

Policy Perspectives on the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (PM POSHAN) in Elementary Schools in Darjeeling, West Bengal

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Abstract. *The Mid-day meal is one of the major tools in enhancing child nutrition, school attendance and educational outcomes in across India. However, in Darjeeling district, the scheme faces the unique challenges which include dispersed settlements, difficult terrain, infrastructural gaps, the presence of tea-garden communities, and significant ethno linguistic diversity. This study analyzes multiple policy perspectives applied to PM POSHAN/MDM in Darjeeling's elementary schools, specifically focusing on the rights-based lens, nutritional and health perspective, educational incentive perspective, governance viewpoint, equity perspective, and operational challenges. Based on the analysis of administrative data, the paper also proposes the targeted strategies or policy recommendation specific to Darjeeling district.*

Key words: *Mid-day meal scheme, policy, challenges, targeted strategies, recommendations.*

Introduction

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDM), rebranded nationally as PM POSHAN, stands as one of the world's largest school feeding programs. It serves as a core component of India's strategy aimed at improving child nutrition, increasing school attendance, and reducing educational exclusion (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2022). Although governed by national norms, the scheme's effective implementation is substantially influenced by state authorities and local administrations, leading to varied realities across different geographical contexts.

The Darjeeling district, situated in the Himalayan foothills of northern West Bengal, faces unique implementation challenges due to several factors. These challenges include dispersed settlements, difficult terrain, infrastructural gaps, the presence of tea-garden communities, and significant ethno linguistic diversity. This study analyzes multiple policy perspectives applied to PM POSHAN/MDM in Darjeeling's elementary schools, specifically focusing on the rights-based lens, nutritional and health perspective, educational incentive perspective, governance viewpoint, equity perspective, and operational challenges.

Historical and Policy Background

The MDM Scheme originated in 1995 as the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education. Since its launch, the scheme has evolved in both normative scope and design, becoming institutionalized in various forms (Global Child Nutrition Foundation [GCNF], 2021). The revised national guidelines for PM POSHAN emphasize several key criteria: supplying hot cooked meals that meet specified calorie and protein norms, ensuring hygienic preparation, maintaining regularity of supply, promoting social inclusion, and ensuring transparency in resource flows (MoE, 2022).

Specifically, the required nutritional standards mandate 450 kcal and 12 g of protein for the primary level, and 700 kcal and 20 g of protein for the upper primary level.

Implementation responsibilities are shared across governmental tiers: the central government provides foodgrains, cooked meal norms, and funds; state governments are tasked with adapting menus, supervising logistics, and appointing nodal agencies; and district administrations coordinate monitoring, distribution, and grievance redressal (MoE, 2022; West Bengal School Education Department, 2019). Historically, West Bengal has shown a strong focus on the MDM, with the state School Education Department functioning as the nodal authority. Local implementation and monitoring fall under the purview of district magistrates and district programme managers (West Bengal School Education Department, 2019). Programmatic documentation (Programme Approval Board write-ups) indicates that West Bengal has actively pursued high coverage rates and introduced state-level adaptations, such as specific engagement norms for cook-cum-helpers, strategies tailored for remote areas, and coordination with the public distribution system for sourcing foodgrains supply (West Bengal School Education Department, 2019).

Rights-based Perspective

From a rights framework, PM POSHAN is understood not as a welfare handout but as an essential entitlement, integral to children's fundamental rights to adequate nutrition and to education. The normative justification for viewing MDM as an entitlement is rooted in court rulings that treat school feeding as crucial to educational access and in the legal entrenchment of education itself as a fundamental right (Right to Education Act). This perspective highlights state accountability, predictable provisioning, and established grievance mechanisms. Policy prescriptions under this lens emphasize the public transparency of resource flows, statutory oversight bodies, and the legal sanctioning of these entitlements.

Applying the rights lens to Darjeeling underscores the state's obligation to ensure equitable access for marginalized populations, including children from indigenous communities, tea-garden areas, and remote hamlets. However, the realization of this entitlement in Darjeeling faces structural barriers, which are viewed as implementation deficits. These deficits include irregular supplies primarily due to the difficult terrain, inadequate kitchen sheds, and a lack of cook-cum-helpers in the most remote settlements (MoE, 2022; GCNF, 2021). A rights-based policy approach for Darjeeling would therefore advocate for targeted budgetary allocations, such as supplementary funds specifically for infrastructure and transport, alongside strong legal accountability mechanisms at the district level to ensure entitlements are fully met regardless of geographical remoteness.

Nutritional and Public Health Perspective

The nutritional policy perspective positions the MDM as a vital public health intervention aimed at augmenting children's daily dietary intake while simultaneously reducing issues like anemia, under nutrition, and micro-nutrient deficiencies. National guidelines mandate specific calorie and protein norms and recommend the inclusion of supplementary items such as milk or eggs where feasible. Although evaluations confirm that the MDM generally improves short-term calorie intake and coverage of school meals, there remain persistent challenges, including inconsistent inclusion of fruits or eggs, variable dietary diversity, and occasional dilution or substitution of the prescribed menus (Satyarthi Children's Foundation, 2021; MoE, 2022).

In Darjeeling, challenges to nutritional effectiveness arise from higher cooking and transport costs, supply chain disruptions particularly during the monsoon season due to landslides—and local cultural food preferences that can impact meal acceptability. Furthermore, tea-garden communities in the district are known to exhibit historically higher rates of child under nutrition, based on local health surveys. This suggests that generic national menus may be insufficient without local adaptations, such as the frequent inclusion of protein-rich items or micronutrient fortification. To maximize nutritional returns, a public health policy approach requires district authorities to prioritize the monitoring of nutritional outcomes through anemia screening and anthropometry. This also necessitates strengthening cold chains and fully integrating school feeding operations with local public health outreach initiatives, such as deworming and micronutrient supplementation (MoE, 2022; GCNF, 2021).

Educational and Incentive Perspective

A primary and strongly articulated justification for the MDM is its function as a powerful incentive to boost school retention, attendance, and enrolment, especially among children from economically marginalized households and for girls. Existing empirical literature suggests a positive association between school feeding programs and improvements in attendance and enrolment, although the degree of impact varies by context (GCNF, 2021). This perspective fundamentally views the MDM as an investment in human capital, generating secondary social benefits.

The incentive function of the MDM is particularly vital in Darjeeling, where school going can be interrupted by household economic pressures, labor demands within tea gardens, and seasonal migration. Evaluations from nearby parts of North Bengal (like parts of Jalpaiguri) indicate that providing regular, visible meals can significantly improve punctuality and reduce early dropouts (JETIR study; local evaluations). However, if the quality is perceived as low or meals are irregular, the intended incentive effect is compromised. Policy, therefore, must ensure both quality and regularity, and link the feeding program with sound pedagogical practices, utilizing midday meal time as a venue for structured personal hygiene training, health education, or other structured learning sessions.

Governance, Decentralisation, and Administrative Perspective

The governance perspective focuses on the hybrid administrative nature of the MDM, characterized by central financing, state-level management, and local implementation. This structure inherently creates both opportunities for local adaptation and potential administrative tensions. Central guidelines establish uniform funding formulas and nutritional standards, while district and state administrations must manage logistics, human resources (cook-cum-helpers), procurement, and monitoring activities. Decentralization aims to foster community participation and empower local entities, such as gram panchayats and school management committees (SMCs); however, uneven capacity across local levels often restricts the scheme's overall effectiveness.

Darjeeling faces specific administrative challenges in coordinating services across Gram Panchayats and dispersed hilly blocks that often suffer from low road connectivity and limited administrative staffing. In areas where local governance capacity is weak, schools might have to rely on ad hoc arrangements or even local NGOs for meal preparation, which, while sometimes improving delivery in specific hamlets, complicates issues of accountability and standardization (West Bengal School Education Department, 2019). Effective policy approaches for Darjeeling must strengthen district programme managers, formalize community monitoring mechanisms (like social audits), invest in capacity building for SMCs, and provide specific district-level administrative resources, such as mobile monitoring tools and transport subsidies.

Equity and Social Inclusion Perspective

The social-inclusion lens critically examines whether the MDM serves to mitigate existing societal inequalities based on ethnicity, caste, location, or gender, or whether it inadvertently perpetuates them. Research from various parts of India has documented instances of caste-based discrimination in meal distribution and differential access for marginalized groups (Satyarthi Children's Foundation, 2021). A core policy objective is to ensure that MDM acts as an instrument of social integration by avoiding practices that marginalize groups and ensuring all children eat together.

In Darjeeling, given its multiethnic composition and history of identity politics, implementation must be culturally sensitive. Acceptability across different communities can be enhanced through menu design that respects local dietary customs while still meeting the mandated nutritional norms. Special policy attention must also be directed toward vulnerable groups, including Scheduled Tribes, children from tea garden households, and newly arrived migrant families, who may encounter language barriers in accessing grievance mechanisms or be less aware of their entitlements (local studies). Recommended policy measures include routine social audits designed to detect exclusionary practices, multilingual information dissemination, and transparent recruitment of cook-cum-helpers from local communities (while safeguarding against nepotism).

Operational and Logistical Perspective

Operational perspectives focus specifically on the functional supply chain aspects of the scheme. This includes sourcing foodgrain (via state channels and the Food Corporation of India), maintaining human resources (cook-cum-helpers), ensuring safety and hygiene standards, procuring locally-sourced pulses and vegetables, and establishing functional monitoring systems. National guidelines set clear norms for the engagement of cook-cum-helpers per enrolment slab and the required kitchen infrastructure; states then adapt these norms according to local conditions (MoE, 2022; West Bengal School Education Department, 2019).

Darjeeling encounters specific operational limitations: remote schools often lack adequate storage facilities or piped water supply. Frequent landslides pose a serious threat, disrupting foodgrain delivery. Adherence to standard menus is often more expensive due to the limited local market supply and the higher cost associated with transport. Seasonal fluctuations, particularly road closures in winter and the monsoon, necessitate the development of contingency plans, such as utilizing community kitchens in cluster schools, pre-positioning stocks, or alternative local sourcing. Recommended operational responses include systematic engagement of cook-cum-helpers, ensuring timely honorarium payment and social security benefits, investment in secure storage and kitchen sheds, and the integration of information technology for real-time monitoring of attendance linked to meal provision (MoE, 2022; Satyarthi Children's Foundation, 2021).

COVID-19 and Adaptive Policy Measures

The global COVID-19 pandemic severely highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in the traditional school-based feeding model. In response, India and West Bengal implemented adaptations, shifting provisioning to cash alternatives, the provision of foodgrain transfers, and the distribution of take-home rations. These adaptive measures underscore the vital need for robust contingency planning and policy flexibility.

In Darjeeling, where the need for emergency measures was exacerbated by prolonged school closures and rising household food insecurity, local tailoring of the response was necessary. This included ensuring that district authorities deployed mobile units to reach remote villages and implementing targeted distribution specifically aimed at tea-garden workers' families (MoE, 2022). A forward-looking policy framework should incorporate hybrid modalities, enabling effective school meals when schools are open and implementing robust take-home ration protocols during emergencies. Furthermore, maintaining accurate beneficiary databases is essential to prevent leakages and ensure that emergency transfers are culturally appropriate and timely.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Evidence-informed Policy

Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are critical for facilitating evidence-based policymaking and necessary course correction. Data regarding implementation gaps, nutritional outcomes, and coverage are derived from various sources: national MIS systems, independent evaluations, periodic social audits, and health and nutrition surveys (GCNF, 2021; Satyarthi Children's Foundation, 2021). However, capacity for M&E at the district level is often highly uneven.

To strengthen M&E in Darjeeling, measures could include community participatory monitoring, regular anthropometric surveys within schools, and the utilization of mobile applications to document daily meal provision and school attendance. Routine micro-evaluations, such as rapid assessments, are beneficial for generating actionable data concerning hygiene issues, supply chain blockages, and menu acceptability. Evidence from neighboring districts suggests that tying monitoring results to clear accountability frameworks, complete with explicit disciplinary measures for identified lapses, significantly reduces irregularities (Satyarthi Children's Foundation, 2021).

Policy Recommendations Specific to Darjeeling

Drawing upon the unique structural, operational, and governance challenges prevalent in Darjeeling, the following policy recommendations are crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of PM POSHAN:

- 1. Targeted Infrastructure Grants:** It is recommended that special allocations be provided for safe

storage facilities, water infrastructure, and kitchen sheds. These facilities must be specifically adapted to seasonal patterns and the requirements of hilly terrain, channeled as a top-up to the standard state allocations for schools in remote areas.

2. Transport and Logistics Subsidies: The policy should include transport subsidies or direct district logistics support to guarantee the regular supply of perishable items and foodgrain, particularly during the challenging winter and monsoon months.

3. Local Menu Adaptation within Nutritional Norms: Policy should permit the localization of menus to respect diverse cultural preferences, such as integrating locally acceptable protein sources, while strictly adhering to the mandated protein and calorie targets set by PM POSHAN.

4. Strengthen Community Participation and SMC Capacity: Capacity building for School Management Committees (SMCs) is vital, encompassing training in hygiene, procurement, grievance redressal, and social audits. SMCs should also be empowered to coordinate actions with tea-garden management committees where relevant.

Special Focus on Tribal and Tea-Garden Areas: Policy must mandate the creation of mobile distribution strategies and specific outreach campaigns aimed at reaching households in tribal settlements and tea-garden areas. Furthermore, additional nutrient supplements should be considered in areas where chronic under nutrition is prevalent.

1. Human Resource Reforms: There must be transparent criteria for local recruitment and mechanisms to ensure timely and fair remuneration for cook-cum Helpers. Bringing these staff members under basic social security benefits is necessary to enhance both their livelihoods and the cultural sensitivity of the service provided.

2. Resilient Emergency Protocols: District contingency protocols, covering pre-positioning of stocks, take-home rations, and emergency coordination with health departments, must be formalized and tested annually.

3. Data and Monitoring Enhancements: Policy should mandate the implementation of district MIS dashboards, regular anthropometry, and community feedback loops. Public display of menus, cooking costs, and grievance procedures in local languages is also essential.

4. Intersectoral Convergence: Promoting robust coordination between the departments of rural development, health, education, and panchayat is necessary to achieve policy synergies, supporting initiatives such as immunisation, deworming, and kitchen garden projects.

Conclusion

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (PM POSHAN) in Darjeeling functions as an entitlement, a local governance challenge, an educational incentive, and a public health intervention simultaneously. While central guidelines offer a strong normative and technical framework, achieving the intended policy objectives in the challenging environment of Darjeeling necessitates context-sensitive adaptations. These critical adaptations include infrastructural investments tailored to difficult terrain, logistics planning, and the creation of culturally acceptable menus, robust district-level monitoring, and strengthened local community governance. A comprehensive, multi-pronged policy approach that seamlessly integrates rights-based accountability, pragmatic local administration, and nutritional best practices is required for the MDM to realize its transformative potential in ensuring educational equity and child well-being across Darjeeling. Future policy evaluations should focus on generating district-specific evidence to ensure that national norms translate into tangible improvements in social inclusion, attendance, and nutrition for the children of Darjeeling.

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