



# When hunger asks a question: Food and federal politics in India

BY PRASENJIT MAITI

*There are more consultations on important issues between the central government and state governments [in India] and within the broad spectrum of political parties signaling an era of co-operative federalism and coalition politics. The central government is exploring options for decentralising anti-poverty and rural development programmes.*

- *Translating growth into human development*, United Nations Development Program.

**The** UNDP's optimistic forecast for federalism in India is being proved wrong on one contentious issue – mid-day meals for elementary school children. Under the scheme, the Government of India supplies and transports food grains free of cost to the states so meals can be provided to school children who live below the poverty line.

Certain state governments have decided to lock horns with the central government over this emotionally-charged issue. The tension built to the point of a no-confidence motion brought against the central government by the opposition in Parliament in August. The motion failed, but the crisis remains.

Recalcitrant states cite financial reasons for not being able to provide cooked meals to hungry children who would otherwise drop out of school to work. Instead of hot meals, these states have been distributing uncooked food grains to primary school students – even though it costs only 1 rupee per child per day to cook meals for the requisite 200 days a year.

Despite the Supreme Court's interim order in November 2001 directing states to introduce cooked mid-day meals in government and government-aided primary schools, many states have not yet done so. West Bengal is one of the main offenders according to the *Times of India*. This is rather surprising as the Left Front Government of West Bengal habitually projects itself as a government of, by and for the poor since it came to power in 1977.

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## West Bengal

NGOs in Calcutta and elsewhere in West Bengal organized demonstrations led by primary school children on Children's Day, November 14, 2002, to protest against the state government's intransigence in providing mid-day meals.

Among the organizers were NGOs like the Right to Food and Work Network, the Campaign against Child Labor, West Bengal Education Network and the Calcutta NGO Forum of Street and Working Children.

The Supreme Court of India directed unwilling state governments to comply immediately with the central government's regulations or else face having their funding from Delhi diverted to carry out this project in primary schools. The West Bengal government, in response to a Supreme Court ruling that states should not compromise on the issue of child nutrition, had earlier petitioned that it was unable to implement the project due to severe financial crisis. West Bengal, true to the rhetoric of competitive federalism, blamed the central government for its sorry state of financial affairs that has brought developmental work in the state almost to a standstill. The Supreme Court, however, summarily dismissed this petition.

In an article in the *Times of India*, social worker Siddhartha Mukherjee of Pushti said West Bengal could ill-afford to neglect this critical issue, given the Supreme Court's order. The Calcutta High Court even issued a direct order to West Bengal's principal secretary of the food and supply department to remedy the irregular distribution of its mid-day meals to primary school children.

The District Magistrate of Purulia in West Bengal condemned the quality of rice supplied by the Food Corporation of India for mid-day meals as "unfit for human consumption" on August 20. As of mid-September, the Government of West



*Girl pupils at the Lakshmi Ashram school in Kausani, Uttaranchal, India.*

Bengal had yet to announce when it will provide cooked mid-day meals to all the schools in the districts.

## Rajasthan

The People's Union for Civil Liberties of Rajasthan filed a petition in May 2001 with the Supreme Court demanding that the country's food grains stock be immediately released to feed its citizens. The court subsequently converted the benefits of eight nutrition-related federal schemes into legal entitlements and directed state governments to provide mid-day meals in government and government-aided schools.

In December 2001 the court ordered the state governments to provide every child in government and government-assisted primary schools with a prepared mid-day meal with a minimum of

- 300 calories
- 8 to 12 grams of protein

The court gave the states three months to convert their dry-rations distributions to cooked-meal programs, and a further three months to extend the cooked meals to schools that had nothing before. It also directed the Union of India and the Food Corporation of India "to ensure provision of fair average quality grain for the Scheme on time."

## Federal war of attrition

States like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand violated this order by not implementing the project. Manipur also plans to follow suit and has submitted an application to the Supreme Court to this effect. State governments refusing to implement the scheme have been claiming that they cannot afford to do so. They also allege that the central government does not help them in any conceivable manner to successfully run this scheme. They confronted Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development over this issue in September 2002.

This is one of the most resisted central schemes in federal India. The states perceive that while they bear the costs of implementing it, the central government will use the issue to bolster its image and to make the state governments look derelict. Jean Drèze of the Delhi School of Economics, however, argues that one might have expected state governments to welcome the school meal program as an opportunity to win votes at a relatively low cost. Indeed the scheme is likely to be quite popular and it is not very expensive for the state governments given that the Central Government is supplying the grain for free. In most states, however, there is no sign of such enthusiasm. Many in India are saying that there is something deeply defective about a democracy where people's basic needs count for so little in electoral politics.

*The Statesman* reported earlier this year that to make matters worse, food grains released by the central government for federal relief schemes like Food for Work, Mid-day Meals and *Gramin Rojgar Yojana* (the rural employment plan) are not always collected on schedule from the Food Corporation of India by the states.

Governments of drought- and famine-prone states like Rajasthan and Orissa have not identified their respective

below-poverty-line populations who are without ration cards. These cards help vulnerable sections of the community purchase food grains at subsidised rates from the public distribution system. A government committee found that ration shops are open only once or twice a month in villages of the calamity-prone region of Kalandi-Bolangir-Keonjhar in Orissa. Ration card holders who fail to collect their quota of rice and wheat when "fair price shops" open are denied a supply of food grains for the rest of that particular month.

Even the central government's decision in April 2002 to raise the rice and wheat quota for each needy family from 20 kg to 35 kg per month under the public distribution system failed to increase the amount of food grains collected by state governments from the Food Corporation of India.

## Food as incentive

A survey conducted in 10 states by the Operations Research Group in collaboration with UNICEF found that the mid-day meal scheme had given a boost to student enrolment, school attendance and retention, especially among girls in rural areas, as reported in the *Indian Express* in November 2000. In January 2003, *The Tribune* found that this scheme also helped increase attendance at government primary schools by 30 percent in the Ludhiana district of Punjab where it was begun in October 2002. Jean Drèze, working with Geeta Gandhi Kingdon from the University of Oxford, found that provision of school meals was a significant incentive to attendance in Himachal Pradesh. Girl pupils who get lunch are 30 percent more likely to finish primary school.

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Mid-day meal programs have been implemented by CARE in states like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. CARE has asked that the program concentrate more on attracting first generation learners to school and keeping them there.

## Voice of the people?

On January 11, 2003, the Right to Food Campaign, an informal network of NGOs led by Jean Drèze, Colin Gonsalves, Kavita Srivastava and bureaucrat-turned-social-activist Harsh Mander, found that benefits from the Supreme Court directives were limited and only grassroots-level protests and demands would be effective, *Humanscape* magazine reported in February. When the requisite political will and vision are lacking, disseminating information and empowering local grassroots groups are the methods needed to put food in the bellies of hungry children.

Former Union finance minister P. Chidambaram is convinced, however, that not many states are really interested in the co-operative federalism model of politics and that state capitals continue to resist decentralization of power and resources. This is especially true in cases like West Bengal where the ruling Left Front Government monopolized by the Communist Party of India [Marxist] is ideologically at loggerheads with the National Democratic Alliance government at New Delhi led by the Hindu nationalist party, Bharatiya Janata. If co-operative federalism won't provide hot meals for poor elementary students, grassroots groups are likely to use other methods to force the governments to deliver. (6)