

Role of Public Leaders and Institutions in The Evolution of Mid-Day Meal Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand the role of public leaders from diverse fields in developing the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme in India. Over the years, the MDM scheme has become a benchmark for public policies, evolving from traditional and religious charity practices of serving food to people experiencing poverty into a focused implementation of an education policy with a multiplier effect on nutrition care, education, and sustainable development. This study employs a comprehensive review of existing literature, including government reports and publications, newspaper articles, journals, magazines, and editorials, to evaluate the various leadership and institutional roles in the development of the MDM scheme. The analysis concludes that the success of the MDM scheme is driven by passionate initiatives taken by public leaders and institutions, including religious organizations, NGOs, Panchayats/Municipalities, Parliament, the Supreme Court, and elected leaders at various levels, from Prime Ministers and Chief Ministers to local government officials and bureaucrats. The study emphasizes that the effectiveness of any public policy is directly proportional to the involvement and initiatives of public leaders from diverse backgrounds. The findings highlight the critical role of strategic vision, commitment, and collaboration in driving large-scale social initiatives, ultimately contributing to the betterment of millions of children across India.

Keywords: Mid-day meal, leadership, policy, nutrition

Introduction

The Taitreyi Upanishad mentions that food is intricately connected with the nature of man, in that 'it determines his mind, body, and life to such an extent that food itself is revered as Brahman or Godhead'. Human beings have a collective obligation to ensure that no individual member of society is deprived of this necessity of life (Sivananda, n.d.). The evolution of the

Mid-Day Meal Policy in India has been a significant aspect of the country's efforts to address the nutritional needs of school-age children. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, initiated by the Government of India, is a school meal program aimed at improving the nutritional status of children (Souza et al., 2021). This program, considered the world's largest school meal initiative, serves hot-cooked meals to underprivileged children, emphasizing the importance of addressing nutrition-related issues, especially among children in disadvantaged communities (Paltasingh & Bhue, 2022). The scheme has been instrumental in enhancing the nutritional levels of children while also reducing the cost barriers to schooling (Chethana & Tjprc, 2018).

The impact of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme on various aspects of child development and well-being has been extensively studied. Research has shown that the program has contributed to improvements in the nutritional status of school children, leading to reductions in underweight prevalence and addressing issues such as anaemia (Gharge, 2024; Mohapatra et al., 2023). Additionally, studies have highlighted the positive effects of the scheme on primary school enrolment, demonstrating its role in advancing elementary education (Jayaraman & Simroth, 2011). The provision of fortified meals through the program has been effective in combating deficiencies and promoting overall growth and development among children (Sharma et al., 2010).

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme has been recognized for its role in enhancing sustainability within the supply chain, with efforts to ensure supplier participation in addressing sustainability objectives (Roy et al., 2018). The scheme has also been acknowledged for its intergenerational nutrition benefits, with a focus on improving the nutritional intake of children in public-funded schools (Chakrabarti et al., 2021). By providing free lunches to students, the program not only addresses immediate nutritional needs but also contributes to long-term health outcomes and educational attainment (K. et al., 2023).

Public leadership is a 'collective leadership wherein political leaders, individuals, public bodies, institutions, civil society, etc. collaborate and work towards a shared vision'. The aim is to deliver improved public value through sustained well-being in social, environmental, and economic terms. Public leadership is evidenced at various levels and includes the participation of political leaders at the highest levels, including the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, MLAs, etc. and bureaucrats like civil servants and Commissioners. It also includes various institutions across different levels of the government, like the Planning Commission, various ministries, government bodies like NITI Aayog (erstwhile Planning Commission), state government bodies, municipal corporations, Gram Panchayats, etc. Accountability is maintained through institutions like the courts, from the Supreme Court at the highest level to the High Courts of states, UTs, and district courts. Civil society organizations, NGOs, academic institutions, think tanks, professional associations, and media also significantly guide policy formulation and evaluation.

The policy landscape surrounding the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has seen significant developments over the years. Court directives, such as the order from the Indian Supreme Court in 2001 mandating the provision of school lunches, have played a crucial role in shaping the implementation and expansion of the program ("School Mid-Day Meal Program in India: Past, Present, and Future", 2021). The scheme has been pivotal in ensuring food security for children, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting its importance in safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable populations (Arora & Sharma, 2022). Additionally, the program has been instrumental in addressing issues of child labour by incentivizing school attendance through the provision of meals (Chaudhuri, 2009).

The role of public leaders and institutions in the evolution of the Mid-Day Meal Policy in India has been instrumental in addressing nutritional deficiencies, promoting educational outcomes, and ensuring the well-being of school children. Through a combination of government initiatives, court directives, and research-backed interventions, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has emerged as a cornerstone of India's efforts to improve the health and development of its young population. The paper seeks to study the role of public leadership from various sections of society in formulating and implementing the Mid-day meal program in India.

History and Tradition of Serving Food

India did not have a formalized mid-day meal program; however, some practices and traditions ensured that children who attended religious and community institutions were provided with food. From the 15th century onwards, religious institutions like Gurudwaras provided 'Langars', where free meals were provided to people irrespective of their caste or religion. Religious institutions like Temples, Churches, and Madrasas also provided meals to students as part of their residential and educational set-up.

Kingdoms and wealthy individuals established 'Anna-Satra' which provided food as charity. In the 12th Century, Prithviraja I built a food distribution centre for pilgrims on the road to the Somnath temple. These kinds of food distribution centres ensured that the needy received meals. Religious institutions and Kings have thus contributed to ensuring that no one is deprived of food (Sivananda, n.d.).

Objective of the study

This study seeks to understand the role and contribution of public leadership in formulating and evolving the mid-day meal scheme in India. The contributions made at individual levels and institutional levels have been analyzed to understand how, different stakeholders ranging from individuals, institutions, and governments are involved in developing a major policy like the mid-day meal scheme.

Methodology

This research paper is a descriptive study grounded in secondary sources. A comprehensive literature review has been conducted to identify research gaps in documenting the historical evolution and leadership involved in the Mid-Day Meal scheme in India. The study draws on various newspaper and journal articles, as well as books focused on public leaders such as Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, K. Kamaraj, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), and M.K. Stalin. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative analysis approach, a timeline has been constructed to trace the development of the scheme. Stakeholders involved in the Mid-Day Meal scheme have been mapped and classified into different categories. These include public leaders (religious and social reformers), bureaucratic and institutional bodies, NGOs and civil society organizations, political leaders, and the judiciary. The roles and contributions of these stakeholders from historical times to the present have been systematically categorized and presented.

History of mid-day meal- Global evidence

Europe

In the 1700s, educators noticed that many children were arriving at school hungry, and often, schools needed to be equipped to provide meals to children. Various individuals and private charities were engaged in providing lunches and helped to mitigate the problem of malnutrition. Gradually, federal and local government authorities took responsibility for school meal programs (Demas, n.d.). Benjamin Thompson, also known as Count Rumford, began the school lunch movement in England. In 1790, he set up soup kitchens to feed unemployed workers and expanded this to cover thousands of undernourished school children. His efforts helped to spread the school feeding movement across Europe to Scotland, Germany, France, and Switzerland. In 1902, during the Boer War, the British Parliament recommended that lunches be supported with private funds. Provision of Meals Act was passed in 1906, which transferred the responsibility of school feeding from charities to educational authorities, and the 1944 Education Act set nutritional guidelines. (Demas, n.d.; Finch, 2019).

In 1849, the French government used surplus National Guard funds to provide school students with food, books, and medical attention. In 1867, a law was passed to set up school funds across the country, and school lunch rooms were set up. 1882, a compulsory primary education law was passed, making school lunches mandatory. Victor Hugo donated money to purchase provisions for preparing lunches. In 1871, the Society for People's Kitchens in the Public Schools was established to provide free meals to school children (Demas, n.d.).

In Italy, in 1896, school students were provided meals, which led to increased school attendance and academic progress, and it was considered a necessary part of education (Demas, n.d.).

USA: In 1853, in New York, a Children's Aid Society opened an industrial school which promoted attendance and offered a noon meal. However, the funding needed to be improved. In 1878, Ellen Richards developed a food lab in Boston, worked towards educating people, and established the Boston School Lunch Program, which fed over 4000 children a day. In 1904, the government set up a New York City School Board Committee to determine if a 30-cent lunch could be self-supporting. By 1914, the lunch program expanded to 17 schools, and guidelines and standards were established (Demas, n.d.)

The National School Lunch Act, of 1946 was launched to address health and welfare concerns. Initiatives under the New Deal during WW II made school meals a foundation to tackle the problems of malnutrition and hunger. Compulsory school attendance was linked to the state's responsibility to ensure children's well-being. In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Child Nutrition Act and launched the School Breakfast Program (Day, 2017; Demas, n.d.; Thompson, 2023).

Japan

Free mid-day meals for school students were introduced by a Buddhist confederation and monk in a Japanese private school in late 1889 (Meiji era) at Tsuruoka City. In 1971, emphasis was placed on providing nutritious food, and minor tweaks were made every subsequent decade. In 1932, the government provided subsidies for school meals. This was later expanded to other parts of the country; however, during WW II, school lunches were reduced due to shortages. In 1944, over 2 million elementary school children received lunch in 6 major cities; by 1950, this was expanded to 8 cities. By 1951, government subsidies began to fund the scheme, and in 1954, the School Lunch Act was enforced. In 1971, school lunches were standardized across the country (Rogers, 2015; Tsuruoka, n.d.; Huong et al., 2021; Sanborn, 2017).

History of mid-day meal scheme in India

Oldest Mid-Day-Meal Scheme in India

Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) was a Catholic priest of the Syro-Malabar Church and a renowned social reformer in Kerala who played a crucial role in the education and upliftment of people belonging to the disadvantaged sections of the community. In 1846, he set up a school for Sanskrit studies at Mannanam and Arpookara villages, where students were admitted irrespective of their caste or religion, and even Dalits were admitted. This was initiated at a time when only the Brahmins or upper caste were allowed education. With a proven leadership track record, he was appointed Vicar General at the Verapoly Archdiocese in 1861. As the chief administrator of the church, he ordered that every church should have a school attached to it (Pallikkoppam

Pallikkoodam), and he threatened to close down the churches that failed to comply (Tharakan, 1984; Devassy and Abraham, 2022; Kamalakaran, 2021).

The Church records and multiple biographies show he started providing free lunch to poor children in 1864 in some schools. The biography by a noted literary figure like Prof. M K Sanu, 'Jeevitham Thanne Sandesham' (Life of Saint Chavara-Life itself is the Message'), published by Malayala Manorama substantiates this initiative (Sanu , 2015) records this clearly, making his initiative as the first such mid-day meal scheme in India. Similarly, other writers like Kurias Kumbalakuzhy, Valerian CD, and a compendium on Chavara on his 150th death anniversary also substantiate this (Rose & Sophy. 2020).

The plight of lower cast members moved him, and children in both schools were given school materials and a noon meal free of cost (Devassy & Abraham, 2022; Kamalakaran, 2021). This evidence makes Chavara's initiative to provide free lunches to the schools' students the oldest Mid-day Meal Scheme in India.

He introduced a unique concept of 'Pidyari', which translates into 'handful of rice'. This was a unique concept of a public distribution system where people donated a handful of rice to people in need. This scheme reinforced the idea that 'charity begins at home' and inspired people to take small daily actions and contribute towards charitable causes in a meaningful way. Their everyday food would save a handful of rice for the starving and needy (Pidyari, n.d.).

The schools founded by Kuriakose Elias inspired the then Diwan of Travancore, Sir. CP Ramaswamy Iyer recommended the implementation of noon meals in all government schools in Travancore in 1936. In 1941, Sir CP inaugurated compulsory education and a free midday meal scheme for the poor and needy at a Government High School in Vellamadam. This is the first account wherein school meals were institutionalized at the government level. The Vanchi Poor Fund was established in 1941 under the initiative of Chithira Tirunal, the then Maharaja of Travancore, and Sir CP Ramaswamy served as its first President. He used his funds and funds from 'Seetha Lakshmi Ammal Dhana Samajam' to fund the free midday meal scheme. During the Second World War the scheme was expanded to provide mid-day meals to children in the Travancore kingdom so that their education would not be interrupted. In Thiruvananthapuram alone, around 2,000 schools were provided mid-day meals. In 1951, a mid-day meal was introduced during the leadership of K Keshavan, and in 1961, under Pattam Thanupillai in the state of Travancore. (India Today, 2023; Tharakan, 1984; Rani & Kumari, 2022; Kumar, n.d.).

Karnataka

In the 19th century, in South Canara (present-day Karnataka), the British government paid attention to developing and uplifting the lower caste people. A Valencia school in Mangalore

provided free mid-day meals for the students. This school inspired the social reformer, Mr. Kudmul Ranga Rao, to provide day meals to school children in Karnataka. In 1897, he set up the Depressed Classes Mission Society in Hubli. He hailed from a middle-class Gowda Saraswat Brahmin community and worked extensively for the welfare of the Depressed Classes. He considered 'Education as a source of progress' and set up schools across Karnataka called 'Panchama schools'. In a bid to persuade students to attend, he arranged for mid-day meals and provided a monetary incentive of 2 paise per day to parents to convince them to send their children to school (Ushaprabha, 2012; Rao, 1930).

Under the guidance of Mr. Vitthal Ramji Shinde, the General Secretary of the Society, the mission started several schools, namely D.C.M. Boarding School, where students from class I-VII were provided vegetarian meals for breakfast and lunch. In Yallapur, two separate municipal schools were established for boys and depressed classes, and meals were provided in both institutions. The Court Hill Panchama School had students from Infant standard to IV; they were provided meals on the school premises as they came from distant places. Municipal grants and donors helped the scheme to function effectively. Individuals like Thimmappa Provided dinner, and an HC Vakil, Mr. U.C. Krishna Bhat, provided plantains for distribution. Students from Sir Rama Krishna Hostel also helped in supplying dinner. On death anniversaries, a few gentlemen sent donations for treats to schoolchildren. The community emphasized removing hunger and provided donations for meals to children from depressed classes, allowing for their upliftment (Ushaprabha, 2013).

1920s- Role of Madras Municipal Corporation

The South Indian Liberal Federation, also known as the Justice Party, was instrumental in ushering in socio-economic change in Madras Corporation. Sir P. Theagaraya Chetty, the then President of the Justice Party, also served as the President of the Madras Corporation. Boys came from impoverished families at a corporate school in the area. The Madras Corporation Council passed a progressive resolution to provide students with free tiffin. A Subbarayalu Reddiar, the First Minister of the Madras Presidency, implemented the mid-day meal scheme in a corporation school in the Thousand Lights area in 1920. The daily cost was capped at one anna per student. The scheme was expanded to include four more schools. The enrolments by children from poor communities doubled from 811 in 1922-23 to 1671 in 1924-25. However, the British government refused to allow funds to be used from the Elementary Education Programme and suspended the scheme in 1925 (Padma, 2024; Sundersan, 2023).

M.C. Rajah, an Indian politician and educationist in Tamil Nadu, was another leader associated with the Justice Party. He advocated for Dalit welfare, and as a member of the Madras

Legislative Council, he highlighted the need for state intervention to eliminate poverty and malnutrition (Ambeth, 2018).

1930's French Administration

The French colonial administration in Pondicherry implemented the mid-day meal scheme in the 1930s. Various local government officials were responsible for the execution and monitoring of the program. School authorities and teachers played a crucial role in distributing meals and overseeing the operations of the scheme. The scheme also saw widespread participation and involvement of local communities and parents.

Mid-day Meal Scheme in Independent India

K Kamaraj (1950s)

K Kamaraj, as CM of Tamil Nadu, is credited with pioneering the mid-day meal scheme in Tamil Nadu and India and is considered solely responsible for raising the education rate of Tamil Nadu to 85% under his leadership (Ramakrishnan, 2020).

Kamaraj was born into a low-income family in 1903 in Madras Presidency, and he had to drop out of school at 11. His experiences helped him understand the importance of education and made him realize that education is an unaffordable luxury for many impoverished families. On his visit to Tirunelveli in the early 1960s, he met a young boy who asked him if he would be provided food if he went to school. This incident inspired Kamaraj to introduce the Mid-day Meal Scheme (Ramakrishnan, 2020).

Despite budgetary constraints, Kamaraj wanted to ensure children from disadvantaged communities attended school and was ready to impose a tax to provide meals. He urged the public to donate, and in 1956, voluntary initiatives by 'enterprising officers of the Education Department' helped in the state-wide implementation of the scheme (Ramakrishnan, 2020; Madras Courier, 2023).

At the beginning of the second five-year plan, he met the PM and members of the Planning Commission to allow budgetary allocations for the scheme. As a result, the Budget for 1956-57 contained a provision for supplying mid-day meals to school children from low-income families for 200 days a year, initially covering 65,000 students in 1,300 feeding centers. The government's contribution amounted to one-and-a-half annas per meal, and the local people bear the rest (Madras Courier, 2023).

Director of Public Instruction (D.P.I.), under the leadership of Sundara Vadivelu and Kamaraj, introduced the mid-day meal scheme in 1956 in Ettayapuram, now part of Thoothukudi district,

where the famous Tamil Poet Subramania Bharati was born. This place was decided as Kamaraj wanted to honor the poet who wrote, 'Even if one person is deprived of food, we shall destroy the world' (Ramakrishnan, 2020; Madras Courier, 2023).

From November 1957, the scheme's coverage expanded to include as many primary schools as feasible. Public funding strengthened the scheme, and local communities established committees, with principals of schools being non-member secretaries (Madras Courier, 2023).

Role of CARE

Since 1961, the NGO CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances Everywhere) has played a significant role in supporting and enhancing the mid-day meal scheme in India through monetary support. In December 1974, the then Education Minister V.R. Nedunchezian said that the State government had been spending Rs. 4 crores every year on the mid-day meal program, and CARE extended an aid amount of Rs. 6 crores every year, benefitting more than 1.6 million children of over 30,000 elementary schools. The N.G.O. provided raw materials, set up kitchens, focused on capacity building and training, mobilized community participation, and emphasized advocacy and policy support (Ramakrishnan, 2023; Madras Courier, 2023).

MG Ramachandran (1980s)

1982, M.G.R. expanded the scheme by making it universal across Tamil Nadu. He emphasised a 'Nutritious Meal Programme', introduced for children aged 2-5 in Anganwadi and 5-10 in primary schools. This allowed students access to nutritious meals and set a precedent for other states in India. He introduced the Nutritious Meal program in a village, Trichy, and it began to be implemented in different rural areas. Gradually, the coverage expanded to urban areas. As a result, beneficiaries who were being fed for 200 days a year at 15 paise per capita would now get food worth 45 paise for all 365 days (Sundaresan, 2024; Ramakrishnan, 2020; Kanmony, 2024).

1995 Implementation as National Nutritional Programme

PM Narasimha Rao hailed the project's success and suggested that the scheme should be implemented nationwide. In 1995, the 'M.G.R. Nutritious Meal Programme' emerged as an example for the rest of India, and the central government announced the 'National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education' (NP-NSPE) on Independence Day. The objective was to provide free lunch to children in classes I-V in government, government-aided, and local body schools. It was launched as a centrally sponsored scheme, and the cost was shared between the Centre and the states at a ratio of 75:25. Institutions like Panchayats and nagarpalikas are entrusted with implementing the scheme, and it was rolled out in 2408 blocks around the country. Within two years, the scheme was in force in all blocks in all states and union

territories. A National-level Steering-cum Monitoring Committee oversaw authority. This scheme had multiplier benefits as it took care of the nutritional needs of children from disadvantaged communities, helped reduce deficiency diseases like anemia, and bridged learning gaps (Sundaresan, 2024; Ramakrishnan, 2020; Kainth, 2013; Kanmony, 2024; IFMR, 2009-2010)

M Karunanidhi (1989-2011)

As CM, Karunanidhi introduced the provision of boiled eggs every fortnight starting in June 1989. The frequency of eggs increased to twice a week in 2006 and thrice a week in 2007. From 1990 to 2008, the egg count gradually increased from 1 to 3 per week. The government gave bananas to children who did not eat eggs (Kanmony, 2024).

Jayalalitha (2011-2016)

Jayalalitha modified the scheme further in 2013 by introducing a variety of rice and masala eggs, as per the children's choice. She emphasized the importance of freshly cooked meals and hygienic preparation. She ensured that the program covered more students, including primary and upper primary school students. To ensure greater accountability, surprise inspections and feedback mechanisms were put in place (Kanmony, 2024).

Stalin (2022-Present)

CM Stalin launched a modified mid-day meal program in 2022 for students from class I-V as a 'Breakfast scheme' to provide primary school students with two meals a day. This scheme was recently expanded to cover government-aided schools aimed at benefiting over 20 lakh children. (Kanmony, 2024; Chandrababu, 2024).

Role of Judiciary and Civil Society Activism

In April 2001, the PUCL (People's Union for Civil Liberties), a human rights body, filed a written petition through P.I.L. in the Supreme Court highlighting the widespread issue of hunger and malnutrition in the country. It came to be known as the 'Right to Food' Case, where under Article 21, Right to Life, it was argued that access to food is a fundamental right, and no individual member of society must be deprived of this basic necessity of life (Garg, 2024; Corsi & Birchfield, 2010; HRLN, 2007). The Supreme Court issued various interim orders and set 'stringent standards for supervising and implementing the mid-day meal schemes' (Garg, 2024).

On 28 November 2001, the Supreme Court ordered all states and U.T.s to provide cooked mid-day meals in all government and government-aided primary schools within six months. This led to the successful implementation of the mid-day meal scheme under the 'National Programme of

Nutritional Support to Primary Education'. It mandated providing cooked meals instead of providing dry rations (Garg, 2024; Corsi & Birchfield, 2010; HRLN, 2007; Lath, 2006).

In 2002, the court appointed commissioners nationwide to monitor and ensure compliance with the scheme. They had to submit periodic reports on the challenges and progress of the scheme (Sundaresan, 2023; Corsi & Birchfield, 2010).

The case highlighted the pivotal role of civil society in ushering in people-led movements and the pioneering role played by the judiciary in upholding the rights of people. Judicial activism plays a crucial role in ensuring greater transparency and accountability. The mid-day meal scheme thus contributed to the 'right to food and education' (Corsi & Birchfield, 2010).

Additionally, school management committees were set up for supervision and quality checks. The state-level steering-cum Monitoring Committee (SSMC) oversees the scheme's implementation, including maintaining nutritional standards and meal quality. (Jebaraj, 2021; Barman, 2021).

2014 onwards

Under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013, the government notified the 2015 Mid-Day Meal Rules, which provide for temporary utilisation of other funds available with the school for M.D.M. in case the school exhausts M.D.M. funds for any reason, entrusted responsibility on the school management committee, and made provisions for food security allowance, in case the meals are not provided on three consecutive working days (PIB, 2015).

In 2021, the Parliamentary Standing Committee expanded the scope of the regular midday meal and introduced a 'breakfast scheme', as underlined in the National Education Policy (N.E.P.). The poor economic status of parents pushes them to leave for work early, and they are often unable to provide breakfast for their children. It has been noted that providing breakfast to school children can lead to improved learning outcomes and reduce dropout rates (Chandrababu, 2024).

The N.E.P. emphasises nutrition as a critical contributor to a robust education system. Currently, the funds are shared between the Centre and the States at a 60:40 ratio for cooking costs and honorariums. The government renamed the scheme to 'PM Poshan Abhiyan' in 2021. The government has mandated a social audit of the scheme and has empowered college and university students to monitor the scheme locally (Jebaraj, 2021; Barman, 2021).

Role of NGOs and civil society

While PUCL had fought for the right to food, several NGO across the country have worked with school principals and institutions to provide nutritious meals to school children. CARE provided

funding, and monetary and policy support in the 1960s, the booming civil society has taken cognizance of the prevalent malnutrition and hunger in society. As of 2013, over 447 NGOs are involved in providing mid-day meals across the country. Akshaya Patra Foundation, Isha Foundation, Rajasthan Bal Kalyan Samiti, Navasrushti International Trust, Rural Development Foundation, and ISKCON Food Relief are a few prominent NGOs involved in the same (First Post, 2013).

Role of leadership- multiplier benefits for education

The mid-day meal scheme's humble implementation from a small district in Ettayapuram, Thoothukudi district, to being implemented universally across the state of Tamil Nadu and then being replicated at the national level with more excellent coverage highlights the critical role played by leadership at various levels of the government. Apart from individual leadership, collective leadership in the form of a proactive citizenry, an active civil society, and institutions like courts and N.G.O.s strengthen policy implementation.

Kamaraj understood that a meal a day could incentivise children to attend school and increase attendance. This would have multiplier benefits in terms of increased gross enrollment ratios and decreased dropouts. By 1971, the literacy rate of Tamil Nadu crossed 45 per cent, and the female literacy rate tripled from 10.10 per cent to 30.92 per cent. M.G.R.'s focus on nutritious meals for children aged 2-10 set a precedent for other states in India. He shifted the focus to providing healthy meals to maintain children's health and expanded the scheme's coverage. The scheme thus encouraged children from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend school regularly. Stalin's introduction of the breakfast scheme has created a tangible impact wherein it has been noted that complimentary breakfast improves attendance and reduces dropout rates (Sundaresan, 2023; Padma, 2024).

Timeline- Evolution of Mid-Day-Meal schemes.

The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme in India has a rich history that spans over a century, marked by numerous initiatives and contributions from various leaders and institutions. This historical timeline highlights key events and milestones in the evolution of the MDM scheme, beginning with the earliest recorded instances of providing mid-day meals to school children in the late 19th century. The timeline underscores the pivotal roles played by religious and social reformers, colonial and post-independence political leaders, and various state and central government initiatives. From the initial efforts of Kuriakose Elias Chavara in Kerala and KR Rao in Karnataka, through significant expansions by leaders like Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, K. Kamaraj, and M.G. Ramachandran in Tamil Nadu, to nationwide implementation and recent enhancements under contemporary political leadership, this timeline captures the progressive

development of the MDM scheme. Each entry reflects the continuous commitment to improving child nutrition and education, showcasing the scheme's enduring impact on India's socio-educational landscape (Table 1).

Table 1: Evolution of Mid Day Meal in India

Year	Event
1864	As Vicar General of Syro Malabar Church, Kuriakose Elias provided mid-day meal for poor students in the schools he started in Mannanam and Arpookara Villages in Kottayam, Kerala. (First instance of Mid-Day Meal Scheme in India)
1897	KR Rao set up Panchama Schools, in Karnataka for the Depressed Classes Mission and provided noon meals.
1920	Madras Municipal Corporation, Sir P Theagaraya Chetty, British colonial govt provided meals in a Corporation school in Thousand Lights area.
1930	French colonial government in Pondicherry implemented the Noon meal scheme.
1936	Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer wrote a letter to Maharaja of Travancore and recommended the implementation of noon meals in all govt schools.
1941	Inspired by the scheme implemented by Kuriakose Elias, the Diwan of Travancore, Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer, inaugurated a midday meal at a govt high school in Vellamadam, Kanniyakumari.
1956	Chief Minister, K Kamaraj and Director of Public Instruction introduced the scheme in Ettayapuram, Tamil Nadu.
1956	2nd Five Year Plan(FYP) included Midday Meal scheme by the Planning Commission under PM Jawaharlal Nehru.
1961	CARE provided monetary support for raw materials, food items, and set up of kitchens.
1982	Tamilnadu CM, MG Ramachandran launched the Nutritious Meal

	Programme, universalized the program, and expanded the coverage to Anganwadi.
1989	Chief Minister M Karunanidhi enhanced it by introducing boiled eggs, and bananas
1995	PM Narasimha Rao govt launched National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education at the national level
2001	In April, PUCL filed PIL in Supreme Court- the Right to Food Case Supreme Court issued a directive to all states & UTs to provide cooked meals in govt, govt aided schools within 6 months
2002	Supreme Court appointed Commissioners for monitoring of the scheme
2011	Tamilnadu CM, Jayalalitha introduced a variety rice and masala eggs in the scheme.
2015	PM Modi's government notified Mid-Day Meal Rules under NFSA(National Food Security Act)
2021:	The Parliament Standing Committee expanded included breakfast under the New Education Policy
2022	The Tamilnadu CM, M K Stalin launched a 'Breakfast Scheme', to provide 2 meals in govt schools
2024	M K Stalin expanded the Breakfast Scheme to cover government-aided schools.

Source: Compiled by the Author

Public Leadership Involved in MDM Scheme

The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme in India is a testament to the impact of visionary public leadership in shaping social welfare programs. Over the years, the scheme has evolved through the concerted efforts of various public leaders who have championed the cause of child nutrition and education. From religious and social reformers who laid the groundwork in the 19th century to contemporary political leaders who have expanded and refined the program, the MDM scheme reflects a legacy of dedicated leadership. These leaders, operating at different levels of government and society, have been instrumental in implementing policies, securing resources, and overcoming challenges to ensure the success of the scheme. The role of public leadership in

the MDM scheme highlights the importance of strategic vision, commitment, and collaboration in driving large-scale social initiatives, ultimately contributing to the betterment of millions of children across India(Table 2).

Table 2: Public Leaders Involved in the MDM Scheme

RELIGIOUS LEADERS/ SOCIAL REFORMERS
Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara Kudmul Ranga Rao Vitthal Ramji Shinde
BUREAUCRACY/ INSTITUTIONS
Schools- Mannanam and Arpoorkara in Kerala. Panchama and DCM boarding school in Karnataka Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer Madras Municipal Corporation British and French colonial administration Gram Sabhas, Panchayats, Parliament
POLITICAL LEADERS
Prime Ministers at various stages. Sir P. Theagaraya Chetty A Subbarayalu Reddiar M.C. Rajah K Kamaraj V.R. Nedunchezian MG Ramachandran M Karunanidhi Jayalalitha MK Stalin
NGOs/ CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
Depressed Classes Mission Society Director of Public Instruction NGO CARE PUCL Akshaya Patra Foundation Isha Foundation Rajasthan Bal Kalyan Samiti Navasrushti International Trust Rural Development Foundation ISKCON Food Relief
JUDICIARY

Supreme Court
State High Courts like- Delhi, Madras, Bombay, Allahabad

Conclusion

This study discloses the roles of various public leaders and public institutions in the evolution of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme as a policy initiative that went on to have a multiplier effect on education, empowerment, and development. The role played by public leaders at various levels of the government, civil society organisations, judiciary, etc., can be inferred that any policy like mid-day meal has multiple leaders involved at various levels who work towards ensuring that all children have access to nutritious food. Comprehensive policy formulation involves deliberations, debates, and cohesiveness among multiple actors, agents, and institutions.

The study highlighted the role played by elected representatives like the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, Parliament, municipal councillors, and members of Gram Panchayats in policy formulation and implementation. The bureaucracy, which heads various commissions and government organisations, ensures accountability and helps monitor and evaluate the scheme.

The courts at all levels, including district, state, and national, are harbingers of upholding rights. Legal entitlement has been granted to the mid-day meal scheme through the Right to Food Case and by bringing meals under NFSA. Civil society organisations like PUCL and N.G.O.s like CARE are instrumental in bringing in greater accountability and keeping the citizens informed and the government in check. These organisations invest in capacity building and training, ensure community mobilisation and participation and lend support through policy advocacy.

Challenges like budgetary constraints can be overcome when the leadership is motivated, and individuals and society need to be proactive to ensure that schemes are implemented fairly by holding those in power accountable.

This study concludes that if Public Leaders from various segments of society, from political leaders, bureaucracy, judiciary, civil society, and even religious leaders or institutions, play their leadership role with utmost responsibility, Public Policy initiatives could evolve and make the highest impact.

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