



Current Affairs of the Day

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Midday meals leave a long-lasting impact: study

Lower stunting among children with mothers who had access to school lunches

Highlights:

1. Girls who had access to free lunches provided at government schools had children with a higher height-to-age ratio than those who did not, said a new study on the intergenerational benefits of the midday meal scheme, published in Nature Communications this week.
2. Using nationally representative data on cohorts of mothers and their children spanning 23 years, the paper showed that by 2016, the prevalence of stunting was significantly lower in areas where the scheme was implemented in 2005.
3. More than one in three Indian children are stunted, or too short for their age, which reflects chronic undernutrition. The fight against stunting has often focussed on boosting nutrition for young children, but nutritionists have long argued that maternal health and well-being is the key to reducing stunting in their offspring.
4. Noting that “interventions to improve maternal height and education must be implemented years before those girls and young women become mothers”, the study has attempted a first-of-its-kind inter-generational analysis of the impacts of a mass feeding programme.
5. The linkages between midday meals and lower stunting in the next generation were stronger in the lower socio-economic strata and likely work through women’s education, fertility, and the use of health services, the paper said.

Mid Day to the intergenerational benefits

1. The scheme was launched in 1995 to provide children in government schools with a free cooked meal with a minimum energy content of 450 kcal. However, only 6% of girls aged 6-10 years had benefited from the scheme in 1999. By 2011, with an expansion in budget, and state implementation following a Supreme Court order, coverage had grown to 46%.
2. IFPRI researchers said the key takeaway is to “expand and improve school meals now for inter-generational pay-offs not too far down in time.”
3. These findings come at a time when the mid-day meal scheme has effectively been put on hold for the last one and a half years, as schools have been closed since March 2020.



4. Although dry foodgrains or cash transfers have been provided to families instead, food and education advocates have warned that this would not have the same impact as hot cooked meals on the school premises, especially for girl children who face more discrimination at home and are more likely to drop out of school due to the closures.
5. The findings of the study exacerbate concerns that the interruptions to schooling and to the mid-day meal scheme could have even longer-term impacts, hurting the nutritional health of the next generation as well.

326 sedition cases were filed during 2014-19

A total of 326 cases were registered in the country under the controversial colonial-era penal law on sedition between 2014 and 2019 in which just six persons were convicted.

Highlights:

1. The Supreme Court last week observed that Section 124A of the IPC — offence of sedition — has been enormously misused and asked the Centre why it was not repealing the provision used by the British to “silence” people like Mahatma Gandhi to suppress the freedom movement.
2. According to the Union Home Ministry data, a total of 326 cases were registered under the sedition law between 2014 and 2019, with the highest 54 cases in Assam.
3. Out of these cases, charge sheets were filed in 141 cases while just six people were convicted for the offence during the six-year period.

SC mulls limit to the role as a policy watchdog

Division Bench remarks on judiciary’s reach run counter to earlier judgment that courts cannot be silent spectators

Highlights:

1. The resolve voiced by a Division Bench of the Supreme Court to “examine” the extent to which the judiciary can question the government’s COVID-19 policies drifts from the court’s three-judge Bench judgment in May, which held that courts cannot be “silent spectators when constitutional rights of citizens are infringed by executive policies”.



2. The May 31 judgment by a Supreme Court Bench of Justices D.Y. Chandrachud, L. Nageswara Rao and S. Ravindra Bhat is associated with the Centre's reversal of its dual vaccine pricing policy.
3. In July, a Bench of Justices Vineet Saran and Dinesh Maheshwari said courts should not undermine the executive at a time when a "collective effort" was required to overcome the public health crisis.
4. The executive has the benefit of experts with their expert knowledge. We will hear submissions on how far constitutional courts should go into these matters.

Separation of Powers

1. The oral remarks from the Division Bench hardly gel with the observations made under a sub-heading 'Separation of Powers' in the May judgment authored by Justice Chandrachud that a public health crisis like COVID-19 does not mean the Constitution should be "kept away and forgotten" by the government.
2. "Our Constitution does not envisage courts to be silent spectators when constitutional rights of citizens are infringed by executive policies. Judicial review and soliciting constitutional justification for policies formulated by the executive is an essential function, which the courts are entrusted to perform," Justice Chandrachud had said.
3. The judgment highlighted that courts across the globe have responded to constitutional challenges to executive policies which violate rights and liberties of citizens.
4. Justice Chandrachud took the example of the United States Supreme Court, which said "a public health emergency does not give Governors and other public officials carte blanche to disregard the Constitution for as long as the medical problem persists".

China denies politics behind UNESCO move on Barrier Reef

1. A top Chinese official said that political tensions between Beijing and Australia were not behind a UNESCO recommendation to place the Great Barrier Reef on its endangered list.
2. Deputy Education Minister Tian Xuejun is chairing the meeting of the UN cultural agency's heritage committee, which comes amid worsening relations between China and Australia.



3. The Great Barrier Reef has been put on a list of World Heritage sites that could be put on the in-danger list after losing half of its corals since 1995.
4. Australia has assailed the move, blaming global warming for the loss, while UNESCO experts argued that pollution run-off has contributed to the loss.

Pegasus spyware used to 'snoop' on journalists

Telephone numbers of some 40 Indian journalists figure in a "leaked list of potential targets for surveillance", and forensic tests were said to have "confirmed that some of them were successfully snooped upon by an unidentified agency using Pegasus software", The Wire, an independent news website, reported on Sunday night.

Highlights:

1. Indian Ministers, government officials and Opposition leaders also figure in the list of people whose phones may have been compromised by the spyware, The Wire, which conducted the investigation along with international partners, claimed.
2. The leaked telephone numbers included correspondents and writers from the Hindustan Times, The Hindu, India Today, Indian Express and Network18.
3. The spyware Pegasus is apparently sold to governments around the world by NSO Group, an Israeli company. It can be used to snoop on phones that run on Android and iOS systems.
4. Seventeen international media groups, including The Guardian and The Washington Post, led the investigation into how Pegasus was used to allegedly extract messages and information from the phones of journalists, politicians and activists.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report on the BharatNet programme

In its preliminary finding, the CAG said the Narendra Modi government's BharatNet programme failed to take off due to financial irregularities, and despite a huge payment to the common service centres (CSCs), the maintenance of cable and other infrastructure was not found efficient in various circles.



Highlights:

1. Government sources said the CAG report was a preliminary one and that a suitable response to the queries raised was being prepared.
2. The work of Operation and Maintenance (O&M) of BharatNet was awarded to CSC at a very competitive cost of ₹800 per km per month for O&M of Optical Fiber and installation of WiFi Access points at ₹80,000 per WiFi access point. Therefore, giving the work of O&M of BharatNet to Common Services Centre (CSC) led to significant savings to the government,” said a government source.
3. Sources said even according to the preliminary report of the CAG, works have been awarded on a nomination basis by BBNL to BSNL, Railtel and Power Grid Corporation of India (PGCIL).