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School Lunch and Social Inclusion in the Context of Urban Poverty

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Introduction

India, in the recent past, has been gaining global influence as an emerging economic power—but large parts of society do not benefit from this development. Rather, extreme poverty, difficult access to basic health services and elementary education—both, often of poor quality—are a reality for many. International and national governmental programmes to fight poverty and illiteracy have been in place and many NGOs have made these areas their targets of intervention.

Regarding the national-level legal situation in the educational sector, the amendment of the Indian constitution in 2002 that made education a fundamental right (The Constitution of India 2004) and the introduction of the Right to Education (*Right to Education* (RTE) *Act* 2009) are milestones towards the government's goal of universal elementary education. School enrolment numbers have, in fact, increased steadily over the last decade and reached 96,9 per cent for children between 6 and 14 years on the national rural level (Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2017) and close to 98 per cent for the same age group in Delhi (ASER 2014). However, according to the ASER surveys, the quality of learning in government schools even decreased after the RTE was introduced and remains a huge problem. At the same time, the proportion of children enrolled to private schools has increased significantly (ASER 2017).

Regarding legal steps for fighting hunger and poverty, a *National Food Security Act* has been passed by the government in 2013. However, this document focuses on redefining eligibility to the Public Distribution Service (PDS),[1] instead of making it universally accessible as demanded by many. It also neglects urgent concerns, such as food security of young children, and therefore disappointed hopes for a 'Right to Food' that could help to actually enhance food security for the poor (e.g. Aggarwal & Mander 2013).

The government also runs a programme designed to enhance educational levels and reduce hunger at the same time. The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE), commonly referred to as Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), was launched in 1995 (Ministry of Human Resource Development). This programme is one of the largest mid-day meal programmes in the world, which served close to 99 million children in 2016-17 (ibid.). It was initiated based on successful experiences in some states (esp. Tamil Nadu) and the good situation of food stocks in the country (De et al. 2005: 3; Harriss 1991). Following a Supreme Court order of 2001 (Right to Food 2001), a hot-cooked meal must be provided to students in primary and upper primary classes of all government and government-aided schools. Many Indian states, including the National Capital Territory of Delhi, took time to set up the system and introduced cooked meals in all government primary schools only in 2003-04 (De et al. 2005: 3).

In these almost 15 years not much in-depth empirical research has been conducted on the social aspects of the scheme. Generally, most studies focus on assessing positive effects of the scheme on enrolment, attendance and nutritional levels of the students. These are indeed the main objectives that the government seeks to pursue with the scheme. The official guidelines however, also mention that the scheme is expected to challenge caste prejudices and class inequalities through the experience of eating together (National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education 2006). But, how joint eating should be organised and guided by the school staff is not mentioned in the guidelines. Each school, therefore, follows its own procedures in this regard. There is a section in literature that is convinced of the MDMS' potential towards reducing social inequalities (e.g. Drèze & Goyal 2003; Kumar 2004). Other scholars bemoan that the socialisation effects of the meal are in reality often neglected (e.g. Deshpande et al. 2014; De et al. 2005) and some express strong doubts on the capability of the school meal in challenging social inequalities (e.g. Singh 2004; Harriss 1991). In fact, several studies and reports found discriminatory practices based on social inequalities—especially caste—during lunchtime in school (e.g. Ramachandran & Naorem 2013; Human Rights Watch 2014; Singh 2016).

In this paper I seek to answer the question: To what extent does the Delhi Mid-Day Meal Scheme contribute to social inclusion? "Social inclusion" emerged as a buzzword in policy discourses in the 2000s when governments formulated "social inclusion agendas" and international development objectives were geared towards enhancing social inclusion. What exactly this concept means has been interpreted in different ways. I follow the United Nations' definition, which see social inclusion as: '[…] the process of improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged on the basis of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights' (United Nations 2016).

In short, it can be broken down to the reduction of social and economic inequalities in the society. This can either be in the larger perspective, as in the case of improved access to schools and better educational levels of children from disadvantaged families. Moreover, I also try to catch the small moments that indicate personal attitudes and behaviour, which can have an impact on social inclusion as well.

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the inclusive effects of the provision of the meal as such. Research reveals that, on the one hand, according to many school staff members (by "school staff" I mean teachers, Principals and distributors) I talked to, the MDMS has positive effects on the attendance of students and their nutritional situation, which help the children in their studies and overall development. On the other hand, I found out that the meal is not as relevant for the families as claimed by most staff members. Moreover, the potential of such inclusive effects to reduce social inequalities on the larger societal scale through better education levels of children from disadvantaged families, is limited by the overall trend of the increasing divide between government and private education (e.g. Garg & Mandal 2013).

In the second part, I examine how lunchtime is organised by school staff and what social dynamics unfold among the children during this time. By doing so, I try to reveal to what extent the MDMS helps challenging socio-economic inequalities among the students. My analysis centres on lunchtime in school, including the role of school staff and the way they shape children's eating experience. From my observations, "dirtiness" emerges as a central theme in which several socio-economic inequalities are reflected. In this context I found that the attitude and behaviour of the school staff and especially of the principal, plays a central role. They shape the way the children experience and re-produce prejudices during lunchtime to large extent.

The empirical sources used for this analysis are participant observations, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with students, school staff, parents, the school inspector and workers of two welfare NGOs in the area. I gathered this material during the 12 months of fieldwork for my doctoral thesis between 2014 and 2016.[2] Moreover, I also use the data recorded in the enrolment registers of the RP Kulam School—a data set that consists of 979 registrations covering the span from 2008 to 2015. Based on this material I seek to highlight that socio-economic inequalities—although at first glance, they do not seem very prominent in the schools—are reproduced in explicit and sometimes implicit ways in daily interactions. While during lunchtime social inequalities are reduced at times, it is at the same time a sphere where prejudices and inequalities are re-enforced.

Socio-economic background of the students

The two government primary schools in which I conducted my research are located in South Delhi. I chose these schools because I have been visiting the area and a local educational NGO Khush over almost ten years, which allowed me to develop deep insights into the histories and living conditions of the people. At the time of my research, Sir Balai School[3] had 125 enrolled students and in RP Kulam School 470 Students were enrolled. It should be mentioned that RP Kulam School has a nursery (pre-school) class, which also receives the MDMS food. They are located about 300 metres away from each other and separated by a main road that runs through an area consisting of residential houses, slums, and markets.

The vast majority of the families whose children go to these two schools live in two slums, which are separated by the same road. Most of the remaining families live in very simple flats in multi-storey houses of the adjacent residential areas, a small slum-like settlement behind a market, a night shelter ("Ren Basera") and in different types of living arrangements around this road—or literally "on" the road. In the "Ren Basera" an Indian and an international NGO are jointly running child welfare programmes. Khush, which I knew well before has its "office" in the next market area. Most of the Muslim students of both schools go there in the afternoon for tuitions, food, and other activities. I include observations I made in both NGOs in the analysis for comparing the way eating is organised in different educational institutions.

Most of the students' families have migrated to the capital city from rural areas or small towns. They come from the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand, and from the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Most students in both schools are Dalits and low-caste Hindus. The enrolment registers of RP Kulam School reveal that only for 685 children—of the

979 students enrolled in the seven-year period of my dataset—the caste or caste category is indicated. 552 of them, or more than 80 per cent, are Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).[4] More precisely: 285 children are Hindu Dalits, 36 Muslim Dalits, one Christian Dalit and 235 children belong to OBCs. 76 children belong to upper Hindu castes, 18 children are upper caste Muslims and one child is categorised as belonging to a Scheduled Tribe (ST). The by far largest group (20.5 per cent) belongs to the Valmiki (Dalit) caste.

Another crucial factor that reflects the children's socio-economic situation is the kind of work their parents do. According to the register entries, 40 per cent of the fathers work as construction labourers. For a rough estimate on their income, they told me that a daily-wage construction labourer earns around INR 300-600 per day (men) and INR 200-400 per day (women). The other fathers are gardeners, farmers, cleaners, drivers, guards, etc. Many of the mothers work as domestic helps and some also work as construction labourers. Moreover, in some families, children also contribute in various ways to the family income, including begging and work in the household.

This brief overview of the socio-economic backgrounds of the school children of my analysis shows that they all belong to the poor and marginalised section of society, though to different degrees. The structural deprivation that confines most of these families to live and work in very precarious and insecure conditions reflects the extreme socio-economic inequality in the society. This is the level of inequality, which I mainly focus on in the first part of the analysis. The families are, at the same time, from different backgrounds in terms of their regional origin, caste and religion and adopted various strategies to secure their livelihoods in the city. Many children, therefore, also experience inequality at school—this will be at the centre of the analysis in the second part.

Inclusive effects of the provision of the mid-day meal in school

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme pursues a dual objective: to increase school attendance, and to provide nutritional support, which in turn enhances concentration levels and therewith, learning outcomes of the students. Since these effects are supposed to be strongest for children from disadvantaged socio-economic background, the scheme thus aims to help reducing inequalities in the larger societal perspective. Against this background, this section examines to what extent the provision of the MDM supports social inclusion, in terms of increasing school attendance and learning outcomes of disadvantaged children.

In both schools, most staff members expressed their conviction that because of the MDMS more children come to school. Some of them said that the scheme has brought up enrolment numbers, but mostly they refer to higher attendance rates. The principal of Sir Balai School, Mrs. Verma, even assumes that 50 per

cent of the children come to school because of the meal. The only regular male teacher among all teachers of both schools also gave a concrete numerical guess on this correlation: of the 25 children present at the time when I talked to him (which is the average attendance according to him), he thinks that only 15 would come without the scheme. However, with an average attendance of above 83 per cent (30 children are enrolled in his class) this class is quite exceptional, as in other classes the average attendance is somewhere between 60 to 65 per cent. Another teacher of the same school even reported that the average attendance in her class is as low as 15 per cent.

Several teachers provided explanations on why they assume that the children come for the food. Some observed that more children attend on the days when "poori" is on the menu, which is by far the most popular item of the MDM. It is served on two days per week. For others the fact that some children come from very poor families or are allegedly not interested in studying, is evidence enough for the assumption that they come to school for the food. Some teachers observed that many children are very happy to eat the food and ask for several servings—which is interpreted as a sign that these children come because they get food.

Many studies on the effects of the MDMS seem to confirm the assumption of the teachers that the scheme has led to both, higher enrolment and increased attendance of primary school students (Jayaraman & Simroth 2011; Kumar 2004; Garg & Mandal 2013). In their large-scale assessment of the impact of the MDMS on primary school enrolment, Jayaraman and Simroth (2011) find a general increase of enrolment due to the scheme with the highest effect (21 per cent) in grades one. Other studies find rising enrolment and attendance rates, which are attributed to the MDM, especially among girls and children from disadvantaged groups (Khera 2006; Afridi 2007).

Nutritional gains of the meal and food culture

Interestingly, a possible impact of the MDMS on gender equity did not come up in the conversations during my research. The school staff rather pointed to nutritional aspects of the meal, which are also discussed in literature. On the one hand, reports on massive shortcomings of the nutritional value of the meal and even incidences of food poisoning have dominated the public debate around the scheme for some time (Reuters 2013). There are, on the other hand, studies that suggest that the meal has a positive effect on the nutritional level of the students (Singh et al. 2014; Singh, Park & Dercon 2014: 277; Afridi 2010: 153). Other studies, such as by Rani Si and Sharma (2008) on the MDMS in Orissa, claim to have evidence for a causal link between the implementation of the scheme and increased motivation and energy of the students. From a quantitative survey on

effects of the MDM on the cognitive effort of students in 18 schools in Delhi, Afridi et al. (2013) even concluded that the scheme can improve learning effects of the children.

The teachers in the schools of my research made their own observations on the nutritional effect of the meal on the students, which they shared with me. A teacher from Sir Balai School (Romila Jannat), for example, claims that because of the MDMS the students fall less sick. She also argues that with a full stomach, the energy level of the children rises and they get more interested to learn. Inherently linked to the assumption that for some children the MDM food is an important source of nutrition, is the view of many teachers that the MDM is the only nutritious meal that many of the children get during the day. One of the MDM-in-charge teachers at RP Kulam School claims that she observed a visible effect of the meal on the children's physical well-being: '[…] health wise it also made a difference for the children, at least that's what we/I [*hum*] feel. The way the children came earlier—even now, when the children come after the two-month holidays or one and a half month they are all very thin [*dubli-patli*]' (Manju, RP Kulam; own translation).

Generally, many teachers say that several students come to school on an empty stomach. According to the third class teacher in RP Kulam (Jyothi), this applies to about 60 per cent of the children in her class. The first class teacher of the same school (Rita) told me that there are children who cry in the beginning of the school day, enquire about the food, and even go out of the classroom to wait for the food. She usually keeps some biscuits with her, which she gives to children if they cry of stomach pain. According to her, they do not know it is hunger, but say they complain of stomach-ache. When she enquires if they require the toilet, and they decline, then she is sure that it is indeed hunger.

A rather simple argument for the phenomenon that children are hungry in school, which both teachers as well as the school inspector (who is also in charge of supervising the implementation of the MDMS in both schools) narrated, is that poor parents cannot provide their children with nutritious food because they do not have the money to buy nutritious vegetables. My research, however, suggests that the reality is much more complex and such assumptions do not adequately reflect the daily-life realities, priorities and the food culture of these families.

Generally, parents attribute much less importance to the MDM than one could assume considering the benefits that the scheme is supposed to have for their children and the parents themselves. This does not mean that they do not appreciate the fact that their children get food in school. Rather, the food as well as the financial provision that the families are entitled to get from the state through the school, are of good use for many of these families. However, the

question whether these programmes are adequate or insufficient notwithstanding, most parents are mainly concerned with the quality of education that their children get. This is not surprising, considering that for these parents, education carries the hope that it will enable their children a better future. This is underlined by a father's answer to the question what he sees as the benefit of the MDMS: '[…] But if you ask about "benefit", I understand the things as benefit that the children have in their head.' (Interview with Mohammed; own translation)

Coming back to the assumption that the parents are not able to provide their children with nutritious food, I observed that most families—even those living in the night shelter, on the footpath or under the flyover—usually have two to three hot meals a day. The most common breakfast is paratha (plain or stuffed) and the other meals usually consist of different types of vegetables (including green-leafy vegetables such as spinach and *methi*), pulses and rice or *roti*. In the majority of households, meat (mainly chicken and sometimes mutton or fish) is cooked at least once a week, in some cases even twice or more times a week.

The daily food pattern of the children differs according to the working situation of their parents. If both parents have to leave for work early in the morning, their children sometimes do not eat breakfast before school or have only *chai* with *fen* (a sweet bread type of dry snack), rusk or biscuits. I heard from some parents, as well as from teachers, that for families in which no one has time to cook in the morning, the MDM has made it easier to send the children to school because they do not have to provide food for them for school. Amira, for instance, a mother who is very outspoken on how little she thinks of the quality of the MDM food, admitted that on days when they get up so late that she has to hurry for her work, her three children just go to school without taking along food, while they would otherwise have stayed at home. However, even in cases where the parents leave early, they often pack same kind of food for the children (sometimes *paratha* or roti with jam, or macaroni). Moreover, almost all parents give their children some money with which they buy crisps or biscuits on the way.

After school, in families where the mother works as a domestic help (usually in the morning and sometimes also evening slots), or where the mother or an older sibling is not working outside home, fresh food is cooked for the children for lunch. In other families—mainly where both parents work as construction labourers, or if the mother does another type of full-time job—food is prepared two times a day, in the morning and in the evening. When the children come from school, they eat the food from the morning again. However, those who live in the "Ren Basera" or on the street do not have fridges or proper spaces for storing food, so in summer the food from morning would probably go bad during

the day. I observed several strategies of these families to cope with this situation and found that most children get food at different times from different sources over the day. Many children join tuition and other activities at Khush, which provides a freshly cooked meal to them around 2 p.m. This food is cooked by Amira, the mother of three children in RP Kulam School, and is very popular among the children.

In the "Ren Basera", too, food is distributed around lunchtime. This is meant to be combined with educational sessions for the small and non-school going children, but sometimes there is enough food that the school-going children can eat after school as well. Moreover, there are several street food vendors and small "hotels" (simple restaurant with open kitchen) in this area, where children sometimes buy hot snacks or a full plate of food for about INR 20. Some children learn cooking at young age and prepare food for themselves and their siblings if their parents come home late. Furthermore, the children, who are begging in the afternoon, often receive food items from people passing by the junctions. Although the latter is surely not a safe and reliable source of nutrition, usually the children—even of the families living in most precarious conditions—in this urban setting do not stay hungry.

These observations bring us closer to understand the phenomenon that many of the parents do say that the MDMS is a scheme for the poor, but at the same time they—even those living on the street—generally exclude themselves from the group of people who are so poor that the provision of the MDM is important for them. This does not only hint to a very differentiated imagination of poverty and dignity in connection to being able to care for one's children, but it also has to do with questions of food and eating culture in general. In fact, food and with that the question who prepared (or even touched) it, is one of the core subjects of caste discriminating practices. Here lies the dilemma that the MDMS faces in many cases: the policy explicitly prefers low-caste and Dalit cooks and helpers for the meal in order to offer employment to disadvantaged people, but (high) caste children refuse to eat it because of the cook's caste (Ramachandran & Naorem 2013: 49).

In my research the situation is different, because the food is prepared in a large-scale kitchen, so the cooks become anonymous. There is still a certain suspicion against food that is cooked at some place for such a large number of children. However, parents who mentioned the feeling of being uncomfortable with this idea did not always make clear whether it is the fact that they do not know who cooked it or whether it is more an issue of hygiene and not knowing how the food is prepared which causes this unease. Some parents are convinced that it is just not possible to cook food in such a large scale similar to the way they cook at home, and that this different way of preparation not only causes

hygiene doubts, but also produces a different taste. By emphasising that their children prefer the tastier (and spicier) home-cooked food, parents establish the importance of their specific food culture. Only in two conversations with high caste parents—of which one is a distributor in RP Kulam School—a feeling of unease came across about the fact that they have to share the sanitation facilities in the slum and food in the school with low castes and Dalits, because in both spheres high castes are in the minority. Their children, nevertheless, eat the MDM food together with all other children.

Interestingly, despite the fact that most children eat the MDM food, most parents provide their children with some food from home as well. Of 76 children from both schools whom I asked whether they bring food from home, 67 said that they bring food at least sometimes. In conversation with parents, it turned out that they give their children food from home because, on the one hand, they do not want to rely on the school food entirely. On the other hand, to be able to provide the child with at least some home-cooked food is essentially a matter of asserting their dignity. A mother of a child in Sir Balai School formulated clearly, what many other parents told me in similar ways:

> So if they get it [MDM food] it's fine and if they don't get it I'm giving it anyway. This way I am not completely dependent on MDM. Whenever my children are hungry or thirsty, they have something with them. As long as God is kind to us, we don't have to send our children in bad condition. They can go and eat what they want and take along what they like. (Interview with Praveen; own translation)

Many teachers told me that it needed some time to convince parents and students that the food is good and that the students should eat it, but now close to all children take at least "pooris"—whether along with food from home or the vegetables provided with it. Who is distributing the food does not seem to matter to them, because in Sir Balai School, besides the employed distributor, the boy who is most active in distributing is a Dalit and some Muslim Dalits also frequently help the distribution. Despite the fact that the MDMS guidelines prohibit the involvement of children in distributing the food, neither children nor school staff have an issue with those children doing so.

Hence, there is an increasing acceptance of non-home cooked food among parents and children and some amount of tolerance even of high caste families towards the eating arrangements at school, which do not follow rigid caste norms. These observations show that the MDM scheme has potential to challenge deeply rooted caste-based eating practices and therefore, it could be argued, that it is a step towards more social equality. However, this finding has to be relativised if we are to believe Rampal and Mander’s (2013) study, which found that caste discrimination (against Dalit or low-caste cooks and students) is

higher in contexts where more caste people are involved in the scheme and lower if more Dalits are engaged in the scheme (Rampal & Mander 2013: 57). Hence, the fact that in the schools of my research upper caste Hindus are in the minority, might in itself be part of the explanation that the provision of the MDM does not trigger caste discriminating behaviour of the parents.

Moreover, we have to be cautious not to overestimate such findings, but also keep in view the larger picture. The argumentation of Garg and Mandal (2013) points to the limits of the effects of the MDMS within the given educational system. Based on qualitative and quantitative research in rural Rajasthan, they examine to what extent the MDMS contributes to universalising elementary education and by that to decreasing social inequality, which they see as the central aims of the scheme. Similar to the literature mentioned above, they found that the MDMS has a positive impact on school enrolment, attendance and nutritional intake of the most marginalised students. Based on this observation they argue that the MDM is one of the rare cases where a social policy actually reaches the disadvantaged (while usually the better-off sections of society fetch the benefits instead). Nevertheless, their central conclusion is that this inclusion of the marginalised in school does not lead to educational equality in the society because the better-off parents put their children in private schools so that social segregation in the educational system is not mitigated but instead increases (Garg & Mandal 2013: 155-62). Several studies show the adverse impact that this development has on the government schools. Their situation often gets worse as the rich families leave them and they are neglected (Dasgupta et al. 2010).

As a result, there is an increasing educational inequality on the larger scale—i.e. a segregation between rich and poor, that runs largely along caste lines—which cannot be challenged, let alone overcome, by schemes such as the MDMS. At the same time, there is reason to assume that this segregation in turn enables the fact that parents do not respond with caste discriminating practices to the MDMS. But to what extent does the scheme enhance social equality within the space of the school? This will be examined more closely in the following section.

Eating together

It is 10:15 am at Sir Balai School. Ranchi, who is employed for distributing lunch, and Ajeet, a boy of about 11 years who is in class three, take out the food containers, put them on a table at a central place on the ground floor of the building, open the sealed lids with a strong hit of the serving spoon and start serving potato gravy and "poori". Children come from all classrooms with their various types of plates or tiffin boxes, wait for their turn to get food and then return to their classroom or stay outside for eating. Two of the teachers come

out of the office from time to time, where they sit together eating the food they brought from home, and tell the children to stand in line, not to take more than they can eat and be careful not to drop the gravy.

Today I had promised Laxmi, Ajeet's sister who is about 13 years old and also in class three, to join her for lunch. She is very keen to share the food she brought from home with me and had even asked her mother to pack an extra "daal paratha" for me. So I sit with Laxmi and two girl friends of her in the classroom at two benches which they joined. The girls eat the food that they brought from home and share a bit of the potato gravy and "poori" of which Ajeet offers me a plate, too, when he joins eating after he finished distributing. For a short time, another boy joins us, which seems to be okay for the girls. Then Tanya, a girl who was sitting two rows in front of us, comes to us with her plate of potato gravy and "pooris", put it on the table and wants to sit next to me, but Laxmi and the others angrily send her away. I ask them what the problem is and say that I do not mind her joining us, but they explain that she eats with hands and did not wash them, which can cause health problems. Silently but with a disappointed expression on her face, Tanya goes back to her place and everyone continues eating.

This scene exemplifies interesting social dynamics among the students at lunchtime, which I will discuss later in detail. It also offers an idea on how distribution and eating of the food are handled by the school staff. As on this day, distribution of the food usually starts at 10:15 am in both schools and is mainly managed by the distributors who are employed for this task. In Sir Balai School, Ajeet and sometimes other children—usually boys of classes three to five—help with the distribution and on days when Ranchi comes late or cannot come, they even handle the distribution on their own while the teachers only supervise the process. In RP Kulam School the distributors, Rani and Sushmeeta, distribute the food parallel on the two floors and separately for each class. Students sometimes get involved in distributing "pooris" and transporting the heavy containers from one place to the other, but usually Rani, Sushmeeta or one of the teachers take the containers from them.

A task in which students are regularly involved in both schools is the weighing of the containers, which two to three boys do together with the teacher who is in charge for the MDM after the food is delivered to the school. In RP Kulam School each teacher supervises the distribution for their class, if necessary they also help distributing or do it on their own if Rani or Sushmeeta are absent. I have observed several instances where the teachers, who noticed that a child is not eating, inquired what the reason was and tried to motivate the child to take at least a bit or if the child said that he or she did not feel well, the teacher told another child to get a portion for the classmate. This not only demonstrates that

the teachers in RP Kulam School take more care of the individual students during lunch, it could also enhance social behaviour among the students. Once distribution is over, the teachers come together in one classroom and eat what they brought from home.

The children are usually served according to what and how much they ask for. However, the size of the portion is limited by the size of the plate or box they have and the estimated overall amount of food in relation to the number of students present on the day. A child with a rather flat plate, for example, does not get much on days with a liquid dish and if the distributors or the teachers have the impression that the overall amount of food might not be enough to serve all children proper portions, the children are served only small portions. It sometimes happens, for instance, that the children get only two "pooris" each—although the official guideline allows three "pooris" per child and most children can easily eat four or five—while the children whose turn is towards the end, if it is clear that there is enough left, get four "pooris".

In both schools of my research, the children are left more or less free during the time of eating. They start eating once they have their food, so that the first students are done or come again to ask for a second portion (which they sometimes get and at other times not, according to how much food is left) while others are still waiting for their first turn. The distributors and teachers sometimes tell the children to go to their classrooms and not to run around with the food, because the floor should not get dirty. In RP Kulam School, where the food is distributed in or in front of each class, most children eat in the classroom in small groups at places of their choice or at the places where they sit during class time. In Sir Balai School, the children eat outside or inside in constellations of their preference.

In both schools usually friends are eating together and sometimes siblings, as in the example of Ajeet and Laxmi. It is not exceptional that children from different castes are eating together, including constellations of upper caste children and Dalits as well as Hindus and Muslims. In some cases, I observed this myself—in Sir Balai School, for instance, two Muslim Dalits of fifth class often eat together with their classmate, who is upper caste Hindu. Moreover, some teachers told me that they do observe such constellations in their classes. However, the school staff does not actively encourage children who are not friends to sit together for lunch. De et al. (2005) in their study on benefits of the MDMS in Delhi come to similar findings:

> Opportunities to take advantage of supplementary benefits were not used as much as possible. In particular, little attention was paid to the socialisation value of the scheme. A good example of what is possible is provided by a researcher who visited an anganwadi[5] in Tamilnadu, where children were

> observed to first sit together and wait until they had all been given their food and then say "*thirukuaral*" [Tamil term referring to ethics and morality] in unison before they began to eat. In one of the sample schools in Delhi, all the children had been given similar steel plates for their food, a step towards making the meal a common experience. Ultimately the teachers' role in using the meal for object lessons in socialisation, hygiene, nutrition and so on is crucial, but there was little evidence of this. (De et al. 2005: 9, emphasis in original)

These observations build on the assumption that an organised sitting arrangement, a common start and uniform eating utensils could create a common experience of the meal and enhance the socialisation effect on the children. However, as in most schools of De et al.'s study, in the schools of my research these aspects are absent and the meal is, therefore, rather an experience that is shaped by the social dynamics already present among the students. The fact that they receive different amounts of food according to the size of their plates or boxes, also appears to be a factor which creates difference rather than equality.

The processes of distribution and eating are handled differently in other places, as the following examples demonstrate. In a visit to a school in Jaipur before I started fieldwork in Delhi, I observed that the children were sitting in two long lines facing each other and had their food on the same steel plates. Similarly, at Khush and in the "Ren Basera", the children take steel plates from a pile and sit in a circle or in lines on mats that they spread on the floor for lunchtime. After the meal, each child washes the plate and puts it back on the pile. In the "Ren Basera" the distribution is mainly done by the staff members, while at Khush it is usually done by the children themselves. In both institutions the staff members supervise the processes, help wherever it is needed and then also eat the same food. If the school teachers also ate the same food, it could possibly set a positive sign to students and parents regarding the quality of the food. It could also be interpreted as an attempt to bridge the social gap between students and teachers.

However, in the system of centralised food provision in urban areas, as in the case of the schools in my research, this is not intended and literature generally does not mention whether this is practised in rural areas or not. In one of the rare studies, that mentions the arrangement of eating (in West Bengal), Kumar (2004) found that in many village schools, children from all socio-economic backgrounds were sitting in one line for lunch. Instead of looking at the role of the school staff for this arrangement, Kumar argues that in his study good quality of food and a variant menu are the relevant factors, which have 'the potential to reducing the social distance to a considerable degree' (Kumar 2004: 15). However, like other literature that touches the social aspects of the MDM,

Kumar remains brief and vague on what kind of social distances he is talking about and how exactly they are reduced by the shared meal.

That literature is thin on the social aspects of the MDMS mirrors the fact that they do not play a central role in the guidelines of the scheme and are therefore not of much relevance for the administrative officials. For instance, the school inspector of the two schools of my research, Mr. Kumar, who is responsible for inspecting the functioning of 50 schools including the MDMS for the Municipal Cooperation of Delhi (MCD), does not tell the school staff how they should organise the eating. According to him, it is up to the principals to decide what the best arrangement for lunch is based on, for example, the size of the school. While in most schools under his supervision the food is distributed in the classrooms, in one school the principal makes the children sit in a circular fashion inside a hall.

Although he is convinced that in a school as big as RP Kulam School it would be difficult to make all children sit together, he did agree with me, on the notion that in Sir Balai School a common sitting arrangement could be introduced. For this purpose, he suggested a hall, which is directly adjacent to the main school building and supposedly used for parents' meetings, but has never been opened while I was conducting my field study there. Mr. Kumar seems to like the idea that such a system could be introduced. On my question, as to why he does not suggest this to the principal, he said that he usually does not visit the school at lunchtime and therefore is not so aware of the current system. Regarding the school staff, it came out clearly in my conversations with some of them that they are trying to keep time and effort for lunchtime at a minimum. Many of them, in fact, perceive the MDMS as a burden on top of the already high amount of non-teaching activities they have to do.

"Dirty" children

Situations as the one I narrated above, when I was sitting with Laxmi and her friends and they sent away Tanya, show that the children follow their own logic for their eating arrangements in which the teachers usually do not interfere. In this case, although it could be assumed that Laxmi and her friends are of a higher caste than Tanya and because of that have a problem in eating together with her, Laxmi herself belongs to the Valmiki (Dalit) caste. Hence, we have to try to understand what she and her friends mean when they say that Tanya eats with hands and does not wash them before that. I have not seen anybody else of this group washing hands either and "pooris" are eaten with hands by everybody—so this alleged dirtiness does not only have to do with body hygiene, but it seems to hint to larger issues of social relations as well.

Several teachers told me that they observe that the children, in their choice with whom they eat, only make a difference when it comes to physical dirtiness. One teacher of RP Kulam School told me how children in class refused to sit next to a boy because he does not wash himself. Another teacher (Amita Das from Sir Balai School) introduced practical education on hygiene for all children of her class (grade two). An intern in her teacher training had the idea to make the children walk in a line (each child puts one hand on the shoulder of the child in front) to the open washing area before the MDM is distributed. So, all children wash hands and then walk back to the classroom in the same way to pick up their utensils for the food. The children seem to enjoy this procedure and the teacher is convinced that it helps them making it a habit to wash hands before taking a meal. By organising hand washing in her class this way, the teacher created a common ritual that has the potential to foster a feeling of equality among the students and is unique in both schools.

In the other classes—if at all—the children go to wash hands before lunch separately or in small groups of two to three children and the teachers do not care much about that. In general, many school staff members do not treat hygiene in a sensible or inclusive way. When I talked to one teacher of RP Kulam School about the use of the MDMS for learning about hygiene matters, for instance, she called a boy to the front to show me his dirty shirt and commented in front of the whole class that in such cases they can only try their bit, but the level of cleanliness depends on the family. Such instances not only create an embarrassing situation for the child, but by showcasing a child and his family like this the teacher also set a negative example for the other children. Many children, in fact, use dirtiness as marker for social difference. Most staff members do not counter this, but many of them instead support such dynamics by their own attitude towards the children. Reena Verma (principal) of Sir Balai school, for example, even talks about the majority of the students of her school as *gande bacche* (literary: "dirty children"). This alleged "dirtiness" is worth a closer look, which can reveal much about the imagination of dirt and how it shapes social structures.

To start with, there is an element of class inequality, since the class background of the teachers (of whom 50 per cent are Dalits) and principals is very different to that of the students. While the former are from the middle-class, the latter are mainly from the precarious labour classes. How strong class inequalities can play out in school is revealed by Dalal (2015), for instance. She offers a shattering account of discriminating and humiliating treatment of teachers towards students referring to their socio-economic background. Dalal witnessed, for instance, how a teacher used a textbook chapter on cultural practices—designed to sensitise children on social differences—to confronted the

children with prejudices and hurtful remarks on their social milieu (Dalal 2015: 37).

In my observations of lunchtime in school I have not come across such open insults by the school staff. However, similar to Dalal's findings that the teachers blame all educational failure on the children's social background, most of the Sir Balai teachers have a very pessimistic view on the children's intellectual abilities because of their background. The principal expressed this most directly as part of the "dirtiness" that she projects on the children. She is convinced that these children will anyway not do anything different to their parents in future as they 'don't have any interest in studying, do not study, are not good at anything at all' (interview with Reena Verma, Sir Balai School; own translation).

This observation matches with the findings of Iyer (2013) who examined the teachers-students' relation in a primary school in Delhi. The author argues that this relation is predominantly shaped by an agenda of reforming the students through disciplining them in the Foucauldian sense, for which the teachers distinguish between *gande bacche* and *acche bacche* (lit. good children). While a central concern of the disciplinary agenda is to establish and maintain "physical order" among the students, the teachers employ the term gande bacche primarily in connection to weak academic performance or alleged lack of effort. Being put into this category is a strong punishment for the student, since in this morally-disciplining system a strict hierarchy is established by ranking the students according to their academic merit (Iyer 2013: 175-89).

As it turns out in the above example as well as in my observations, "dirt" in this context refers to physical dirt, alleged lack of intellectual abilities and class inequality, but it also has an element of caste impurity. For understanding the complex interlinkage of these concepts in the caste system, Douglas (2002) offers a useful approach. She argues that any kind of social system (i.e. hierarchy) builds on the basic pattern that people try to order their surrounding because at its most simple level dirt is disorder and disorder needs to be avoided (Douglas 2002: 2). In other words, dirt and pollution are elements that do not fit into our patterns of order, i.e. the categories that we create, or describe something that is not in the right place. Hence, when we are cleaning (ourselves and our house, for instance) we are putting things where they belong and try to get rid of polluting substances. According to Douglas, each society has its own system of order (to which the individual prescribes to varying extent) and corresponding views of pollution.

The Indian caste system is based on the principle that the castes which are due to their occupation in contact with things that are considered dirty (e.g. waste of all sort or dead people and animals) are at the lowest point of the hierarchy and are thought of as being most polluted and therewith most polluting

to others. The highly complex system of castes and sub-castes therefore builds on the main principle that each caste tries to avoid pollution by lower caste members and anything that is considered polluting. Part of the logic for keeping this system intact is that sexual relations as well as the intake of food and water are particularly regulated by pollution rules. More generally, the moral code is to a large extent linked to pollution rules by which people are kept in their places (Douglas 2002).

Following Douglas's discussion offers a line of thought for understanding the principal's concept of gande bacche, which shows how much the stigma of dirtiness is still attached to people from low castes and Dalits. Moreover, the children's own use of dirtiness as a marker of difference seems to reveal a certain parallel. In fact, the strong sense of cleanliness and attempt to distinguish oneself from those who do not follow the own standard of cleanliness seems to have a caste-element as well, since especially for Dalits there is a strong social pressure to fight the prejudice of being unhygienic or even polluting. Many of the children are most probably aware of caste inequality and how it overlaps with hygiene issues, i.e. that Dalits are often seen as "dirty". Hence, they might have internalised this and understood that taking care of cleanliness and distinguishing from "dirty" people can be a way to try to escape this stigma. So, they pick up such behavioural pattern from the adults and by that re-produce the social system in their own way.

While most school staff members were keen to assure me that their students are unaware of caste, literature shows that school children do adapt to caste-thinking. Mohite (2014), for example, found in his study on critical thinking of students on caste that many children show caste-thinking in their behaviour. The teachers of his study do not see caste as a problem and therefore undertake no efforts to counter caste inequality. Hence, Mohite concludes: 'At the two schools, there is a complete absence of systematic analysis of the self and society and criticism of inequality, exploitation, oppression and domination on the basis of caste that leads to and perpetuates caste inequality.' (ibid.: 144) Moreover, in many schools staff members not only fail to counter caste inequality, but by practising discrimination on the basis of caste and against other minorities they even hinder the education of children (Human Rights Watch 2014).

Religious inequalities

One such minority are Muslims and the question how well they are integrated in school, is a particularly sensitive one. Reflecting the fact that the educational situation of Muslims in India is worse than that of Hindus (Government of India 2006), in my research, most Muslim students are living in the worst conditions and probably have the highest rate of dropouts and not-in-school children. Most

Muslims in the schools of my research belong to a Dalit community who migrated from Bihar to Delhi and secure their existence by daily-wage labour on construction sites, as domestic helps or by begging. Hence, the multiple socio-economic disadvantages that come together in their case, would need particular attention by the educational system for a serious attempt to reduce social inequalities in the society. Instead, as Farooqui (2017) shows for instance, even in a school that is located in an area in which predominately Muslims live (Old Delhi in this case), Muslim students are alienated in many ways in school. Farooqui argues that the curriculum does not reflect their religious and cultural background and daily-live reality adequately and therefore re-creates a feeling of exclusion. Moreover, she found that teachers—in disciplining and teaching—rather follow the set norm than understanding the children's issues and thereby further contribute to the children's marginalisation.

Among the school staff of Sir Balai School there are strong prejudices against Muslims. Again, Mrs. Verma formulated this most directly when she talked about gande bacche and explained to me that, Muslims are generally *ganda* in her view. It is interesting to note that she remains stubbornly convinced that the Muslim students are not good at studies although she herself handed a reward to Mumtaz, a Dalit Muslim, for having scored 100 per cent in the exam at the end of the school year. Moreover, when I asked Mrs. Verma about the caste and social composition of the teachers in her school and she said that there are no Muslims among them, she emphasised how happy she is about the fact that she does not have to work together with Muslims. In conversations and observations in this school, it became obvious that some of the teachers, too, have prejudices against Muslims and do not hesitate to let the children feel that.

One day during lunchtime, Saleem and a few other five-class students were walking around on the schoolyard while eating. Because Saleem had egg (omelette) from home, one of his classmates (a Hindu) made a comment that he would never bring non-vegetarian food[6] to school. Another boy said that it is not allowed to bring non-vegetarian food to school. Saleem's classmates went on teasing him that he eats chicken as well and that they kill goats for the Eid festival. In want of a better question, I asked whether they did not celebrate Eid, to which they described the Hindu-Muslim difference to me via the fact that Saleem allegedly supports Pakistan while they support India in cricket matches. In this context they and even their teacher, who had joined the group, said that going to Pakistan is very dangerous. A simple omelette had triggered a conversation, which in a matter of a few minutes turned from non-vegetarian food over religious practices of Muslims to Pakistan as a dangerous country.

This scene exemplifies how the normative discourse on vegetarian food that is connected to the MDMS has entered the school space and is used as basis to

establish the superiority of one religion over the other. In fact, most children I talked to from the schools—Hindus and Muslims alike—told me that they do eat non-vegetarian food at home. This observation supports the argument that the MDMS menu reflects upper-caste Hindu practices and thereby establishes this as norm, while the majority of children who receive the food do normally not follow these strict rules of vegetarianism (N.P. 2015). While nine states introduced the provision of egg as part of governmental food schemes, some groups of upper-caste Hindus dominate food-politics and strongly oppose eggs in food schemes in other states (ibid.). The discussion on the courtyard, therefore, is based on politically constructed differences between the religions. Hence, the way the MDM menu is designed in my research context, as well as the biased behaviour of the school staff in Sir Balai School potentially reinforce religious inequalities instead of reducing them.

The role of the principal

Interestingly, in RP Kulam School I have not come across prejudices against Muslims. In fact, it seems that the attitude and behaviour of the school staff—and especially of the principal—account for much of the differences between the two schools. This refers to the way the processes around the MDMS are handled in the schools and is also reflected in the general atmosphere at the schools. Seema Sakshi, the principal of RP Kulam School who belongs to the highest caste (Pandit), told me proudly that there is a long tradition in her family to reject casteism and religious discrimination. Her father, grandfather and even grand grandfather were free-minded people who rejected casteism and had no prejudices against Muslims. This view seems to shape Mrs. Sakshi's interaction with people, too—no matter with whom I saw her interacting in school, she maintained a friendly tone. She has been working in this school for the past 17 years (first as teacher and then as principal) and therefore knows the parents well. Laughingly she told me that she is on good terms with them as many of them are her former students and are therefore cooperating nicely with her. Moreover, Mrs. Sakshi organises regular meetings of parents and teachers as well as of the school management committee. A friendly atmosphere among the school staff also seems to be important to her. For the festival of Diwali, for instance, she called all teachers as well as Rani, Sushmeeta and me for a small party where she distributed *samosa* and sweets.

The prejudiced view on the students and parents of Mrs. Verma, in contrast, has been mentioned many times. In fact, in many conversations that I witnessed between her and parents or teachers, she shouted, snubbed or refused to act on the request of someone. By doing so, she creates a rough, sometimes almost hostile atmosphere which also spreads to the teachers to various extent.

Moreover, the school does not have a functioning school management committee, nor organised parents-teachers' meetings.

These quite opposed characters of the principals have significant influence on the MDM processes in their respective schools. Hence, in RP Kulam School the processes are more organised and mainly build on the involvement of each teacher who take care of the distribution process in their classes. Moreover, the school staff as a whole successfully managed to make sure that almost all children bring steel plates or boxes (which is supposed to be more hygienic) instead of plastic. This is something that the Sir Balai School staff is allegedly trying since long time, but has not been able to establish yet. Generally, in Sir Balai School the distribution and eating of the MDM is less guided by the school staff. Except the adjunct teacher of class two, who introduced group hand washing, the other school staff usually only interfere in lunch processes to discipline the children—which is often done in a rough tone and I even observed an incidence when Mrs. Verma slapped a girl who stood in line for food. Hence, the way the eating is organised and guided in RP Kulam School as well as the attitude of the school staff towards the students allows for a more inclusive effect of the scheme than in Sir Balai School.

Conclusion

For the analysis of the extent to which the MDMS contributes to social inclusion, I looked at two aspects. Firstly, I traced the question to what extent the provision of the MDM as such supports social inclusion through higher school attendance and learning levels of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. To approach this question, I started from the official objectives that the scheme should attract children to school and provide nutritional support that enhances concentration levels and therewith learning effects of the students. Since these effects are supposed to be strongest for children from disadvantaged socio-economic background, it could help reducing social inequalities. In the two schools where I conducted my field study, many teachers indeed observed higher attendance rates which they attribute to the scheme. Most teachers also emphasised that in cases when parents do not have the time to prepare food in the morning, they can send the children to school more easily without worrying about their food. While some parents, whom I talked to, see the latter as a helpful aspect, too, the large majority of them packs food for their children to take along for school anyway. Many parents have their reservations on the type of food or the fact that it is cooked in such large quantity. Two high caste mothers also expressed caste-related concerns. However, most of the parents do not attribute very much importance to the MDM, but are much more concerned with the quality of

education their children receive, to which they attach the hope for a better future of their children.

Against this backdrop, the observation that close to all students do eat the MDM food at least on some days demonstrates an inclusive effect of the scheme. However, the fact that the schools are visited only by children from poor families of whom the large majority are low castes or Dalits, reflects the general development of the educational system that those who are economically a bit better off send their children to private schools. The structural educational inequality, therefore, increases and can be countered to very limited extent by schemes such as the MDMS.

For the second aspect of the analysis, I focused on lunchtime in school with special regard to how it is organised, what social dynamics unfold during the time of eating and how the attitude and behaviour of the school staff challenges as well as reproduces social inequalities. Generally, the distribution of food happens in a more or less smooth routine and for eating the children are to large extent left free by the teachers. On the first sight, caste or religious differences do not seem to play an important role in these processes as the children take the food regardless who distributes it and sit or stand together with their friends who are sometimes from different castes or religious backgrounds. However, since the school staff does not guide the sitting arrangement, nor the start and end of the meal, they miss the chance to make the students eat next to someone who is not their friend and to make the meal a more common experience.

My observations revealed, moreover, that the children by refusing to sit next to an allegedly dirty child—for eating or during class—identify dirtiness as factor for social exclusion. Many teachers do not treat this issue in a sensible way and are, therefore, negative examples for the children. Mrs. Verma, the principal of Sir Balai School, is most direct in her prejudiced view on gande bacche. This "dirtiness" refers not only to physical aspects, but is also inherently interlinked with class and caste prejudices. Furthermore, Mrs. Verma and some teachers of her school are strongly biased against Muslims, hence, they reaffirm religious inequalities rather than reducing them. In RP Kulam School, in contrast, I have not encountered any prejudices against Muslims.

Generally, the figure of the principal and her attitude seem to make a significant difference. Both principals do not put much effort in finding ways how the MDMS could be a more common and inclusive activity for the students. However, in RP Kulam School the process runs in a more organised way and a friendlier atmosphere. In Sir Balai school, in contrast, the strongly biased perception of Mrs. Verma shapes the overall social climate and supports the reproduction of socio-economic inequalities rather than effects of the MDMS for social inclusion.

Endnotes

[1] The Indian Public Distribution Service (PDS) has its roots in the food shortage of the mid 1960s and continues to provide households with food grains to highly subsidised prices. Since 1997 the entitlement to food rations is regulated by a system that categorises people according to different levels of poverty. (Department of Food and Public Distribution,
http://dfpd.nic.in/public-distribution.htm, [retrieved 22.08.2018].

[2] My doctoral research was part of the Transnational Research Group "Poverty Reduction and Policy for the Poor between the State and Private Actors: Education Policy in India since the Nineteenth Century" funded by the Max Weber Foundation.

[3] All names of people, schools and living areas are changed.

[4] Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) are the official categories based on which the government recognises certain groups as eligible for reserved quotas in the public sector. Each federal state has its own lists indicating how the castes/communities are categorised. I used the government SC and OBC lists of Delhi, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Madhya Pradesh and identified the child as SC or OBC when I found the caste in one of the lists. The SC-lists are accessible under:
http://socialjustice.nic.in/UserView/index?mid=76750 [retrieved 03.01.2019],
the OBC lists under:
http://www.ncbc.nic.in/User_Panel/CentralListStateView.aspx [retrieved 03.01.2019].

[5] 'Anganwadis' are local centres which have been set up under the government run Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), in order to offer health and nutritional care to pre-school children as well as pregnant women and lactating mothers. This includes that those children who participate receive some kind of cooked food or snack.

[6] In the Indian context, egg is seen as falling under the category of non-vegetarian food.

Interviews

Interviews used for the article (all names and places are changed):

Interview with Amita Das. 2015. Sir Balai School, New Delhi, 18 December.

Interview with Jyoti. 2015. RP Kulam School, New Delhi, 8 November.

Interview with Krishna Kumar. 2016. MCD office, New Delhi, 18 May.

Interview with Manju. 2015. RP Kulam School, New Delhi, 2 October.

Interview with Mohammed. 2015. Sir Balai residential area, New Delhi, 4 December.

Interview with Praveen. 2015. Sir Balai residential area, New Delhi, 8 December.

Interview with Pravesh. 2015. Sir Balai School, New Delhi, 2 September and 7 September.

Interview with Preeti. 2015. Savitri Camp, New Delhi, 28 October.

Interview with Reena Verma. 2015. Sir Balai School, New Delhi, 23 November and 9 December.

Interview with Rita. 2015. RP Kulam School, New Delhi, 2 November.

Interview with Romila Jannat. 2015. Sir Balai School, New Delhi, 30 September.

Interview with Seema Sakshi. 2015. RP Kulam School, New Delhi, 13 December.

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