



EATING TOGETHER, BELONGING TOGETHER: MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME, SOCIAL COHESION AND REDUCTION OF SOCIAL DISPARITIES AMONG RURAL SCHOOL CHILDREN IN DHALAI, TRIPURA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study examines livelihood diversification within a resource-dependent rural economy through The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) is generally understood as a nutritional and educational welfare intervention designed to address classroom hunger and promote school participation. However, its significance extends beyond nutrition and enrolment because the practice of eating together creates a routine social space in which children from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds interact. This paper examines the role of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme in fostering social cohesion and reducing caste, tribal, linguistic and economic disparities among students in rural schools of Dhalai district, Tripura. The paper is developed from the first two objectives and empirical findings of a descriptive survey study involving 300 respondents, comprising 200 students, 40 teachers and 60 parents. A quantitative-dominant approach, supported by qualitative observations and informal responses, was adopted. The analysis indicates a positive perception of the scheme's contribution to social cohesion, with a composite social-cohesion mean of 3.90 (SD = 1.11) on a five-point scale. Equality-related responses also produced a positive mean of 3.79 (SD = 1.16). Students largely reported sitting and eating together, increased interaction and greater comfort with classmates from different backgrounds. The evidence further indicates that uniform meal provision reduces the visibility of economic differences and creates opportunities for interaction across tribal and non-tribal groups. Nevertheless, occasional avoidance, seating imbalances, linguistic hesitation and culturally shaped food preferences indicate that shared meals do not automatically eliminate entrenched social boundaries. The paper argues that MDMS can function as an everyday institution of socialisation and an important mechanism of substantive inclusion when supported by inclusive school practices, teacher supervision and culturally sensitive implementation.

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Introduction

Education is not merely a mechanism for transmitting knowledge; it is also a major institution of socialisation. In a socially and culturally diverse society such as India, schools provide important spaces in which children encounter individuals whose caste, tribe, language, religion and economic circumstances may differ from their own. Consequently, everyday school practices can either reproduce existing social divisions or provide opportunities for developing more egalitarian relationships.

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme occupies a distinctive position within this social process. Although originally associated primarily with nutritional security and educational participation, the provision of a common cooked meal creates an institutionalised opportunity for children to sit together, eat together and interact beyond the formal classroom. The dissertation on which this paper is based conceptualises this process through the sociological idea of commensality, or eating together, arguing that shared meals can reduce social distance and contribute to collective belonging.

This dimension is particularly relevant in rural Dhalai district of Tripura. The dissertation identifies Dhalai as a predominantly rural and geographically challenging district with a substantial tribal population, linguistic diversity including Kokborok and Bengali, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Schools consequently become important institutional spaces for interaction between children belonging to different communities.

The social significance of MDMS therefore deserves examination beyond conventional indicators such as enrolment, attendance and nutrition. The central concern is whether a routine institutional practice - sharing a common meal - can contribute to weakening social boundaries and strengthening everyday interaction among children.

The present paper focuses exclusively on the first two objectives of the dissertation:

1. To examine how the Mid-Day Meal Scheme helps build social cohesion among rural school students in Dhalai, Tripura.
2. To analyse the impact of shared meals on reducing caste, tribal, linguistic and economic disparities in Dhalai, Tripura.

Background and Context

Mid-Day Meal Scheme and the Social Function of Schooling: The dissertation conceptualises MDMS as a multidimensional intervention involving nutritional security, educational participation and social equity. Its distinctive social dimension derives from the provision of a common meal to children irrespective of their social background. The practice is sociologically significant because food has historically been connected with social boundaries. Rules concerning who eats with whom can reproduce distinctions of status, purity, community and identity. Institutionalised commensality potentially challenges these boundaries by making shared eating an ordinary part of school life. In this sense, the meal becomes more than food. It becomes a social institution within the school institution.

Dhalai as a Significant Social Setting: Dhalai provides a particularly relevant setting for examining this process because rural schools frequently bring together children from tribal and non-tribal communities and different linguistic backgrounds. The dissertation notes that schools may constitute some of the few institutional spaces where sustained interaction across social and cultural boundaries takes place. The shared meal therefore has the potential to provide repeated opportunities for:

- interpersonal interaction;
- friendship formation;
- informal communication;
- reduction of social distance;
- development of belonging;
- exposure to cultural diversity; and
- normalisation of egalitarian practices.

However, the dissertation also emphasises that the outcome depends upon school-level conditions such as seating arrangements, teacher supervision, school climate, infrastructure and community attitudes.

Theoretical Framework

Commensality and Social Cohesion: The principal theoretical concept underlying the paper is commensality—the practice of eating together. Shared eating provides an informal setting for communication and interpersonal contact. Repeated participation can transform social interaction from an exceptional occurrence into an everyday routine. The dissertation interprets this process from a Durkheimian perspective: collective rituals can strengthen solidarity and contribute to the development of a collective consciousness. The school meal consequently operates as a routine ritual of collective participation.

Social Learning: Social learning theory provides a second explanatory perspective. Children learn attitudes and behaviours through observation, participation and interaction. When children repeatedly observe teachers and peers engaging in non-discriminatory shared practices, egalitarian behaviour can become normalised.

The dissertation therefore treats meal time as a form of experiential social learning rather than merely a welfare activity.

Hidden Curriculum: The concept of the hidden curriculum is particularly useful in interpreting the findings. Formal curricula may teach equality and fraternity explicitly, but institutional routines teach these values implicitly. Eating together provides children with an opportunity to experience equality rather than simply learn about it.

Thus, MDMS may operate as a form of everyday democratic pedagogy.

Review of Related Literature

The dissertation's literature review demonstrates that previous research has predominantly concentrated on nutritional outcomes, enrolment, attendance, retention and learning. Evidence reviewed in the dissertation suggests relatively consistent positive effects on school participation, while outcomes concerning learning and nutrition vary according to programme design and implementation quality. The review also identifies an important gap concerning the social dimensions of the programme. In particular, there is limited systematic research examining how students experience inclusion or exclusion during meals and how teachers mediate interaction across social boundaries. The Tripura-specific literature identified in the dissertation similarly indicates that systematic district-level research on social cohesion, equality and everyday meal-time interaction is limited, especially in remote and tribal-dominated areas such as Dhalai. This gap provides the rationale for the present analysis.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design: The study employed a quantitative-dominant descriptive approach, supplemented by qualitative observations and informal responses. The descriptive survey design was selected because the research sought to examine existing perceptions, practices and social interactions rather than manipulate variables experimentally.

Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of perceived and observed associations, not as definitive causal effects.

Study Area: The research was conducted in rural areas of Dhalai district, Tripura. The district was considered appropriate because of its tribal concentration, linguistic diversity, geographical remoteness and infrastructural constraints.

Sample

The study included **300 respondents**:

Respondent category	Number
Students	200
Teachers	40
Parents	60
Total	300

Schools were selected purposively, students through simple random sampling, and teachers and parents purposively according to their involvement with the scheme.

Data Collection Tools: The study used questionnaires for students, teachers and parents. The student questionnaire included Likert-scale items addressing social interaction, equality and inclusiveness. Observational notes and informal feedback were used to contextualise quantitative findings.

Data Analysis: The dissertation reports the use of:

- percentage analysis;
- mean;
- standard deviation;
- group-wise comparison;
- correlation analysis; and
- qualitative thematic interpretation.

For the present paper, emphasis is placed on findings directly relevant to Objectives 1 and 2.

Findings and Analysis

Objective 1: Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Social Cohesion

The first objective examined whether the Mid-Day Meal Scheme contributes to social cohesion among rural school students. Five questionnaire items (Items 6–10) measured dimensions including shared seating, comfort in eating with classmates, interaction, friendship and unity. The composite Social Cohesion score was $M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.11$ on a five-point Likert scale.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics Relevant to Social Cohesion

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Social Cohesion	3.90	1.11	1.00	5.00
Equality	3.79	1.16	1.00	5.00

The overall mean of 3.90 is above the neutral midpoint of the scale and indicates a generally favourable perception of social cohesion associated with shared meals. The dissertation reports that most students agreed that children from different backgrounds sit together, feel comfortable eating with classmates, interact more during meals and experience greater unity.

Shared Eating as a Social Interaction Space

The findings suggest that meal time creates a semi-formal social environment distinct from the classroom. Field observations recorded relaxed communication, fluid peer-group boundaries and spontaneous sharing among younger children. Teachers also observed that students interacted beyond the relatively structured hierarchies of classroom life.

This is sociologically important because social cohesion is not produced solely through formal teaching. It emerges through repeated interaction. The meal therefore appears to provide three related mechanisms:

shared physical space → repeated interaction → increased familiarity and belonging

The process is particularly important for children whose everyday social networks may otherwise remain relatively community-specific.

Community-wise Similarity

The dissertation reports very similar social-cohesion means for tribal and non-tribal respondents:

Community	Mean Social Cohesion
Tribal	3.89
Non-Tribal	3.91

The difference is only 0.02 points, suggesting a high degree of similarity in the reported experience of social cohesion between the two groups.

This finding is particularly relevant to the first objective because it indicates that the integrative experience of shared meals is not confined to one community group.

From Classroom Segmentation to Meal-time Interaction

The qualitative evidence strengthens the quantitative result. Students reportedly became more socially expressive during meals, while informal peer boundaries became less rigid. The meal can therefore be interpreted as a social bridge between otherwise differentiated peer groups. However, the evidence should not be interpreted as complete elimination of social boundaries. A minority of respondents reported occasional avoidance, minor seating imbalances and cultural hesitation. Thus, the more defensible conclusion is that MDMS contributes to the weakening of visible social segmentation, rather than completely eliminating social differentiation.

Objective 2: Shared Meals and Reduction of Social Disparities

The second objective examined whether common meals reduce caste, tribal, linguistic and economic disparities.

The equality dimension was measured through Items 11–15. The composite mean was 3.79 (SD = 1.16), slightly below the social-cohesion score but still clearly above the neutral midpoint.

Students largely agreed that:

- all children receive the same food;
- students are not treated differently because of caste or tribe;
- rich–poor differences become less visible;
- students generally do not avoid eating with others; and
- diversity is respected.

This finding suggests that the common meal operates as a structural equaliser.

Caste and Tribal Differences

The provision of a uniform meal potentially disrupts distinctions that may otherwise enter everyday school interaction. The dissertation reports minimal difference between tribal and non-tribal students' perceptions and identifies the structural uniformity of food provision as a factor reducing visible social distinctions.

The community-wise social-cohesion scores reinforce this observation:

Tribal = 3.89

Non-Tribal = 3.91

The near-identical scores suggest that both groups perceive the shared-meal environment in broadly similar terms.

Nevertheless, the study also found that some tribal students preferred sitting with familiar peers. This indicates that formal equality does not necessarily translate immediately into complete social integration.

Linguistic Differences

Dhalai's linguistic plurality, particularly the presence of Bengali and Kokborok, creates another potential boundary.

The qualitative responses indicated that language occasionally restricted initial interaction and that some tribal students preferred familiar peers. Yet repeated interaction appeared to reduce hesitation over time. This finding is theoretically significant.

It suggests that social integration is cumulative. A single shared meal may have limited transformative capacity, but repeated participation can gradually normalise interaction across linguistic boundaries.

Thus, repeated commensality may be more important than isolated commensality.

Economic Differences

The strongest mechanism of economic equalisation arises from the uniformity of food provision.

In conventional school settings, economic differences may become visible through the quality and quantity of food children bring from home. The common meal reduces the significance of this distinction by providing the same meal and portion to students.

The dissertation reports that parents perceived reduced economic stigma and that economically weaker students experienced less embarrassment regarding lunch quality. Equal portions and equal access to nutritional benefits were also identified.

This produces what may be termed economic invisibility during mealtime.

This mechanism matters not merely for material redistribution but for dignity. When children do not have to publicly display differences in household food resources, the social stigma associated with poverty may be reduced.

Discussion

Together, the two objectives show that the social significance of MDMS operates through two interconnected mechanisms.

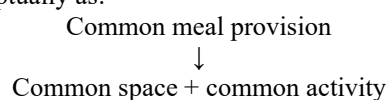
First: Interaction

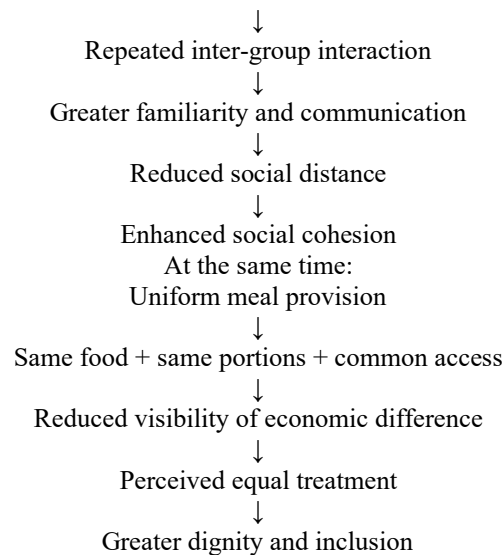
Shared meals bring children into repeated physical proximity and create opportunities for informal communication.

Second: Equalisation

Uniform provision reduces the visibility of differences in food resources and establishes a common institutional standard.

These mechanisms can be represented conceptually as:





The empirical results support this conceptual model, although the descriptive design does not permit a definitive causal claim.

Theoretical Interpretation

From a Durkheimian perspective, the daily meal can be interpreted as a collective ritual that reinforces solidarity. The common activity creates a shared experience that transcends some pre-existing group boundaries. From the perspective of social learning theory, children learn inclusion through repeated observation and participation. From the perspective of the hidden curriculum, the school communicates equality not only through textbooks but through institutional practices. The significance of the findings is therefore broader than the meal itself. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme potentially transforms a welfare intervention into an everyday institution of democratic socialisation.

Formal Equality versus Substantive Equality

An important contribution of the findings is the distinction between formal equality and substantive equality. Providing every child with the same meal represents formal institutional equality. But substantive equality requires more: children must also feel accepted, comfortable and respected. The findings show progress toward both forms, but not complete achievement. The mean equality score of 3.79 is positive, while qualitative evidence reveals occasional avoidance and cultural hesitation. Consequently, the study supports a nuanced conclusion: MDMS creates the institutional conditions for equality, but the transformation of social attitudes depends upon the wider school environment.

Major Findings

Based specifically on the first two objectives, the study establishes the following major findings:

1. Social cohesion was positively perceived, with a mean score of 3.90 (SD = 1.11).
2. Students generally reported sitting together irrespective of social background.
3. Shared meals increased opportunities for interpersonal communication and informal interaction.
4. Students reported greater comfort in eating with classmates from different backgrounds.
5. Teachers observed reduced rigidity in peer-group boundaries during meal time.
6. Tribal and non-tribal social-cohesion scores were remarkably similar—3.89 and 3.91 respectively.
7. Equality received a positive mean score of 3.79 (SD = 1.16).
8. Students largely perceived uniform meal provision as non-discriminatory.
9. The common meal reduced the visibility of economic differences, particularly differences in household food provision.
10. Language occasionally created barriers to interaction, but repeated exposure appeared to reduce hesitation.
11. Economic stigma associated with lunch quality was reportedly reduced through equal meal provision.
12. Social disparities were reduced but not eliminated; occasional avoidance and culturally influenced seating preferences persisted.

Conclusion

The evidence examined in this paper indicates that the Mid-Day Meal Scheme performs an important social function in rural schools of Dhalai district, Tripura. Its significance lies not only in providing food but in creating a repeated institutional occasion for children from diverse social backgrounds to participate in a common activity. With a social-cohesion mean of 3.90 and an equality mean of 3.79, the empirical evidence indicates broadly positive perceptions of the scheme's integrative role. The similarity between tribal and non-tribal social-cohesion scores further suggests that the shared meal creates a relatively common social experience across community boundaries.

The evidence concerning economic disparity is particularly important. By providing children with the same food and portion, MDMS reduces the social visibility of differences in household food resources. Similarly, repeated interaction appears to provide opportunities for overcoming initial linguistic and cultural hesitation.

Nevertheless, the study does not support an idealised claim that shared meals automatically eliminate social inequality. Occasional avoidance, culturally preferred seating and linguistic hesitation indicate that deeper social boundaries can survive within apparently inclusive institutional arrangements.

The central conclusion, therefore, is that the Mid-Day Meal Scheme should be understood as a potential mechanism of everyday social integration rather than merely as a nutritional welfare programme. Its effectiveness depends substantially on how schools organise the meal, how teachers supervise interaction, and whether the wider institutional culture supports equality and inclusion. The scheme is most transformative when policy provision is accompanied by social pedagogy.

Policy and Educational Implications

The findings suggest several practical measures.

Inclusive Seating: Schools should encourage mixed seating rather than allowing persistent community-based peer clusters.

Teacher Facilitation: Teachers should actively observe meal-time interaction and intervene sensitively where exclusion occurs.

Cultural Sensitisation: Schools can introduce activities addressing dietary diversity, tribal and non-tribal cultures and linguistic differences.

Language Inclusion: Simple bilingual or multilingual interaction during meal activities may help reduce linguistic hesitation.

Social Indicators in MDM Monitoring: Monitoring should extend beyond food quantity and quality to include:

- inclusive seating;
- student perceptions of discrimination;
- peer interaction;
- social exclusion;
- community participation; and
- dignity and equal treatment.

The dissertation similarly recommends inclusive seating policies, social-cohesion indicators, teacher training, parent awareness and periodic social audits.

Limitations

The findings must be interpreted within the methodological boundaries of the original dissertation. First, the study is confined to rural government and government-aided schools in Dhalai district. Second, the research employs a descriptive rather than experimental design. Third, much of the evidence concerns perceptions and self-reported experiences. Fourth, the study does not measure long-term changes in social attitudes. Consequently, the findings demonstrate a positive association and perceived contribution, but they cannot establish that MDMS alone caused changes in social cohesion or eliminated caste, tribal, linguistic or economic inequalities.

Scope for Future Research

Future research should move beyond cross-sectional descriptive evidence and examine:

1. longitudinal changes in children's inter-community attitudes;
2. differences between tribal-majority and mixed schools;
3. urban–rural comparisons;
4. ethnographic observation of meal-time interactions;
5. experimental evaluation of rotational seating;
6. the relationship between teacher behaviour and social integration; and
7. the long-term relationship between school-based commensality and adult attitudes toward social diversity.

Such studies would help establish whether the social effects observed in Dhalai are temporary behavioural adjustments or evidence of deeper attitudinal transformation.

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