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## Theft in mid-day meals, use of Aadhaar critical

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Ever since the government announced that the use of Aadhaar would be made mandatory in the mid-day meal (MDM) scheme, there has been all-round criticism of the move. Most observers have argued that since there are few instances of corruption in the sense of students not getting their free meals, using of Aadhaar is unnecessary. That assertion, however, is not based on fact and there is, as in other programmes like the PDS, plenty of scope for corruption. A CAG report of 2015 makes this clear. In 2013-14, it points out, there were 138.7 million children enrolled in government schools while those being given meals were a fourth lower at 108 million. The gap is even higher in certain states like Uttar Pradesh where, as compared to 19.8 million children enrolled, those appearing for meals is a much lower 11 million. Since there are no children who don't get fed, this suggests the enrolment data is fudged. Apart from the possibility of getting more mid-day allocations thanks to the fudge, more money can be got for teachers' pay, etc. Unlike ration shop theft where people don't get their rations when there is theft, since the kids are all getting their free meals, no one will report the problem. The only people who will see the problem is accountants who study the data.

Right now, the saving grace is that mid-day meal allocations of grain are made on the lower numbers of the meals served and not the enrolment, but the scope for corruption exists since at some point there can be a clamour that a fourth of children aren't getting fed and so allocations need to be raised. Also, there is no independent corroboration of the number of children being fed either. Like the enrolment data, this too is based on what state governments report; using Aadhaar will get a genuine head-count since, as the CAG

pointed out, %audit evidenced an institutionalised exaggeration of figures regarding students availing MDMs+.

The problem gets worse. Right now, the government norm is that 100 grams of foodgrain be given to those providing meals per child per day in primary school, and 150 grams be given for older children. Based on that, in 2013-14, you would require 3.9 million tonnes of grain based on the enrolment numbers and 3 million based on the numbers getting meals. since the government data show the states lifted 2.6 million tonnes, clearly there is no fraud; if anything, states are under-feeding the children. But, some private-sector mid-day-meal-providers say that, on average, children don't eat more than 60-65 grams of foodgrain per day. between the younger and the older lot. If you use this number, based on the number of kids who turn up for the free mid-day meal, you get a foodgrain requirement of 1.7 million tonnes, a good third less than the 2.6 million tonnes that was lifted by the state governments in 2013-14. That is why, after being told about this during its performance audit, the CAG report says %the present norms fixed for quantity of dry ration warranted a review+. Though not related to diversion, since there are more children moving to private schools. at least 35-40% of kids are schooled privately. this suggests a mid-day meal is not critical for getting children to school; alternatively, extending the scheme to private schools may be a good idea.