



IMPACT REPORT - 2025

# Beyond the Plate

## Nourishing Young Minds

A Research Report on Impact of The Akshaya Patra Foundation PM Poshan Yojana

 **Nielsen**  
A Nielsen Report 2025



# Executive Summary





# Executive Summary



The Akshaya Patra Mid-Day Meal Programme has demonstrated a profound and wide-ranging positive impact across students, parents, and teachers, reinforcing its vital role in supporting education and community well-being. The program has successfully served **over 4 billion meals to 2.35 million children** across more than **25,000 schools and Anganwadi centres**, achieving an **80% satisfaction rate** among its stakeholders.

The core of the program's success lies in its ability to address food insecurity and improve educational outcomes. The survey data highlight a strong alignment with the needs of beneficiary communities, **where 75% of parents earn below ₹20,000 per month**, and **90% have not progressed beyond secondary school education**. For these families, the program serves as a critical incentive for regular school attendance and provides a reliable source of nutrition.

## Key Impact and Statistical Highlights

- **Student Engagement and Health:** The program is a significant motivator for school attendance, with **93% of students citing the meals as a reason they are excited to attend school**. This has translated into marked improvements in well-being, as reported by students



**80%**

Satisfaction rate  
among the  
stakeholders



**89%**

reported increased  
activity levels.



**85%**

reported better  
concentration in class.

# Executive Summary

**Program Acceptance and Social Impact:** The program has been overwhelmingly embraced by students, with **91% opting to eat the provided meals and only 8% bringing food from home**. The communal aspect of the meals is a key driver of satisfaction, with **90% of students enjoying the experience of eating** with their friends. This fosters a sense of community and reinforces positive social dynamics.

**Parental Perception:** Parents overwhelmingly recognise the program's value, with a near-perfect **100% awareness of the meals**. The program's positive influence on children's well-being is widely reported:

- **77%** of parents see **improvements in their child's health**.
- **85%** report their children **eagerly anticipate school because of the meals**.
- **51%** believe the **nutritional value is comparable to home-cooked meals**.

**Educational Outcomes:** Teachers have observed a clear link between the meals and improved academic performance and school stability.

- **88%** of teachers report **improved food quality** since Akshaya Patra's involvement.
- **78%** report **increased school enrollment**.
- **65%** report **improved classroom participation**.
- **59%** report **improved student focus**.

**Operational Excellence:** The program's operational integrity is a significant strength, with high marks for hygiene, food quality, and timely delivery.

- **96%** overall satisfaction with **timely meal delivery**.
- **95%** agreement on **food safety** across all segments.
- **96%** of students **wash their hands before meals**, reflecting the program's success in promoting hygiene habits.
- **94%** of teachers rate the **cleanliness and maintenance** of dining areas as excellent.





# Executive Summary



## Opportunities for Enhancing Impact

While the program has achieved significant success, stakeholder feedback reveals clear opportunities for strategic enhancements to further boost its nutritional and educational impact.

**Nutritional Enhancements:** Feedback from students and parents indicates a strong demand for greater dietary diversity.

- The desire for specific food items is evident, with **strong interest in seasonal fruits (72%), increased vegetable variety (63%), and the addition of curd (56%)**. Adding curd a few times a week can support gut health, improve meal satisfaction, and boost protein and calcium intake.
- There is a clear **opportunity to introduce a simple breakfast to combat early morning hunger** and boost micronutrient intake, especially among children from food-insecure families.

**Expanding Student Engagement:** The program's influence can extend beyond meal provision to enrich the school experience.

- There is a **high interest among students (89%) and teachers (90%) in participating in inter-school sports** and cultural competitions. Linking meals with sports, health days, or cultural events can increase student engagement, build stronger school community ties, and promote healthy eating habits.
- The **desire for special or celebratory meals (57%)** presents an opportunity to add variety and make mealtimes even more engaging.



opportunity to introduce a simple breakfast to combat early morning hunger



Linking meals with sports or health days can increase student engagement, build stronger school community ties and promote healthy eating



desire for special or celebratory meals (57%) presents an opportunity to add variety and make mealtimes even more engaging.

# Table of Contents

01

Background  
(Page 6)

02

Objective  
(Page 9)

03

Methodology  
(Page 15)

04

Findings  
(Page 20)

05

Potential  
Challenges  
(Page 73)

06

Areas of  
Improvement  
(Page 81)

07

Socio-Economic  
Profile of  
Government  
School Students  
(Page 90)

08

Healthcare  
Expert Opinion  
(Page 110)

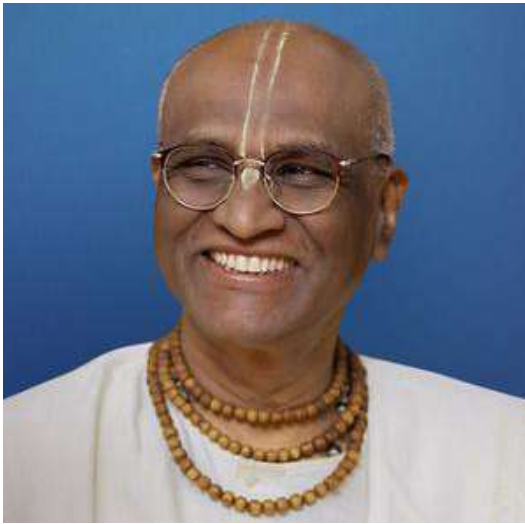


# Background

## Section 1

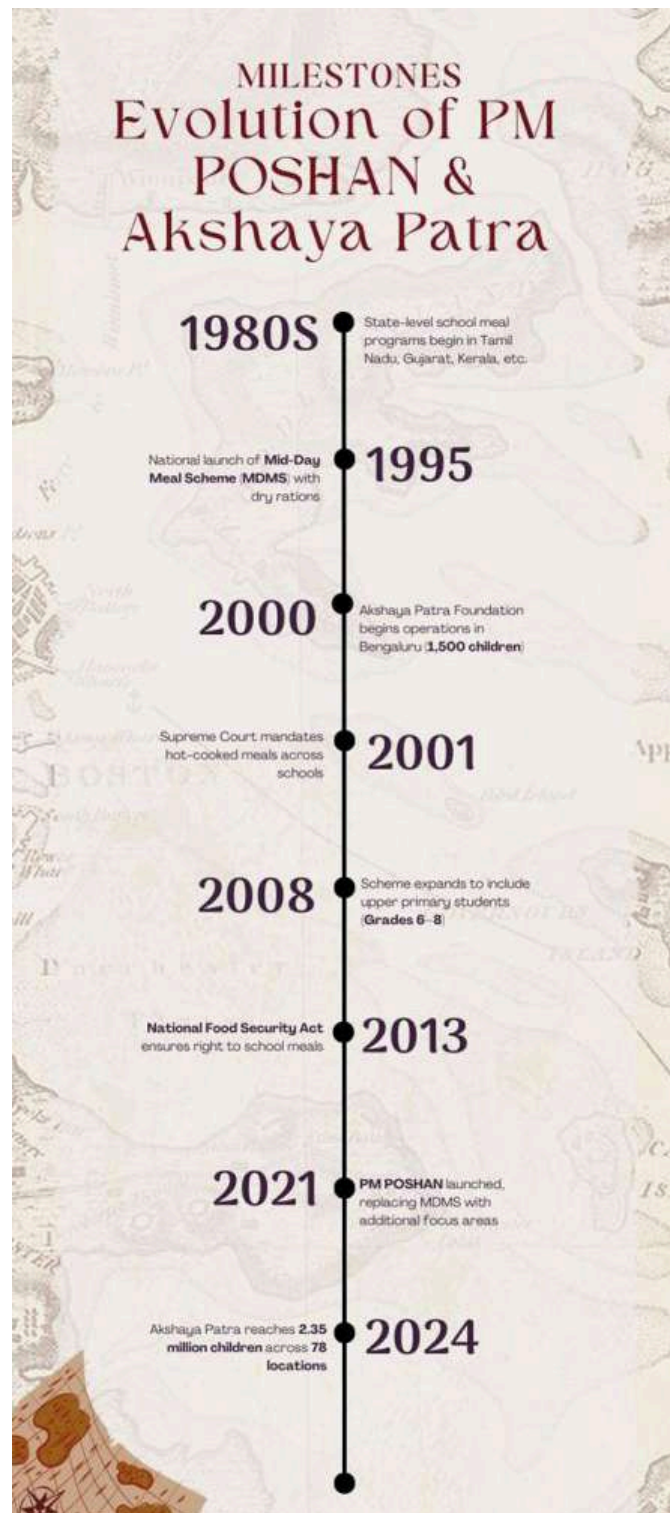


# Background



India has long battled malnutrition and classroom hunger, particularly among school-age children. To address this, the Government launched the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme in 1995**, later strengthened and rebranded as the **PM POSHAN Scheme in 2021**. Today, it reaches over **12 crore children** across the country, offering cooked meals aligned with nutritional guidelines and supported by allied health and hygiene initiatives.

Akshaya Patra, a key implementation partner, began its journey **in 2000** with just **1,500 children in Bengaluru**. Since then, it has grown to become the world's largest NGO-run school meal program, serving **2.35 million children daily** across **16 states and 3 Union Territories**, in partnership with the Government under **PM POSHAN**.





# Objective

## Section 2



# Study Objectives



This study assesses Akshaya Patra's implementation of the PM POSHAN program, focusing on outcomes, perceptions, and operational efficiency. It aims to:

- 1. Evaluate Educational Impact:** Understand how the program influences enrollment, attendance, classroom performance, and student retention.
- 2. Assess Nutritional and Health Outcomes:** Examine the contribution of meals to daily dietary intake, energy levels, and child health indicators.
- 3. Capture Stakeholder Perceptions:** Gather insights from students, parents, teachers, and health experts on aspects such as taste, hygiene, trust, and overall satisfaction with the meals.
- 4. Review Operational Effectiveness:** Assess the performance of kitchen infrastructure, food preparation, delivery logistics, and compliance with safety and quality standards.
- 5. Understand Psychosocial Impact:** Explore how shared meals influence social inclusion, equality, and school bonding experiences.





# Stakeholders



## 1

### Teachers & Principals

Teachers and school administrators witness first-hand the impact of nutrition on learning and overall student well-being. Their insights help in assessing:

- The role of nutrition in improving students' focus, classroom engagement, and academic performance.
- Changes in attendance, dropout rates, and classroom participation due to PM POSHAN.
- Operational challenges related to meal logistics, distribution, and quality control.
- Social outcomes, such as how school meals foster equality and reduce stigma among students from different socio-economic backgrounds.
- Suggestions for enhancing the scheme, including possible expansions or complementary initiatives.



## 2

### Parents & Guardians

Parents, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, often rely on PM POSHAN as an essential support system for their children's nutrition. The research explores:

- How free school meals reduce financial strain and improve household food security.
- Perceived health benefits, including improvements in children's energy levels, immunity, and physical growth.
- The level of trust in food quality, safety, and nutritional adequacy.
- The scheme's role in school retention and enrolment, particularly for girls.
- Additional support parents feel they need to complement school nutrition at home.

# Stakeholders



## 3

### Health Experts & Pediatricians

Medical professionals offer an evidence-based assessment of how mid-day meals affect children's health and nutrition. Their perspectives help in understanding:

- Observed improvements in child health indicators, such as reduction in anaemia, malnutrition, and stunting.
- The adequacy of the nutritional content in mid-day meals for optimal childhood development.
- Common health challenges among school-going children, and any dietary gaps that need addressing.
- Recommendations for enhancing the nutritional quality of meals provided under the scheme.



## 4

### Student

Students experience the direct benefits of the MDM program on a daily basis, and their feedback provides valuable insights into the impact of nutrition on their school experience. Their perspectives help assess:

- How the meals influence their energy levels, concentration, and participation in both academic and physical activities.
- Whether the availability of MDM motivates students to attend school regularly, increases excitement about coming to school, and helps improve classroom focus and overall engagement.
- Student opinions on the taste, quality, and temperature of the meals, including aspects they enjoy and those they would like to see improved.
- How the shared meal experience fosters social interactions, reduces stigma, and promotes equality among students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.
- Students' feedback on hygiene practices related to mealtimes, including handwashing habits and the cleanliness of utensils, which is essential for ensuring the overall safety of the food program.



# Parental Aspirations Beyond School Meal for Children

*A*lthough capturing aspirations was not the direct objective of this research, an indirect approach was adopted to understand long-term opportunities for scaling and refining the scheme. By exploring what families hope for their children's future, the study seeks to identify how nutrition and education initiatives can be aligned with their broader

**Parental Aspirations for Their Children** – The study indirectly explored what parents envision for their children's future, whether in terms of higher education, government jobs, vocational training, or entrepreneurship.

**Gaps & Barriers to Achieving These Aspirations** – Insights were gathered on whether parents are aware of available opportunities, and whether nutritional deficiencies, economic limitations, or educational gaps are perceived as hindrances.

**Opportunities for Strengthening the Scheme** – The research sought to uncover ways in which PM POSHAN can be leveraged beyond nutrition to better support children's futures. Potential interventions could include specialized dietary support for children excelling in sports, enhanced nutrition for STEM-focused students, or integration of career guidance alongside meal programs.



# Methodology

## Section 3





# Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method approach to evaluate Akshaya Patra's implementation of the PM POSHAN program across 10 states, combining quantitative research, qualitative study, and expert opinion to balance statistical rigor with contextual depth and professional insight.

The quantitative research focused on measurable outcomes - including student nutrition, school attendance, and satisfaction levels among students, parents, and teachers. The qualitative component explored personal experiences, perceptions, and broader developmental needs through in-depth discussions with key stakeholders such as parents, teachers, principals, and students.



To complement these perspectives, the study also incorporated expert opinion from leading paediatricians, offering a clinical lens on child nutrition, health, and well-being - particularly in the post-pandemic context.

Together, these three dimensions provided a comprehensive 360-degree view of the program's effectiveness - from kitchen operations to classroom outcomes, and from community voices to clinical perspectives.

# Expert Contributors to the Study

## Dr. Upendra Kinjawadekar

MBBS, MD (PEDIATRICS)  
FORMER NATIONAL PRESIDENT, INDIAN  
ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS (2023)

Dr. Upendra Kinjawadekar is a senior pediatrician based in Navi Mumbai with over 35 years of experience, including 31 years as a specialist. He currently practices at Apollo Hospitals, Belapur, and is recognized for his leadership in pediatric healthcare. A graduate of Lokmanya Tilak Medical College, Mumbai, he served as the National President of the Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP) in 2023. His clinical focus includes child nutrition, pediatric diabetes, and cerebral palsy. A strong advocate for improving child nutrition in India, he actively promotes fiber-rich diets and balanced meals to prevent long-term health issues in children.



## Dr. Dhanya Dharmapalan

MD, CONSULTANT IN PEDIATRIC INFECTIOUS  
DISEASES AT APOLLO HOSPITALS

Dr. Dhanya Dharmapalan, MD (Paediatrics), is a Consultant in Paediatric Infectious Diseases at Apollo Hospitals, Navi Mumbai. She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Paediatric Infectious Diseases from the University of Oxford. She is additionally trained in infection control through a program approved by the Infectious Disease Society of America.

Her research on antibiotic stewardship in paediatric care has been recognised by the World Health Organization (WHO) and featured in national and international media. Dr. Dhanya has served as Editor of the Paediatric Infectious Journal (IAP)<sup>16</sup> and contributed to several landmark paediatric textbooks. She is a member of IDSA, ESPID, IAP, and IMA.





# Sampling Overview

Category	Sample/Detail
Geographic Coverage	10 States (see map)
Total Students Covered	1,908 (from 76 schools)
Parents Interviewed	221
Teachers Interviewed	218
In-depth Interviews (IDIs)	24 (Teachers, Parents, Students, Doctors)
Qualitative States	7 Focus States (Karnataka, UP, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra Odisha)
Expert Interviews	2 National Pediatric Specialists
Tools Used	Surveys, Anthropometric Measurement, Discussion Guides

# Findings

## Section 4





## Section 4.1

# Benefit OBSERVED

# Impact on Health and Growth Outcomes





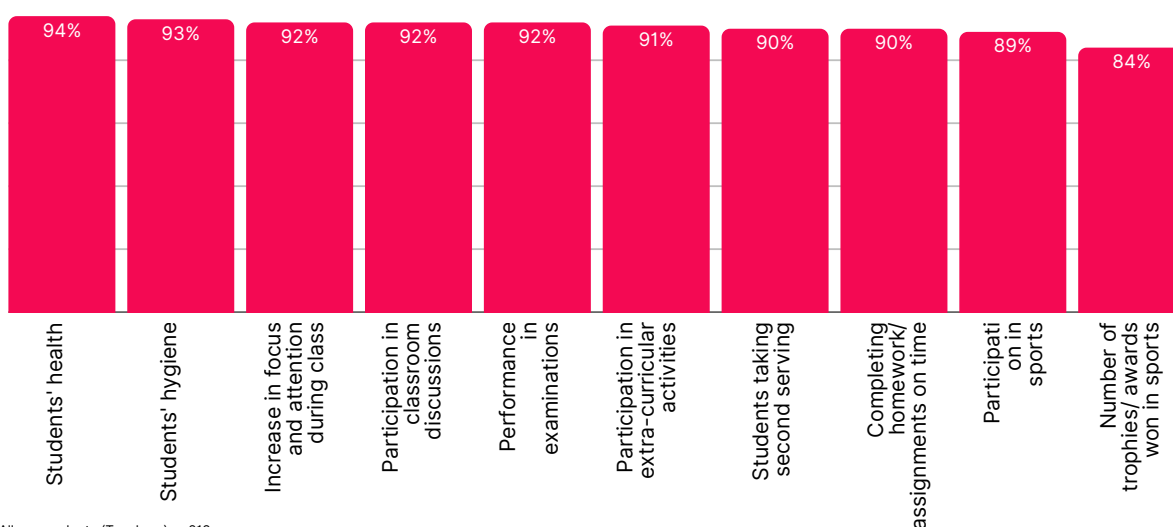
# Improvements in Health, Energy, and Physical Growth

The PM POSHAN Scheme, implemented by Akshaya Patra, has significantly improved children's physical health, energy levels, and resilience - especially in low-income communities. A remarkable **94% of teachers** observed **better student health and energy**, with **92% noting enhanced focus**, classroom participation, and exam performance. **Hygiene improvements** were reported by **93% of teachers**, and **90% reported** that students now **complete assignments more consistently**.

Notably, teachers from Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra observed better growth patterns among children, **attributing this to protein-rich meals** (dal, chana, soya) served regularly. In rural regions where children assist with household labour, better nutrition helped reduce fatigue and sustain school participation.

*"Since Akshaya Patra took over, they have established a proper system-one that ensures hygiene and also provides hot meals."*

- Principal from Vrindavan



Base: All respondents (Teachers) n=218

Q20a: Based on your observations, how have the following aspects changed under PM Poshan Yojna (Mid-day meal program) in the past years?

Q20: Under PM Poshan Yojna (Mid-day meal program), how much do you agree or disagree that the student's performance have improved on below parameters?



## 94%

teachers witnessed heightened energy levels among students



## 93%

Hygiene improvements were reported by teachers



## 92%

teachers noted enhanced focus

# Emotional Security & Household Impact

*"We send them to school without any worry, knowing they'll receive proper meals and be able to focus on their studies".*  
- A Parent from Puri, Orissa

In many households, especially in low-income areas of Maharashtra and Karnataka, school meals relieve parents of the stress of ensuring at least one proper meal for their children. **82% of parents** reported that the MDM ensures their **child eats at least one full meal per day**, while **81% felt it improves energy** and concentration in school.

The meals also ease financial pressure, with **66%** acknowledging **reduced household food expenses** and **69% appreciating the saved time and effort** of meal preparation. Interestingly, even in higher-income families, exposure to school meals inspired children to ask for better food at home - bridging gaps in dietary knowledge.



Base: Coded 4/5 in Q42 (Parents) n=221

Q43: You mentioned that you feel happy about the mid day meals served at the school. What do you think is the biggest benefit of mid-day meal for your child?



**82%**

parents reported child eats at least one full meal per day



**81%**

parents felt that it improves energy and concentration in school



**69%**

parents appreciated the saved time and effort of meal preparation



# School Attendance, Retention & Engagement



Teachers credited the mid-day meals with major improvements in student engagement and continuity in education. 78% reported increased enrolment, **86% observed improved attendance**, and **60% saw a decline in dropout** rates.

These improvements are reinforced by rising classroom enthusiasm: **92% of teachers noted higher participation in discussions** and better exam performance, while **89% saw greater involvement in sports** and **91% in extracurricular activities**. Teachers noted that students now come to school more regularly, stay attentive, and actively engage in both academics and play.

*"A healthy child naturally has a glow on their face and appears energetic and well. In contrast, an unhealthy child may look dull, lacking that vibrancy and overall healthy appearance..*

*- A Principal from Bhubneshwar, Orissa*

**78%**  
**increase**  
In the student enrolment under the PM Poshan Program

**86%**  
**Increase**  
In the student attendance levels under the PM Poshan Program

**60%**  
**decrease**  
In the student dropout levels under the PM Poshan Program

Q17: Under PM Poshan Yojna (Mid-day meal program), how has the student enrollment changed at your school?

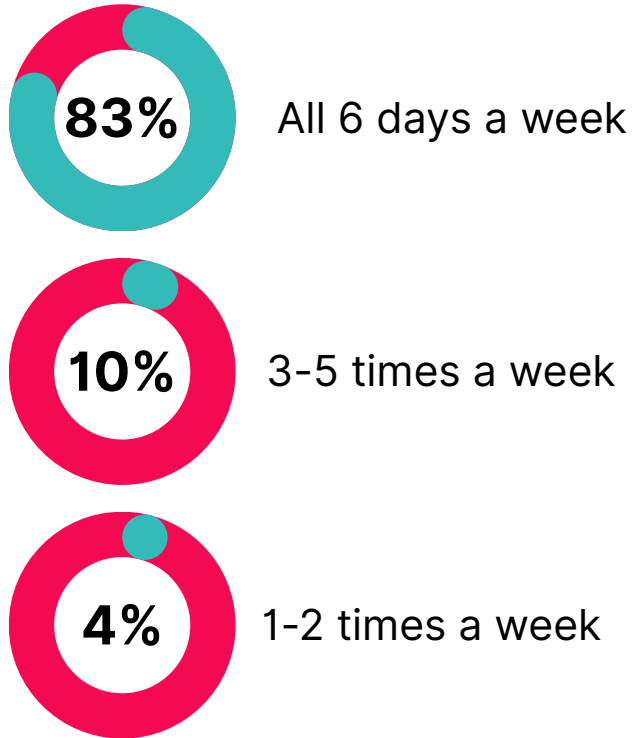
Q18a: Under PM Poshan Yojna (Mid-day meal program), how has the student attendance levels changed at your school?

Q19a: Under PM Poshan Yojna (Mid-day meal program), how has the student dropout rates changed at your school?

Base: All Respondent (Teachers) n = 218

Data source: Nielsen, Quantitative Research conducted in 2025 in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana

# Daily Reliance on Mid-Day Meals



The mid-day meal has become a central part of students' daily routine, especially in government schools. According to the survey:

- 83% of students eat the MDM all six days a week.
- 91% consume the school-provided meal instead of bringing food from home.

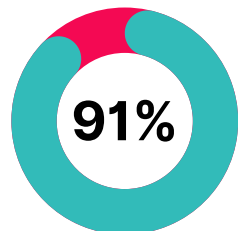
This high adoption underscores the program's acceptance, reliability, and the vital role it plays in sustaining child nutrition across socio-economic backgrounds.

Q22 How often do you eat the mid-day meals served at the school?

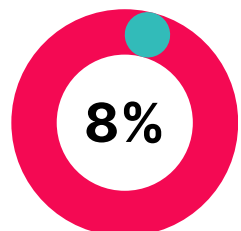
*"In many families, only one person earns while there are many mouths to feed. Children help out at home. I've seen a child in Class 3 who cooks, washes utensils, and still comes to school."*

- Principal, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

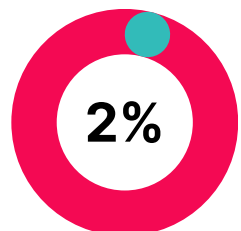
Food served as mid-day meal



Food brought from home



Food purchased from outside the school



Base: All respondents (Students) n = 1,908

Q22 How often do you eat the mid-day meals served at the school?

# Emotional & Cognitive Benefits of Regular, Nutritious Meals





# Cognitive Uplift and Learning Readiness



*“Before, many students used to lose focus by the second half of the day. Now, they remain active throughout, participate in class discussions, and even show interest in extracurricular activities”.*

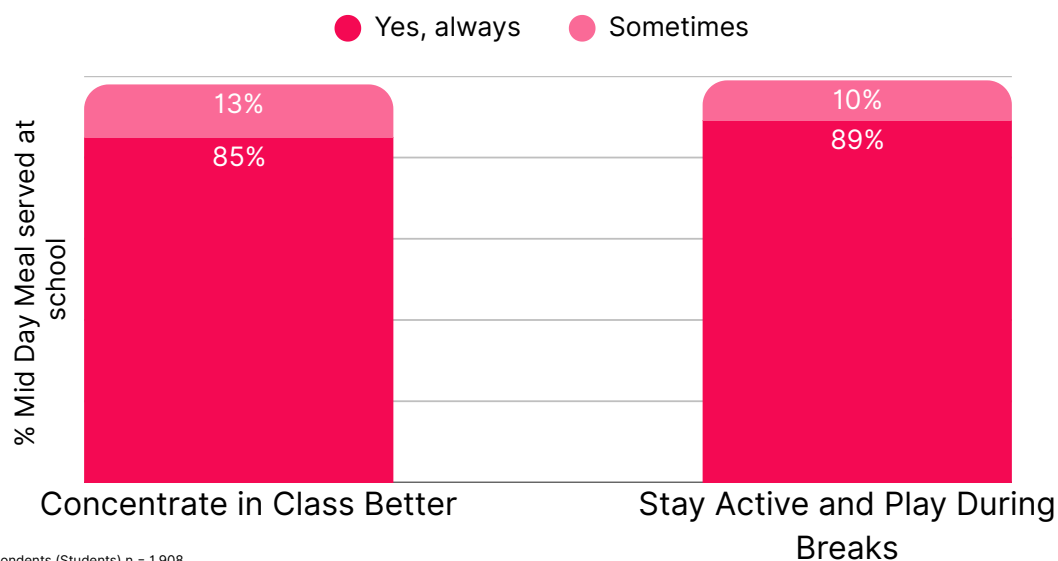
- Teacher, Puri, Odisha

Regular access to nutritious meals has significantly enhanced children’s ability to concentrate, absorb information, and actively participate in class. According to the quantitative survey:

- 85% of students report they are always able to concentrate better in class after consuming the mid-day meal
- 89% of students say they are always active during breaks, indicating sustained energy levels throughout the day

These outcomes reflect the direct link between improved nutrition and cognitive performance, especially in low-income settings where breakfast is often skipped.

Additionally, better mental alertness has led to increased participation in both academic and co-curricular settings, laying a stronger foundation for learning and development.



Base: All respondents (Students) n = 1,908

Q: Do you feel that the food you eat at school as per mid-day meal program helps you concentrate in class?  
Q: Do you feel that the food helps you stay active and play during breaks?

Data source: Nielsen, Quantitative Research conducted in 2025 in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana

# Emotional Security and Mental Stability Through Meal Consistency

A consistent meal routine plays a critical role in reducing anxiety and emotional stress, especially among children from food-insecure households. Teachers and parents shared that prior to MDM, children often arrived at school anxious or irritable due to hunger - impairing their ability to focus or engage in learning.

With the assurance of a daily hot meal:

- **90%** of students said they **enjoy eating with friends**, suggesting that mealtime now provides both nourishment and social comfort
- **85%** of students expressed **satisfaction with the taste of food**, which contributes to a more positive emotional association with school
- **78%** of students reported they **feel healthier and more energetic**, further reinforcing the emotional well-being benefits

This emotional shift, anchored in routine and reliability, has become a pillar of stability for children navigating difficult home environments.



**90%**

students said they  
enjoy eating with  
friends



**81%**

students expressed  
satisfaction with the  
taste of food



**78%**

students reported they  
feel healthier and more  
energetic

# Confidence, Motivation, and Joy in Participation

The emotional and physical stability provided by the mid-day meal is also driving greater confidence and motivation among students. Teachers and principals noted significant behavioural shifts - with once-shy students now actively volunteering for class discussions, public speaking, and even sports.

This is reflected in participation metrics:

- 91% of students participate in extracurricular activities
- 90% take second servings, indicating satisfaction and a healthy appetite
- 83% eat the meal on all six school days, highlighting regular, voluntary engagement

The program has not only addressed hunger - it has unlocked potential, making students more expressive, socially confident, and aspirational in their learning journey.



**91%**

students participate in  
extracurricular  
activities



**90%**

take second servings,  
indicating satisfaction  
and a healthy appetite



**83%**

eat the meal all six  
school days



# Development of Healthy Eating Habits in School Settings



# Cognitive Uplift and Learning Readiness

One of the most visible shifts attributed to the PM POSHAN Scheme has been the transformation in children's food choices. Many children, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, were initially resistant to vegetables, leafy greens, and protein-rich items like dal and soya chunks. Over time, exposure to these foods in a school setting helped alter those preferences.

Quantitative findings reflect this shift:

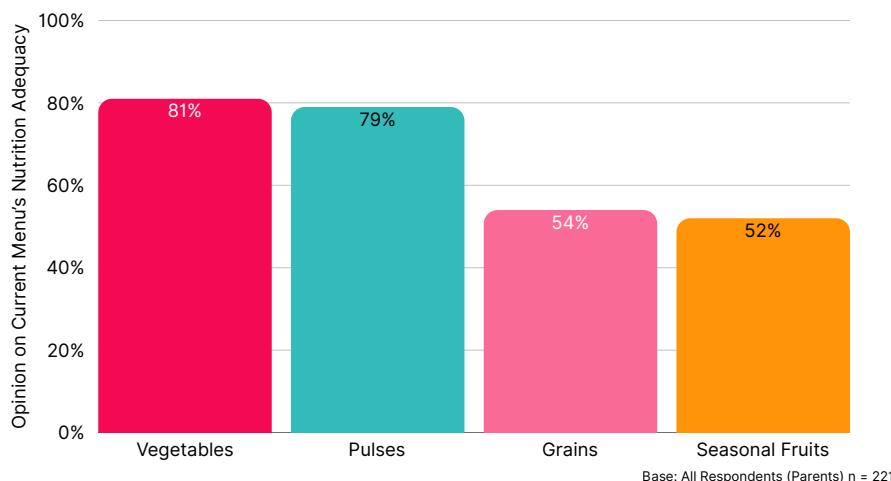
- 81% of parents agreed that vegetables were adequately included in school meals
- 79% reported the same for pulses, indicating consistent exposure to essential nutrients
- 51% of parents felt that the nutritional value of the school meal is comparable to home-cooked meals
- 34% even considered school meals to be better than meals at home

This growing acceptance of nutritious food was validated in qualitative interviews:

*"Earlier, we didn't cook leafy vegetables at home because my children wouldn't eat them. Now, since they eat them at school, they ask for them at home too."*

– Parent, Puri, Odisha

This suggests that structured, repeated exposure to healthy foods in a communal environment is reshaping dietary behaviour in lasting ways.



Q38: Do you believe the current menu of mid day meal program contain adequate quantity of following nutrition to meets the needs of child/children?

*"Some students initially resisted eating soya chunks and leafy vegetables, but over time, they adapted".*

– Principal,  
Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh



91%

parents agreed that vegetables were adequately included



79%

parents feel that there is a sufficient supply of pulses in the meals



34%

considered school meals to be better than meals at home

# Social Dynamics as a Driver of Food Acceptance

Children are highly influenced by the behaviour of their peers. School meals create a shared environment where children eat together, observe others, and normalise the consumption of foods that might otherwise be rejected at home.

Nutritional psychology\* supports this - children are more likely to try unfamiliar foods in a group setting where rejection is less socially acceptable and modelling is easy to follow. Over time, this peer-normalisation process helps reduce picky eating and builds dietary openness.

This behavioural pattern was highlighted across parent and teacher narratives:



*"Sometimes they eat it because their friends eat it."*

- Parent, Kalyan, Maharashtra

## \*REFERENCES

"Effects of peer models' food choices and eating behaviors on preschoolers' food preferences."

Child Development, 51(2), 489-496.

- Birch, L. L. (1980)

"Specific social influences on the acceptance of novel foods in 2-5-year-old children."

Appetite, 45(3), 264-271.

- Addessi, E., Galloway, A. T., Visalberghi, E., & Birch, L. L. (2005)

"Effectiveness of teacher modeling to encourage food acceptance in preschool children."

Appetite, 34(1), 61-76.

- Hendy, H. M., & Raudenbush, B. (2000)



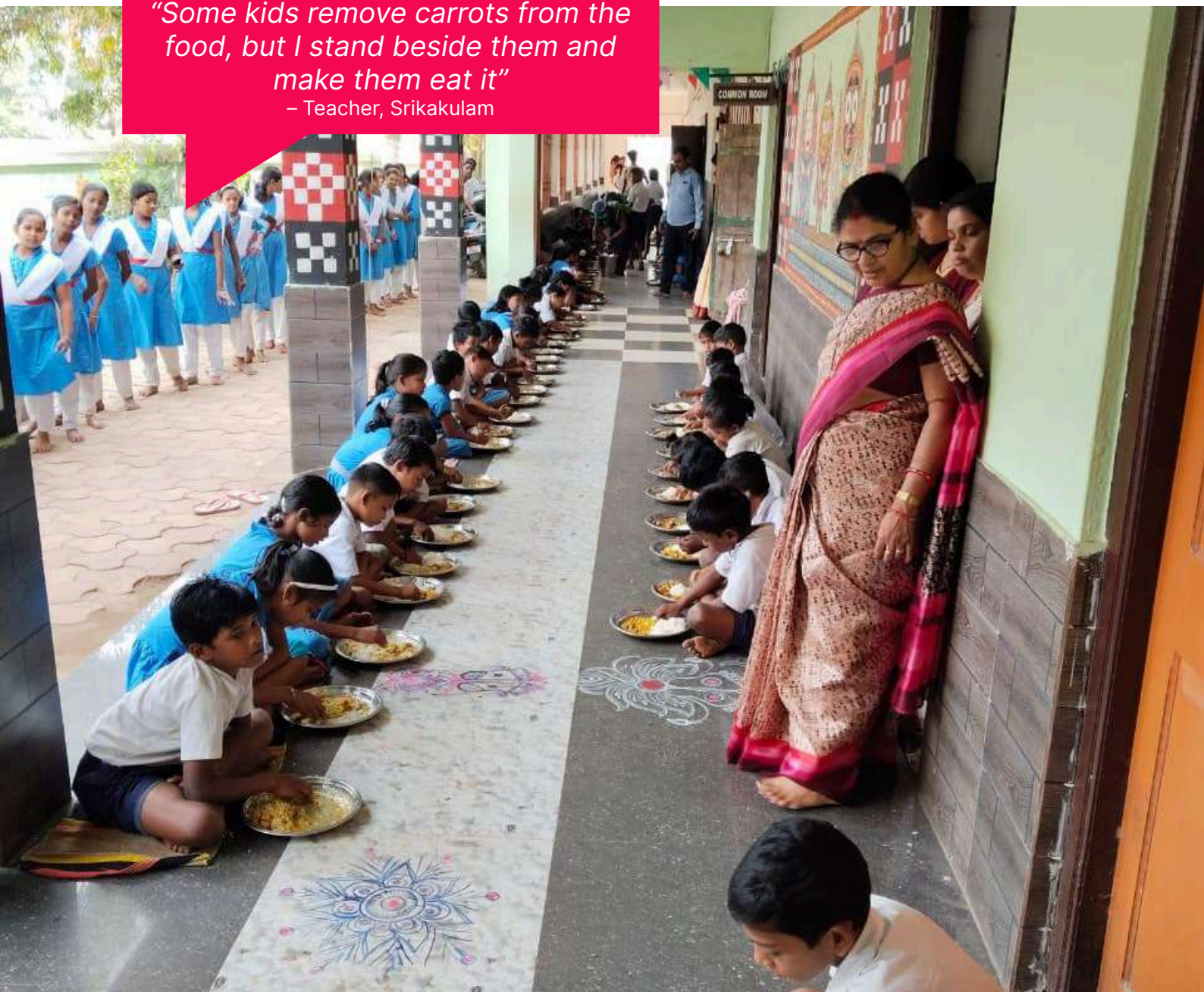
# Role of Teachers and Staff in Reinforcing Healthy Eating

School staff play a crucial role in the success of nutrition programs — not just through administration, but through active engagement with students during meals. In many schools, teachers and food distributors encourage students to try everything on their plate, often negotiating with them to take even a few bites of less-preferred items.

This gentle but consistent nudging, reinforced by the respect students have for teachers, has contributed to real behavior change. The role of teacher influence is particularly strong in younger children, who often aspire to emulate their educators.

*“Some kids remove carrots from the food, but I stand beside them and make them eat it”*

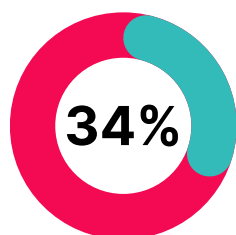
– Teacher, Srikakulam



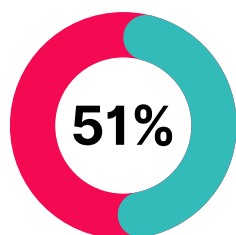


# Ripple Effect on Household Eating Patterns

Parents' opinion of the Nutritional Value of home-cooked meals compared to mid-day meals at school



Better than home-cooked meals



Similar to home-cooked meals

Q66: How do you feel about the nutritional value of meals served under the mid-day meal program at school compared to your home cooked meals

The positive change in children's food behavior at school has begun to influence family-level dietary decisions. Many parents shared that their children now request vegetables and greens at home - ingredients that were previously avoided. This reverse influence - where children shape household eating habits - is one of the program's most powerful secondary benefits.

This shift is supported by the quantitative finding that **51% of parents** perceive the **nutritional value of school meals to be on par with home meals**, further validating the program's success in aligning with culturally acceptable, nutritious standards.

*"My children used to eat only rice and sambar at home. But now, they are eating vegetables, green leaves, and different types of dal at school."*

– Mother, Karnataka



Base: All Respondents (Parents) n = 221

# Lifelong Nutrition Behavior Formation





# Nurturing Healthy Food Preferences from Early Years

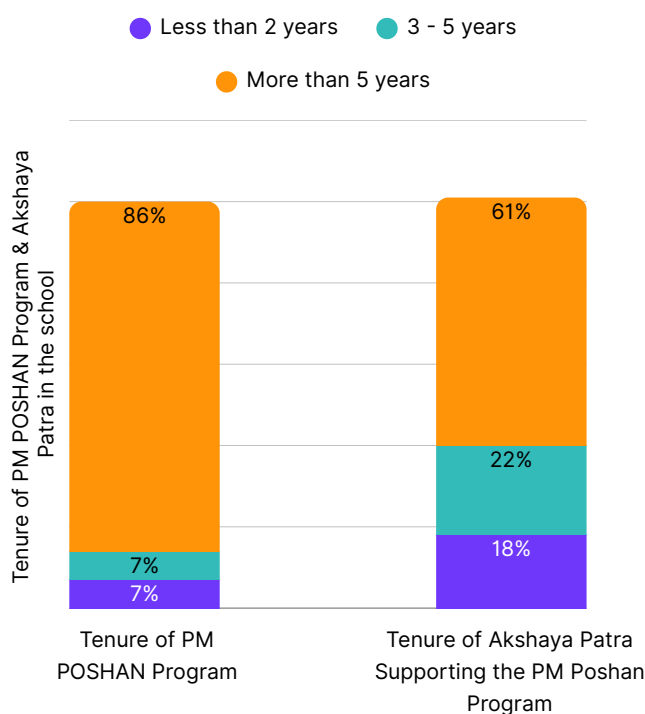
Early childhood is a critical window for forming lifelong dietary habits. The consistent exposure to balanced, nutritious meals through Akshaya Patra's implementation of the PM POSHAN Scheme is helping children develop a lasting preference for healthier foods - a shift that could have generational impacts on nutrition and well-being.

The quantitative survey confirms the long-term continuity and trust in the program:

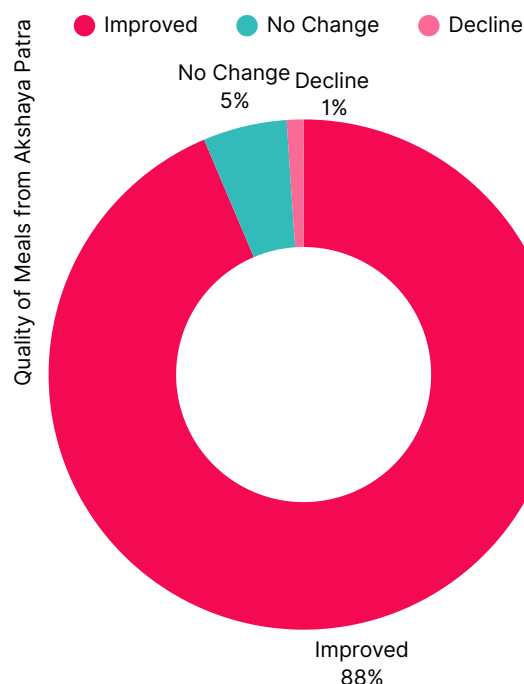
- **86%** of respondents said the **PM POSHAN program** has been running in their schools for **over 5 years**
- **61%** of respondents confirmed that **Akshaya Patra's support** has also been sustained for **over 5 years**
- **88%** reported that the **quality of meals has improved** over time

This long-term exposure is enabling children to build sustained familiarity with **vegetables, grains, pulses, and protein sources like soya and dal** - many of which were initially rejected. As students begin to enjoy these foods at school, they increasingly request them at home, reinforcing healthy choices across settings.

*"Initially they didn't eat greens or dal. But now they ask for them even at home. This is a huge change."*  
- Parent, Karnataka



Base: All respondents (Teachers) n=218



Q60: How long has the PM Poshan Yojana (Mid-day meal program) been running in your school?

Q61: How long has Akshaya Patra been supporting the PM Poshan Yojana (Mid-day meal program) in your school?

# From Reluctant Eaters to Curious Consumers

Teachers and principals across states shared stories of students who, over time, transformed from picky eaters into curious, open-minded consumers - willing to try new foods and even develop enthusiasm for balanced meals. This behavioral shift highlights that school meals do more than just nourish - they **reshape children's relationship with food**.

This repeated exposure, combined with peer influence and gentle reinforcement from school staff, is laying the foundation for children to **carry these preferences into adulthood**.

By establishing good eating habits early, the PM POSHAN program is helping mitigate risks of malnutrition, obesity, and lifestyle-related diseases later in life. The development of **structured eating patterns, portion control, and dietary diversity** prepares children not just to eat well now - but to stay healthy in the future.

*"It's not just food - it's training. Children are learning how to eat properly, and that will stay with them forever."*

– Principal, Gujarat





# Mindful Eating and Waste Reduction





# Conscious Eating Habits and Reduction in Wastage

One of the most positive yet often underappreciated impacts of the mid-day meal program is its influence on children's **attitudes toward food value and wastage**. The consistency, structure, and communal setting of school meals have led to more **mindful eating** and significantly **reduced food wastage** across schools.

Teachers across states reported that children now **finish their meals more regularly**, showing greater appreciation for the food provided. This shift was especially noticeable among children from economically disadvantaged families, where food is treated as a precious resource.

*"When they waste food, it truly hurts. We teach them that 'Annam Parabrahma Swaroopam' - food is sacred - and they understand and respect that."*

– Teacher, Srikakulam



# Portion Control and Self-Regulation in Eating



Quantitative data affirms that children are not only eating regularly but **doing so responsibly**:

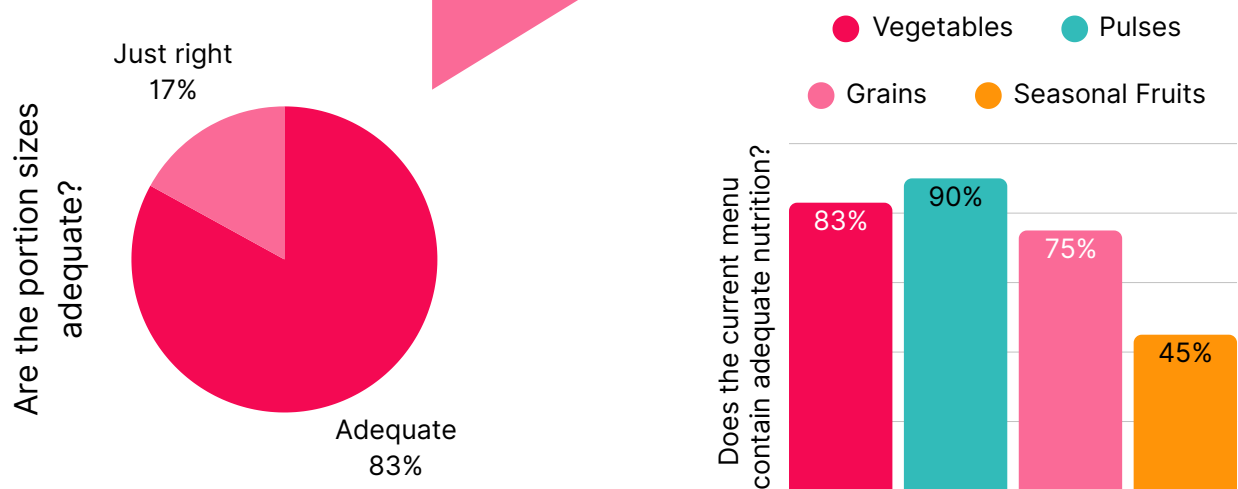
- **83%** of respondents said meal portion **sizes are adequate**
- **90%** confirmed that **pulses/proteins are sufficiently included**
- **83%** reported that **vegetables are provided adequately**

(However, grains and **fruits** still show **scope for improvement** at 75% and 45% respectively)

These numbers reflect a well-balanced meal plan, which enables children to take just enough food, guided by both their hunger and staff instruction - **reducing both under-eating and wastage**.

Teachers noted that children are **learning to regulate their portions** and often ask for second servings only when truly hungry, helping instill a **habit of measured and mindful consumption**.

*"We encourage children to finish their food, but we also let them take a second serving if they're still hungry. This way, they don't waste what's on their plate."*  
 – Teacher, Kalyan, Maharashtra



Base: All respondents (Teachers) n=218

Q15: Please tell me, how do you feel about the portion sizes of meals that are served to the students?

Q14: Does the current menu of mid day meal program contain adequate quantity of following nutritions to meets the needs of students?



# Routine and Respect Around Mealtimes

The structure of school mealtimes - **designated hours, orderly eating, and clean-up habits** - further reinforces a culture of **discipline and food respect**. This contrasts with the irregular mealtime environments many students face at home, particularly in families where meal prep depends on parental work schedules.

In schools, however, students are:

- **Sitting together** in an organized manner
- **Washing hands** before and after eating
- Encouraged to **complete meals** within a time frame
- Guided by staff to **eat properly** and without distraction

These structured habits - introduced at school - are foundational not just for nutritional impact, but also for cultivating respect, mindfulness, and self-regulation that can carry into adulthood.

*"They eat their meals and clean their plates afterward. Through this, children also learn how to eat properly and how to sit and eat in an orderly manner. Discipline is important."*

– Principal, Lucknow, UP





# Structuring Children's Eating Schedules for Better Health



# Regularized Mealtimes Through School-Based Routines

The Akshaya Patra-supported PM POSHAN program is helping children **develop structured eating patterns**, especially those from households where meals are irregular or skipped due to economic or logistical challenges.

At school, the daily mid-day meal acts as a **time anchor**, introducing the habit of eating at a fixed hour - something many children may not experience at home.

This daily routine cultivates **metabolic discipline**, **improves digestion**, and **reduces binge-eating or skipping meals** - laying the groundwork for healthier long-term dietary habits.

*"Some children don't eat breakfast at home because their parents leave early for work. The mid-day meal is their first structured meal of the day."*

– Teacher, Rajasthan





# Hygiene, Discipline, and Eating Etiquette



Meal routines in schools go beyond just timing - they embed **hygienic practices** and **social discipline**. Children are expected to:

- Wash hands before eating
- Queue up and eat in groups
- Sit in designated areas
- Finish meals within a reasonable time

These routines foster a culture of **orderliness, respect, and responsibility**, especially valuable in early childhood.

Quantitative data confirms widespread hygiene awareness:

- 96% of students report washing hands before meals
- However, only 54% of schools provide soap/handwash regularly - a clear improvement opportunity





# Transferring Discipline from School to Home

Teachers and parents report that children are now **carrying structured eating habits back home**. Many children who earlier ate at erratic times now insist on fixed mealtimes - even on weekends and holidays.

This cross-contextual habit formation reinforces the program's role not just in feeding children, but in **shaping their lifestyle patterns**.

*"Earlier children used to get restless if the food was late, but now, with Akshaya Patra's timely delivery, the lunch breaks are structured, and students know exactly when to expect their meal."*

– Principal, Gujarat



*"My child eats on time at school, and now demands the same routine at home. This was never the case before."*

– Principal, Gujarat



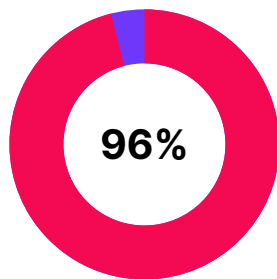
# Operational Efficiency



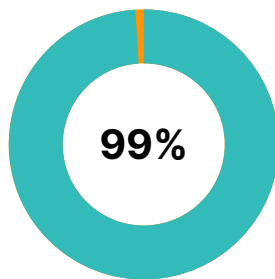


# Timely Delivery Satisfaction

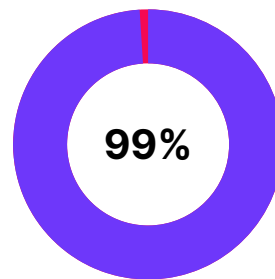
Building on the essential role that timely meal delivery plays in shaping children's eating habits, the **quantitative survey** demonstrates Akshaya Patra's remarkable **operational efficiency**, a critical factor in the program's success. This efficiency is evidenced by the exceptionally **high satisfaction (96% and above)** rate among students, parents, and teachers concerning the **timely delivery** of meals. This **near-universal** approval underscores the program's ability to consistently provide meals as scheduled, a testament to its robust logistical framework and **commitment to punctuality**.



Students



Teachers

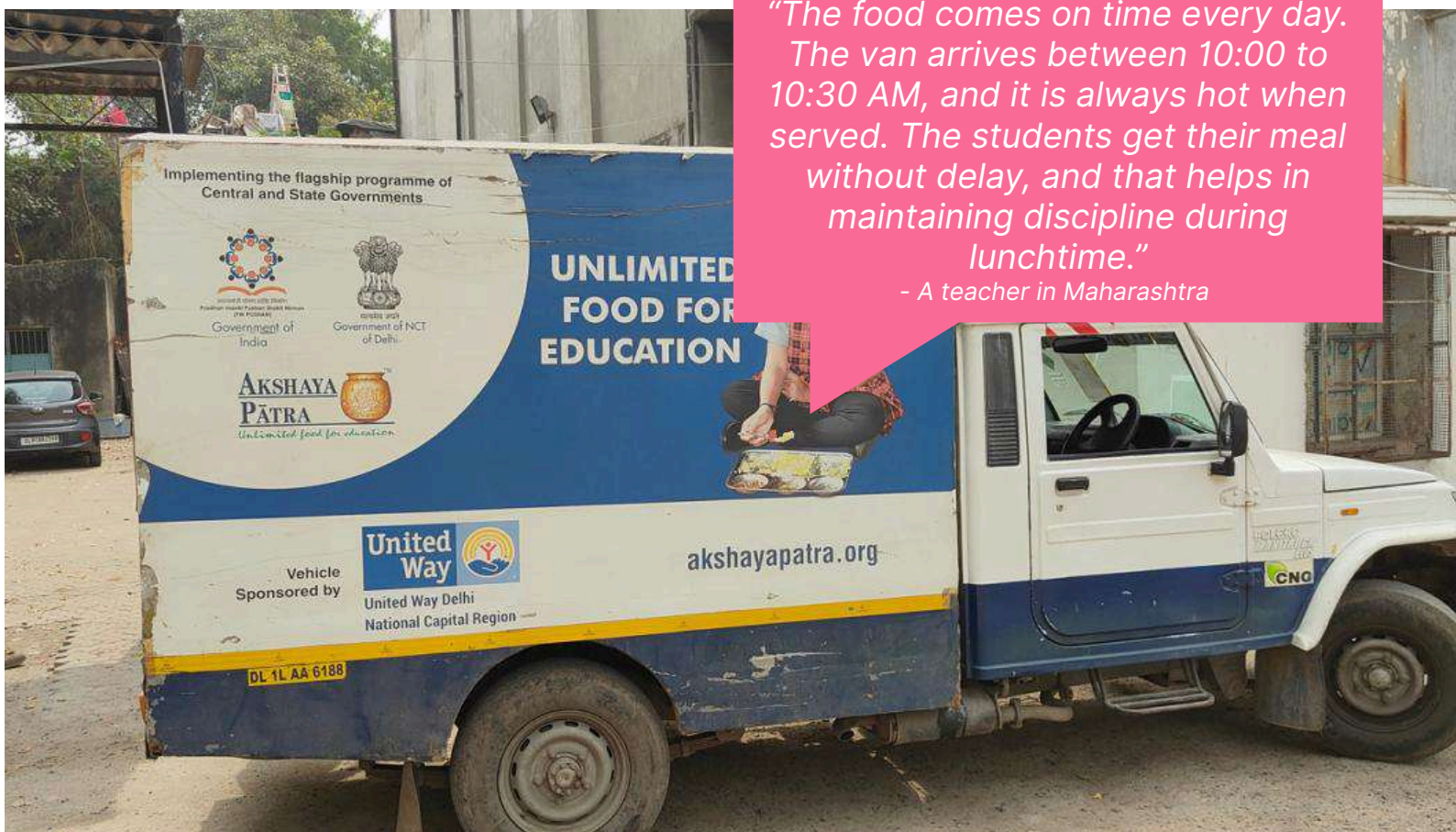


Parents

Q50: On a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 is 'Always Delayed' and 5 is 'Always on Time', how would you rate the timeliness of meals delivery?

*"The food comes on time every day. The van arrives between 10:00 to 10:30 AM, and it is always hot when served. The students get their meal without delay, and that helps in maintaining discipline during lunchtime."*

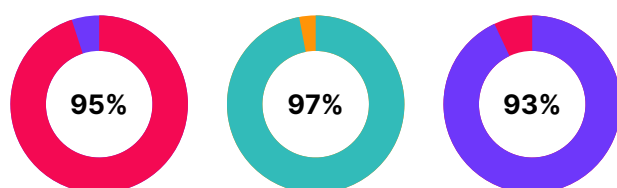
- A teacher in Maharashtra





# Safety of Food Perception and Type of dinning areas for students

## Safety of Food Perception



Students

Teachers

Parents

On a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 is 'Not Safe' and 5 is 'Very Safe', how safe do you consider the food served?

By safe, we mean that the "food is safe to be eaten, and is very hygienic"

The quantitative survey strongly underscores Akshaya Patra's unwavering dedication to food safety, demonstrated by the consistent cleanliness of utensils, exceeding 90% satisfaction, which directly translates to a strong sense of trust among students, parents, and teachers.

## Type of dinning areas for students

16%

A dedicated dining hall with proper seating arrangements

41%

A covered area (With shade) with seating but no proper dining hall

39%

An open space where students sit on the ground to eat

Base: All respondents (Teachers) n = 218

Q69: What type of designated area does the school have for students to eat their meals?

## Type of dinning areas for students

Notably, despite the significant infrastructural hurdle of 80% of schools lacking dedicated dining halls with proper seating arrangements, Akshaya Patra manages to uphold exceptional safety standards. This achievement is further validated by the remarkably high 95% satisfaction rate across all stakeholder groups concerning the safety of the food served. This paints a picture of a program that not only prioritizes the nutritional needs of children but also operates with a level of efficiency and commitment to hygiene that transcends the limitations of the physical environments in which it operates.



99%

Teachers and Parents feel that the meal is delivered on time.



90%+

More than 90% satisfaction across all segments about food safety and hygiene



16%

Only 16% schools claimed they have dedicated dining area for students

# Fostering Inclusion by Providing Uniform School Meals





# Equal Access to Nutritious Meals for All Backgrounds



The PM POSHAN Scheme has played a pivotal role in fostering **social equality among students**, particularly in socioeconomically diverse schools where financial disparities often reveal themselves in subtle but deeply rooted ways. By guaranteeing that every child—irrespective of their economic background—receives the same nutritious meal, the program has effectively eliminated one of the most visible markers of inequality in schools: access to food.

*“We all eat together without any discrimination of caste or creed. This sense of love and mutual respect is something you won’t find in private schools.”*

- A Teacher from Kalyan, Maharashtra

## Strengthening Peer Connections Through Shared Mealtimes

These instances underscore how food insecurity impacts not only a child’s physical health but also their emotional well-being and self-esteem. The PM POSHAN Scheme, by offering a common meal to all students, has **helped foster social equality within the classroom**, ensuring that no child is set apart based on what they can afford to eat. The initiative has created an environment where students from **poor, middle-class, and well-off families come together**, attend school regularly, and share meals side by side—enhancing **gender equity** and inclusivity through a simple yet powerful act of communal dining.

*“This is a place where students from poor, middle-class, and even well-off families come together. Now, they attend school regularly and share their meals side by side.”*

- A teacher from Puri, Orissa

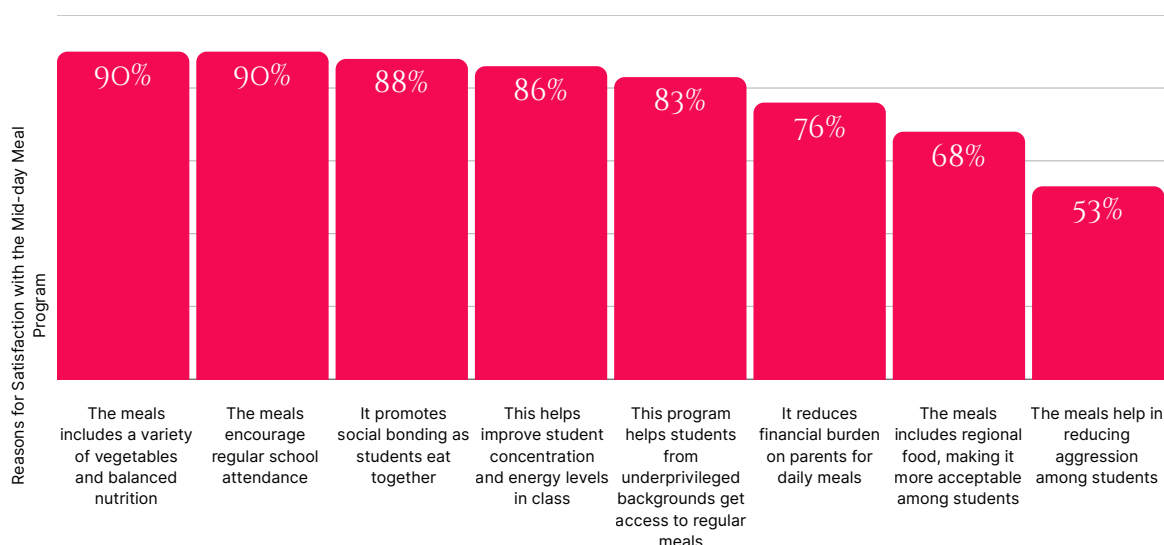
Such instances highlight how food insecurity not only impacts physical health but also deeply affects a **child’s self-esteem** and **emotional well-being**. By providing a common meal to all students, the PM POSHAN Scheme has effectively erased this distinction, creating a more level playing field where no child is singled out based on what they can or cannot bring from home.

# Breaking Social Barriers by Eating Together at School

One of the most profound shifts observed has been in the social dynamics among students, with many teachers and principals noting that shared meals have significantly **fostered social equality**. The simple act of eating together has helped build stronger peer relationships and a deeper sense of camaraderie. In urban schools, where economic divides are often more pronounced, the mid-day meal has emerged as a **powerful equalizer-breaking down barriers** and enhancing gender equity by creating inclusive spaces where all children, regardless of background, share the same experience with dignity.

*“When children sit together and eat the same food, differences melt away. It doesn't matter who comes from a rich home or a poor home. They just see each other as classmates.”*

- A principal from Jaipur



Base: Coded 4/5 in Q72 (Teachers) n=208

Q72a: You mentioned that you are satisfied with the mid day meals served at the school. Please tell me the reasons why you said so.

Building on the profound shifts in social dynamics observed among students, the quantitative survey reveals that teachers' high satisfaction with Akshaya Patra's MDM program is driven by several key factors, each contributing significantly to the overall positive perception. The program's **commitment to providing balanced, vegetable-rich meals**, evidenced by a **90% satisfaction rate**, is a major driver, highlighting the **nutritional value and quality** of the food. Furthermore, the program's demonstrable impact on student attendance, also registering a **90% satisfaction rate**, underscores its crucial role in encouraging **regular school participation**. Finally, the program's contribution to fostering **social bonding during mealtime**, with an **88% satisfaction rate**, highlights its positive influence on the school's social environment. These elements collectively demonstrate that teachers recognize Akshaya Patra's program as not just a source of nutrition, but as a holistic contributor to student well-being and school engagement, leading to their general happiness with the program.

Data source: Nielsen, Quantitative Research conducted in 2025 in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana



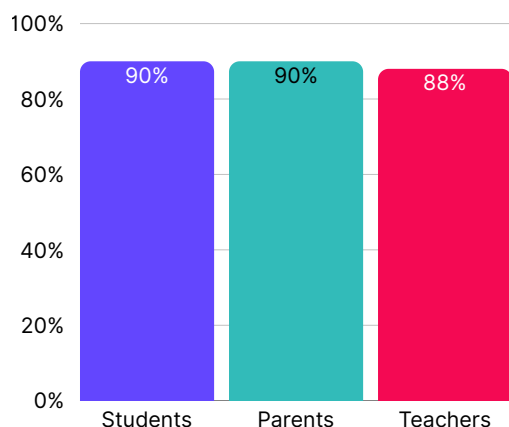
# Growth in Student Participation and Social Confidence

In rural areas, where caste-based divisions still linger in social structures, the act of eating together may challenge traditional biases in small yet significant ways.

*“Most of the children are from the slums. Some are migrants from Nepal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar. Some are from Maharashtra. All are mixed.... Some students come here because they get good food.... They all eat together”*

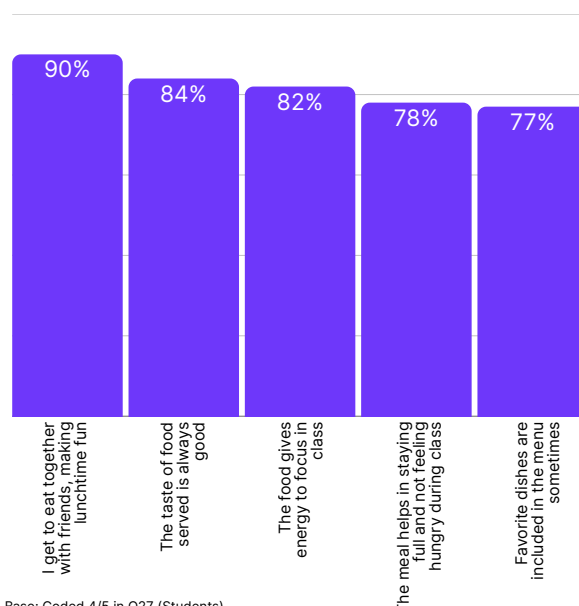
- A teacher from Kalyan, Maharashtra

Even in industrial and migrant-dominated areas like Bhiwandi, Maharashtra, where many students come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the common meal has provided a rare point of connection between children who might otherwise struggle to relate to one another.



Stakeholders' Satisfaction with MDM Promoting Social Eating

The quantitative survey strongly indicates that Akshaya Patra's MDM program plays a significant role in **promoting social equity within schools**, a sentiment shared by all stakeholders. Notably, the program fosters a sense of community and inclusion, with **90%** of students expressing that their primary satisfaction stems from the opportunity to **"eat together with friends, making lunchtime fun."**



Base: Coded 4/5 in Q27 (Students)

Q28: You mentioned that you feel happy about the mid day meals served at the school. Please tell me the reasons why you said so.

This highlights the program's ability to transform mealtime into a **positive social experience**, breaking down potential social barriers. Furthermore, the **practice of food sharing among friends**, reported by **85% of students**, reinforces the program's social benefits, demonstrating that it cultivates a collaborative and supportive atmosphere, where students actively participate in building camaraderie and shared experiences.

# Universal Access to School Meals Across Socio-Economic Divides

Before the introduction of PM POSHAN, students who couldn't afford a meal often felt a sense of inferiority, leading to withdrawal from social interactions and classroom activities. Some teachers noted that children who had previously been reluctant to participate in class discussions and group activities have shown **increased confidence** since the **introduction of the scheme**.

*“All the children are eager to participate because they have the strength and energy to play any game they choose. They are strong, not weak, and this gives them the confidence and determination to take part in everything. They don't hesitate-they step forward willingly and participate with enthusiasm.”*

- A Principal from Bengaluru, Karnataka





# Increased Girls School Enrolment Linked to Meal Provision



In many Indian households, food is often linked to social status, with certain meals or dietary habits reflecting economic standing. The PM POSHAN Scheme disrupts this dynamic by offering a **uniform meal** to all students, **breaking the association between food and class distinctions**.

While some parents initially resisted the idea of their children consuming government-provided meals-believing it to be 'for the poor'-teachers reported that over time, this perception changed as **children from all backgrounds began eating the same meal together**.

*“This is a place where students from poor, middle-class, and even well-off families come together. Now, they attend school regularly and share their meals side by side.”*

- A teacher from Puri, Orissa

# Support for Girls Education





# School Meals as Enablers for Girls Education



Education is a fundamental right, yet gender-based disparities continue to hinder the educational progress of girls, particularly in economically disadvantaged families. In many households, especially those with low income and unstable employment, sending boys to school takes precedence over educating girls. However, interventions like the PM Poshan Yojana have played a crucial role in **encouraging families to send their daughters to school**, ensuring higher enrollment, retention, and aspirations for a better future.

While societal and economic challenges still exist, our qualitative research highlights a **positive shift in attitudes toward girls' education**. Parents, teachers, and even the girls themselves have spoken about how regular school meals and improved awareness have helped them overcome obstacles to education.

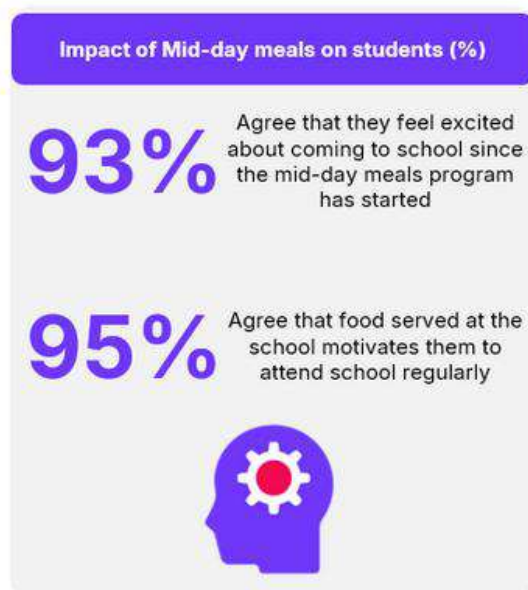


# Reduction of Domestic Work Load Allowing Girls to Focus on Studies

One of the most significant challenges in girls' education is financial constraint. In families where resources are limited, educating a girl is often seen as an additional burden rather than an investment. However, the availability of free nutritious meals at school has **relieved parents** of the financial stress of providing lunch, making it **easier for them to send their daughters to school**.

*“If we had to pack tiffin for both our kids, we would struggle. Now, we don't have to think about food. I send my daughter to school.”*

- A mother from Puri



Base: All respondents (Students) n = 1,908

This sentiment was echoed in rural and semi-urban areas, where education for girls was traditionally deprioritized due to financial hardship. Now, with food security ensured, **school is viewed as a more viable option for girls**.

To further support this point, the quantitative survey also reveals a remarkable level of student enthusiasm, with approximately **95%** expressing that the Akshaya Patra MDM program **significantly motivates them to attend school**. This near-unanimous sentiment underscores the program's powerful role in fostering a positive **association with education**, effectively transforming school attendance into an eagerly anticipated part of the daily routine.

Q23: Do you feel excited about coming to school since the mid-day meals are served at the school?  
Q75: Does the food served at school motivate you to attend school regularly?



Data source: Nielsen, Quantitative Research conducted in 2025 in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana

# School Meals as a Driving Force



Base: All respondents (Parents) n = 221

Q36: Are you aware of mid-day meals being provided at your child's school?  
Q35: How many days per week does your child attend the school?  
Q37: Does your child look forward to attending school because of mid day meals served at school?

The quantitative survey unequivocally demonstrates the profound impact of Akshaya Patra's MDM program on parental perceptions and school engagement. The survey highlights near-universal awareness of the meals, with **100% of parents recognizing the program's existence**, and an impressive **96% reporting near-perfect school attendance**. Furthermore, a substantial **85% of parents** attest that their children eagerly anticipate **attending school specifically because of these meals**, underscoring the program's significant appeal and its integral role in the daily school routine.

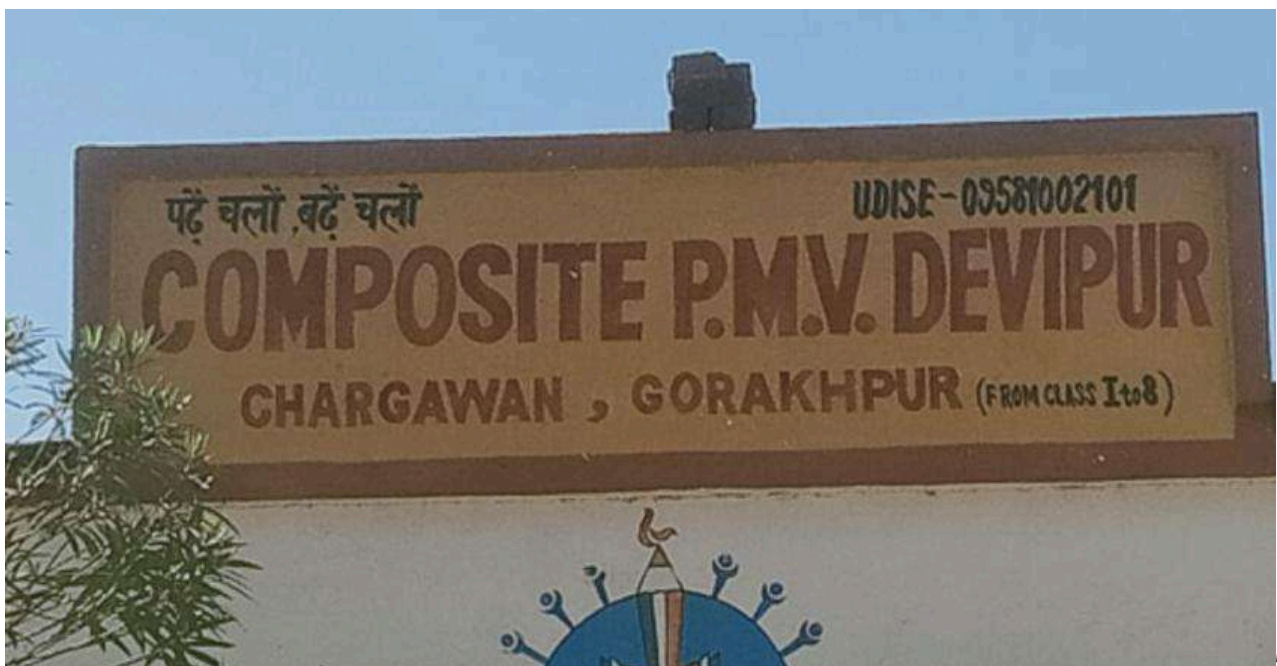


Data source: Nielsen, Quantitative Research conducted in 2025 in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana



# State Specific Learnings

The quantitative survey data paints a clear picture of the remarkable integration of Akshaya Patra's MDM into the daily rhythm of the school system across the surveyed regions. The fact that a significant **83% of students partake in the program all six days** of the school week underscores its central role in their nutritional intake and daily school experience. Notably, **Karnataka** leads the way with an exceptional **97% of students consistently consuming the MDM throughout the entire school week**, closely followed by **Uttarakhand at 96%**, demonstrating an almost universal reliance on the program in these states. Furthermore, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha also exhibit impressive levels of consistent consumption, with approximately 90% of their students utilizing the MDM program every school day. This means that in most places, Akshaya Patra's meals are a key part of the students' daily lives at school.



# State Specific Learnings

As per the quantitative survey, across the states where the survey was conducted, it's noteworthy to see that about **9 out of every 10 students say the food they get is always warm**. This shows that the process of getting the meals to the students is working well in most places. But **Karnataka and Uttarakhand are doing even better!** In these two states, almost every single student – **99% in Karnataka and 98% in Uttarakhand** – say their **food is always served warm**. This is a really good sign and shows that the systems for keeping the food warm until it reaches the children are particularly effective.



As per the quantitative survey, **99%** of the **students consume the lunch** at school served as MDM by the Akshaya Patra. This indicates a very high acceptance and consumption rate of the program's offerings. Even more impressively, states like **Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Uttarakhand** are reporting **near-perfect** figures, with **approximately 100%** of students stating that they eat the provided MDM during lunchtime.





# State Specific Learnings



As per the quantitative survey, across the majority of states surveyed, a significant **9 out of 10 students feel more excited and motivated to come to school regularly** because of the MDM served at school. This highlights the program's success in making school a more attractive and positive experience for children. Furthermore, in **Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Karnataka**, a similar high proportion of students (9 out of 10) also report feeling healthier and more energetic after eating the MDM served at school. This dual benefit – increased motivation to attend and improved feelings of health and energy – underscores the powerful positive impact of the Akshaya Patra program on students' overall well-being and their engagement with education in these particular states.

As per the quantitative survey, in over half of the states where the survey was conducted, a remarkable **9 out of 10 students shared that they are able to focus better** in their classes and also have **more energy to stay active** and **playful during their breaks**, all thanks to the food they receive at school. This clearly shows that the MDM are not just filling their hunger, but they are also helping students learn better and enjoy their time at school more fully. It's a strong sign of the positive impact the program is having on their overall school experience.



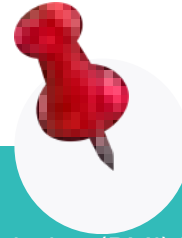
Data source: Nielsen, Quantitative Research conducted in 2025 in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana

# Anthropometric Findings

## Impact on BMI (Body Mass Index)

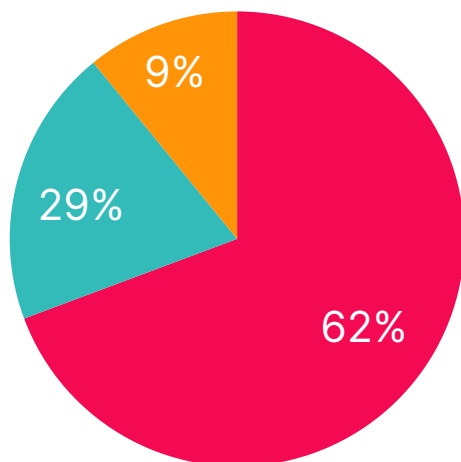
Across the 10 states, the BMI of 1908 students (991 boys and 917 girls) aged 5-16 years was measured and compared against World Health Organization standards to determine if their weight was normal, underweight, or overweight.

The results show that a significant **majority of both genders fall within the normal weight range: 62% of the boys and a higher 70% of the girls**. This strong prevalence of normal weight among the students strongly suggests that the hot, nutritious meals they receive at school are indeed making a positive impact on their nutritional health. The consistent access to these meals appears to be a key factor in supporting healthy weight maintenance for a substantial proportion of the children in this study.



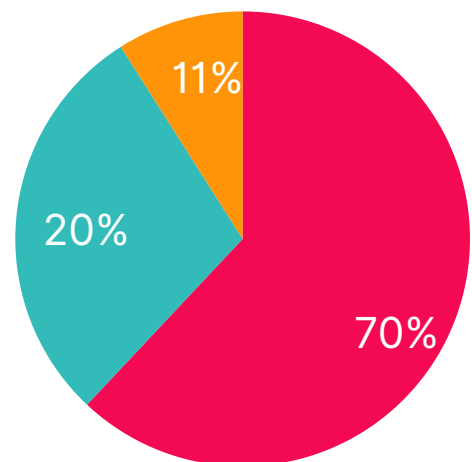
Body Mass Index (BMI) is a person's weight in kilograms divided by the square of their height in meters. For children and teenagers, BMI is age- and sex-specific and is often referred to as BMI-for-age. This measurement helps assess whether a child or adolescent is underweight, normal weight, overweight, or obese, and is commonly used to track growth patterns and identify potential health risks. It is an important tool in monitoring nutritional status and overall health during development.

- Normal
- Underweight (-2 SD)
- Overweight (1 SD)



Body Mass Index (BMI) for Girls

- Normal
- Underweight (-2 SD)
- Overweight (1 SD)



Body Mass Index (BMI) for Boys

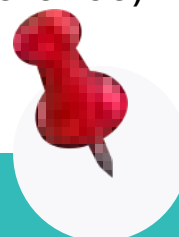


# Anthropometric Findings

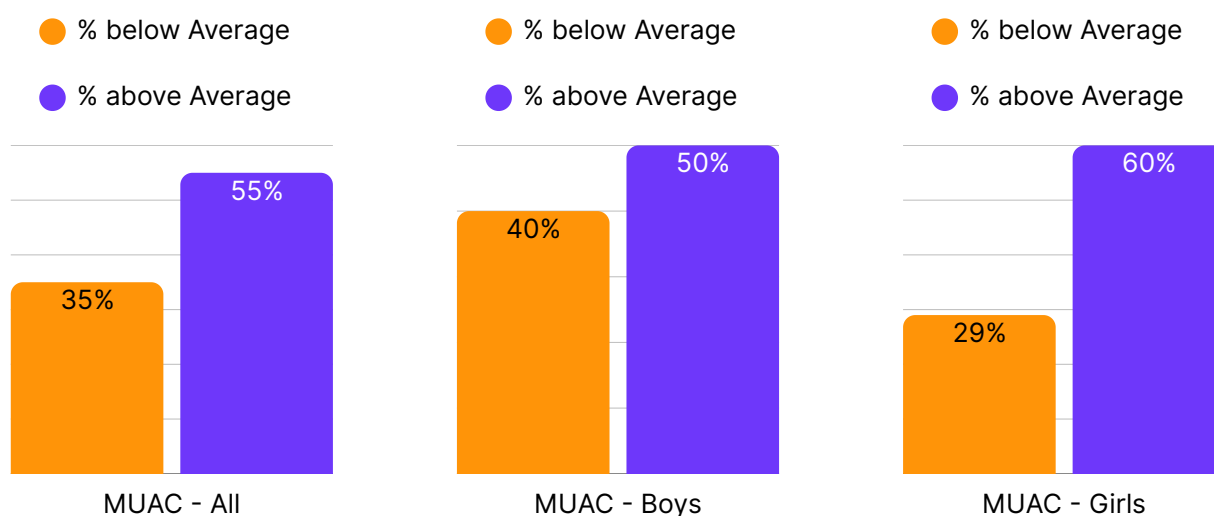
## Impact on MUAC (Mid-Upper Arm Circumference)



From the quantitative survey, the fact that over half of the students measured exceed the national average MUAC of 18cm strongly indicates Akshaya Patra's MDM program's positive impact on their physical health. MUAC, a key indicator of nutritional status, demonstrates that the program effectively addresses potential deficiencies, contributing to improved overall well-being.



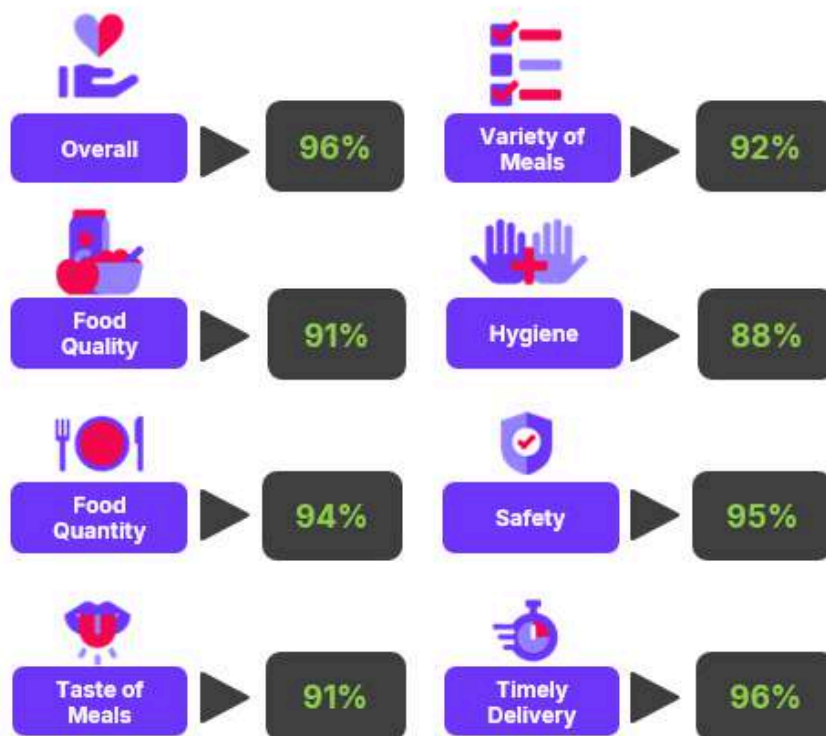
MUAC (Mid-Upper Arm Circumference) is the circumference of the left upper arm, measured at the midpoint between the tip of the shoulder and the tip of the elbow. In children, MUAC is a useful tool for assessing nutritional status. Increasingly, MUAC is also being used to assess the nutritional status of adolescents; however, globally recognized MUAC cut-offs for classifying malnutrition among adolescents have not yet been established. The Nielsen team has referred to several similar studies conducted in India and has considered 18 cm as the cut-off point for analyzing the nutritional status of school-going children in the age group of 5-14 years.



Data source: Nielsen, Quantitative Research conducted in 2025 in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana

# Stakeholder's Satisfaction

According to the quantitative study, Akshaya Patra's MDM program demonstrates strong overall satisfaction across students, teachers, and parents.



## Food & Menu

### Variety:

- Food quality is rated **excellent by 91% overall**, with **teachers showing the highest satisfaction (93%)**.
- Food quantity is consistently rated very **satisfactory by 94% across all segments**, highlighting the program's success in providing adequate portions.
- Taste of meals** receives an **excellent rating from 91% overall**, with all the segments reporting high satisfaction levels.

Meal variety is considered very **satisfactory by 92% overall**, with students and parents showing stronger agreement (92% and 91%, respectively) than teachers (87%).

## Hygiene:

- Hygiene** around serving areas is rated **excellent by 88% overall**, with **parents showing the highest satisfaction (92%)**.
- Food safety** is a significant strength, **with 95% of students, teachers, and parents** agreeing the food is safe, showcasing trust in Akshaya Patra's practices.
- Timely delivery** of meals is a major success, with **96% overall satisfaction**, and **parents/teachers** expressing the **highest approval (99%)**.
- Overall program satisfaction** stands at **96%**, with consistent positive feedback across all segments.

## Improvement / Enhancement Areas:

- Despite the high satisfaction, the feedback reveals clear areas for potential enhancement. The strong **desire for seasonal fruits (72%)**, **increased vegetable variety (63%)**, and the addition of curd (56%) indicates a demand for greater dietary diversity and nutrient enrichment. While The Akshaya Patra has already commenced providing fruits at certain states, due to the demand seen across all the stakeholders, Akshaya Patra could start providing fruits for all the states in the future.



# Persistent Barriers Limiting Student Success Despite Improvements

In many households, young girls bear a disproportionate share of household responsibilities, from cooking and cleaning to looking after younger siblings. Often, this becomes a barrier to their education, as they are expected to prioritize domestic work over schooling. However, with the assurance of a school meal, parents are now less likely to keep them at home for meal preparation, reducing their domestic workload and allowing them to focus on studies.

*“The situation was quite difficult earlier. I remember a Class 3 student who used to cook food and wash utensils before coming to school. Concerned, I visited her home to understand what was happening. One day, a teacher scolded her for being late, and she broke down in tears. I called her to the office and gently asked her what was wrong. She said, “My mother is unwell, and I have a younger brother to take care of-so I cook before coming to school.””*

- A Principal from Lucknow, UP

We expect a shift in particularly important for adolescent girls, who are often expected to take on more household duties as they grow older.



# Potential Challenges

## Section 5





# Implications of Skipped Breakfasts on Student Wellbeing



During our visits to Akshaya Patra's kitchens and the government schools it serves, we encountered a thought-provoking paradox. On one hand, children from financially well-off families often struggle with modern lifestyle issues-limited physical activity due to a preference for online entertainment, high exposure to junk food, and reduced real-world social interaction due to excessive mobile phone usage. On the other hand, children from underprivileged backgrounds-those benefiting from the PM POSHAN Scheme-appear to have several advantages. They eat nutritious, freshly prepared meals at school, have limited or no access to mobile phones (which results in more face-to-face social interactions), and actively engage in outdoor play. Their classrooms, in many cases, are equipped with digital infrastructure that rivals or surpasses that of many private schools.

Given these circumstantial advantages-healthy diet, active lifestyle, strong peer connections, and decent school infrastructure-why do we still see relatively few students from this group rising to national prominence in academics, sports, or leadership? Why does this segment, which might be circumstantially privileged despite economic hardship, not yet emerge as a consistent talent pipeline?

This section reflects on that very question. It explores the persistent challenges-systemic, psychological, and societal-that continue to act as barriers, and identifies areas where further support and intervention are essential.

# Breakfast – Importance and Need

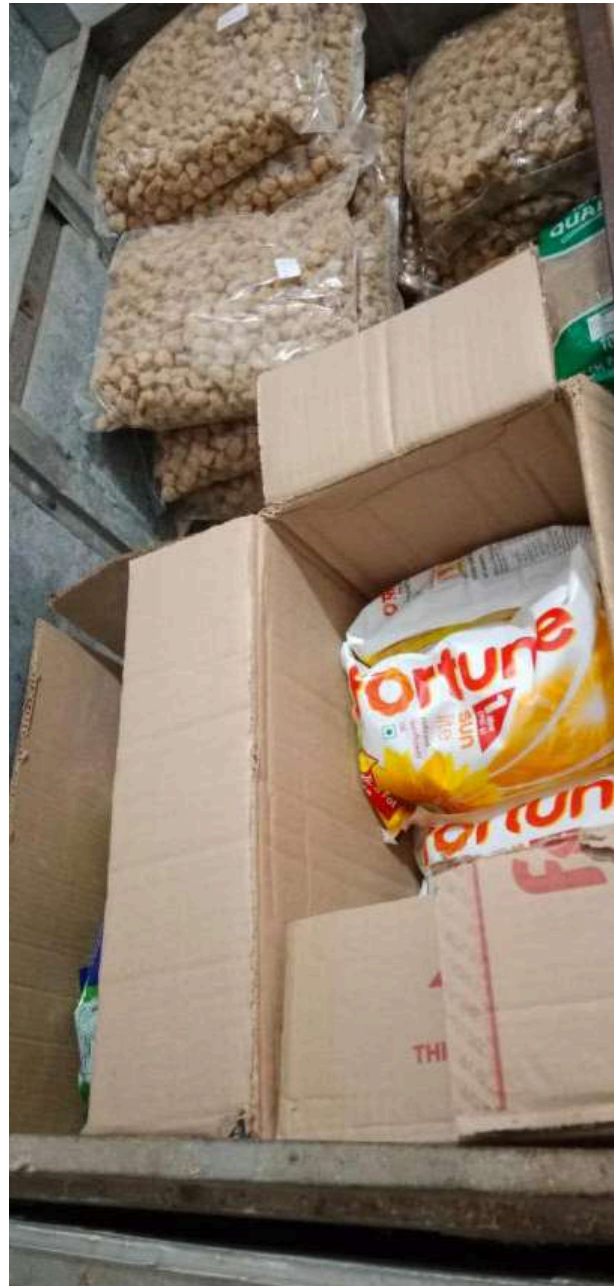
Out of the three daily meals, breakfast remains absent from the scheme, leaving a significant nutritional gap in a child's diet. Breakfast is widely regarded as the most important meal of the day, as it kickstarts metabolism, boosts energy, and enhances cognitive function. Studies have consistently shown that children who eat a healthy breakfast perform better academically and have improved attention spans in class (Benton, D. (2008). The influence of children's diet on their cognition and behaviour). However, many children come to school on an empty stomach due to financial constraints at home, significantly affecting their early-day concentration and energy levels. Teachers and principals have reported that students struggle to focus in the first few hours of school, often appearing lethargic and inattentive.

*“Some students come to school without eating anything in the morning. By the time they get their first meal at school, they are already exhausted. A small morning snack or breakfast could make a big difference.”*

- A principal from Lucknow

Despite the success of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, addressing the breakfast gap remains a major challenge, as hunger in the morning affects learning and engagement.

This sentiment is also echoed in the quantitative survey which reveals a concerning statistic: nearly 30% of parents report their children regularly miss breakfast.



This finding presents a significant opportunity for Akshaya Patra to expand its support by incorporating breakfast provision. By addressing this critical nutritional gap, Akshaya Patra could further enhance student well-being, ensuring children receive essential nutrients at the start of the school day, potentially leading to improved concentration and academic performance.



# Impact of Taste Preferences on School Meal Acceptance



Even though the school-provided meals are nutritious, unhealthy food consumption outside school hours remains a serious challenge. Many children, especially those living in poor localities, have easy access to cheap, highly processed junk food sold in their communities. These low-cost snacks-such as deep-fried items, candies, and packaged foods loaded with artificial flavors and trans fats-are often more appealing to children than healthy meals.

*“Since morning, my kids start demanding Yippee and Maggi for breakfast - that’s what they enjoy the most.”*

- A Parent from Puri, Orissa

This problem is particularly pronounced in urban and semi-urban areas, where unregulated street food vendors operate outside school premises. While schools promote nutrition, children’s eating habits outside school remain largely unsupervised, diluting the impact of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme.

The quantitative survey further highlights a dichotomy in students' dietary habits: while 91% regularly consume familiar, homemade meals like chapati and rice, establishing a positive nutritional baseline, a concerning 42% report daily consumption of packaged snacks (chips, biscuits, etc.). This juxtaposition underscores the need for Akshaya Patra to collaborate closely with teachers to actively promote healthy eating habits. By integrating nutritional education into the school curriculum, and perhaps offering healthy snack alternatives through the program, Akshaya Patra can work to mitigate the reliance on packaged snacks and reinforce the benefits of a balanced diet, ultimately contributing to students' long-term well-being.

# Why Some Kids Find School Food Less Tasty



One of the unexpected challenges faced by the program is children's complaints about the taste of school meals, especially the lack of salt. The ingredients used in mid-day meals are measured to ensure maximum health benefits, and excessive salt consumption is scientifically linked to high blood pressure and other health risks. However, children at home are accustomed to eating food with higher salt content, making them less receptive to the controlled salt levels in school meals.

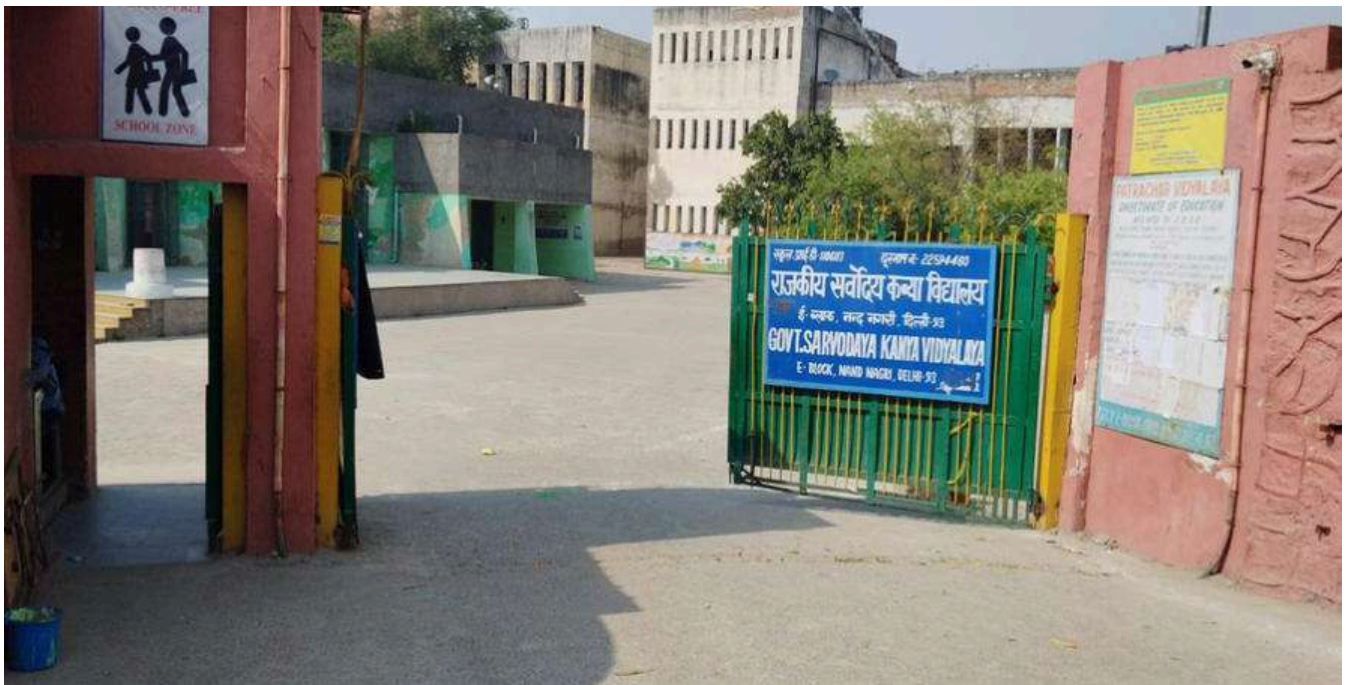
*“Some students say the food tastes bland because it has less salt. In some schools, teachers or staff even provide extra salt to add on top.”*

- A teacher from Ahmedabad

This indicates an underlying problem-children's home diets are often unhealthy, and parents may not be aware of recommended nutritional standards. It also suggests that schools may need to work more closely with parents to ensure healthier eating habits outside of school.



# Environmental Factors Affecting Children's Health and Scheme Impact



Although Akshaya Patra and other implementing agencies have expertise in nutrition and meal planning, they do not have the freedom to make changes to the menu. The government strictly mandates meal composition at the regional and state levels, which means that even when local feedback suggests necessary improvements, adjustments are not easily made.

For example, some students may have dietary preferences or cultural food habits that could make the standard meal less appealing to them, but menu modifications require approval from government authorities, delaying implementation.

*“The meals are nutritious, but some students get bored of the repetition. If we could adjust the menu based on local preferences while keeping nutrition intact, it could help maintain student interest.”*

- A principal from Hubli, Karnataka

Greater menu flexibility, while retaining government-mandated nutritional benchmarks, could enhance meal acceptance among children and reduce plate waste.

# Addressing Poor Home Hygiene - it's Impact on Students

Many children growing up in impoverished areas are exposed to unhealthy behaviors, including substance abuse, violence, and a general lack of hygiene. These factors can negatively impact their overall well-being, despite the nutritional benefits of school meals.

Some children, particularly adolescents, begin imitating the habits of adults in their surroundings. The lack of parental supervision due to economic hardships can lead children to develop habits that counteract their health gains from school meals.

*“Some students have grown up seeing addiction and street violence. Their physical health may improve with food, but their environment continues to pose challenges to their overall well-being.”*

- A teacher from Kalyan, Maharashtra

Mid-Day Meals can only partially address this issue-additional interventions such as health awareness programs and community engagement initiatives are needed to create a holistic impact on the children's health and lifestyle choices.





# Need for Awareness - WASH Programme

While school environments emphasize cleanliness and hygiene, the same cannot always be said for home environments. Many children come from households with limited access to clean water, proper sanitation, and hygienic food storage facilities. Even if they receive a nutritious and safe meal at school, they may still consume contaminated food or water at home, increasing their risk of diseases and malnutrition-related setbacks.

*“We often see cases where children fall sick due to poor hygiene at home. They get healthy meals at school, but food poisoning, diarrhoea, or infections from home environments can undo these benefits.”*  
- A doctor from Maharashtra

Schools can play a vital role in hygiene education, but improving home conditions requires broader government interventions, including sanitation programs, access to clean drinking water, and community-level awareness campaigns.



# Areas of Improvement

## Section 6





# Quick Wins

*(Changes that can be implemented immediately or with minimal resources)*

- **Add fruits or simple breakfast items** (milk, porridge, bananas) to support morning energy and focus
- **Fortify existing meals with iron and calcium** using ingredients like jaggery, leafy greens, fortified rice or wheat
- **Introduce high-protein vegetarian add-ons** like peanut chikki, sprouted moong, or roasted gram
- **Enhance meal taste with simple inter-regional dishes** using existing ingredients (e.g., khichdi with regional twist)
- **Better communication of hygiene standards** through school posters, parent WhatsApp messages, or classroom storytelling
- **Organize guest lectures or short factory exposure visits** in nearby Akshaya Patra kitchens or nutrition labs
- **Add hygiene reminders and handwashing rituals** before meals (with posters and verbal reinforcement)

## Medium-Term Changes

*(Requires some planning, partnerships, or coordination effort across schools)*

- **Introduce a Shared Sports & Nutrition Educator Model** for structured PT sessions and dietary guidance
- **Develop structured sports programs and regular inter-school competitions** (can begin at cluster level)
- **Tie-up with local skilling partners or NGOs** for guest sessions on careers in food safety, nutrition, logistics
- **Introduce more diversified, aspirational menu cycles** (e.g., rotating weekly menu with local and inter-regional favourites)
- **Pilot breakfast programs** in select clusters before statewide/national rollout
- **Introduce protein-rich meal boosters** like soya nuggets, paneer cubes, millet-based snacks on fixed days

## Longer-Term Goals

*(Requires infrastructure, policy change, or budget allocation)*

- **Upgrade school infrastructure to include dining halls** or shaded eating spaces
- **Appoint full-time PT or nutrition educators** in every school (state or CSR-supported)
- **Integrate sports into daily timetables** with dedicated periods and equipment
- **Develop school-level nutrition monitoring systems** (e.g., digital tracking of height, weight, haemoglobin)
- **Implement full-scale breakfast + lunch program** with state funding and logistics support
- **Create structured career pathway programs** in food tech, hygiene, nutrition through curriculum or certification

# Socio-Economic Profile of Government School Students

## Section 7





# Socio-Economic Background of Students Families



Understanding the background of children attending government schools provides critical insights into the challenges they face and the environment in which they grow up. These children, often from economically disadvantaged communities, navigate a world that is marked by financial instability, difficult living conditions, and exposure to harsh social realities. Their aspirations, family dynamics, and everyday experiences shape their approach to education, career dreams, and life expectations. This section explores the key characteristics of their socio-economic environment, the psychological impact of their upbringing, and how these factors influence their aspirations.

# Parental Involvement in Education

A significant majority of children in government schools come from families that struggle financially. Their parents are either daily wage earners, domestic workers, factory laborers, auto-rickshaw drivers, or street vendors. Even those engaged in small businesses-such as running a tailoring shop or ironing clothes-struggle to make ends meet.

*“We buy vegetables based on what we can afford. Since we are poor, we usually choose the ones that are available at lower prices.”*

- Parent from Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

Many parents recognize the instability and hardships of their professions and wish for their children to move beyond their struggles

*“I run my own hair cutting salon, but I don't want my son to follow the same path. I want to give him a good education and better opportunities.”*

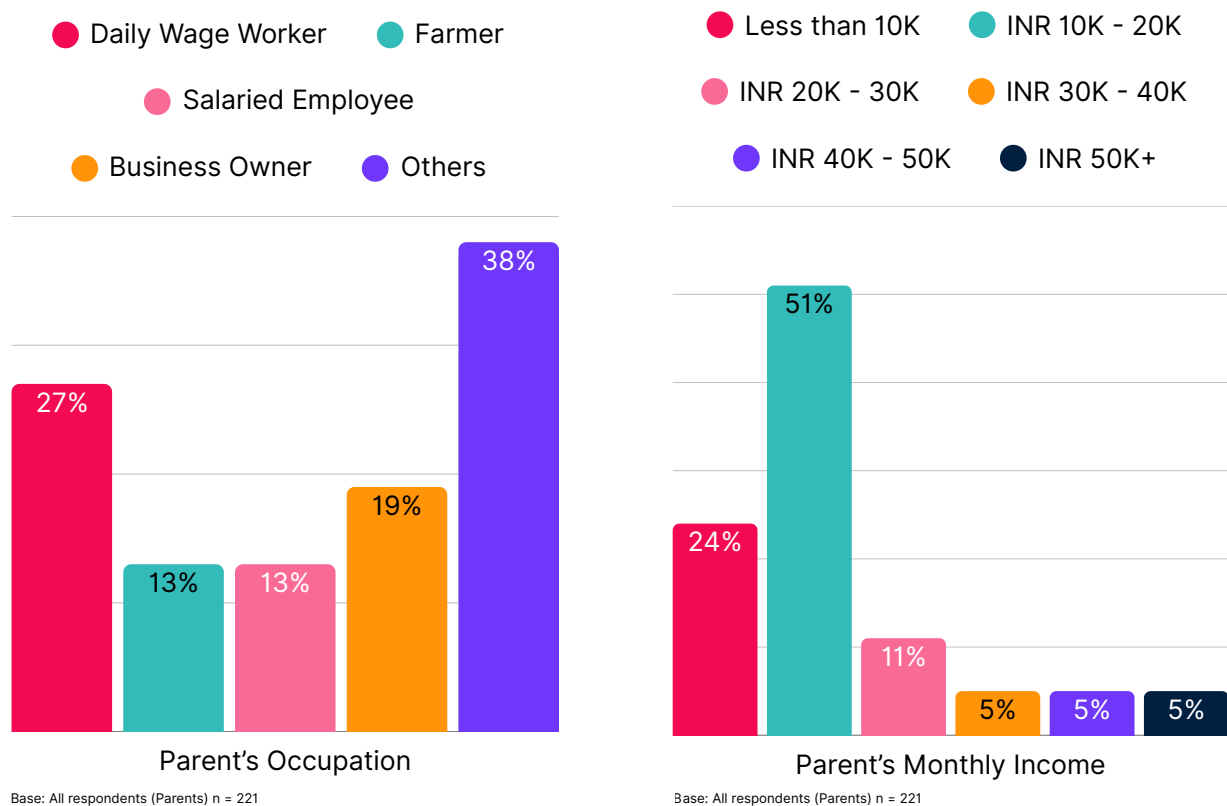
- A father from Ahmedabad, Gujarat





# Social Environment and Role of School Support

This sentiment is common. Even parents running small businesses in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Karnataka openly admitted that their work is unpredictable and exhausting. This economic insecurity forces them to prioritize survival over long-term planning, often leading to short-term goals for their children's education.



The quantitative survey also highlights the critical socio-economic context in which Akshaya Patra's PM POSHAN program operates. The finding that 75% of parents earn below ₹20,000 monthly, with a significant portion being daily wage earners, underscores the widespread economic vulnerability within beneficiary communities. This stark reality directly correlates with potential food insecurity for children, emphasizing the PM POSHAN scheme's indispensable role in providing a reliable source of nutrition.

# Social Environment and Role of School Support

One of the key observations in government schools is the varying degree of parental involvement in their children's education. While some parents are deeply invested in their child's progress, a significant proportion—especially those from economically weaker backgrounds—engage minimally beyond ensuring school attendance. This gap in awareness and active participation has profound implications for students' academic performance and long-term educational aspirations.

Many parents from economically weaker backgrounds view education as merely a stepping stone to basic literacy or, at best, a means to secure a stable, low-risk job such as a government position. Their aspirations for their children often do not extend beyond passing key educational milestones like clearing the 10th or 12th grade. Discussions with parents revealed that long-term career planning is rare, as many are caught in a survival mindset, focusing on immediate financial needs rather than future opportunities.

*“Parents come to school only when called. They are concerned about their child passing but rarely ask how they are performing or what more can be done.”*

- A school principal in Vadodara

This indicates that while parents acknowledge the importance of education, they do not necessarily engage in active academic support, long-term goal setting, or career planning for their children. For many families, financial instability means that both parents work long hours, often leaving little time or energy to monitor their children's studies. In such cases, children may not receive the necessary encouragement or academic supervision at home. Instead, they are left to navigate their education independently, often relying on peers, siblings, or even teachers for guidance. One teacher in Maharashtra mentioned how this lack of parental guidance affects learning:

*“We see children who don't complete homework because there's no one at home to help them. The parents return late from work, and by that time, the child has already played and forgotten about studies.”*

- A school Teacher in Maharashtra

This situation is especially common in households where the parents are daily wage labourers, factory workers, or small-scale vendors. The unpredictability of their income and work schedules further prevents them from attending parent-teacher meetings or monitoring their child's progress regularly.

Furthermore, the quantitative survey reveals a significant educational challenge within the beneficiary communities: 90% of parents have not progressed beyond SSC/HSC, suggesting potential limitations in their ability to actively support their children's education. In this context, the PM POSHAN scheme serves as a vital incentive for school attendance, effectively bridging educational gaps where parental involvement may be constrained.



# Family Demographics and Education



Most children studying in government schools live in neighbourhoods that are marked by poverty, crime, and social instability. Many of these localities house a mix of hardworking labourers and individuals involved in illegal or anti-social activities. Growing up in such an environment significantly shapes a child's worldview, confidence, and psychological resilience.

*“Sometimes, police come to their locality to catch someone. The children see these things happening around them regularly. Imagine the psychological effect it must be leaving on them—some grow up fearing authority, others admire the power of criminals.”*

- A teacher from Bhiwandi

Despite these challenges, schools provide a structured environment that is often the only place of stability for these children. Teachers play a crucial role in providing emotional support, and schools act as a safe space where they can escape the chaos of their homes and localities.

# Children from Migrant Families: Educational and Social Profile



A defining characteristic of families whose children attend government schools is their larger household size, often consisting of three or more children. With limited financial resources and both parents frequently engaged in labour-intensive work, responsibilities often trickle down to the children-especially the eldest sibling-who take on additional household duties at a very young age.

*“Many of our students have three or four siblings. When parents are struggling to afford basic needs, education becomes a lower priority. They think, ‘At least let one of them study till Class 10, the rest will manage somehow.’”*

- A teacher in Rajasthan

For many children, school is not the only obligation of their day. Instead of devoting their time entirely to studies and play, some must shoulder responsibilities that would typically fall to adults in more privileged settings. Girls, in particular, are often expected to help with household chores, including cooking and cleaning, before and after school hours.

*“In some families, only one person earns while there are many mouths to feed. So, children are often expected to help. I’ve seen a Class 3 student who cooks meals and washes utensils before coming to school.”*

- A teacher from Lucknow, UP



In cases where both parents are engaged in daily wage labor, such as construction work or factory jobs, the responsibility of childcare falls on the elder children. It is not uncommon for a young student-sometimes as young as 10-to be left at home during the day to care for younger siblings, including infants.

These circumstances create a direct conflict between their education and their family responsibilities.

Additionally, while child labour is officially banned in India, it persists informally in various ways. Some children assist their fathers in their small businesses-be it running a tea stall, selling vegetables, or working in tailoring shops. Others support their mothers in domestic work, sometimes helping with sewing, handicrafts, or agricultural labor in rural areas.

Such responsibilities inevitably impact not only the children's academic performance but also their emotional and psychological well-being. The burden of these additional tasks leaves little room for leisure or social interaction, both of which are essential to childhood development. The expectation that children should contribute to the household, either through labour or caregiving, underscores the deep-rooted economic struggles of these families.



Despite these challenges, many children display remarkable resilience, juggling their studies alongside their domestic duties. However, the need for greater support mechanisms-both in schools and in the broader community-is evident. Without intervention, these additional responsibilities may significantly hinder their educational progress and limit their opportunities for upward mobility.



# Parental Educational and Career Aspirations



A significant chunk of students in government schools belong to migrant families-labourers who move from one state to another in search of work. These families often face linguistic and cultural challenges, making adaptation difficult for their children.

*“My elder son studied in a Hindi-medium school in Bihar. When we moved here, he struggled because everything was in Kannada. He didn’t understand anything for months.”*

- A parent in Karnataka, originally from Bihar

For children who were born in one state but raised in another, the transition is smoother. However, for those who move after spending several years in their home state, the change can be difficult. Not all children get the opportunity to study in schools offering education in their native language, which can lead to disinterest in school, lower academic performance, and reduced self-confidence.

*“Some of the students come from migrant families-from Nepal, UP, Bihar .... Whatever we teach them at school often doesn’t get reinforced at home. When we ask them the next day -they go completely blank.”*

- A teacher from Maharashtra

However, this migrant background also makes these children highly adaptable. Over time, they learn multiple languages, develop social resilience, and adjust to diverse environments.



# Use of Technology in Student and Family Life



One of the starkest realities observed was the limited aspirations among both parents and children. Due to financial insecurity and limited exposure, many parents only plan one step ahead, rarely thinking beyond the next academic year.

*“Parents just want their children to pass this year. If the child is in Class 5, they aim for Class 6. If they are in Class 10, they hope they pass. The long-term goal is often just getting a small, stable government job.”*

- A teacher in Maharashtra

Government jobs are considered the ultimate aspiration because they offer job security and less physical labour.

*“Government jobs are good. You don’t have to struggle in the sun all day. I just want my son to get some small government work.”*

- A teacher from Maharashtra

However, regional differences were evident - parents in the southern region tended to have higher aspirations and broader outlooks compared to those in other areas. For instance, a mother of two, married to a house painter, spoke passionately about her dreams for her daughters -

*“My eldest daughter wants to become a bank manager. My second daughter wants to be a police officer.”*

- Parent from Srikakulam

Likewise, a mother of three from Hubli, married to a barber, also harbors high aspirations for her children.

*“It is our wish that they become a doctor or an engineer. Then their life will be settled, and they will be in a good position.”*

- Parent from Hubli

Schools play an important role in compensating for the lack of parental involvement by providing additional counselling, mentorship, and exposure to diverse career options. Some teachers actively motivate students to think beyond traditional job roles, but the impact of such interventions is often limited unless parents are also engaged.





# Teacher Background and Professional Motivation



Despite financial hardships families are not cut off from the outside world. Smartphones and the internet have given them unprecedented exposure to the world out in the open.

*“Parents usually own a basic mobile phone, which they take with them to work. As a result, children only get access to it when their parents return home.”*

- A teacher in Bhiwandi

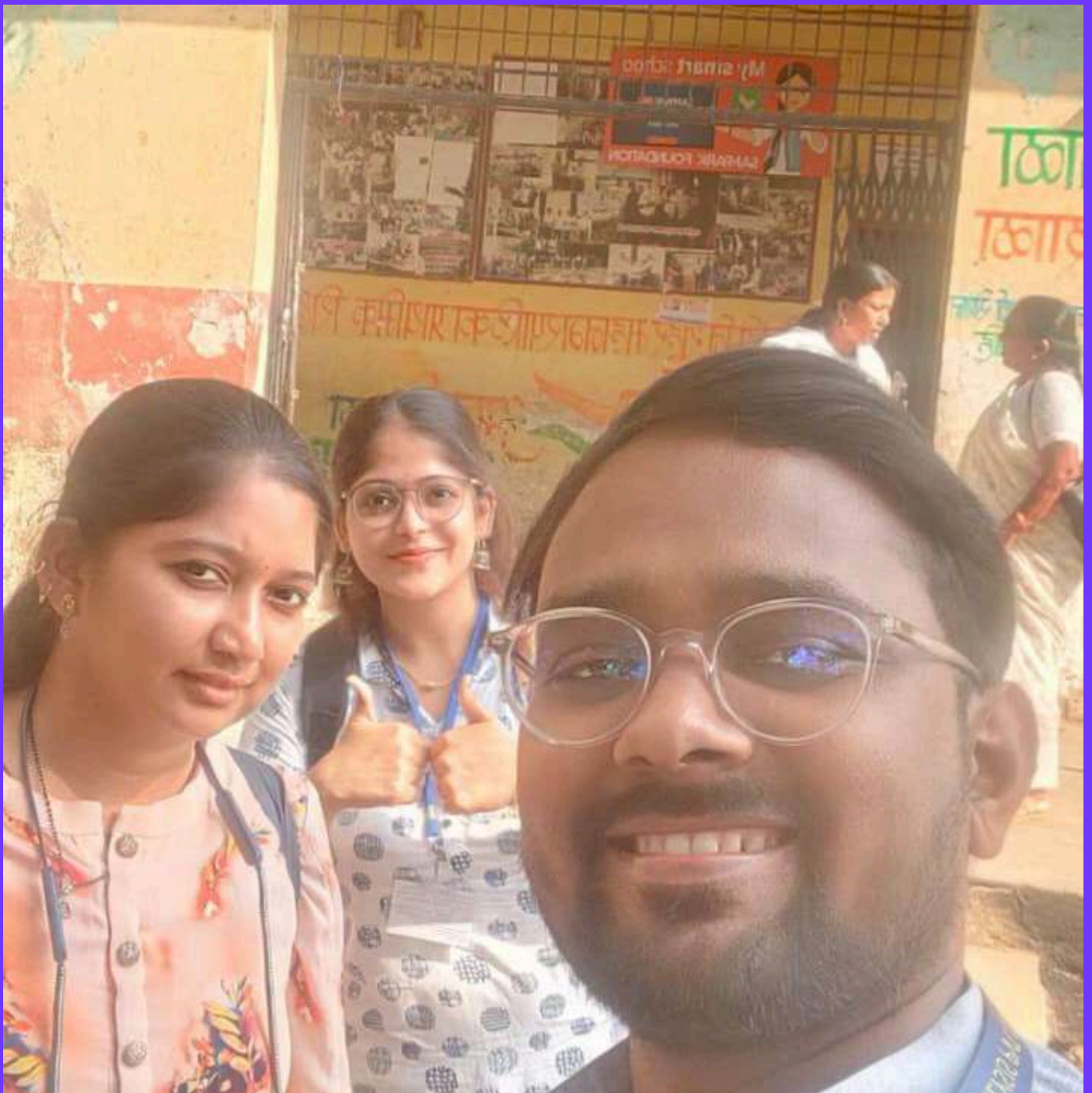
Parents, too, absorb new-age parenting trends through social media. Concepts like not pressuring children into a specific career, allowing them to follow their passion, and treating them as equals are slowly influencing them, even if they don't fully practice them yet.

*“In 2014-15, a child died due to excessive mobile phone use.. .. [We have to tell parents not to give it to kids].... Because in pediatrics, it's 10% medication and 90% counseling. You need to heal the parents, not the child.”*

- Dr Jaywant Bodake, Bhiwandi

This exposure is a double-edged sword-while it broadens perspectives, it also creates confusion and unrealistic expectations, especially when not backed by real-world guidance.

# Profile of Teachers and Principals in Government Schools





# Their Background, Challenges, and Commitment



While there is often a widespread perception that educators in government schools are indifferent, unmotivated, or merely holding onto secure jobs without passion, our research offers a compelling counter-narrative. Through in-depth conversations with teachers and principals across multiple states, we uncovered a side of their profession that is rarely acknowledged. These educators are not just instructors; they are mentors, disciplinarians, caregivers, and sometimes the only stable presence in a child's life. While challenges exist-ranging from large classroom sizes to difficult socio-economic conditions of their students-their dedication to shaping young minds often transcends the limits of the resources available to them. This section presents their side of the story, based on direct experiences shared during our discussions, providing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their role in government schools.

These educators are more than just instructors; they are mentors, role models, and sometimes even surrogate parents who bridge the gap between socio-economic disadvantages and educational aspirations. Through our qualitative study, we gained deep insights into their background, challenges, and the level of commitment they bring to their role.

# Teacher Roles and Contributions

Government schoolteachers and principals come from a variety of backgrounds. Many have pursued teaching as a deliberate career choice driven by a passion for education, while others have taken up the profession due to job security associated with government employment. Their teaching experience ranges from a few years to several decades, and many have witnessed the transformation of the education system over time.

*“I have been teaching for over a decade. Earlier, students were different, less exposed to the outside world. But now, even though they come from difficult backgrounds, they are aware of things through their parents' mobile phones, TV, and discussions at home. It makes our job both easier and more challenging at the same time.”*

- A teacher from Vadodara

The principals, on the other hand, often come with long teaching tenures before taking on administrative roles. Many have served in rural as well as urban government schools, giving them a broad perspective on educational challenges in different settings.





# Teacher Workload and Responsibilities

Despite the systemic challenges, government schoolteachers are deeply committed to their students' welfare. Their role extends beyond the syllabus—they help students fill out forms for scholarships, provide guidance on career choices, and in some cases, even offer emotional and financial support to students in distress.

*“Many of our students don't even know how to fill out forms for further studies or scholarships. If we don't help them, who will? We guide them, fill out forms, and ensure they don't miss out on opportunities due to a lack of awareness.”*

- A principal from Kalyan

Teachers are also instrumental in shaping students' food habits under the PM Poshan Yojana. In Maharashtra, a teacher who also oversees the meal distribution shared how she actively encourages students to eat nutritious food, even if they initially resist it.

*“At first, children refused to eat certain vegetables. But I negotiate with them- ‘Try at least two bites today, and if you still don't like it, we will see tomorrow.’ Over time, they start eating without complaints.”*

- A teacher in Maharashtra



# Teacher Dedication and Professional Commitment

Teaching in government schools comes with unique challenges. Many educators struggle with the pressure of large class sizes, lack of adequate resources, and the social issues their students face. Since a significant number of students come from low-income and unstable family backgrounds, teachers often have to step into counselling roles.

*“Some of my students come from families where parents are daily wage workers, and sometimes they don't return home for days due to work. Who ensures that these children study? Sometimes, it falls on us to track them down and encourage them to come back to school.”*

- A teacher from Rajasthan

In crime-prone or migrant-heavy areas, teachers also witness firsthand how students are affected by their surroundings. A teacher from Kalyan described the difficulty of keeping students focused in such an environment:

*“Sometimes police come to their neighbourhoods to catch criminals. Kids see these things happen regularly. It impacts their confidence-some get scared, while others get influenced and aspire for the wrong kind of power.”*

- A teacher from Kalyan





# Teacher Perceptions on Career Development

Despite the difficulties, most teachers remain dedicated to their mission. The emotional toll of dealing with children from distressed backgrounds is real, but so is the sense of satisfaction they derive when they see their students succeed. Many teachers feel an immense sense of pride when students they once taught go on to secure stable jobs or higher education opportunities.

*“I want my daughter to become a teacher or a doctor... [Why teacher?] Because she will produce 3-4 more teachers. It is respectable profession.”*

- A Parent from Bengaluru, Karnataka

This sentiment echoes across many regions, reinforcing that teachers and principals in government schools are not merely employees of the education system but caretakers of a community's future.



# The Unspoken Reality: Limited Aspirations Among Teachers

While teachers inspire students to dream big, many educators themselves have limited career aspirations. This is particularly true for those in government schools, where job security is high, but professional growth opportunities are limited. Unlike private schools where teachers might aim for promotions, research work, or even international teaching stints, government schoolteachers often accept their roles as static.

*“Our students dream of becoming government employees because they see us-stable job, security, and no pressure of private-sector competition. But sometimes, I wonder-how many of us teachers dream beyond this?”*

- A teacher from Karnataka





# Additional Responsibilities of Government School Teachers in India

Government schoolteachers in India often shoulder a multitude of non-teaching duties mandated by various government directives. These responsibilities, while essential for administrative and civic processes, frequently divert educators from their primary role of teaching, impacting the quality of education delivered.

*“Our job is not just teaching. Every few months, there is some government order-data collection, survey work, election duty, census duty. It keeps adding to our workload. It's important work, but it takes away from our primary role of educating children.”*

- A school principal in Vadodara

## Election Duties

Teachers are commonly assigned roles such as presiding officers or polling officers during local, state, and national elections. These duties encompass tasks from overseeing polling booths to ensuring the integrity of the voting process. While the Right to Education (RTE) Act permits teacher deployment for election-related work, the extensive time commitment required can significantly disrupt academic schedules.

## Census and Survey Participation

Educators are frequently enlisted to conduct population censuses and various governmental surveys, including data collection for socio-economic and health-related studies. These activities often coincide with school hours, thereby limiting classroom engagement.

## Administrative and Clerical Tasks

Beyond field duties, teachers are responsible for meticulous record-keeping and data management within schools. This includes maintaining student attendance records, managing mid-day meal documentation, and compiling reports for educational authorities. Such tasks are time-consuming and often redundant, detracting from instructional time.

## Implementation of Government Schemes

Teachers play a pivotal role in executing various government initiatives at the school level, such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, vaccination drives, and health check-up programs. While these schemes aim to enhance student welfare, the additional responsibilities can overburden educators, leading to reduced focus on pedagogy.

## Impact on Teaching Quality

The cumulative effect of these non-teaching duties is a notable reduction in the time and energy teachers can dedicate to instructional activities. This diversion contributes to diminished educational outcomes and hampers the overall learning experience for students.

## Policy Interventions

Recognizing this issue, certain state governments have initiated measures to alleviate the non-teaching burden on educators. For instance, the Andhra Pradesh government amended the RTE Act to exempt teachers from non-academic duties, including election and census work, unless there is a shortage of staff from other departments. This policy shift aims to refocus teachers' efforts on classroom instruction and improve educational quality.

# Healthcare Expert Opinion

## Section 8





# The Vital Role of Health Experts



As India strives to improve child health and nutrition through school-based interventions like the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) program, insights from pediatricians and public health experts are invaluable. In this section, we present perspectives from two renowned pediatricians - Dr. Dhanya Dharmapalan, a specialist in infectious diseases, and Dr. Upendra Kinjawadekar, a senior pediatrician and former President of the Indian Academy of Pediatrics.

Their combined insights go beyond basic nutritional requirements to uncover emerging health challenges, dietary deficiencies, lifestyle-related risks, and systemic gaps. From gut health and anemia to the critical importance of breakfast and AMR awareness, their inputs highlight how school meals can evolve to meet both nutritional and developmental needs of children.

# Emerging Health Trends and Risks in Children

Dr. Dhanya Dharmapalan emphasizes the dual impact of COVID-19 on children's health: malnutrition among poor children and obesity among the affluent. She warns that "schools are a second home" and loss of mid-day meals during lockdowns led to serious setbacks. Dr. Kinjawadekar, meanwhile, flags a surge in post-COVID issues such as constipation and rising hypertension among children-largely due to processed food consumption and lack of fiber.

*“There were 2 repercussions in terms of nutrition, one that children who would have a good meal in the midday meal program they lost that meal officially... the children who were poorer became malnourished and the children who were fine and wealthy became obese.”*

- Dr Dhanya Dharmapalan





# Gut Health and Role of Vegetables

Both doctors highlight the importance of fiber-rich diets. Dr. Kinjawadekar reports that “60-70% of children are not consuming vegetables,” leading to long-term gut health issues and even elevated risks of colonic cancer. He urges a food plate where vegetables are three times the quantity of fruits.

*“People often overlook the vital role that vegetables play in our overall nutrition. We usually hear the phrase “fruits and vegetables,” which unintentionally places greater emphasis on fruits. In reality, the order should be reversed. I deliberately say “vegetables and fruits” to stress the greater importance of vegetables in a balanced diet. For example, our daily fruit requirement is roughly 100 grams - something as simple as a banana can cover that. But when it comes to vegetables, we need at least four times that amount to adequately meet our nutritional needs.”*

- Dr Upendra Kinjawadekar



# Micronutrient Deficiencies and the Need for Supplementation



Dr. Dhanya warns of widespread deficiencies in B12, iron, folic acid, and calcium, especially in malnourished children who are more vulnerable to diseases like tuberculosis. Dr. Kinjawadekar concurs, citing a 60% anemia rate among girls and strongly supports mass-scale supplementation: “On the mass scale, the best is medicine.”

“

*Malnourished children are even more vulnerable to diseases like tuberculosis. TB can worsen the malnutrition, leading to treatment failures and drug resistance. I've seen the emotional toll-young children having to take painful injections every day. It's terrible. Though the new treatment regimens avoid injectables, drug-resistant TB (DRTB) continues to be a serious issue and remains challenging to treat.*

- Dr Dhanya Dharmapalan



# Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) and Hygiene Education



Dr. Dhanya identifies AMR as a top health threat, driven by overuse of antibiotics. She suggests introducing AMR awareness in schools and has led cartoon-based education campaigns. “Even parents self-medicate their children,” she warns.

*“We’re also educating other pediatricians, and one important discussion has been around raising AMR awareness among children. If they learn from a young age that antibiotics aren’t needed for every fever, it can help reduce misuse in the long run. To promote public awareness, we even released a cartoon video last year specifically designed for children.”*

- Dr Dhanya Dharmapalan



# Importance of Breakfast and Menu Expansion

Dr. Dhanya supports the expansion of MDM to include breakfast, describing it as “the most important meal of the day.” Dr. Kinjawadekar agrees, recommending banana, milk, and chikki (nut-based bars) for energy and protein. He remarks, “The breakfast has to be nutritious. It gives the jump start to the body.”

“Breakfast comes after an overnight fast, so it gives the body a much-needed jumpstart. It needs to be nutritious. A simple combination - like a banana, and a glass of milk - can be very effective. Bananas provide instant energy. Even 2-3 such items are sufficient at a mass scale. Groundnuts, which are often overlooked, are also an excellent and affordable source of protein.”

- Dr Upendra Kinjawadekar





# Regional Disparities and Policy Implementation

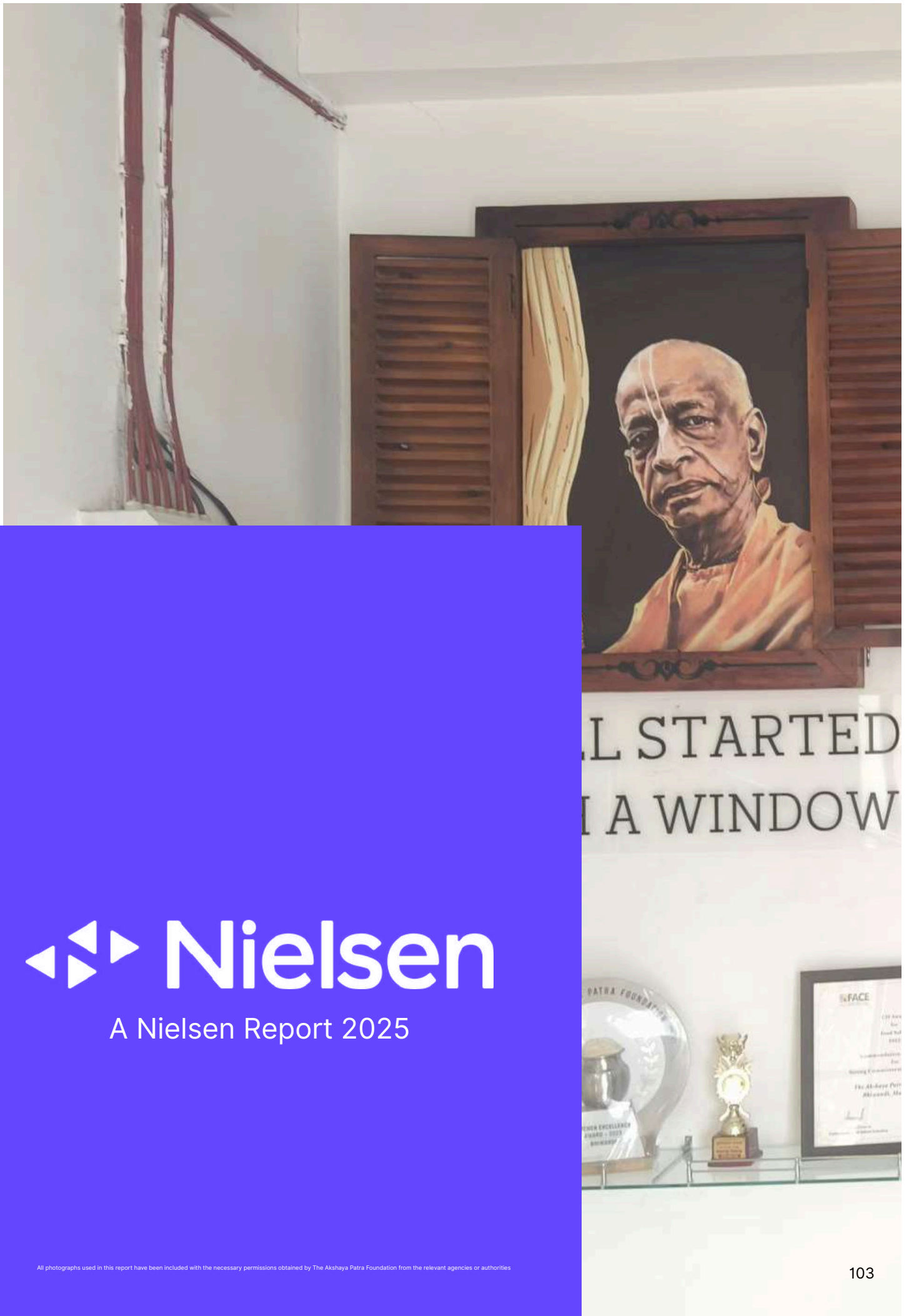


Both doctors raise concerns about inequitable distribution of benefits. Dr. Kinjawadekar notes that “urban poor areas like Mumbai are overlooked,” while tribal areas receive more support. Dr. Dhanya suggests integrating public health monitoring into school systems to address local outbreaks and nutritional needs.

*“The moment you talk about travellers, Adivasi communities, or those living in remote areas like Gadchiroli, they immediately receive access to most government benefits and schemes. But what about the urban poor - in a city like Mumbai, they are often overlooked and not included in such programs. We shouldn't focus only on tribal or remote areas; urban low-income populations need equal attention. That kind of neglect should not happen.”*

- Dr Upendra Kinjawadekar





A Nielsen Report 2025