of millions of children receive daily meals through the MDM Programme in government and government-aided schools nationwide. This study seeks to evaluate how the Mid-Day Meal Programme influences nutritional status, educational outcomes, and social empowerment among schoolchildren in India This research is motivated by the pressing need to assess the Mid-Day Meal Programme's impact on crucial aspects of child development amidst India's social welfare agenda. The paper is structured to examine nutritional development, educational outcomes, social empowerment and conclude with key findings.

2. Nutritional Development

Malnutrition remains a significant challenge for school-aged children in India, impacting their physical growth, cognitive development, and overall health. High rates of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and stunting persist, with detrimental long-term effects such as diminished educational attainment and productivity. According to the 2023 Global Hunger Index (GHI), India has the highest child wasting rate among all countries surveyed. Anemia is also prevalent, particularly affecting

children aged 5–19, with girls disproportionately affected. Additionally, a substantial proportion of the population struggles to afford a healthy diet, contributing to the persistence of undernourishment.

In 2021, 74.1% of Indians, around 1.043 billion people, couldn't afford a healthy diet, as per the 2023 joint report by FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO. The report also indicated that India had an undernourished population of 16.6% between 2020-2022. Addressing this issue is crucial for the well-being and future prospects of India's children and the nation's socio-economic development. The Mid-Day Meal Programme plays a pivotal role by providing free, nutritious meals during school hours, aiming to combat malnutrition and improve overall health. Encouragingly, recent reports indicate improvements in key nutritional indicators. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 shows reductions in stunting, wasting, and underweight prevalence among children under 5 years compared to NFHS-4. Similarly, Joint Malnutrition Estimates (JME) indicate a decline in stunting prevalence from 2012 to 2022, accompanied by a decrease in India's global burden of stunting.

Moreover, mortality rates among Indian children aged 5 to 9 years have been consistently decreasing (Chart-1), attributed in part to welfare projects like the Mid-Day Meal Programme. Comparatively, India's performance in addressing malnutrition surpasses that of Pakistan, which is also an Asian Country and does not have any programme like MDM, with notable reductions in stunting rates over the last two decades, particularly since 2008 (Chart-2). Furthermore, India exhibits lower overweight proportions compared to Pakistan across the considered period (Chart-3). India's concerted efforts, including initiatives like the Mid-Day Meal Programme, have shown promising results in combating malnutrition and improving the nutritional status of its children.

3. Educational Development

The provision of mid-day meals has been shown to have a significant positive impact on enrollment rates. Before the implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Programme, enrollemnt was low due to various factors including poverty, lack of access to nutritious food, and the need for children to support their families with household work. Following the introduction of the Mid-Day Meal Programme, there has been a noticeable increase in enrollment rates in schools as families are more likely to send their children to school knowing they will receive a nutritious meal during the day. This is particularly beneficial for children from low-income households, as the meals provided at school serve as an incentive for parents to enroll their children in education.

In chart 4, an overall increase in school enrollment is observed in India. In 2003, the rate of increment was much higher compared to other years, with enrollment increasing by more than seven percentage points. Data for the next three years were not available. In 2008, the enrollment rate peaked at 108.31%. Subsequently, the rate decreased slightly over the next three consecutive years, reaching approximately 104% in 2011. In 2012, the rate of enrollment increased again to 107.77%. However, after this year, it decreased until 2019, reaching the lowest rate of 96.12% in the last twenty years. After 2019, the rate started to increase again and crossed 108% in 2022. In this chart, the rate of enrollment in primary schools in India was compared with that of Pakistan. It is evident that from the beginning to the end, Pakistan's enrollment rate has always been lower than India's. The Mann-Whitney test finds the Z-value is 7.708, and the p-value is .000. This indicates that there is a substantial, significant difference between the rates of enrollment in India and Pakistan.

Table 1 presents a comparison of enrollments in primary schools in India for two selected periods. The first period spans from 1986 to 1995, while the second period spans from 2013 to 2022. The first period provides data just before the introduction of the MDM programme, whereas the second period presents the most recent data, post full implementation of the programme. For the second period, data for 2014 and 2017 were not available. A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test finds the 'Z' statistic value is -2.521, with a significance level of .012. This indicates that enrollment has significantly increased in the second period under consideration.

Table 2 represents data regarding dropout rates in Indian primary schools from 1990-91 to 2021-22. In 1990-91, the dropout rate was relatively high at 42.6%. Over the next decade, there was a slight decrease in the dropout rate by 2000-01 to 40.67%. A significant drop occurred between 2000-01 and 2010-11, where the dropout rate decreased to 27%. The dropout rate continued to decline sharply in the subsequent years, reaching as low as 1.5% in 2019-20 and 2021-22. However, there are fluctuations in the dropout rates in some years. For instance, there was a notable increase in the dropout rate in 2016-17 to 6.35%, followed by a decrease in the following years. Overall, the trend indicates a positive trajectory with a consistent decrease in dropout rates over the years, suggesting potential improvements in primary education accessibility, retention efforts, or other interventions aimed at reducing dropout rates in India.

In Table 3 data related to transition of students from primary to upper primary schools in India is presented. The transition rate fluctuated over the years, with some variations observed. In 1991-92, the transition rate was at 89.4%, indicating that a significant proportion of students successfully transitioned from primary to upper primary education. There was a slight decrease in the transition rate by 1995-96 to 84.4%, followed by a slight increase in 1998-99 to 85.9%. From 2009-10 to 2021-22, there seems to be a general increasing trend in the transition rates, with occasional fluctuations. Notable increases in transition rates occurred in recent years, such as in 2019-20 and 2021-22, where the rates reached 92.8% and 93.18%, respectively, indicating an improvement in the successful transition of students from primary to upper primary education

levels. An overall positive trend in last few years the data indicates potential improvements in the continuity of education from primary to upper primary levels in India.

Table 4 presents the retention rates in primary schools in India on a yearly basis. In 2003-04, the retention rate was relatively low at 53.43%, indicating that approximately half of the students who started primary school remained enrolled till the end of the academic year. There was an increase in the retention rate by 2004-05 to 58.11%, suggesting a slight improvement in student retention. A significant increase in retention rates is observed in the later years, particularly from 2017-18 onwards. This upward trend in retention rates continued in subsequent years, with retention rates remaining consistently high, exceeding 86% in 2018-19 and 2019-20. A notable increase occurred in 2020-21, where the retention rate rose sharply to 95.39%. This positive trend in retention rates continued in 2021-22, with a slight increase to 95.43%. Overall, the data suggests a remarkable improvement in the retention rates in primary schools in India over the years, particularly in recent years.

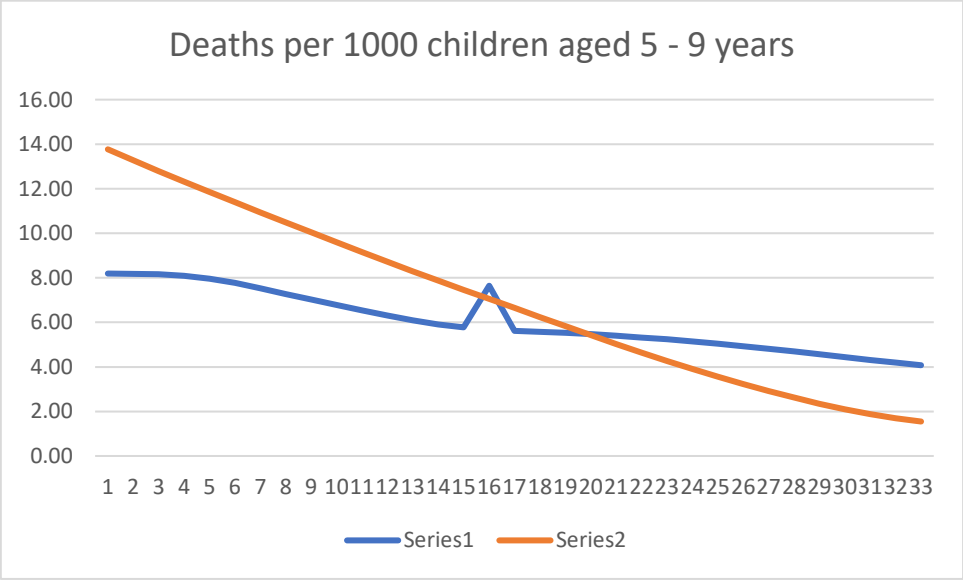
4. Community Development

The Mid-Day Meal Programme is helpful for the community in many ways. The programme gives job opportunities to women as cooks and helpers. This helps them support their families and be more independent. It also promotes equality between men and women. By providing free and nutritious meals, the programme helps all children, especially those from poor families, to attend school without worrying about food. This makes sure that every child has a chance to learn and succeed in school. The programme teaches children, parents, and the community about health, nutrition, and cleanliness. This helps them stay healthy. The programme does not just help children in school. It also improves the health, education, and financial situation of the whole community. It brings people together and makes the community stronger and more resilient. Finally, having access to nutritious meals during school hours helps children focus on their studies and enjoy being at school. This boosts their confidence, self-esteem, and sense of belonging, making them happier and more successful overall.

5. Conclusion

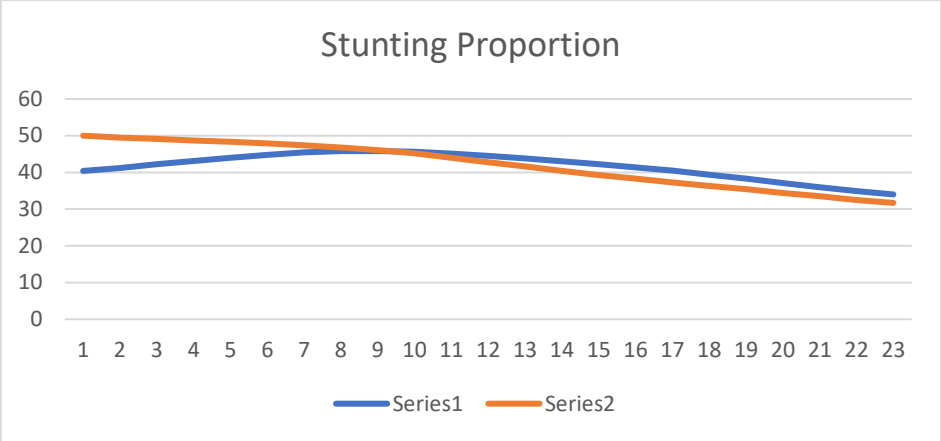
In this paper, it is found that the social impact of the MDM Programme is highly satisfactory. Child mortality, stunting rates, and overweight proportions have decreased significantly after the implementation of the MDM Programme. When compared with Pakistan, India shows a much better position in these parameters. This indicates that the MDM Programme has a positive impact on controlling malnutrition among school-going children in India. The impact on educational development was also discussed in this paper. It was found that various aspects of education, such as enrollment, dropout rates, transition rates, and retention rates, have developed much better compared to the period when the MDM Programme was not implemented. Furthermore, the MDM Programme has also contributed to community development through job opportunities and promoting healthy lifestyles.

Chart-1: Deaths per 1000 children aged 5 - 9 years



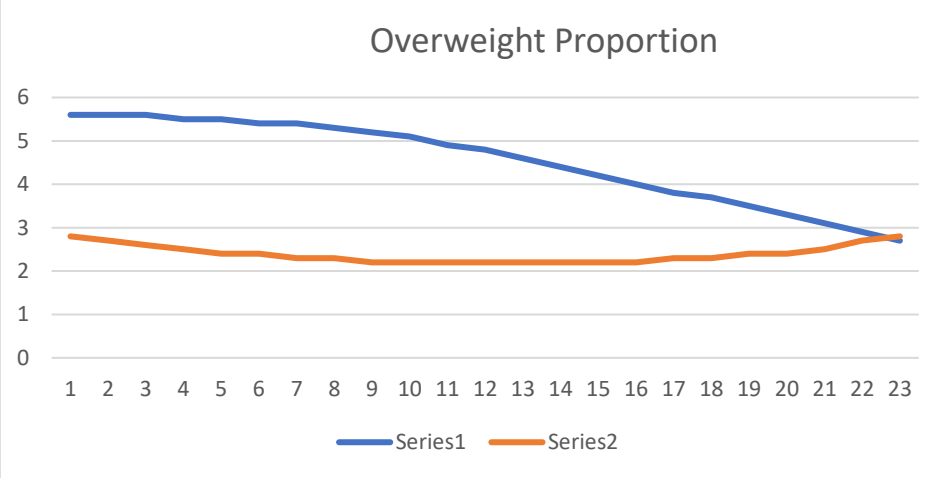
Source: UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation

Chart 2: Stunting Proportion



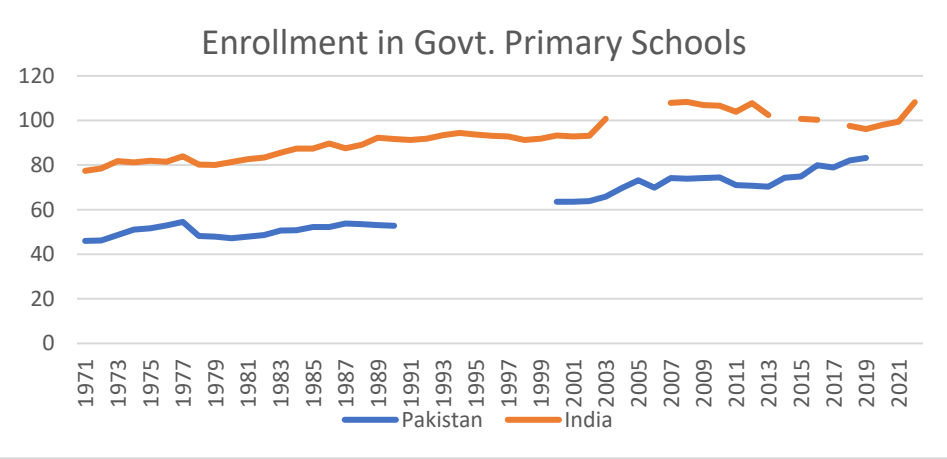
Source: UNICEF

Chart-3: Overweight Proportion



Source: UNICEF

Chart 4: Enrollment in Govt. Primary Schools



Source: World Bank

Table-1: Ratio of enrollment, to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown.

Year	Enrollment in Primary Schools (%)	Year	Enrollment in Primary Schools (%)
1986	89.6029	2013	102.5176
1987	87.54055	2014	
1988	89.06922	2015	100.7128
1989	92.2303	2016	100.254
1990	91.64843	2017	
1991	91.30232	2018	97.5933
1992	91.79192	2019	96.11713
1993	93.39665	2020	97.96932
1994	94.34188	2021	99.39272
1995	93.68376	2022	108.1452

Source: World Bank

Table 2: Dropout rates in Primary School

Year	Rate in %
1990-91	42.6
2000-01	40.67
2010-11	27
2011-12	5.62
2012-13	4.67
2013-14	4.34
2014-15	4.13
2015-16	4.09
2016-17	6.35
2017-18	3.51
2018-19	4.5
2019-20	1.5
2020-21	0.8
2021-22	1.5

Source: UDISE plus

Table 3: Transition rate from primary school to upper primary school

Year	Rate in %
1991-92	89.4
1995-96	84.4
1998-99	85.9
2009-10	85.17
2013-14	89.58
2014-15	89.74
2015-16	90.14
2016-17	88.56
2017-18	90.78
2018-19	90.51
2019-20	92.8
2020-21	91.76
2021-22	93.18

Source: UDISE plus

Table 4: Retention rate in primary school

Year	Rate in %
2003-04	53.43
2004-05	58.11
2017-18	86.11
2018-19	86.32
2019-20	86.97
2020-21	95.39
2021-22	95.43

Source: UDISE plus

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