

PhD dissertation: “Just Lunch: An Ethnography of School Meals and Poverty in Delhi”

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SUMMARY:

In the dissertation titled “Just Lunch: An Ethnography of School Meals and Poverty in Delhi” I examine the actual social outcomes of one of the largest and most prominent social policies of the Indian government in the field of poverty reduction and education – the so-called Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS). By providing a hot meal free of cost to all primary students in government schools of the country the central aims of the scheme are that it should contribute to higher numbers of children in school and a better nutritional situation of them. Beyond that, it is supposed to have more or less direct social impacts through the creation of employment for women especially from disadvantaged backgrounds and through bridging caste and class barriers in classroom by the shared meal. Against the backdrop of these different aims of the scheme, I try to answer the question: To what extent does the Indian Mid Day Meal Scheme contribute to reducing inequalities?

The analysis draws primarily on own empirical research (conducted in 2015/16) in two governmental primary schools in Delhi and the area around the schools where the students live with their families. The large majority of these families are Hindus and Muslims belonging to low castes (including a high share of Dalits) who have migrated to the capital city from rural areas. I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews as well as informal conversations with students, parents and teachers, staff members of one kitchen as well as other relevant actors of the research area. Additionally, I used data from enrolment registers of the two schools.

My analysis starts with an examination of the role the MDMS plays as an educational and nutritional policy in the daily lives of the children and their families in the context of the poverty and deprivation they experience and the highly unequal educational system of the country. I then discuss my findings of how the processes around the distribution and eating of the meal are organised and the social dynamics I observed in this context. These include an increasing invisibility of caste prejudices which are nonetheless persisting as well as observations how the attitude and behaviour of the school staff in MDMS processes challenge as well as reproduce inequalities among the students. Further, I examine the employment practices and labour regimes under the MDMS arguing that they largely reproduce inequalities with regard to the position of women and Dalits. Finally, I assess how, by whom, based on which rationalities and with what techniques and what consequences the MDMS is governed, discussing how welfare, humanitarian, neoliberal and rights based approaches coexist and intersect in this scheme.

Overall, my research reveals that the MDMS is a useful programme as the food reaches its target group in a direct (and in my area) reliable manner. Also, in the processes and arrangements of food preparation and eating that I examine, it creates opportunities for the reduction of inequalities to some extent. However, my results lead to the conclusion that the MDMS is not a driving force for the reduction of inequalities. Rather, in the way the MDMS is embedded in the existing social structures and power relations of the society it does also contribute to reproducing inequalities.