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Q14

Case study. You are the Sarpanch of a Panchayat. There is a primary school run by the government in your area. Midday meals are provided to the children attending the school. The Headmaster has now appointed a new cook in the school to prepare the meals. However, when it is found that the cook is from the Dalit community, almost half of the children belonging to higher castes are not allowed to take meals by their parents. Consequently, the attendance in the school falls sharply. This could result in the possibility of discontinuation of midday meal scheme, thereafter of teaching staff and subsequent closing down the school. (a) Discuss some feasible strategies to overcome the conflict and to create the right ambiance. (b) What should be the responsibilities of different social segments and agencies to create a positive social ambiance for accepting such changes?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · GS IV · 20 marks · Ethics Case Studies

Case Studies on above issues.

Core demand of the question

- **As Sarpanch:** a new midday-meal cook is Dalit; higher-caste parents stop children from eating; attendance collapses; the school may lose the meal scheme, teachers and then close. (a) Feasible strategies for conflict and the right ambiance. (b) Responsibilities of social segments and agencies to make such change acceptable

Revision summary

Parents pulling children from a Dalit-cooked midday meal is caste practice, not a hygiene footnote.

Do not sack the cook or open a second kitchen; keep the meal running and eat it in public.

Mobilise same-community peers, teachers and the department so attendance rules do not kill the scheme.

Article 17 and the atrocities law back dignity; use them with facts.

Every group - parents, elders, teachers, Panchayat, district - has a duty to keep the school open as one republic at lunch.

Introduction

A child's plate has been turned into a caste test. If the school dies, the poorest child loses food and letters together. As Sarpanch I will not restore attendance by sacking a Dalit cook to please a prejudice.

Body

Stakeholders

- Children who still eat, children who are kept away, and the Dalit cook whose dignity is on the line.
- Higher-caste parents, Dalit families, teachers and the Headmaster.
- The **midday meal scheme**, which is a legal nutrition right, not a club lunch.
- You as Sarpanch, the Panchayat, revenue and education officers, and community elders.

Values

- Equality (**Articles 14, 15, 17**). Untouchability is abolished; a plate is not a temple from which a cook can be cast out.
- Right to food and education of every child.
- **Courage with persuasion:** a sarpanch who only lectures will lose the school; one who only surrenders will lose the Constitution.

(a) Feasible strategies

- Keep the cook. Removing her is the one strategy that looks easy and teaches caste that it still owns the kitchen.
- Keep the kitchen open every day. A closed meal is a victory for the boycott.
- **Immediate:** visit homes with a teacher, an ANM, and a respected person from the same caste groups that are boycotting, not as a beggar but as the head of the village: the meal is the State's, the cook is qualified, the child who stays home loses food and school.
- **Eat in public:** Sarpanch, Headmaster and willing parents take the same meal, same line, photographed only if it helps and does not humiliate the cook as an exhibit.
- **Separate the nutrition science from the prejudice:** the menu is the same; caste does not live in the grain.
- If some parents still refuse, do not starve the children who come. Do not run a "two-kitchen" solution that re-creates untouchability in stainless steel.
- Involve the education department and the midday meal authority so that attendance rules are not used mechanically to kill the scheme while a caste boycott is on. Ask for a recorded exception and extra mobilisation days.
- If there is incitement to boycott a public scheme, treat it as a rights issue; the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 may apply where humiliation of a Dalit cook is caste-based. Use it with evidence, not as a first shout that empties the village.
- Children's clubs, baal sabhas, and a mothers' committee that includes Dalit mothers, with rotating tasting - dignity as routine, not as a one-day drama.
- If a rumour of hygiene is the mask, do a real, public hygiene audit and fix any true gap, without accepting caste as a proxy for cleanliness.

(b) Responsibilities of segments and agencies

- **Higher-caste parents:** send the child; prejudice is not a parental right over a public plate.
- **Dalit families:** they should not have to plead; the village owes the cook protection from insult.
- **Elders and faith leaders:** if they bless a boycott they own the school's death; they must say that a shared meal is not pollution.
- **Teachers:** eat the meal, stop coded remarks, and teach **Article 17** as a living rule.
- **Panchayat and Sarpanch:** budget, lighting, water in the kitchen, and a spine.

- **School management committee:** minutes that name the boycott as the cause of absence, so that a distant official does not blame the cook.
- **District education and food departments:** do not withdraw the scheme for a caste-created attendance dip without a field inquiry; support the sarpanch.
- **Police and revenue:** only if intimidation is organised; a heavy lathi on day one can freeze positions, but a documented threat cannot be ignored.
- **Media and NGOs:** amplify the child's right, not a caste war as entertainment.
- **The State:** midday meal is an entitlement under national policy and Supreme Court directions in the PUCL right-to-food line; local caste custom is not a permitted exemption.

Options I reject

- Sack the cook or hide her behind a "helper" from a "accepted" caste.
- Run parallel plates.
- Wait silently for the school to close and blame "social realities".

Flow diagram

Caste boycott of meal -> Keep cook and kitchen
 Keep cook and kitchen -> Public shared meal
 Keep cook and kitchen -> Home visits with peers
 Two kitchens -> Recreates untouchability
 Sack Dalit cook -> Caste wins the school

Conclusion

The conflict ends when the Dalit cook stays, the kitchen stays, and parents who boycott are pressed by peers, teachers and the scheme's officers. Every segment has a duty; none has a right to close a school to keep a plate "pure".

Facts & figures

Article 17, Constitution of India

Abolishes untouchability; a public school kitchen cannot revive it as a parental preference.

Midday meal scheme

A national nutrition-and-enrolment programme; caste boycott is not a lawful ground to end it.

PUCL right-to-food litigation

Supreme Court orders treated midday meals as a justiciable support for children's nutrition, not a local favour.

SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989

May apply to caste humiliation of a Dalit worker; it needs evidence and should not be a substitute for winning the parents.

School management committee

The lawful local body that should minute the real cause of absence and defend the cook and the kitchen.

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