

IS THE CHIEF MINISTER'S BREAKFAST SCHEME IN TAMIL NADU POPULIST OR PERTINENT?

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Children eat breakfast at a corporation primary school under the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme, in Katpadi. | Photo Credit: Venkatachalapathy C.

Is the 'Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme' in Tamil Nadu required in a Dravidian welfare model state today or is it yet another populist scheme couched cleverly in the language of welfare of the poor? With a budget outlay of 33.5 crore in the initial phase, the new scheme caters to 1,14,095 primary school students from 1,545 government schools. It mainly aims to help students attend school hunger-free and improve their nutritional status.

The scheme stands at the confluence of three sociopolitical developments: a fierce but murky political debate on freebies, falling human development performance, and the educational disruption caused by COVID-19. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin defended the scheme as a responsibility of the state, and not as a freebie, charity or incentive. This distinction is significant as the freebie debate clubs clientelist, populist, welfare-promoting, and human development-enhancing schemes as one and denigrates all of them without distinction. The States have a responsibility to promote welfare and minimise inequalities in income as well as in facilities and opportunities among individuals and groups (Article 38). The freebie debate strategically deploys fiscal burden as a potent tool to possibly constrain States from discharging this responsibility.

The welfare responsibility of the States remains undiminished, especially since India is ranked 71 out of 113 countries on the Global Food Security Index, 101 out of 116 countries on the Global Hunger Index, and 132 out of 191 countries on the Human Development Index. India's mean years of schooling stood at just 6.7 years in 2020-21. Additionally, India has among the highest levels of inequality in education. This corresponds closely with the rising wealth inequality, as brought out by the recent Credit Suisse report.

Despite this dismal record, India's spending in human development-enhancing welfare schemes has been wanting. There is an urgent need for implementing innovative and effective welfare schemes to address the disruptions caused by the pandemic in the education and nutrition sectors and strengthen these sectors. Initiatives such as Illam Thedi Kalvi and Ennum Ezhuthum were positive attempts in the education sector. Since the breakfast scheme is introduced as a first-of-its-kind scheme to address nutritional deficiencies among primary school-going children, it is relevant to look at how T.N. fares.

The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2016-18, carried out in May-August 2018 in T.N., shows us the level of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies among children aged 5-9 years. About 10% of children aged 5-9 years were stunted in 2018, much lower than the all-India average of 22% and marginally lower than Kerala's average (11%). T.N. had a marginally higher level of underweight children (23%) than Kerala (21%), but this was lower than the national average (35%). In T.N., 19% of children were malnourished (BMI for age), which was higher than the 16% in Kerala but lower than the national average (23%). About 10% and 7% were anaemic and deficient in Vitamin A, respectively, whereas 41% were deficient in Vitamin D. While the State's levels were lower than the national average in anaemia and Vitamin A deficiency, but not in Vitamin D deficiency, they were much higher than Kerala's average. T.N.'s performance is relatively good in aspects of nutrition and micronutrient deficiencies among primary school students, but the levels would be higher among children from socioeconomically

disadvantaged groups.

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To what extent can the new scheme improve nutritional performance and address specific micronutrient deficiencies? The answer depends on the focus and content of the scheme. Since the scheme caters mainly to children from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, who constitute the major proportion of students at government schools, it scores well on focus and appears pertinent given the huge socioeconomic disparity in the nutritional outcomes of children. But going by the content of the scheme, it seems unlikely that it will bring any substantial or sustained improvements in the above-mentioned aspects of nutrition, especially since T.N. is already doing well in this regard.

Though the scheme has the potential to ensure that children attend classes hunger-free, reliable and representative data on what proportion of them attend school without having breakfast regularly is scarce. Though the State acknowledges that students tend to skip breakfast because of the school timing and their financial situation, it is important to identify which among these is the significant contributor. The present approach does not distinguish between the two.

Nonetheless, the scheme might yield a positive outcome in one important aspect. Studies from other countries suggest that free breakfast schemes might help increase educational outcomes through a likely increase in school attendance and improved concentration on studies. Though T.N. fares quite well overall in NITI Aayog's index on school education quality, its performance in the subcomponent on learning outcomes seems rather wanting.

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