



WRITE for ATol | ADVERTISE | MEDIA KIT | GET ATol BY EMAIL | ABOUT ATol | CONTACT US

Read us in Chinese at



Search: Archive ASIA TIMES by keyword



- Front Page
- Greater China
- China Business
- South Asia
- Southeast Asia
- Japan
- Korea
- Middle East
- Central Asia
- World Economy
- Asian Economy
- World Affairs
- IT World
- Book Reviews
- Speaking Freely
- Letters
- Forum

South Asia

Sep 19, '13

Like 4 Tweet 5 0 2

India's free lunches exact a high price

By Keya Acharya

BANGALORE, India - In spite of India's much-publicized national renewable energy policy as part of its international commitments to reduce carbon emissions, its Mid Day Meal (MDM) Scheme, the world's largest school lunch program, has no energy conservation or even a fuel policy in its workings. Approximately 120 million children in 12.65 million schools around the country get a hot, cooked meal at lunch time every day.

The ruling Congress coalition government's flagship MDM Scheme, and one that it counts as a voter's favorite in the upcoming national elections in May 2014, has a central government budget of more than US\$2 billion, with each state adding its own finances to its allotted amount.

The central government in New Delhi also gives foodgrains to each state, mandating 100 grams of uncooked rice per primary school

child and 150 grams for higher classes. Accompaniments of "dal" or lentils, vegetables and yoghurt are standard menu in southern states, whilst northern schools have "chapatis", the Indian wheat flatbread.

The food, over 24 million killograms of it, is currently being cooked mainly through wood fuel stoves and some amount of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). Along with the firewood, LPG is used as a supplementing energy source, subsidies on which were removed in 2012, costing the government, and the exchequer, a further \$117 million. There are 577,000 kitchens employing 2.4 million

Print this article

Email this article

Currency converter

Comment on this article: Go to

RELATED ARTICLES

READERS' PICKS

- War and Terror
- The Complete Spengler
- The Complete Henry C K Liu
- The Best of Pepe Escobar
- The Complete Chan Akya

cooks, mostly women and in rural areas, cooking in "smoke-filled rooms", by the government's own admission.

And yet, in spite of the magnitude and scale of operations, there is almost zero research on the amount of firewood being used daily to fuel the midday meals, and no attention as yet on the impact this is having on deforestation, soil conservation, the health of women and children and a host of related factors, including climate change.

While the Ministry of Human Resource Development in charge of the MDM Scheme has made no public mention of the matter, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) says it is taking steps to spread the use of biomass-based, smokeless cookstoves in the midday meal scheme.

In 2009, a government initiative to create better technology for cookstoves produced a few improved versions, but the stoves did not end up in the MDM Scheme. "They're not used," says Professor Rajendra Prasad of the Centre for Rural Development Technology at the premier Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, which collaborated with the government on improved technology for cookstoves. "Unless someone tells the schools to use biomass cookstoves, there's no awareness," Prasad tells IPS.

"Unlike the fuel energy sector, there is no lobby to push this; all the attention is given to subsidizing conventional fuels," says Tejaswini Ananthkumar of the Adanya Chethana Trust Bangalore. Adanya Chethana cooks 200,000 government-aided midday meals for 300 schools in Karnataka state, over 75,000 of them catering to children in Bangalore city alone.

In 2012, the trust converted from diesel generator power to biomass briquettes for gasifier energy used for steam generation for its giant cooking vats. Energy costs have since then come crashing down from 60 paise (approximately 1 US cent) per meal to 8 to 9 paise per meal in 2013.

Another well-known organization, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness's Akshaya Patra scheme cooks using biomass gasification in 12 of the 19 midday meal kitchens it has set up in nine Indian states. Both Adanya Chethana and Akshaya Patra are now working on methods to reuse, reduce and recycle water, effluents, kitchen waste and energy in its midday meal kitchens, but these two organizations remain a rare species inside the MDM Scheme.

Though midday meal cooking in cities constitutes less than a quarter of all midday meals in India, turning to low-consumption methods in urban kitchens too works out to significant savings in India's huge petroleum imports (diesel and gas), which leapt to a record \$140 billion in 2011 to 2012 due to globally high petroleum prices.

Dr B S Negi, in charge of the government's cookstove program in the MNRE in Delhi, thinks everybody needs a little patience. "We can't go ahead for the sake of the public without competent approval first," says Negi, speaking of measures the government is currently taking to standardize and push gasifier cookstoves in the market.

But the dissatisfaction amongst those involved in the midday meal scheme continues. "Ask the government what is being done about fuels for these stoves," says Dr H S Mukunda from another premier institute working with the government on gasification, the Bangalore-based Indian Institute of Science's Gasification and Propulsion Laboratory.

Mukunda, who is in charge of working with the MNRE for gasifier technologies, says the technology has been available for over a decade now, but lacks political and administrative push. "This field is so disorganized," he says.



**ONLY
YOU
CAN
PREVENT
WILDFIRES.**



LEARN MORE »



Biofuel, mostly from agri-residues in compressed briquette and pellet form for large-scale applications in India, is currently hampered by irregular supply, with manufacturers complaining that lack of government help for collection, storage, transportation and marketing has resulted in exploitative middlemen taking advantage of the situation.

Manjunath Oli of Bangalore-based Alternative Fuels says the lack of government controls on pricing has led to de-husking mills (for biomass from agricultural produce) stamping "any old price they want".

Ritesh Mehta of Sri Biofuels, based in interior Karnataka state, says most biofuel manufacturers now try to stock their agricultural resource when in season, but Oli says the field is so neglected that the technology in the market too is inadequate. "We are now making our own briquette-making machines," says Oli.

Negi seems unhurried. "We will now hold consultations with industry to bring down fuel costs, and we are now trying to decentralize pellet-production to make them locally available," he says. "Talk to me in 2014, lots will have taken off by then," Negi tells IPS.

(Inter Press Service)



Asia Times Online

Like 8,442



Add a comment...

Comment using...

Facebook social plugin

Start your own school



www.educompschools.com

Excellent Partnership opportunity. Educomp Schools. Apply Now!

Wood Pellet Mill



Planetary Power Inc.



Find solar generators



All material on this website is copyright and may not be republished in any form without written permission.

© Copyright 1999 - 2013 Asia Times Online (Holdings), Ltd.

Head Office: Unit B, 16/F, Li Dong Building, No. 9 Li Yuen Street East, Central, Hong Kong

Thailand Bureau: 11/13 Petchkasem Road, Hua Hin, Prachuab Kirikhan, Thailand 77110

