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Nutritious Meal Programme for Children of Tamil Nadu

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At 12 noon on July 1, 1982 nearly 5.6 million children sat down in 21,137 Child Welfare Centres (Balwadies) and in 32,470 Primary Schools spread all over the state of Tamil Nadu to partake of the hot nutritious meal served at government cost. Thus was born Tamil Nadu's gigantic "Nutritious Meal Programme for Children" in the age range of 2 to 10 years, living below the poverty line—perhaps the most massive nutrition programme of its kind to be undertaken anywhere in the world. This colossal venture, the brainchild of Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister, Thiru. M.G. Ramachandran is designed to bring about a significant change not only in the health/nutrition status of the children but also in the social environment in the rural areas, at a cost of nearly 120 crores per year. The unique feature of the programme is the feeding of all the needy children from two years of age to 10 years below the poverty line, on all 365 days of the year. The programme thus gives the 'under tens' an opportunity to have at least one good meal a day.

Scope and Objectives: The Programme is implemented through two channels: for the under-fives, that is for 2 plus to 4 plus through the Child Welfare Centres (CWC) or Balwadies, and for the 5 to 9 plus through the primary schools. The programme supplies the children a nutritious hot meal at noon, free of cost, with the following specific

objectives: (1) Provide more than one-third of the nutritional requirements and thus help promote health, growth, development and learning ability of the children; (2) Enthuse children to go to school, and improve school attendance; (3) Foster sound social behaviour among children, and dispel feelings of differences between various castes; (4) Inculcate good dietary and personal hygiene habits and promote awareness of the importance of environmental sanitation; (5) Impart health/nutrition education to children, parents and the community; (6) Provide employment for women below the poverty line; (7) Bring about a gradual socio-economic transformation among poor rural communities.

Coverage: In all 59,973 centres cater the meals through 26,617 CWCs and 33,356 primary schools. The number of children who benefit has increased from 5.6 million in July to 6.4 million in October 1982. Each pre-school or Child Welfare Centre is centrally located for the population covered, and is in a place to which the communities in the neighbourhood including the tribal communities and Harijans, have an easy and free access. Each centre is self-contained with a storage area, cooking facilities, including smokeless chula (oven), necessary cooking utensils, washing area and toilet facilities. Wherever possible, rent-free buildings have been acquired by

the Block or village. Primary schools have also been directed to secure all the above facilities, if they do not possess them already.

Personnel: For 'Below-Fives':

Each Child Welfare Centre is managed by a Child Welfare Organiser (Balasevika) and two Child Welfare Assistants—all of whom are selected from the same community where the centre is located. The Balasevikas are, in most cases, girls with a secondary school leaving certificate, in the age group of 25-35 years. In the case of widows, the age range is 25-40 years. The helpers are recruited from those with ability to read and write Tamil, in the age range of 25-40 years. The helpers have been trained to cook and serve the food to the children. The Balasevika is in overall charge of the CWC and imparts pre-school education. Educational aids and play materials and cooking utensils, plates and tumblers have been supplied to all CWCs.

For 'Above Fives': A part time cook and one helper to assist and clean the vessels have been appointed in each primary school. The teachers in the schools at present monitor the cooking and serving of the meals. Where the number of beneficiaries is more than 500 provision has been made for the appointment of one more cook.

Training the Personnel: All the personnel for the 'Under Fives' have been trained through 'multiplier training system' by the Instructors, who, in turn, were trained by the Panchayat Extension Officers (Mukhiya Sevikas), who underwent training through Sri Avinashilingam

Home Science College, Coimbatore, in six district headquarters in Tamil Nadu in batches of 100 each. The training has been phased and given in three instalments. In the first phase, the implementors in the rural areas were given training in nutritious recipes, their preparation, methods of cooking and points to be considered while implementing the programme with stress on the nutritional, hygienic and quality aspect of foods. In the second stage, the same personnel were trained in the principles of pre-school education, its course content, basic equipment needed, incorporation of nutrition/health education in the pre-school curriculum and innovative ideas to make pre-school education effective, useful, attractive and novel. In the third stage, training was given to the implementers in the urban centres as a combined course in both nutrition and pre-school education. Thus, training of the personnel had been geared to inculcate in them the need to prepare and serve the food hygienically and also store them in proper conditions on the one hand, and scientific organisation and administration of the pre-school on the other.

All the personnel for the 'Under Fives' and some of the primary school teachers have been given training in integrating nutrition and health education programmes with the meals programme. The teachers in the primary schools and CWCs have developed various educational aids for children.

The menus for the Nutritious Meal Scheme have been planned by Sri Avinashilingam Home Science College, Coimbatore, to meet nearly one-third of the daily requirements as recommended by the Indian Council of Medical Research for these age groups (Table).

Composition of the Meal					
	Price	Dhal	Oil	Leafy veg	Other veg
Pre-school child	80	10	7	25	25
School child	100	15	7	25	25

The cost of the meal including fuel and transport works out to about 45 paise (Re. 0.45) per child. The meal provides about 410 kc and 10g pro-

tein for the pre-school child and 510 kc and 12 g for the school child.

Utilising the food ingredients mentioned in the Table Sri Avinashilingam Home Science College has standardised 28 recipes for a four-week cycle, each of which could be prepared as a single item on a day to ensure taste, flavour, ease of preparation, serving and handling.

Delivery of Food Articles: The food commodities are delivered at the doorsteps of the CWCs/Primary Schools by lorries, for one to two months in advance, through the Civil Supplies Corporation and its network of Cooperative Societies according to a fixed programme drawn in consultation with the agencies concerned. Suitable containers have been provided for each centre for the storage of the required quantities of food of that centre. Thus, regularity and quality of supplies have been ensured. The staff in the centres purchase only vegetables and firewood locally.

Monitoring the Programme: At the apex level, a high-level committee, headed by the Chief Minister, steers the programme. At the official level, the programme is administered and monitored through a powerful, committed chain of officials, headed by the Chief Secretary, Government of Tamil Nadu. At the district level, the District Collector is in overall charge in a particular revenue district. While the Panchayat Union officials administer the pre-schools through the extension officers under the supervision of the Director of Social Welfare, the Director of School Education monitors the primary school sector.

Village Committees have been constituted giving representation to women, social workers, philanthropists and representatives of the underprivileged classes. These committees have been entrusted with the responsibilities of monitoring the functioning of the new scheme in the locality. A network for feed-back and information has been built up, weaving together official and non-official agencies. The headmasters, child-welfare organisers and local committees keep regular records of

attendance, accounts and commodities. Periodical using forms and proforma prescribed for the purpose, patched by them to the P Union Office and District E Officer, who, in turn, reports to the District Collector. The Collector is responsible to report the same to the Chief Secretary. To evaluate the scheme, a check-list has been prepared, and frequent visits are made to ensure that food is prepared hygienically and served on time there is no pilferage.

Impact on School Enrollment: More than 2.5 lakh children in the age group 6-10 have been additionally enrolled in the classes from 1975 during the two months since inception of the scheme. The Nutritious Meal Programme has helped to attain unprecedented success in the achievement of an important ideal of 'Universalisation of Primary Education'. Under the scheme, employment opportunities have been provided for 1,05,000 women, in the rural areas, with preference given to widows and destitutes. This massive provision of employment opportunities is perhaps the single largest employment programme for the rural areas of independent India in the last few years.

Health Inputs: The Balasevikas are also equipped to teach the children basic facts of health and hygiene. A detailed scheme for providing health cover for the pre-school children is also under operation. The scheme envisages maintenance of health cards for all the beneficiaries in the CWC itself. The Medical Officers of the Primary Health Centres and the public health personnel visit every centre to examine the children and provide proper treatment and care. A weighing scale will be supplied to each centre to enable the recording of the weights of all the children once in three months. The CWCs have been trained to take and record the weight of the children. The "Multi-purpose Health Workers" will also visit the Nutritious Meal Centres once a fortnight during their regular visits.