

Right to Food and Implementation Realities of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme in West Bengal: An Insight

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Abstract

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), recently restructured as PM POSHAN, is one of the largest school feeding programmes globally and constitutes a central pillar of India's rights-based welfare framework. Originating from the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (1995) and subsequently strengthened through Supreme Court directives (2001) and the National Food Security Act (2013), the scheme seeks to enhance school participation, improve child nutrition, and promote social equity. This paper presents findings from a field-based study conducted in August 2025 across approximately fifty government and government-aided schools in four districts of South Bengal, namely Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Birbhum. The study evaluates implementation dynamics, participation patterns, nutritional adequacy, infrastructure, labour conditions, and monitoring mechanisms. The findings indicate that while the scheme remains operationally stable and widely accessed, its implementation reflects uneven infrastructure, limited dietary diversity, delayed honorarium payments to cook-cum-helpers, and variations in community monitoring. The paper argues that although the scheme continues to serve as a critical nutritional support mechanism, particularly in economically vulnerable areas, qualitative improvements are required to align implementation with the constitutional and policy objectives underpinning the programme.

Keywords: Mid-day meal, welfare, rights, social equity, vulnerability.

Introduction

Food insecurity and malnutrition continue to pose significant challenges to educational attainment and social development across the globe. In response, governments and international organizations have implemented various school feeding programmes aimed at addressing these dual concerns. Among these, Mid-Day Meal (MDM) schemes have emerged as a crucial social intervention. These initiatives primarily seek to enhance school enrolment, attendance, and retention while simultaneously combating classroom hunger and improving the nutritional status of children. Across countries with diverse socio-economic structures, MDM schemes have not only served as tools for public health promotion but have also functioned as instruments of social justice and educational empowerment.

Globally, the practice of feeding children in schools has evolved from sporadic charitable actions to formal, state-sponsored programs. In countries like Brazil, Kenya, and the United States, school meal initiatives have become institutionalized components of social protection systems,

contributing not only to child health and education but also to local agriculture and community livelihoods. These global experiences have illustrated that when carefully designed and equitably implemented, school feeding programmes can contribute to long-term human development and foster inclusive growth.

India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme, one of the largest school feeding initiatives in the world has its roots in localized experiments in the early post-independence decades, which were gradually integrated into national policy. Institutionalized under the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education in 1995 and given constitutional force under the Right to Food jurisprudence post-2001, the scheme today reaches over 100 million children across government and government-aided schools. Its scope has since expanded to include nutritional guidelines, infrastructural mandates, and community participation frameworks, thus anchoring it as a central pillar in the country's educational and nutritional policy ecosystem. However, implementational realities show a different picture.

The development of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme in India is deeply embedded in the trajectory of the country's educational and food security policies. Its origins can be traced to the broader ambitions of the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, which recognized that universalizing elementary education required more than just schools and syllabi- it demanded attention to the socio-economic barriers that prevent children from attending school. Among these, hunger and malnutrition were central. The NPE explicitly recommended the provision of nutritious meals as a means to incentivize school attendance, particularly among children from disadvantaged communities. (Gracious, 2013)

In the years following the NPE, various state-level experiments in school feeding in Tamil Nadu and Kerala demonstrated measurable gains in enrolment, attendance, and child health. These successes created the momentum for a national programme, culminating in the launch of the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) in 1995. This centrally sponsored scheme aimed to provide free midday meals to children studying in government and government-aided schools, with a focus on addressing classroom hunger and enhancing enrolment in primary education. A significant turning point came in 2001, when the Supreme Court of India, in response to the landmark *People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) vs. Union of India* case, directed all state governments to provide cooked midday meals to school-going children. The Court transformed what was previously a policy choice into a justifiable right, effectively framing the MDM Scheme within the country's evolving rights-based governance framework. (Right to Food and Work, 2025)

The next major policy milestone was the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, which legally entitled every child between the ages of 6 and 14 studying in a government or government-aided school to one nutritious mid-day meal every school day. Chapter II, Section 5 of the Act explicitly codifies this provision as a matter of enforceable law, reinforcing the state's obligation to address child hunger and malnutrition as a core responsibility. The NFSA brought greater accountability and standardization, while also mandating nutritional norms, grievance addressal systems, and participatory mechanisms at the school and community levels. These developments demonstrate a clear shift in Indian policy-from welfare-driven initiatives to rights-based entitlements-where food and education are not privileges but guarantees under the Constitution. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, situated within this policy arc, is no longer a supplementary initiative but a foundational component of India's strategy to achieve universal elementary education, nutritional security, and social equity. (Right to Food and Work, 2025)

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme in India: Objectives, Norms, and Institutional Architecture

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, as it exists today, is the product of decades of administrative evolution, policy refinement, and judicial activism. It is one of the largest school feeding programmes globally, covering over 100 million children across approximately 1.1 million schools and Education Guarantee Scheme centres. Its primary objectives are threefold: to enhance enrolment, retention, and attendance in schools, to improve the nutritional levels of children, and to promote social equity and gender empowerment.

The Scheme has clear nutritional benchmarks: each child at the primary level (Classes I–V) is entitled to a hot cooked

meal containing at least 450 calories and 12 grams of protein, while students in upper primary (Classes VI–VIII) receive meals with 700 calories and 20 grams of protein. These guidelines also recommend the inclusion of food grains, pulses, vegetables, and protein supplements such as eggs, milk, or soy products. States are encouraged to contextualize these meals according to local dietary patterns, while adhering to the minimum nutritional standards.

Institutionally, the Scheme is jointly funded by the central and state governments. The central government supplies food grains through the Food Corporation of India (FCI), and covers a significant portion of the cooking cost, transportation, and management expenses. The Ministry of Education is the nodal authority at the national level, while state-level implementation is carried out through State Mid-Day Meal Societies, often under the Department of School Education or Panchayati Raj institutions.

Operational execution rests with school management committees (SMCs), headteachers, and cook-cum-helpers, many of whom are women from marginalized communities. This decentralized approach allows for better community monitoring and flexibility, although disparities in fund disbursement and administrative efficiency remain challenges. To ensure quality control, regular inspections, social audits, health check-ups, and automated monitoring systems are increasingly being introduced.

In 2021, the scheme was rebranded as the PM POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman) Scheme, signalling an expanded emphasis on nutrition outcomes, convergence with health services, and greater transparency through digital governance. Under this revised framework, provisions such as fortified rice, deworming, menstrual hygiene management, and community kitchen gardens have been gradually integrated to make the intervention more holistic.

What distinguishes India's MDM scheme is its vast scope and inter-sectoral nature-bridging food security, primary education, public health, and social inclusion. Its continued evolution reflects both the challenges and promise of implementing large-scale welfare programmes in a federal democracy. As India grapples with persistent child malnutrition and educational inequality, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme remains not only a policy imperative but a moral cornerstone of the nation's developmental vision. However, implementational failures are often visible. In Chhattisgarh, 78 students were served meals licked by a dog. In Bihar 100 children fell ill after consuming a meal with dead snake in it. A video surfaced where in Madhya Pradesh students are being fed puffed rice instead of mandated menu of kheer-puri, in Punjab mid-day meal workers, primarily women, not being paid their monthly honorarium, are demanding high wages. (The Hindu, 2025)

In West Bengal, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme plays a particularly vital role in addressing entrenched regional inequalities in access to food and education. The state has witnessed both administrative innovation and infrastructural challenges in implementing the scheme across its diverse districts. From urban centers to tribal hinterlands, the delivery of meals is influenced by a range of intersecting factors including poverty levels, caste and gender dynamics, geography, school infrastructure, and the administrative will at the district and block levels.

School feeding programmes are widely recognised as instruments that bridge the fields of education policy and social protection. Across different national contexts, such programmes function as mechanisms to address classroom

hunger, enhance school attendance, and mitigate structural inequalities that impede child development. In India, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme represents one of the most expansive public interventions in this domain. The MDMS was formally launched at the national level in 1995 under the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education. It aimed to incentivise enrolment and regular attendance in primary schools while addressing child malnutrition. The scheme's significance deepened following the Supreme Court's 2001 directive in *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, which mandated the provision of cooked mid-day meals in all government and government-aided primary schools. This directive transformed the scheme from a policy initiative into a justiciable entitlement. The enactment of the National Food Security Act (2013) further institutionalised this right by guaranteeing nutritional support to school-going children aged 6–14 years. In 2021, the programme was restructured as PM POSHAN, with renewed emphasis on nutritional adequacy, fortified food inclusion, and digital monitoring systems. Despite this robust legislative and policy framework, implementation experiences vary across states and districts, reflecting differences in administrative capacity, socio-economic context, and local governance practices. West Bengal provides a particularly relevant site for examining such variation as it encompasses regions characterised by agrarian vulnerability, tribal populations, urban growth, and persistent socio-economic disparities. (GOI, n.d.)

Objectives and Methods of the Study

The study was undertaken with the following objectives: First, to examine whether the Mid-Day Meal Scheme is being implemented in accordance with prescribed norms in the selected districts of West Bengal. Second, to evaluate the extent to which the scheme achieves its intended objectives of enhancing participation and addressing nutritional needs. Third, to identify infrastructural, administrative, and logistical challenges affecting the successful delivery of the scheme's promises to the beneficiaries. Fourth, to assess the conditions and experiences of the cook-cum-helpers who constitute the frontline workforce of the scheme. Finally, to propose recommendations based on field findings, in order to strengthen the implementation of the scheme and ensure qualitative improvement.

The study was conducted over a three-week period in August 2025. Approximately fifty government and government-aided schools were selected across four districts of Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Birbhum. The selection was purposive and stratified to ensure representation of urban, semi-urban, rural, and tribal areas. The four selected districts represent varied socio-economic landscapes within South Bengal. Malda is marked by agricultural dependence, seasonal flooding, and relatively high poverty levels. Household food insecurity remains a concern in several rural blocks. Educational infrastructure is present but unevenly distributed. Murshidabad, one of the most densely populated districts in the state, combines agricultural livelihoods with small-scale trade. Gender disparities in literacy and income persist in certain regions, influencing educational participation patterns. Nadia presents a mixed profile, combining urban centres with rural hinterlands. Educational indicators are comparatively stronger in certain blocks, though disparities remain across socio-economic groups. Birbhum includes significant tribal populations in its western belts. Remoteness and infrastructural deficits characterise several areas, shaping access to public services, including

school-based welfare programmes. Understanding these contextual differences is essential for interpreting variations in MDMS implementation across districts.

The data collection methods included structured questionnaires administered to headteachers and school coordinators, semi-structured interviews with cook-cum-helpers and students, and direct observation of kitchen facilities, meal preparation processes, and distribution practices. School records relating to attendance and menu schedules were examined wherever available. However, it is to be kept in mind that this study does not claim statistical representativeness; rather, it seeks to provide qualitative insight into ground-level realities with time constraints and limited access to certain remote locations constituting the acknowledged limitations.

Across the surveyed schools, it was seen that a scheme maintains quite broad coverage. In the rural Malda and Birbhum, the participation in the midday meal nearly universal. Teachers reported that for many children particularly those from economically vulnerable household, the meal constitutes a significant daily source of nutrition and it is in these areas attendance often relates positively with the meal provision. In Murshidabad, the participation of students, children remain steady across rural and semi urban schools where the scheme is widely accepted an integrated into the daily routine of these students. Urban participation rates showed moderate variation where families with relatively stable income, occasionally opted out and preferred home prepared meals. However, this did not show any significant reduction in the overall coverage. The initial observation revealed that the scheme performs a dual function. First, it acts as a nutritional lifeline in poor and rural context, and secondly, as a supplementary support in a more economically secure urban setting.

The prescribed nutritional norms under the scheme requires a provision of 450 calories in 12gms of protein at the primary 11 and 700 calories and 20 gms of protein at the upper primary level. Field observation suggested that calorie requirements are broadly met across the survey schools primarily through staple based meals, consisting of rice and lentils. However, dietary diversity remains limited vegetable inclusion varies depending on seasonal availability and local procurement practices. Even though the official guidelines do talk about inclusion of eggs in the meal. It is not uniformly implemented across all schools in certain schools. Eggs are provided regularly in others, financial constraints or supply irregularities have limited the frequency. Murshidabad displayed some innovation through school-based kitchen gardens that supplement vegetable supply. Such practices enhance freshness and reduce dependence and external procurement. However, these initiatives were very unique to a few schools in Murshidabad and were not universal. The limited incorporation of fortified foods and micro nutrient rich items suggests that while basic energy needs are addressed, comprehensive nutritional adequacy requires further attention. Infrastructure constraints further complicate the delivery of the program. Despite the presence of school-based kitchens in most locations, basic amenities such as piped water, functional exhaust systems, electricity, and refrigeration are absent in many schools surveyed. Cooking often takes place in semi-permanent structures or open spaces adjacent to the school premises, exposing food to environmental contaminants and logistical inefficiencies. Reports from multiple zones in Birbhum and Murshidabad noted a lack of proper storage facilities for grains and condiments, increasing

the risk of spoilage and pilferage. Even in more developed areas like urban Nadia, kitchen spaces remain under-equipped, and school authorities report frequent interruptions in gas supply or cooking fuel availability.

A noteworthy element of the MDM Scheme in West Bengal, consistent with national patterns, is its gendered employment impact. A significant majority of cook-cum-helpers employed under the scheme are women, many of whom belong to local Self-Help Groups (SHGs). While this reflects a measure of localized empowerment, the fixed honorarium of INR 1,000 per month continues to be insufficient, especially in the face of rising living costs and increased work burdens. The lack of formal training in nutrition, food safety, or basic kitchen management further restricts their professional development and long-term upward mobility.

Monitoring mechanisms such as School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), though formally instituted, display mixed effectiveness. In zones such as urban Murshidabad and central Nadia, SMCs were observed to maintain attendance registers, menu logs, and feedback records with some regularity. In contrast, rural zones in Birbhum and parts of Malda exhibited passive or inconsistent oversight, often depending on individual school headmasters or community volunteers for compliance monitoring.

While the GCNF 2021 report highlights the innovative responses of states during the COVID-19 pandemic-ranging from dry ration distribution to food security allowances-the situation in West Bengal appears more restrained. (School Meal Programs around the World: Results from the 2021 Global Survey of School Meal Programs, 2022) As of August 2025, many schools have resumed hot meal services, yet supply chain inconsistencies and delays in food grain delivery remain unresolved. Some schools continue to report dependence on emergency stockpiles or community donations during disruption periods, indicating systemic fragilities in procurement and logistics. The MDM Scheme in West Bengal, particularly across the districts of South Bengal, operates in its current form with a foundational yet minimalistic orientation. The scheme fulfils its basic statutory responsibilities but falls short in maximizing its potential as a transformative intervention in child health, education, and gender empowerment. The evidence gathered in this report signals the need for a policy recalibration that balances fiscal discipline with nutritional ambition, infrastructural adequacy, and inclusive governance. In the chapters that follow, the scheme's components will be further deconstructed and contextualized within a mythological allegory-framing the fight against hunger as a battle not only of state capacity but of collective will and imagination.

Ground Level Realities: An Insight

An analysis of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme across the four South Bengal districts-Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Birbhum reveals considerable variation in participation rates and coverage effectiveness. While all four districts formally adhere to state-mandated delivery standards, ground-level uptake by students and parental engagement vary significantly due to socio-economic and cultural contexts.

In Malda, coverage is dichotomous. Rural schools in zones such as Kaliachak report near-complete MDM participation, reflecting the district's high poverty index and nutritional insecurity. In contrast, urban schools in English Bazaar struggle with engagement. Students from middle-income households often bring food from home, undermining the

universality of the scheme. Teachers describe the mid-day meal as "ignored" by students who find it monotonous or redundant. This creates a skewed participation matrix where policy reach exists on paper but dwindles in more affluent, urbanized areas.

Murshidabad, though socio-economically comparable to Malda, demonstrates a more even distribution of coverage. In Domkal and Raghunathganj, teachers emphasized that students, regardless of urban or rural placement-depend on the meals, not just for nutrition, but for social cohesion. The district's high-density population, coupled with a tradition of community support, has fostered high participation. Even when facing irregular supply chains, schools used local networks to ensure food delivery. As one headmaster noted, "In Murshidabad, food is not refused, even when it is late." Participation here seems as much a cultural habit as it is a welfare necessity.

Nadia offers a textbook case of rural-urban divergence. Urban zones like Krishnanagar and Kalyani show declining MDM engagement. Students from relatively privileged backgrounds, according to teachers, prefer home-packed meals, and many parents view the scheme as unnecessary. In contrast, schools in Chakdaha and Ranaghat remain reliant on MDM to drive attendance. Rural teachers routinely describe the meal as a "daily incentive," suggesting that in certain pockets, education and food are inseparable. Notably, the data from Nadia indicates that the scheme's appeal has become conditional-not universal, shaped by income levels and social perception.

Birbhum presents the most striking evidence of how geography dictates participation. In tribal and forested areas like Suri and Rampurhat, the MDM scheme functions as a primary source of sustenance. Children not only eat every day at school, but often rely on the mid-day meal as their only significant meal of the day. Teachers reported close to 100% coverage in these zones, though it was often accompanied by logistical struggles such as inadequate facilities or delayed supplies. In urbanized Bolpur, coverage is less dramatic but steady, with students participating regularly but expressing similar concerns about food quality and variety.

If visualized, a quadrant graph placing rural vs urban and poor vs moderately affluent would show Malda and Nadia diverging on the urban front, Murshidabad balancing the midpoint, and Birbhum anchoring the rural-poor quadrant. This suggests that while administrative coverage is widespread, real engagement is uneven-driven by class, location, and perception of the MDM scheme's relevance.

Nutritional Adequacy and Meal Composition

One of the foundational goals of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme is to combat undernutrition among school-aged children through structured, calorie- and protein-rich meals. According to national standards, primary school students should receive meals delivering at least 450 calories and 12 grams of protein, while upper primary students should receive 700 calories and 20 grams of protein. However, the findings from field-level surveys in Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Birbhum indicate that while these norms form the policy framework, their actual translation into practice is often erratic, region-specific, and deeply influenced by local logistics and budgetary restrictions.

In Malda, the nutritional integrity of meals varies drastically between zones. Rural areas such as Kaliachak still rely heavily on basic staples-rice and dal-served with minimal oil and occasionally accompanied by a seasonal vegetable. Egg

inclusion remains inconsistent despite official menu guidelines stating it should be served once or twice a week. Several students and teachers interviewed expressed frustration at the lack of variety, with one teacher remarking, “It’s a rotation of rice and lentils—there’s no nourishment beyond the basics.” Urban schools face a different problem: even when more variety is technically available, the lack of freshness and preparation quality dissuades students from consuming the meals, leading to food waste rather than under-consumption.

Murshidabad provides a slightly more optimistic picture. While constrained by similar state allocations and logistical limitations, several schools have managed to enhance the meal plan using local resources. In Domkal, for instance, school authorities have partnered with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to grow spinach and other leafy greens in kitchen gardens. As a result, meals often include saag or vegetables beyond potatoes. Egg distribution, although inconsistent, is more frequent than in Malda. Students surveyed noted that the meals “feel fuller” on days when protein is present, and cooks shared that they adjust ingredients based on market availability. The result is a flexible, if modest, nutritional profile, with teachers acting as mediators between policy and practical meal provisioning.

Nadia presents a more complex narrative. The meals here generally meet the caloric threshold but fall short in terms of nutritional diversity. The heavy reliance on rice and lentils, with very little fruit, green vegetables, or fortified food items, reflects a minimalist interpretation of the state’s food provisioning guidelines. In several urban schools, students report disliking the meal due to its repetitive nature. One upper-primary student in Krishnanagar quipped, “It’s the same thing all year—rice, dal, and alu.” In rural Ranaghat, some schools supplement meals with locally available items, but there is no systematic incorporation of dairy, fruit, or fortified micronutrients. Iron and iodine deficiencies—while not officially tracked in the study, were alluded to by teachers, especially among adolescent girls.

In Birbhum, especially in tribal and forest-fringe zones, the nutritional situation is more fragile. Here, meals are often basic to a fault. Several schools cook using single-burner setups with poor ventilation, and menu logs indicate a recurring triad of rice, watery dal, and boiled potatoes. Eggs are rare, and green vegetables are typically seasonal and in low supply. A cook in Rampurhat shared her concerns: “When we don’t get pulses, we cook rice with salt and turmeric. That’s all we can do.” Students echoed these limitations but still expressed gratitude, underscoring how MDM is often their only dependable meal. In relatively better-equipped urban schools like Bolpur, the situation improves marginally, with eggs more regularly included and cooking processes somewhat standardized.

If we were to represent the findings as a stacked bar chart showing diversity of meal components—grains, pulses, vegetables, eggs, dairy, and fortified items—Birbhum and Malda would rank lowest, with high reliance on cereals and little else. Murshidabad would score moderately across all components, while Nadia would show high cereal-protein provision but poor micronutrient and vegetable variety. In sum, nutritional adequacy across the four districts remains anchored in survivalist provisioning, rather than health optimization. While none of the districts are in outright violation of the minimum standards, the operational interpretation of what constitutes a “complete meal” remains narrow and largely unfortified. This calls for both increased

financial allocation and localized food innovation—ranging from kitchen gardens to decentralized supply chains—to elevate the MDM Scheme from adequacy to true nutritional empowerment.

Infrastructure and Kitchen Safety

Infrastructure forms the skeletal foundation of any public welfare scheme. In the case of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme, the availability and quality of infrastructure—ranging from kitchens, storage units, fuel systems, ventilation, and seating spaces to water and sanitation—are crucial determinants of both implementation efficiency and the dignity of service delivery. Across the four South Bengal districts of Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Birbhum, infrastructural conditions are starkly uneven, often exposing the fault lines of geographic neglect, administrative inertia, and policy minimalism.

In Malda, infrastructure has seen limited evolution beyond basic compliance. While most schools possess designated cooking spaces, they are often makeshift or dilapidated. Rural schools, especially in Kaliachak and surrounding areas, still cook meals in semi-open areas due to inadequate ventilation and crumbling roofs. Fuel supply remains a recurring concern. While liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) cylinders are allocated by the state, several schools reported delays in refilling or complete dependency on firewood during shortages. One cook shared her experience: “We wait for days for gas. Sometimes we cook with firewood in the open. Smoke fills the room.” Water access, especially safe piped water, is sporadic, and storage containers are often uncovered or poorly maintained, posing hygiene risks. Teachers frequently intervene to maintain kitchen cleanliness, but structural limitations overwhelm good intentions.

Murshidabad shows a somewhat more dynamic picture. In Domkal and Beldanga, a few schools have implemented modular kitchen units with separate areas for grain storage and vegetable cleaning. This is often the result of district-level coordination or local administrative prioritization. However, these functional facilities coexist with under-equipped schools in other zones, where single-burner cooking continues without exhaust systems or proper sinks. Water availability is less of a concern here, largely due to community-driven borewell maintenance and local investment in piped supply. However, storage conditions vary dramatically—some schools use plastic bins without lids, and others store grain sacks in classrooms or under staircases. Despite these challenges, Murshidabad stands out for local adaptations and improvisation, which have prevented a total collapse of hygiene standards even under duress.

Nadia, by contrast, is marked by contradictions. Schools in urban and semi-urban areas such as Krishnanagar, Chakdaha, and Kalyani often boast more structurally complete kitchens, some of which have tiling, designated cooking zones, and gas supply. However, the quality of maintenance is inconsistent. In one school, a supposedly upgraded kitchen had blackened ceilings and non-functional exhausts. “We have the infrastructure, but no upkeep,” a teacher remarked. In rural schools, the problem is compounded by irregular delivery of ingredients and inadequate kitchen size. Many kitchens are too small to accommodate the number of meals cooked daily, leading to logistical bottlenecks. Drinking water is more accessible in Nadia than in Malda or Birbhum, yet schools seldom integrate water filtration or safe storage systems. Moreover, children often eat meals in corridors, verandahs, or under trees, as designated dining areas remain rare.

In Birbhum, infrastructure collapses at the point of distance. In tribal and forest-border zones of Rampurhat and Suri, schools are often forced to cook outdoors or in semi-constructed sheds with tarpaulin roofs and no wall separations. In one school visited, rice and pulses were stored in a classroom corner, exposed to rodents and weather. The cook-cum-helper described her fear of fire accidents: “There is no water close by. If anything happens, we don’t have a way to stop it.” Fire safety equipment was absent in all schools surveyed in these interior zones. In Bolpur, conditions were somewhat better, with permanent kitchens and LPG access, yet even there, storage was informal, and utensils were limited. Electricity access remains patchy, with many schools relying on natural light and cooking even during power cuts. If conceptualized as a layered heatmap of kitchen safety and adequacy, Birbhum’s tribal interiors and Malda’s rural belts would appear in the red zone, indicating acute infrastructural fragility. Murshidabad would vary from red to amber, depending on block-level support, while Nadia would lean more towards yellow-adequate in structure, but lacking in consistency and maintenance. Overall, the infrastructural state of the MDM scheme in these districts reveals more than logistical failings—it exposes a philosophical contradiction. While the scheme intends to provide equitable nutrition, the inequity of facilities betrays a troubling spatial bias. Rural and tribal students continue to receive meals under structurally unsafe and unhygienic conditions, making a strong case for targeted infrastructure grants, decentralized kitchen units, and regular maintenance audits. Infrastructure, in this scheme, is not just a medium of service; it is a measure of respect afforded to the beneficiaries.

Human Resources and Gender Dynamics

Behind the operational machinery of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme lies an often invisible but indispensable workforce—primarily composed of women from economically marginalized communities. These cook-cum-helpers are not only tasked with meal preparation and distribution but also act as informal custodians of cleanliness, nutrition awareness, and safety. Across Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Birbhum, the survey data and field interviews conducted in August 2025 revealed that while this workforce is central to the scheme’s daily success, it remains structurally undervalued, underpaid, and systemically excluded from decision-making processes. In Malda, women hired under the scheme expressed both pride in their roles and frustration over their conditions. Most cook-cum-helpers surveyed had been employed for over five years, yet continued to receive a monthly honorarium of only INR 1,000—a sum unchanged despite inflation and rising living costs. Many juggled MDM responsibilities with other informal work to support their households. “We wake up at 5 a.m., manage our homes, then come here to cook. But the money is nothing,” one cook remarked. Despite playing an essential role in food distribution to hundreds of children, they are rarely consulted in school-level decisions. The relationship between the teaching staff and helpers in Malda was respectful but hierarchical, reinforcing the idea that MDM workers are support staff, not stakeholders. Murshidabad offers a somewhat more participatory environment. Several cooks here were part of active Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and some schools reported that decisions regarding ingredients and purchasing were occasionally taken in consultation with these groups. In one semi-urban school in Beldanga, the headteacher proudly mentioned that “our meal

helpers are more than cooks; they are community builders.” Women here described a stronger sense of agency, even though their financial compensation remained inadequate. Some had even undergone basic nutrition or hygiene training—often initiated at the block level. Yet, even in Murshidabad, these improvements were uneven. In rural zones, many workers lacked proper uniforms, gloves, or equipment. Several women reported seasonal layoffs or delayed payments stretching up to two months.

Nadia reveals the paradox of systemic structure without human empathy. While the district had relatively organized kitchen systems, formal record-keeping, and functional monitoring bodies, the treatment of MDM workers remained impersonal and transactional. In Krishnanagar and Chakdaha, cook-cum-helpers complained of being “treated like outsiders” by school staff. One woman noted, “No one asks for our opinion. We cook, serve, clean, and leave. That’s all.” They were seldom invited to SMC meetings or given space to express concerns. Payment cycles were marginally more regular here, and schools did receive occasional hygiene kits, but the lack of integration of MDM workers into the school’s welfare ecosystem was palpable. This exposed a deeper cultural issue: administrative efficiency without social inclusion.

In Birbhum, particularly in tribal-dominated zones, the story took on a more urgent tone. Many cook-cum-helpers were Adivasi women with limited literacy and no formal bank access. Payments were often delayed due to bureaucratic bottlenecks, and grievance redressal mechanisms were practically non-existent. Several women cooked without aprons or head covers, often squatting near open fires or balancing utensils in unsafe kitchen corners. In a school in Rampurhat, a woman recounted how she had continued to work through illness because “there is no one else, and the children need food.” Their sense of duty was matched only by the neglect they faced from the system. Yet, in some instances, these women acted as unofficial mentors to the students, checking their attendance, reminding them to wash hands, or even guiding them in household skills. In Bolpur, some headteachers acknowledged this and had begun involving MDM workers in monthly planning sessions, a small but symbolic step.

Visualizing the findings, a radar chart plotting five dimensions—pay regularity, training, decision-making involvement, dignity of labor, and workplace safety, would show Murshidabad ahead in community participation and recognition, while Birbhum would lag behind due to isolation and systemic neglect. Malda would display moderate respect but poor compensation, and Nadia would score high on structure but low on worker integration.

Ultimately, the gendered dynamics of the MDM Scheme in South Bengal reveal a dissonance: women are trusted to feed the next generation but not empowered to participate in shaping how that food is prepared, managed, or evaluated. Addressing this would require not just a revision of honorarium structures but a fundamental shift in how policy recognizes labor rooted in care, community, and gendered resilience.

Monitoring, Record-Keeping, and Accountability

The effectiveness of a large-scale welfare program like the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme does not rest solely on delivery and consumption; it hinges equally on the strength of its monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Transparent record-keeping, regular inspections, responsive grievance

redressal, and community oversight are crucial elements that determine whether policy implementation aligns with ground realities. The field survey conducted in August 2025 across the districts of Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Birbhum revealed a widely uneven landscape of monitoring infrastructure and administrative culture. While some zones had embraced procedural formalism, others operated in near opacity, with accountability reduced to symbolic gestures.

In Malda, the monitoring system was inconsistent at best. Most schools maintained basic registers-recording daily attendance and meal quantity, but these were often incomplete or updated retrospectively. Teachers reported that block-level inspections were rare and, when they did occur, were largely perfunctory. One headmaster in English Bazar described the situation bluntly: “They come once in two months, look at a few registers, sign, and leave. No one checks the food.” The School Management Committees (SMCs), which are mandated to meet regularly to review the scheme’s implementation, existed largely in name. In many rural schools, parents were unaware of their roles in SMCs, and meeting minutes, if available, were filled out pro forma. This lack of functional oversight created an environment where issues like food quality, gas shortages, or irregular honorarium payments went unreported and unaddressed.

Murshidabad, in contrast, presented a more engaged ecosystem. Several schools had not only updated registers but also maintained photographic evidence of food preparation and distribution. In Beldanga and Raghunathganj, SMCs met at least once a month and often included women from Self-Help Groups and parents of enrolled students. One teacher proudly showed a file with grievance redressal forms and inspection summaries: “Even if the problems aren’t solved immediately, we at least have a record. That keeps pressure on the suppliers and local officials.” Interestingly, Murshidabad had also begun experimenting with mobile-based record submissions to the district portal—a pilot initiative that aimed to digitize oversight and allow real-time monitoring. While the system was still nascent and limited to a few schools, it indicated a forward-looking attitude towards governance.

Nadia illustrated the strengths and limitations of systematized monitoring. In Krishnanagar and Kalyani, schools maintained rigorous documentation-daily MDM logs, hygiene checklists, and staff rotation schedules. Inspections were more regular than in Malda, and teachers displayed a clear understanding of procedural expectations. However, this formalism often masked a deeper disconnect. SMCs functioned but rarely exercised critical oversight. Parents, particularly those from lower-income groups, seldom spoke out about food quality or kitchen hygiene, possibly out of deference to school authority or lack of awareness. As a result, issues such as delayed egg distribution or inadequate salt and oil procurement went unchallenged. Teachers admitted that while reports were regularly submitted, “follow-ups are rare, and problems persist month after month.” Nadia, therefore, exemplifies a bureaucratic model of compliance, where monitoring exists on paper but lacks transformative impact on implementation.

Birbhum, especially its tribal interiors, revealed the most concerning deficits in accountability. Schools in Suri and Rampurhat often lacked updated registers altogether. In some cases, meal quantity was estimated verbally and not documented. Several teachers confessed that while they tried to maintain order, the lack of administrative presence made monitoring an afterthought. “The officers come once or twice a year,” a teacher stated, “and usually during celebrations or

government events, not during regular school days.” SMCs here were dormant, and parents were rarely invited to participate in decision-making. In one school, the cook was unaware of whom to contact in case of a gas leak or ingredient shortage. Bolpur’s urban schools fared better, with more formalized reporting and some evidence of community feedback. Yet even there, the absence of third-party audits or student feedback mechanisms limited the accountability framework.

If visualized as a compliance pyramid, Murshidabad would occupy the top layer, integrating community voices with state procedure. Nadia would form the middle, grounded in documentation but lacking participatory depth. Malda would fall lower, marked by superficial oversight, while Birbhum’s interiors would rest at the base, largely unregulated and informally managed.

Ultimately, the findings underscore that effective monitoring is not merely a question of paperwork, but of institutional culture, participatory governance, and access to redressal mechanisms. For the MDM Scheme to realize its full potential, accountability must shift from a top-down model of passive review to a bottom-up model of active involvement, empowering teachers, parents, cooks, and students to co-own the scheme’s future.

What is to be done? A discussion

The study reveals that the Mid-Day Meal Scheme remains operationally stable and widely accessed across the four districts studied. The scheme plays a critical role in supporting children from economically vulnerable households, particularly in rural and tribal areas.

At the same time, qualitative challenges persist. Dietary diversity is limited, infrastructure requires improvement in certain regions, and cook-cum-helpers face financial insecurity due to low honorarium and occasional payment delays. Monitoring systems function but could be strengthened through greater community engagement and outcome-oriented assessment.

Based on field findings, several measures emerge as necessary to strengthen implementation. First, enhancement of dietary diversity is essential. While caloric norms are met, increased inclusion of protein-rich items such as eggs and pulses on a consistent basis would better align meals with nutritional objectives. Encouraging and institutionalising kitchen gardens can supplement vegetable supply and promote local engagement. Second, infrastructural investment must prioritise rural and tribal schools. Construction of permanent kitchen sheds, provision of adequate ventilation, fire safety equipment, and improved storage facilities would enhance hygiene and operational efficiency. Third, the honorarium of cook-cum-helpers requires revision in light of rising living costs. Timely disbursement mechanisms should be strengthened to prevent financial hardship. Structured training programmes in nutrition, hygiene, and safety would further professionalise their role. Fourth, monitoring systems should incorporate participatory oversight through active School Management Committees. Community involvement fosters transparency and accountability. Fifth, integration of fortified food components, where feasible, would strengthen the scheme’s nutritional impact, particularly in districts with higher anaemia prevalence.

These recommendations reflect observations documented during field research and align with the scheme’s foundational objectives. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme in West Bengal continues to function as a critical welfare intervention that

supports both educational participation and child nutrition. The field study across Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, and Birbhum demonstrates that the programme remains widely implemented and valued by beneficiaries. However, ensuring that the scheme fulfils its full potential requires qualitative enhancement rather than mere continuity. Addressing infrastructural disparities, strengthening dietary diversity, improving working conditions for cook-cum-helpers, and enhancing participatory monitoring would reinforce the scheme's effectiveness. The MDMS embodies a constitutional commitment to child welfare and educational equity. Sustained attention to implementation quality will determine whether this commitment translates into lasting social transformation.

Conclusion

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), now implemented under the PM POSHAN framework, represents one of our country's most significant welfare intervention that is rights-based and aims at addressing child hunger, improving educational access and promoting social equity. The findings of this study illustrate that the scheme continues to act as a critical pillar of nutritional and educational support in India, particularly for children who belong from economically vulnerable backgrounds. The rural and tribal areas that the team visited shows that the programme serves not merely as a supplementary initiative, but a vital source of nutrition along with a catalyst for regularising school attendance. Along with this, several implementational challenges are present that limit the schemes' potential. While in some areas, the prescribed calorie requirements are broadly being met through staple based diet, diversity in the diet remains limited due to lack of protein rich food and micro nutrients. Infrastructure deficiencies add to the existing challenges of food security and meal preparations. The helpers complain about poor working conditions, most of whom are women from marginalised communities, revealing the structural inequalities resulting from low honorarium, delayed payments and lack of training mechanisms. The mechanisms to monitor and seek accountability have also displayed uneven effectiveness across the districts visited. Some school management committees have shown improved recordkeeping, but others show limited community participation indicating disparities in administrative capacities, local governance practises and the quality of implementation. Despite these challenges, the mid-day meal scheme remains vital in advancing constitutional commitment to the right to food and universal elementary education in India. It is recommended that if dietary diversity is maintained, kitchen infrastructure is invested into, compensations are made fair and frontline workers are trained, the schemes' effectiveness can be improved. At the end one can believe that the long-term success of the scheme will depend not only on its extension, but also on the efforts and intention of all the stakeholders.

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