

Food politics hits India's most malnourished children

July 9 2015, byNirmala George



In this June 24, 2015 photo, a girl holds a flatbread in her hand, part of a meal of two flatbreads and a scoop of boiled potato curry at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

Clutching battered metal plates, the children waited patiently in a remote central Indian village for the two small flat pieces of bread and scoop of boiled potato curry that would be their only full meal that day.

They are among the 120 million malnourished [children](#) across India who depend on a government-run program serving lunch five days a week.

Still, the modest menus are clearly not enough to make up for the calories and nutrition that poverty has denied. All 35 or so children gathered on the dirt floor of their preschool in Madkheda, a village in the state of Madhya Pradesh, show the telltale signs of malnutrition—coarse hair lightened to a sandy brown for lack of nutrients, limbs stick thin, and bellies swollen from chronic hunger.

More than half the children in Madhya Pradesh state, with a population of nearly 77 million, are underweight and malnourished.

So last month, it was suggested that eggs—a key source of protein—be added to the lunch program. But that idea was rejected by Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the state's top elected official, a member of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and a strict vegetarian. He suggested that milk and bananas be given to children instead.

"As long I am the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, eggs will not be introduced," Chouhan declared in the state capital, Bhopal. "The human body is meant to consume vegetarian food, which has everything the human body requires."

The decision has outraged nutritionists and social activists who say politicians are using food to push a religious and political agenda at the expense of children's health. They accuse governments of pandering to a nationwide agenda led by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to draw poor

and tribal communities, with their mostly animist beliefs, toward the majority religion by forcing them to become vegetarian.

India has the highest number of vegetarians in the world owing to Hinduism's predominance, although not all Hindus are vegetarians and there are millions who eat meat. Most of Madhya Pradesh's undernourished children come from ethnic, non-vegetarian tribes, some of whom are animists, who have lived for centuries in central Indian jungles, or belong to the lowest castes.

The move suggests that Modi's party hopes to spread and deepen Hinduism's influence in India by appeasing vegetarians.

"There is a deep political motive behind the decision to stop eggs. The government is forcing these people to become vegetarians and draw them closer to Hinduism," said Naresh Biswas, a food rights activist working to revive traditional farming methods and improve nutrition in Madhya Pradesh.



In this June 24, 2015 photo, children are served flatbreads, part of a meal of two flatbreads and a scoop of boiled potato curry at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

Similar allegations were made amid the Modi government's push to make yoga compulsory in schools nationwide, with many Muslims objecting to what they see as attempts at a "Hinduization" of the country.

Chouhan found support for his decision from his party colleague, India's Minister for Women and Child Development, Menaka Gandhi, who said the benefits of eggs were exaggerated. Besides, "eggs are expensive and there are cheaper sources of protein that could be used to feed children"

in government lunch programs, Gandhi told reporters in New Delhi.

India has the world's highest number of chronically undernourished people in the world, with nearly 195 million scarcely able to afford even one meal a day, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. That number has barely changed despite a decade of rapid economic growth that has created legions of millionaires and a burgeoning middle class.

Only 10 out of India's 29 states include eggs in children's meal programs. While none of the BJP-ruled states include eggs in children's lunch scheme, activists say even states run by other parties, such as in the Congress Party-led Karnataka state, have not included eggs to appease Hindu sentiments.

Earlier this year, the government of the neighboring state of Maharashtra, also ruled by the BJP, banned cattle slaughter and beef sales in a move that has deprived millions of lower caste and non-Hindus of a cheap source of protein. Beef in India is mostly buffalo meat and is cheaper than chicken, goat or lamb.

Development economist Jean Dreze said excluding eggs from the school supplement program was a "missed opportunity," given that they not only boost nutrition but also improve school attendance, according to studies carried out in several states.

"Indian children are among the most undernourished in the world," said Dreze of the Delhi School of Economics. "The situation is worse when it comes to rural and tribal people, who are even more deprived. They are starved of protein, vitamins, iron and other essential nutrients."

Poor nutrition leaves the children vulnerable to disease, susceptible to infections and diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera. Deprived of

adequate nutrition in their formative early years, these children remain mentally and physically stunted for life.

Nutritionists say eggs are one of the cheapest ways of delivering nutrition-dense meals, with their vitamins and minerals easily absorbed by young children.



In this June 24, 2015 photo, children have a meal of two flatbreads and a scoop of boiled potato curry at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

In other states, such as Bihar, one of India's poorest, the government has

successfully introduced eggs in the state-run meal programs for young children and seen a rise in attendance.

Welfare workers note that eggs are easy to distribute with very little risk of being contaminated by chemicals or pollution—a huge problem in India, where there is almost no refrigeration, few storage facilities and poor transportation links.

The sleepy village of Madkheda, on a stony dirt road lined with acacia forests a couple of hours away from the city of Gwalior, had not received wheat supplies for two full weeks, leading one former teacher to buy flour on credit to keep the children's meals going.

"Unlike milk, which can be diluted, or lentils, or wheat flour, which can be adulterated, an egg is a neat package," said Sachin Jain, a food rights activist.



In this June 24, 2015 photo, a boy holds flatbread in his hand, part of a meal of two flatbreads and a scoop of boiled potato curry at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India.

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The vegetarian agenda promoted by high-caste politicians has even baffled and embarrassed some Hindus.

"Why would we mind if eggs are served to other peoples' children?" Sapna Baghel asked while feeding bits of bread soaked in lentils to her 2-year-old daughter at a state-run nursery in Gwalior. "We don't eat eggs, but we shouldn't stop others from eating what they like."



In this June 24, 2015 photo, children have a meal of two flatbreads and a scoop of boiled potato curry at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

Her neighbor, Uma Pal, nodded in agreement. "If they could afford it, these children would eat eggs every day," she said. "Disallowing [eggs](#) from the children's lunch is a shame. This is all politics."



In this June 24, 2015 photo, children have a meal of two flatbreads and a scoop of boiled potato curry at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)



In this June 24, 2015 photo, crumbs of nutritious meal for undernourished children lines the mouth of a boy after he finished eating at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)



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In this June 24, 2015 photo, a boy licks his plate after finishing a meal of two flatbreads and a scoop of boiled potato curry at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)



In this June 24, 2015 photo, Omwati Tomar, a child and mother care worker, points out the vegetarian menu set for different days of the week to be served to children at Devrikala, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)



In this June 24, 2015 photo, a metal plate lies with the remnants of a meal of two flatbreads and a scoop of boiled potato curry at a government-run program serving lunch five days a week to children at Madkheda, Madhya Pradesh state, India. Madhya Pradesh, one of India's largest states is revising school menus to remove an item many devout Hindus found objectionable - eggs. More than half of India's children are malnourished, and nutrition experts say the eggs in school lunches were one of the only means of providing protein to needy kids. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

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