

AKSHAYA PATRA MID-DAY MEAL PROGRAMME

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Methodology	4
Background	4
Objective	7
Programme design: Akshaya patra mid-day meal programme	7
Key Stakeholders	7
Process Flow: How does the programme function	8
Financial Resources	10
Impact	10
References	13
Appendix A – Interview Questionnaire	14

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The India of the 21st century is an India of contrasts. As the country leapfrogs to join the league of the world's emerging super-economies, it also juggles its development being pulled back by poverty and illiteracy, the vicious cycle of which is a hard one to break. But education makes much of this possible. In fact it is education alone that can lift a person out of poverty into a respectable life. However this is easier said than done, as is indicated by the near 8.1 million children who are out of school to be able to earn a single meal in a day.

The staggering numbers underline that much needs to be done before all children can be brought into school, and efforts in earnest are already being made. There is the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 for free and compulsory education to children till 14 years, provisions for free text books and uniforms, and also free bi-cycles to girl students and students from SC and ST communities. But the most significant impact has been had by the Government's Mid Day Meal Scheme, which has brought direct outcomes on enhanced school attendance and enrolment, and in improving the nutrition status of children.

India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme today covers 110 million (11 crore) children in 12,00,000 schools across the country, making it the world's largest school lunch programme. This is implemented by the Government in partnership with voluntary organisations to help mobilize community support, as also promote public-private partnership (PPP) in the scheme.

Within the PPP model of implementation of the MDMS, the largest partner of the Government is the Akshaya Patra Foundation, a not-for-profit trust of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), Bangalore. Akshaya Patra started in the year 2000, and today reaches to over 8600 schools in 8 states across India. It serves cooked lunches from 19 kitchens to 1.3 million children daily, forming the largest NGO-run mid-day meal programme in the world. Wherever located, Akshaya Patra kitchens have enhanced the effectiveness of the Mid-day Meal Scheme in the local schools, and have brought benefits in bettering enrolments and the school attendance of children. This is in addition to the nutritional development of children, most of who hail from marginalised backgrounds.

This case study looks at the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme through a visit to their kitchen in the Nathwara *tehsil* of Rajsamand district in Rajasthan. The kitchen was inaugurated in July 2011, and today serves 32,000 children in 443 schools daily across the *tehsil*. The coming of the kitchen here has helped bring up school attendance and enrolment to near 100%, a significant achievement considering Nathwara is a predominantly tribal region.

Further, benefits are also seen in promotion of social cohesion through inter-dining in the classroom where children across castes and communities sit together and eat. The summary

impact of a daily assured meal under the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme is seen in the attitudes of children, who look forward to school, and their parents, who no longer want their children to drop out.

METHODOLOGY

This case study on the Akshaya Patra Mid-day Meal Programme proceeds with a visit to the kitchen in Nathwara for a first-hand account of how the entire mid-day meal preparation process is conducted. This was followed by visits to a few schools to interact with students and teachers at lunch hour when Akshaya Patra's blue buses came in to deliver the meals.

The **Primary Research** engaged with the main stakeholders, and included semi-structured interviews with children as the main beneficiaries of the programme, school teachers and head masters, parents of the children, and the Akshaya Patra staff including kitchen staff and route supervisors of the Blue Bus. This was supplemented by **Secondary Research** comprising referencing web-based resources like research reports and media articles, and the Akshaya Patra annual report of 2010-2011.

Limitation: The case study looks at the Akshaya Patra Mid-day Meal Programme from a visit to the Nathwara kitchen, which is only one of its 19 kitchens; hence some of the specific impacts could be more local in context. The researcher has not spoken to a Government representative on the programme.

BACKGROUND

Setting the context and introducing the public service delivery:

The Mid-day Meal Scheme

The Akshaya Patra Foundation operates in the Mid-day Meal programme arena, which has been the Government of India's primary effort towards ensuring nutritional development of children through provisioning of lunch free-of-cost to school-children on all working days. The key objectives of the Mid-day Meal programme are to: protect children from classroom hunger, increase school enrolment and attendance, improve socialisation among children belonging to all castes, address malnutrition, and enable social empowerment through provision of employment to women.

The Mid Day Meal Scheme began formally following a landmark direction of the Supreme Court of India on November 28, 2001, which directed all State Governments/Union Territories to implement this scheme by providing every child in Government and Government-assisted Primary Schools with a prepared mid-day meal. Prior to this, a number of states like Gujarat, Kerala, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tamil Nadu, and the UT of Pondicherry were implementing the mid day meal programme with their own resources on a large scale.

Problem Definition: Through a targeted intervention, the MDMS has a longer term vision to be able to address the hidden issue of malnutrition in India, which in children under-five, is nearly double that of Sub-Saharan Africa. 42% of the world's underweight children under age 5 are in India. ¹

Further, as per the Global Hunger Index 2011 (GHI) of the International Food Policy Research Institute, India ranks 67th out of 84 countries on indicators like child malnourishment, child mortality and calorie deficiency. While India's literacy rate has jumped from 64.8 per cent to 74.4 per cent (as per the latest census), 8.1 million children still remain out of school today – majority of them to earn a meal daily.

The massive effort of Akshaya Patra takes from the mission of the organisation that *“No child in India will be deprived of education because of hunger.”* This is understandable, for only when the stomach is full, can a child concentrate on learning. And if the meal she has to labour for comes free at school, then school is the place the child would rather be in. Learning and education inevitably follow as corollary of coming to school for that one meal!

Introducing the best practice:

The Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme

The Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme started in the year 2000 in Bangalore by serving 1500 children in 5 schools across the city. This was an ISKCON Bangalore pilot, following which Akshaya Patra was instituted into a Foundation in October 2001. The programme soon scaled up across different states in partnership with, and with invitation from respective state Governments.

The Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme is present in 8 states, and operates out of 19 kitchens to reach 1.3 million everyday across India. Of the total kitchens, 16 are centralised kitchens, and 3 are decentralised.

In a centralised kitchen format, meals for all schools in a region are prepared in one kitchen; these are hi-tech kitchens that ready a huge number of meals in short time, with the highest standards of hygiene. Decentralised kitchens, on the other hand are smaller, located more in very remote areas, and are set-up close to individual schools.

Today Akshaya Patra's Bangalore kitchen, a centralised one, serves more than 5 Lakh (536,921) children daily. Centralised kitchens in three other states – Rajasthan, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh – serve more than a 100,000 children on a daily basis.

¹ As per the 2010 Global Hunger Index

The Akshaya Patra kitchens are located in the following places:

Centralised kitchens	De-centralised kitchens
1. Vrindavan	1. Nayagarh
2. Bhilai	2. Baran
3. Gandhinagar	3. Mathura
4. Vadodara	
5. Bangalore North	
6. Bangalore South - Vasanthapura	
7. Bellary	
8. Hubli	
9. Mangalore	
10. Mysore	
11. Puri	
12. Jaipur	
13. Nathdwara	
14. Visakapatnam	
15. Guwahati	
16. Hyderabad	

Source: Akshaya Patra Website

The children served under the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme belong to primary and upper primary standards, from the age group of 6 to 14 years. The state-wise reach of the programme is as follows:

State	No of children served
Karnataka	536,921
Rajasthan	256,008
Gujarat	169,801
Uttar Pradesh	159,763
Orissa	63,841
Andhra Pradesh	42,544
Chattisgarh	36,664
Assam	31,757
Tamilnadu	750

Source: Akshaya Patra Website

In Nathwara: In Nathwara, the Akshaya Patra kitchen was set up in the year 2007 to serve 10,000 children initially, expanding later to reach 18,000 children across 228 schools. During this time, the kitchen operated out of rented premises.

In July 2011, a new technology-intensive kitchen was inaugurated, which is Akshaya Patra's own set-up. This has enabled to further increase the coverage of the mid-day meal programme to 32,000 children in 443 schools from January 2012.

The Nathwara kitchen is spread across an area of 32,000 square feet. This is one of the most modern kitchens to be operated by Akshaya Patra. Functioning at full capacity, the Nathwara kitchen will be able to serve 75,000 children in a day.

OBJECTIVE

As mentioned by the Akshaya Patra mission that “no child in India will be deprived of education because of hunger”, the basic aim of the programme is that children come to school. But with more pressing concerns of hunger and poverty, education inevitably takes a back seat. As per the RTE Act report of 2011, 8.1 million children are out of school in India, largely to be able to earn a meal a day.

Akshaya Patra intends to address this vicious cycle of poverty, hunger and lack of education through its mid-day meal programme. Food - being the most basic of all human needs - if this is taken care of, other endeavours become easier.

The programme approaches the issue of children dropping out of school by assuring them a well-cooked, nutritious and good to eat meal every single day so they come to school. In the long run, the expectation is that children who attend school will have a fair chance to improve their life standards, and thus escape the loop of poverty and hunger.

In terms of the Millennium Development Goals, the programme caters to MDG 1 through directly addressing the hunger issue, and MDG 2 by incentivising the universalisation of education through its meal programme.

PROGRAMME DESIGN: AKSHAYA PATRA MID-DAY MEAL

PROGRAMME

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Students: The primary stakeholders of the Akshaya Patra Mid-day Meal Programme are the students served by the programme. Since the coming of the meal programme the enrolment has increased and children do look forward to coming to school. In OneWorld’s interactions with school children, they have mentioned they like the food served by Akshaya Patra because it is tasty, and has variety.

Teachers: Teachers at the schools being covered by the AP mid-day meals are quite supportive of the programme, not only because of it increasing attendance and helping retention / enrolment, but also since it has reduced on their work load considerably.

Teachers earlier were responsible for administering the mid-day meals from their schools, which included much work in procuring rations, keeping records, supervising the cooking,

and in many instances, cooking the meals themselves. The coming of the Akshaya Patra meals has significantly reduced the work load, and giving them more time to devote to learning and teaching with children.

Parents: The biggest incentive for the children also holds for their parents. The common refrain is that the meal programme assures good quality and a filling amount of food everyday for their children, which many parents otherwise may not be able to afford. Parents, across the board, have affirmed their acceptance of the Akshaya Patra programme.

Akshaya Patra staff: The Akshaya Patra meal programme is coordinated in an organized manner by a dedicated and trained staff comprising the Kitchen In-charge, supported by assistants in different sections, like cooking, store keeping, cleaning and meal delivery.

The staff members in the kitchen attend training from time to time, and are closely supervised to ensure compliance with hygiene and nutrition standards. In interactions with staff members, they commented on their association with Akshaya Patra as contributing to a greater cause of hunger amelioration, which evidently has also brought them satisfaction on the job.

PROCESS FLOW: HOW DOES THE PROGRAMME FUNCTION

The focus of the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme is to ensure every child gets a hot, nutritious meal every day at lunch in school. To this end, the programme has set in place a stream lined process that starts from the preparation of the meal in their kitchen, to its hot and fresh delivery by Akshaya Patra's trademark blue buses.

The massive effort is underpinned by a well-planned and high-tech kitchen, operated by a team of trained kitchen staff. The Nathwara kitchen presently comprises 75 staff-members, 32 of whom are women. The kitchen operations are supervised by the In-Charge, Pawan Singh, who is supported by assistants in different sections, like the roti section supervisor, rice-curry section supervisor, store managers, etc.

Pawan informs that work in the Nathwara kitchen starts before dawn; food is packed ready by 9 am in the morning, and reaches schools around 11am. He also monitors the cleanliness and hygiene in all processes, and adds that the kitchen is cleaned thoroughly three times a day, at 9am, 1pm and 3pm.

Akshaya Patra kitchens are characterised by high-tech infrastructure, most of which has been designed indigenously. In Nathwara, a flour-kneading machine prepares dough out of 75 kgs of wheat flour (*atta*) in nine minutes; this is then mounted on a roti-maker set up that flattens out the dough, cuts it into round roti-shapes, and mounts it on a *chulha* (burner) to produce puffy rotis, 40,000 in an hour. In another section of the kitchen the rice and curries are steam cooked in huge steel cauldrons. Mechanized processes of peeling and chopping vegetables enable huge quantities of food to be prepared in short time.



[The Nathwara kitchen at work (credit: Madhusmita Hazarika/ OW)]

The Nathwara kitchen presently serves 25,000 rotis, 600 kgs of rice, 270-280 kgs of dal, and 1100 kgs of vegetables on a daily basis. The food, as it is prepared, is immediately packed into specially designed tiffin boxes, weighed, and loaded onto the Blue Buses to be sent for delivery.

The entire food preparation and delivery process adheres to 6-sigma standards which means – the food gets packed at a specific temperature (not less than 90 degrees Celsius) and is delivered at school while it is still hot (not less than 60 degrees Celsius). Route supervisors monitor the daily delivery of meals by the trademark Blue Buses specially designed for the purpose.

The kitchen staff, directly involved in cooking, is trained from time to time in maintaining proper hygiene standards and safety in cooking processes and in operating the machines. Importance is laid on ensuring that the food retains its nutritive qualities, and has variety that appeals to the children’s appetite.

The meal menu keeps changing throughout the week, and is customised as per the local / regional food habits. For instance, roti is integral to the meal in North India, while in South

India it is rice that is more primary to the meal. In the Nathwara kitchen, the meals comprise *roti, thulli, rice, khichdi, karhi, vegetables and dal*. Of this, the children love eating rice.

Akshaya Patra engages closely with stakeholders at every step of the meal production and distribution process. Food preparation is closely monitored on nutrition and hygiene benchmarks, and for on-time, hot delivery. At school, the route supervisors regularly take feedback from the teachers on the quality and quantity of the food. The amount of food to be prepared in a day is determined as per the previous day's attendance collected from the teachers. Teachers, met by this researcher, have noted that any feedback on the food is considered seriously by Akshaya Patra, and changes in the menu or food item are actioned accordingly.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme is driven by a subsidy-partnership with the Government. This allows them access, at subsidised rates, to quality food grains from the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and the Food and Civil Supplies Corporations. This approximates the cost of a meal per child to about six rupees a day. The programme is also supported by donations from individuals, corporates, banks/PSUs, and other trusts and foundations. Akshaya Patra was supported in building the Nathwara kitchen by the Lalit K Tulsian and Radha Devi Joshi family foundation.

IMPACT

The incentive of a guaranteed meal under the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme has been able to bring children back to school. This is the most significant impact of the programme. As students' enrolment and attendance increase, so do their educational levels. The meal programme thus reinforces the Government's Right to Education Act. In the long term, it is expected that children with benefits of education, would eventually be able to lift themselves out of poverty.

Since the programme directly addresses the issue of hunger, it benefits from wide based support across all stakeholders.

In the researcher's interactions with parents, they have mentioned that their children look forward to school. And their concurrence with the programme is total.



Gota Lal, from Nada Bhil Basti, is father of Mahender, Sushila and Rahul, who are just starting school. He is a cobbler (*mochi*) by profession, and is barely able to make ends meet, coming in the BPL (Below Poverty Line) category defined by the Government. He has eight

children in all; his elder sons and daughters are drop outs. But he is happy that at least his younger children are going to school.

[Gota Lal and family (Credits: Madhusmita Hazarika/OW)]

A daily meal from Akshaya Patra for three of his children has brought him some relief, and he shares that his children are now more particular about going to school.

Shyama Goyal, an Anganwadi Worker at Ulpura, also adds that the food children get to eat at school is much better than what they get to eat at home. Most children come from poor families, and at times are not even able to afford a proper meal in a day. The mid-day lunch is thus a huge incentive to come to school.

The parents' opinion of the programme is corroborated by teachers, who have noted definitive improvement in the school enrolment and attendance rates, and also in the nutrition status of children.

Snehprabha Sharma, Head Mistress at the Government Primary School, Upla Nohra, Parwal attributes that children eat well, as there is good variety in the meals provided by Akshaya Patra. This has not only improved their health, but has brought 100% retention and enrolment in her school. Sunita Rathore, teacher at the Primary School in Nada Bhil Basti, adds that health benefits in children are visible in higher energy levels, and better performance in the classroom.

Another benefit of the mid-day meal programme is in the promotion of inter-dining in the classroom. Children across all castes and communities eat together, without discrimination, which is notable, considering Nathwara as a region is fairly conscious of caste hierarchies.

Conclusion

The Akshaya Patra Programme demonstrates a success story in the field of Public Private Partnership in India's Mid-day Meal Scheme. It has set an example how a well-implemented programme can effectively address the issue of hunger and malnutrition in the country. In doing so, the Akshaya Patra Programme is also reinforcing the Right to Education Act by ensuring that children not only come to school, but more importantly stay in school.

The unique aspect of this intervention is that the programme has been able to take a massive initiative to scale, while keeping its high quality and delivery standards integral. In this respect it stands as a best practice, and offers value in being replicated across the country. Furthermore, the impacts are verifiable clearly, which lends credibility to the intervention, and has definitely helped build a multi-stakeholder partnership around the programme.

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(GKC) team.*

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 - <http://mdm.nic.in/>
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Semi-structured interviews with teachers:

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- Snehprava Sharma, Government Primary School, Upla Nohra, Parawal, Nathwara
- Sunita Rathore, Nada Bhil Basti Government Primary School, Nathwara
- Anita Sen, Bhopa ki Bagal Government Primary School, Mullela, Nathwara
- Sankar Tripathi, Ulpura Magra Upper Primary School, Nathwara

APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

For teachers:

- How has the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme benefited your school?
- Do you see any change in school enrolment / attendance that corroborates the impact?
- How is the nutritional status of children impacted? And health-wise also?
- How do you find the food that is served?
- Do you give feedback to Akshaya Patra staff on the quality / taste of the food served?
- Has there been any instance when the quality of food was not up to mark?
- How do you decide how much food comes to your school?
- Has there been any attitudinal change in children, in terms of better interest in school, after the coming of the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme?
- Any change in attitudes of parents, in terms of them sending their children to school rather than having them drop out to work?

For parents:

- Are you aware of the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme? What do you know about it?
- How do you find the food that is served?
- Is the free meal at lunch an incentive to send your children to school?
- Do you see any attitudinal change in your children after the coming in of the Akshaya Patra mid-day meal programme?

For children:

- How do you find the food that comes to school?
- Do you know where the food comes from?
- What do you like most in the meals?
- Do you like coming to school?
- What is better in school – learning or the free food?

Akshaya Patra staff

- How do you determine how much food needs to be cooked?
- How do you collect feedback from teachers? And do you incorporate the feedback into your meals?
- Is there a training programme for the staff members in the kitchen – in operating the machines, hygiene standards, etc?
- How do you maintain the nutrition standards in the food?
- What is the experience of working in this programme?