



Locked Nutrition

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Received: 24-APR-2020

Accepted: 09-JUN-2020

Published: 25-JUN-2020

Some of the children that attend the two privately-managed, Goa government-aided schools I administer come for the midday meals and not necessarily for learning to read/write/count. At the best of times, their parents, who work as handymen, maids, low-end salespersons, freelance masons or helpers to electricians/plumbers, carpenters/tailors, beauticians/drivers, have no time/inclination to give them tiffin. Even those who do carry dabbas, usually bring cheap packaged biscuits or store-bought fried snacks.

From standards I-VIII, the students who opt for the mid-day-meal-scheme get a monotonous but nutritious meal which has two pulses and two vegetables in a coconut-based gravy, served with bread. Our neighbourhood Women's Self-Help-Group team, which on instructional-working days caters to 1200 students in multiple schools, comprises four women. They start cooking around 0445 hours and dispatch the meals by 0930. The lockdown means no income for them, either. Perhaps their skills could have helped the migrants who were suddenly homesick and wanted to leave Goa? Our random checks of their premises assure us of cleanliness in their workplace. At our end, we make sure there is a fresh newspaper-sheet covering the desks they eat at, hands

are washed and wiped with handkerchiefs and teachers check that the food is consumed, not discarded randomly.

My small audit sample is limited to approximately seven-hundred students; contrary to what one expects in such government-aided 'free' institutions, the teachers/staff here take an interest in their wards' health. When the Primary Health Centre doctors come a-checking, any students with deficiencies have their parents called in for a stern chiding. De-worming and iron tablets are given on schedule; in the long run, we expect a healthy bunch to make it to the Xth Boards.

Our aspiration is limited: may our students do us proud by being disciplined, productive citizens, never mind the academic results.

Throughout the summer/Ganapati/Diwali/Christmas vacations, whilst we counsel all parents that they must provide balanced meals, we know that the children from a few homes eat when/where they please, whatever their parents dole out. Often, it is a vadaa-paav/samosa equivalent from a neighbourhood gada-on-wheels, washed down with watery, sugary tea. We have never worried about them through their holidays in years past, knowing they would return to us,

Cite this article as: Jaywant S. Locked. RHiME. 2020;7:156-58.

to the midday meals. Now, though, with indefinite uncertainty looming, we will have to consider involving the PTA to spread awareness on nutrition or the lack of it and its consequences on the students. Schooling isn't only about stationery and examinations. Online tutorials may help those who have smart phones, connectivity, money to pay for the facility. 'Our' children will need help but after their bellies are full. If the schools reopen soon, no problem, the midday meal will be served. If the reopening is postponed, we hope some thought will be given to the little ones and their diet. We have to wait for reopening dates to be declared. Until then, this is like any other summer vacation.

Now everyone's been Locked-down. No studies, no routine. No privacy for parents, no space to play for the children. Nothing to do, nowhere to go and when hunger strikes, it's a high-carb, low-protein input. The private-sector high-fees schools have quickly adjusted and devised creative and brilliant methods of tutoring online. This single factor is going to make a difficult situation worse: the haves will trot ahead, the have-nots will lag further behind. Every month lost means a future nurse might end up as a construction worker, a draftsman-to-be become a car-washer. 'We' have limitations, 'our' children have access to phones, not necessarily smart ones. There is little access to computers.

However, while studies can wait, nutrition can't. If precautions have to be taken against illness, infection has to be controlled and wellness take priority, locking-down fully didn't help. It's been considered an idleness-induced television-watching holiday. The local Doordarshan/AIR channels have taken steps to educate the population. But, many of 'our parents' are migrants from Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Telangana, and other states, with different native-tongues: the Konkanni/Hindi programs don't transfer the sense of urgency that's required.

Never mind the illiterates. It's assumed that

literate=intelligent. There are many among the 'educated' who believe that come 15 July 2020, or some other date, life's 'normal' switch will be flicked on. Shops will open, businesses will bear the brunt of a few weeks' loss, schools will function on schedule thereafter, etc. The behaviour of a bullying, deadly virus is not understood by even post-graduates. Mutation, the time taken for research, the limitations of vaccination, the spread of infection, the development of immunity, are alien concepts, which some 'educated' feel are no more than pessimistic concerns. Strangely, the words uttered by priests, irrespective of religion are more believed than those spoken by scientists and doctors. Brahmins, Padres, Maulvis are the ones who reach out to the masses effectively. No teacher/doctor/employer can work the magic of religious 'leaders' even in minor places of worship. They should be invited for workshops and involved in publicizing programs. All the posters in the world don't have the power of a priest's sermon. Exposing practising priests to scientific temper and training them in modern medical concepts will help to healthcare workers in the field. A tenth-standard girl from an elite school said to me: 'There are no Dalits/SCs/STs in Goa.' They are invisible to her because she has never seen a ration-shop or queued for piped water. Her freezer is full; she must hands-on do some gathering of and cooking with wood-fuel if she is to know that all kitchens aren't tiled. This is an unusual time on the planet. One that we can use to bridge gaps, if we involve the upper end to help fellow creatures.

Builders' lobbies, professional associations (like the Architects' and Hoteliers' Associations) must also be reached out to. The expectation from them is not charity in cash/kind, but the use of the influence they wield.

We don't know how long the Lock-down will continue, even in our small green-zone state, Goa, where things are considered to be 'under control'. Those students who will lose

out on the midday meals, will lose out on nutrition. The effects of a poor diet will be seen four or five years down the line. It won't be about only Covid-19, but about deficiencies of micro-nutrients leading to stunted physical and mental growth and overall low quality of health. Those who are dependent on labour for factories, the hospitality and catering industries, healthcare businesses, indeed in all walks of life, can benefit from workers in good health. Someone with tuberculosis, chronic diarrhoea or cough, skin infections, just plain tiredness, is not contributing to anyone's profit.

The tension (not the solution) between the right to liberty, the threat to public health, and access to food is there to see. Health issues

are a problem, true. Education, after that, will be even more of a problem.

The good news is, the government is being supported where it cannot reach by NGOs and some panchayats, by individuals and by communities who have stepped up and have combined resources to provide basic dal-bhaji-rice, to poor locals and 'outsiders' alike. We need more. If we have to ensure a healthy future for ourselves, for India, we need to go beyond our homes and reach out to the under-fives, the teenagers, the mothers-to-be to make sure next year or even a decade after this year, we have young people with stamina and ability that survived Covid-19. In whatever way, project 'midday meal' must continue.