Mid-Day Meal Scheme

What is the issue?

- Two decades have passed since the mid-day meal became a part of the daily routine in government schools nationwide.
- By this time, procedures have stabilised but accidents continue to occur. The procurement of food items still faces hurdles of different kinds.

What is a Mid-Day Meal scheme?

- The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) was launched as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme in 1995.
- It aims to enhance enrolment, retention and attendance and simultaneously improving nutritional levels among children.

What are some revealed corrupted practices?

- **Corrupt practices** - A video showed plain chapatis being served with salt in a school.
- Another video revealed how a litre of milk was mixed with water so that it would suffice for the more than 80 children present that day in school.
- As per the government norms, every child is entitled to receive 150 ml of milk as part of the mid-day meal.
- **Supervision** - These videos proved useful for the officers who supervise the scheme as they help them learn about the reality in schools.
- Each such revelation leads to the same reflexive official statement: punish the guilty, locate the video-maker and deal with him/her.

What are the 3 categories of stories appearing in the media?

- There are cases of **bad food**, leading to food poisoning.
- There are different kinds of reports are about **cheating**.
- The third category is pertaining to **caste bias** and **discrimination**.
- Food is central to the caste system, so in many schools, children are made to sit separately according to their caste status.

Why the scheme should be made a part of curriculum?

- There is so much to be learnt - **food prices**, **quantities**, **cooking method**,

etc.

- **Data sorting** is a part of the mathematics curriculum, and the meal provides ample data.
- As an occasion, **collective eating** could also serve as a time to relax and reflect. But, none of this happens.
- The mid-day meal is considered as a chore to be carried out under difficult circumstances and constraints.
- The scheme is **perceived as charity**, not a civic responsibility.
- Nowhere in the country can one see a comfortable absorption of the mid-day meal in the school's daily life in a curricular sense.
- Even in educationally advanced States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, one doesn't hear stories of teachers asking children to keep a weekly record of what they eat, to assess the weekly intake of different nutrients.
- In some regions, one can see the daily menu painted on the school wall.
- Writing letters to authorities and documenting the gap between the painted menu and what is actually served might be a great activity.

What is its similarity with other schemes that serve the poor?

- With the growing shift of the better-off parents to private schools, government schools are viewed as places for the poor.
- Therefore, the mid-day meal is associated with poverty both in public perception and state policies.
- Like other schemes that serve the poor, this scheme is also covered by norms that insist on the cheapest.
- The menu, the money, the cook's remuneration, the infrastructure - they all show the value India places upon its children.
- Nor is the scheme conceived as a pedagogic resource.
- While the northern States strictly depend on the Central grant, the southern States augment it significantly.
- That is why horror stories from the south are less frequent than those from the north.

What does UNICEF's open letter say?

- UNICEF's executive director Henrietta Fore recently wrote an **open letter to the world's children**.
- It marked 30 years since the promulgation of children's rights by global consensus.
- The letter listed eight reasons why its writer is worried and another eight why she is hopeful.
- Reading the two lists, one will feel that there is a lot more to worry about than to feel hopeful about.

- **Coverage** - The letter starts by acknowledging that poverty, inequality and discrimination still deny millions of children their rights.
- Food and education are among them.
- Then there are larger issues like the impact of conflicts, climate change, new technologies and their impact on the integrity of democratic procedures.
- The concluding part of the letter is about children's loss of trust in institutions.
- From fake news to divisive policy choices, the UNICEF chief's global letter evokes a wide range of local thoughts.
- A whole new industry backed by public institutions is now handling the supply side of public demand for moral training during the formative years of life.
- UNICEF must be aware that some of its sister agencies in the UN system are actively involved in the emerging neuroscience of ethics.
- One cannot charge fake news alone for waylaying the young.

Source: The Hindu

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