

Refereed article

Free School Meals and the Reproduction of Inequalities: Caste and Gender in Food Production for Delhi's Slum Schools

Alva Bonaker

Summary

The Indian Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) – one of the largest school meal programmes in the world, currently reaching over 115 million children – was introduced in 1995 nationally with a twofold aim: enhancing school enrolment and retention as well as improving nutrition levels among poor children. According to the guidelines of the programme and a Supreme Court order, moreover, the scheme was intended to create employment opportunities especially for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, namely women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other minorities. This article focuses on employment practices and labour regimes in the food production processes of the scheme, asking: To what extent are inequalities reduced or reproduced in the production of school lunches? In the rural context, where predominantly local women work in school-level kitchens, large numbers of them face caste-based discrimination and underpayment. While issues of caste distinction and underpayment are by no means absent in urban areas, where the food is produced in centralised kitchens, this case study, which focuses on the urban context of Delhi, reveals that gender inequality is the prevailing feature here. Further, I found no particular effort to employ people from disadvantaged castes in the kitchen of Bhojan Foundation. At this non-governmental organisation, which provides food to approximately 130,000 children in 260 schools across Delhi, the bulk of the work in the semi-automated kitchen is done by men, while women (about 50 per cent of whom are Dalits) are engaged almost exclusively for the poorly remunerated distribution of the food. Generally, at Bhojan Foundation all women are counted as 'unskilled' workers and receive much lower wages than men. The article examines the underlying mechanisms of institutional management that create little scope for challenging inequalities, but rather foster gender stereotypes regarding 'male' and 'female' work and thereby contribute to reproducing gender and caste inequalities within wider society.

Keywords: Mid Day Meal Scheme, inequality, gender, caste, food production

Alva Bonaker is PhD student at Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS), Georg-August-Universität Göttingen.
alvabonaker@gmail.com

Introduction

Inequalities on the rise

While India has gained in economic power over the last three decades, deeply rooted inequalities nevertheless still prevail. In fact, the processes that have generated economic growth have, to a large extent, aggravated inequalities based on pre-existing social divisions such as caste, tribe, gender and region of origin. Anthropological evidence, as provided by Shah et al. (2018: 17) for instance, clearly shows that the processes of economic growth (following economic liberalisation in the early 1990s) involve mechanisms of inequality in which the historically disadvantaged Dalits¹ and Adivasis² are largely powerless in relation to dominant social groups and institutions. Although some members of these groups have achieved relative economic betterment, most of them have ended up, rather, in new forms of exploitation – that is, in working and living conditions that are precarious and at the lowest ends of the labour force, with few chances to improve this situation (Shah et al. 2018).

Under the current government of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party – ruling since 2014 – minorities, especially Dalits and Muslims, are experiencing marginalisation, harassment and the suppression of their rights on an unprecedented scale. The ongoing harsh treatment of students protesting against the discrimination against Dalits and challenging Hindu nationalist ideology in institutions of higher education (see, for example, Wazir 2016) demonstrates the new regime's commitment to imposing its political agenda in the educational sphere. At the same time, violent attacks by right-wing vigilantes on Dalits and Muslims in the name of 'cow protection', largely condoned by the state, gave rise to protests which were also brutally suppressed (Govindarayan 2016; Pollmann 2016).

Sexual violence against women in India – and especially rape crimes by upper-caste men against Dalit women – are another brutal means of rampant caste supremacy, occurring in combination with gender domination. Shocking rape cases are increasingly gaining national and international attention and spark massive protests, with them denouncing the fact that despite legislative reforms many upper-caste culprits enjoy impunity while victims often cannot access justice (Dey and Orton 2016; Ellis-Petersen 2020; Godbole 2020; Sabharwal et al. 2015; Werleman 2020). Further, the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) 2019,³ which discriminates against Muslims, provoked extensive

1 Dalits are members of the lowest castes. As agrarian slaves and their descendants they were – and to a large extent still are – seen and treated as outside of the rest of society made up of all other castes (Viswanath 2014: 8).

2 'Adivasi' is the term for the tribal population of India.

3 The CAA was passed by the Indian parliament on 12 December 2019 (<http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/214646.pdf>). It offers Indian citizenship to non-Muslim immigrants from

nationwide protests, to which the regime responded in turn with mass arrests and police violence (Ahmed 2020).

While the CAA protests were in full force, the global covid-19 pandemic hit and further contributed to the rise of inequalities in a dramatic way. The global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus that causes the possibly life-threatening disease covid-19 and the national-level measures that have been taken with the aim to reduce infections have caused a severe humanitarian crisis in India and elsewhere. While deepening the divide between privileged and underprivileged sections of the Indian population, the pandemic has shone a bright light indeed on the inequalities permeating the society. Social fault lines have become more visible and inequalities deepened, as those who are marginalised and excluded are the least protected, having very limited access to healthcare. At the same time, they are the ones most affected by the consequences of the measures taken to slow down the spread of the virus – yet their concerns are given little to no consideration in political decisions and actions.

In India, a countrywide lockdown of (initially) 21 days was announced on 25 March 2020 with advanced notice of less than four hours (Samaddar 2020: 13–18, 56). This caused severe problems for the poor, especially migrant labourers, many of whom lost their jobs overnight. In this sudden state of emergency, large numbers⁴ of migrants had no choice but to leave cities in trying to return to their places of origin, many of them making the journey on foot (Samaddar 2020: 50). The few governmental relief programmes rolled out were deeply insufficient; they were connected to existing welfare ones such as the Public Distribution System (PDS),⁵ to which many of the migrant poor have no access since they are not officially registered as urban residents and as such lack the required ration cards (Khera and Somanchi 2020; N.A. 2020: 8).

Exclusion and inequality also define the experiences of the urban poor – many of whom are migrants – in the educational sector. Over the last few decades, the massive privatisation of education has led to an increasing quality gap between public and private institutions. In fact, government schools have largely become ones for the poor, being marked by poor infrastructure, very low educational

Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The explicit exclusion of Muslims from this provision, in combination with the controversial rules on citizenship of the National Register of Citizenship and the National Population Register, have provoked massive nationwide protests among Muslims as well as non-Muslims defending secularist principles.

4 Estimations on the number of migrants who left the cities in this situation range from 22 million (Lele et al. 2020: 13) to about 120 to 140 million migrants (Dandekar and Ghai 2020: 30, 31).

5 The PDS has its roots in the food shortage of the mid-1960s and continues to provide households with food grains at highly subsidised prices. Since 1997, the entitlement to food rations has been regulated by a system that categorises people according to different levels of poverty (National Food Security Portal 2021). Apart from this controversial system of eligibility assessment, many poor people are excluded because they are not officially registered. Moreover, the recent linkage of the PDS to the ‘adhaar’ system adds to problems of access, as the latter is prone to technical failures (Khera and Somanchi 2020: 8).

quality and extremely limited learning achievements (Dasgupta et al. 2010; Editorial 2013: 8). The covid-19 pandemic has further aggravated this educational inequality, as the closure of schools and shift to digital teaching modes has affected students of schools without digital equipment and with less opportunities to study at home most dramatically.

Another social inequality that plays a central role in this article, namely gender inequality, has also been reinforced by the current global health crisis. Women who are on average doing a higher share of (child)care and household work than men and who are often engaged in working positions with low payment and high insecurity, have been more negatively affected by the pandemic (Deshpande 2020). Overall, the pandemic – as with other crises – has served to dramatically deepen existing inequalities.

In this article, I focus on the reproduction of the latter within the food-related processes of the Indian Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS). Drawing on my PhD research,⁶ I attempt to answer the question: To what extent are inequalities reduced or reproduced in the production of school lunches? In the analysis, I pay particular attention to the position of women and Dalits within the processes related to food production. I examine the employment and management practices of one non-governmental organisation (NGO) that cooks for the MDMS in particular, but also address other food production scenarios and reveal general patterns in how inequalities are reproduced.

The Mid Day Meal Scheme

The scheme that I focus on here is the National Programme for Mid Day Meal in Schools (NP-MDMS),⁷ commonly referred to as the Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS). This scheme was introduced nationwide in 1995 with the primary aim of enhancing school enrolment and retention as well as improving the nutritional intake of students. At the time of the MDMS's introduction, National Sample Survey data (from 1995–1996) identified 31 per cent of children in the 6- to 11-year-old age group as not attending school (Ramachandran 2008: 71). Since then, school-enrolment numbers have increased steadily, reaching 96.9 per cent on average for children between 6 and 14 years old – even at the rural level (ASER 2017). Regarding the nutritional situation, the Global Nutrition Report of 2018 found that 38.9 per cent of the world's stunted children live in South Asia (Development Initiatives 2018: 30). While the report found that 22.2 per cent of all

6 My research question is: 'To what extent does the Indian Mid-Day Meal contribute to reducing inequalities?' This 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' led by the German Historical Institute London, and funded by the Max Weber Foundation (2013–2017).

7 The original title was 'National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education', before being renamed the 'National Programme for Mid Day Meal in Schools'.

children in the world under five years old were stunted in 2017 (Development Initiatives 2018:14), the figure for India – reported by the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey of 2016–2018 – is 34.7 per cent; while 33.4 per cent are underweight (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2019: 108, 109). The phenomenon of persistently high rates of malnutrition in India despite economic growth has become known as the ‘Asian enigma’ (Guha-Khasnobis and James 2010). Moreover, there has even been a negative trend in the nutritional situation. As the first round of the fifth National Family Health Survey shows, even before the covid-19 pandemic caused a hunger crisis for many in 2020, malnutrition parameters have worsened in the majority of the states (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and International Institute for Population Sciences 2020).

The problem of enduring hunger and malnutrition is a central topic of many academic disciplines, including Human Geography. From an earlier focus on food production and availability, attention has shifted of late to questions of access to food and food security. With increasing research interest in matters of food security, scholars now examine, for instance, the multilayered challenges of access to food, new strategies of coping with the changing geography of food in urban spaces and consequences for famine-warning systems (e.g. Moseley 2001: 82, 83; Sonnino 2016). With growing attention paid to the complexity of these matters, inequalities are increasingly recognised as the root causes of hunger and malnutrition – both in academia as well as in policy debates (Lang and Barling 2012). Hence, a rights-based approach to food security has become more prominent. This trend can be observed in India too, where the rights based approach has also shaped the contours of the MDMS to some extent.

Most prominently, the Right to Food Campaign in India was initiated in 2001 as reaction to a public interest litigation suit lodged with the Supreme Court by the Public Union for Civil Liberties, which has become known as the ‘Right to Food Case’. In a time of severe drought the petitioners demanded that the food grain stocks of the country – which were otherwise rotting – be used to feed the poor. While the case was closed after 17 years without a final order, a number of interim orders have been passed, among them the Supreme Court one of 2001 (Right to Food Campaign 2001) according to which, under the MDMS, a hot-cooked meal must be provided to students in primary and upper-primary classes of all government and government-aided schools. Prior to the implementation of this order, the ‘meal’ consisted of dry rations in many places.

Many states, including Delhi, had fully introduced cooked meals only by 2004 (De et al. 2005: 3). As per the rules of 2015 – applicable at the time of my field research, and continuing until today – the meal is supposed to consist of 450 kilocalories and 12 grams of protein (lower-primary classes) and 700 kilocalories and 20 grams of protein (upper-primary classes) respectively (Mid Day Meal Rules 2015, referring to National Food Security Act 2013: 16). In terms of the financial arrangements, the food grains (rice and wheat) are provided free of cost from the

godowns of the Food Corporation of India and fixed rates of transportation are reimbursed by the central government. The cooking costs are shared between the central and the state governments in most federal states (at a ratio of 60:40), while these costs in the union territory of Delhi are fully borne by the central government. At the time of my research, from July 2015 the cooking costs per child/day were set at INR 3.86 (primary) and INR 5.78 (upper-primary) respectively (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016). These rates have increased steadily, currently standing at INR 4.97 and INR 7.45 respectively (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2020). The other activities involved – such as the cooking of food, provision of cooking fuel, creation of physical facilities and overseeing of manpower resources – are the responsibility of the states (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2016).

Across the country, there are two distinct cooking arrangements. One is the food preparation in school-based kitchens in rural areas where the meal for students is cooked in the school itself. The other arrangement is that of the centralised kitchens that are run by so-called service providers (mostly NGOs) under contract with the state government in urban places because of space constraints on school premises and shorter distances between schools. My case study in Delhi is an example of the second type of arrangement. Initially, as many as 72 suppliers were engaged in the Indian capital, which was reduced stepwise to 11 NGOs running 13 kitchens in 2005 (De et al. 2005: 6) and increased again to currently (in 2019/2020) 51 service providers cooking in 60 semi-automated kitchens (NP-MDMS Annual Work Plan and Budget 2020/2021: 2). The NGOs manage the preparation of the food, the transportation of the containers to the schools and back to the kitchen, and are also responsible for paying and managing distributors who serve the food to students (Mid-Day Meal Rules 2015).

In 2004, another order of the Supreme Court under the Right to Food Case demanded commitment to disadvantaged sections of society under the MDMS. According to this order, among several other points, '[i]n appointment of cooks and helpers, preference shall be given to Dalits, Scheduled Castes [SCs] and Scheduled Tribes [STs]' (Supreme Court Order 2004).⁸ Further, the website of the MDMS emphasises the intention to give preference to women as kitchen staff: '[T]he state governments are expected to roll out a mass mobilization campaign to involve mothers' (Mid Day Meal Scheme 2020). This should include giving preference to women for the positions of cooks and helpers. The official guidelines mention that 'self-help groups' (preferably consisting of poor women, and women whose children participate in the MDMS) can be assigned certain responsibilities under the scheme, including cooking and serving the meal (National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education 2006, paragraphs 3.6 and 4.4). Additionally, some states, such as Karnataka and Odisha, have set up clear rules

8 The respective terms refer to castes and tribes that are listed as eligible for quotas in the public sector as part of the 'affirmative action' enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

regarding the preferential employment of female cooks from disadvantaged backgrounds (Government of Karnataka; Letter of School and Mass Education Department of Odisha 2013).

In line with the Supreme Court order and policy guidelines, the Indian government laid down terms and conditions for the selection of cooks and helpers in centralised kitchens in a letter to service providers / NGOs. According to this document, priority should be given to 'weaker sections', which include women, SCs, STs and others (Unpublished letter of the South Delhi Municipal Corporation, dated 9 December 2016).⁹ Yet how exactly this is meant to be carried out and controlled is not specified. Hence, the interpretation and actual implementation of the terms and conditions are largely left to the NGOs themselves.

Theoretical approach

In my analysis of how the policy guidelines on employment are interpreted and implemented in the kitchen of Bhojan Foundation¹⁰ and in food production under the MDMS in general, systematic gender segregation emerges as a persistent phenomenon. Job segregation by gender is, according to Tilly, '[the] best-documented form of categorical inequality' (2009: 164) – accounting for more than half of the income difference between men and women. The main causes for occupational segregation by gender (and in many cases also by race) are commonly seen in individual characteristics – such as rational-choice and human-capital differences, personal preferences as well as in socialisation processes (Mincer and Polachek 1974; Hakim 1998).

In contrast, I draw on Tilly (2009) and Tomaskovuc-Devey (2005) to argue that organisational processes play a more important role in creating segregation – and hence in recreating inequalities. This does not mean that the organisations – or the people who manage them – are necessarily acting in an intentionally discriminatory manner, but by managing organisations within the given socio-economic environment typically certain mechanisms are at work that serve to recreate those inequalities. Hence, I use Tilly's (2009) concept of 'durable inequalities' and their recreation to untangle the underlying and intersecting mechanisms of institutional management that create such segregation, and thereby foster and reproduce inequalities within the context of wider Indian society. Tilly (2009: 13) calls inequalities 'durable' if they last from one interaction to the next, and especially if they span a whole lifetime, career or organisational history. These

9 I only gained access to this document from December 2016, but was assured that the clause had existed earlier as well.

10 All names of people, local settlements where they live and institutions have been changed for the purposes of anonymity. This includes for the NGO that cooks the food for the schools situated within my research area; other NGOs that run centralised kitchens are referred to by their real names, meanwhile, as there is no need for anonymity in their case. Most of the information given on them in this article is freely available on the Internet.

inequalities usually run along the lines of categories such as male/female, white/black and (high) caste / Dalit, divisions which are widely accepted as unequal in society. Tilly's basic argument is that much of what is usually ascribed to personal characteristics or 'human capital' is the result of such categorical inequalities (Tilly 2009: 13, 14). How exactly these mechanisms work will become clear when I use this scholar's approach in my analysis of ethnographic data.

Research area and method

Besides extensive review of secondary literature and primary sources (such as policy documents), this article draws heavily on my own first-hand empirical research too. I conducted my ethnographic research at one of the large MDMS kitchens in South Delhi, run by the NGO Bhojan Foundation, two government primary schools that receive food from this kitchen, RP Kulam School and Sir Balai School, and at various places in the area where the students of these schools and their families live, including two welfare NGOs that some of them regularly visit. The methods used were participant observations, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with staff of the NGO kitchen, food distributors, students, school staff, parents and workers from the two welfare NGOs. I gathered this material during 11 months of PhD fieldwork (one month in 2014, and five months each in 2015 and 2016 respectively) and analysed it with the MaxQDA software. Moreover, I also used data on the socio-economic background of students from enrolment registers – a data set from RP Kulam School consisting of 919 registrations covering the span from 2008 to 2015 and from Sir Balai School, consisting of 327 registrations covering a timespan from 2010 to 2015. However, since my data from Sir Balai School does not cover all categories, I use it only for certain information, which I specify.¹¹

For this article, I primarily use observations, informal conversations and interviews conducted with persons working in the kitchen and in food distribution for the schools. The recorded interviews that I directly draw from here were conducted with one of the top managers of Bhojan Foundation (Mr Thomas), one female kitchen employee (Mrs Dash/Das), three distributors (Rani, Sushmita and Ranchi), and with the principal of RP Kulam School (Mrs Sakshi). The interviews took between half an hour and more than two hours; some of them were conducted in two parts (see Appendix).

11 Only in RP Kulam School I was allowed to take photos of the enrolment registers and use it for my research. In Sir Balai School I was only allowed to take hand written notes, so that I did not collect enough data to use it for a quantitative analysis on all categories. From thoroughly looking through the registers of Sir Balai School and the notes it took, as well as from my observations, however, I know that the students of both schools are from the same living areas, communities and in many cases even the same families. Hence, the data derived from RP Kulam School can be seen at least as a very close proxy for information about the students of both schools. The type of registers and the way they are kept by the school staff is the same in both schools.

Bhojan Foundation has cooked food under the MDMS since 2004. The government renews its contract as ‘service provider’ on an annual basis, and every three to four years they have to apply again and go through the tendering process alongside the other NGOs that apply. The kitchen is located on the southern outskirts of the city (about 10 kilometres south of the schools researched). In this kitchen, according to Mr Thomas, Bhojan Foundation cooks food for about for 1.3 lakh (130,000) schoolchildren in 260 schools, 149 anganwadi centres¹² as well as 5 Jan Ahaar stalls¹³ six days per week. Occasionally, food is also provided to other places, such as temples, churches and Resident Welfare Associations. Of the schools, 229 belong to two administrative zones of the Municipal Cooperation of Delhi (MCD) and the remaining ones belong to the Directorate of Education, for which cooking as well as administrative processes are run entirely separately.

Sir Balai School (with 125 enrolled students) and RP Kulam School (with 470 students) are two of the overall 1,222 government and government-aided primary and pre-primary schools that were operating in Delhi in 2015/16 (Economic Survey 2019/2020: 288). They are located about 800 metres away from each other, being separated by a main road that runs through an area consisting of residential houses, slums and markets. I chose this particular area encompassing the two schools because I had been in contact with a local NGO that provides informal education and other forms of support to disadvantaged children from the area, since six years prior to my field research. I kept track of educational and social programmes in the area and observed how the poor negotiated their relationships to these various programmes and institutions. These well-established contacts enabled access to crucial spaces and people beyond the access granted to schools by an official permission to conduct research.

Most of the children enrolled in the two schools live in two slums, which are also separated by the main road. Others live in very simple flats in multistorey buildings in 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 itself in various kinds of self-constructed shelters. The vast majority of the families whose children go to these schools had migrated to the capital from rural areas or small towns of north and central Indian states, such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. According to the enrolment register data, 86.7 per cent of the families are Hindu, 12.6 per cent

12 So-called anganwadi centres are local centres set up under the government-run Integrated Child Development Services in order to offer basic education to pre-school children, and health and nutritional care to both them as well as to pregnant women and lactating mothers. Children who participate receive some kind of cooked food or snack.

13 In 2010, the government, in cooperation with NGOs, started the Jan Ahaar Yojana under which food ‘centres’ (initially seven of them) offer meals for INR 15 (The Hindu 2010).

Muslim and 0.7 per cent Christian. Close to half of the students are Dalits, and more than one-third are Other Backward Classes (OBCs).¹⁴

The fathers of at least 43 per cent of the students worked as daily-wage labourers on construction sites. Others were gardeners, farmers, drivers and guards, or did some kind of cleaning job according to the register of RP Kulam School. Although this is not noted in the latter, most of the mothers also worked – primarily as domestic help or construction labourers. Generally, most parents do not have a regular income since their jobs are in the informal sector and often on a short-term or daily-wage basis. The construction labourers, for instance, earn around INR 300–600 per day (men) and INR 200–400 per day (women), and only if there is work for them. It should be mentioned here that although according to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009, children aged 6 to 14 years old have a right to elementary education free of cost; in reality, most parents still have to spend money on the latter's education. There are no admission fees for government schools and families belonging to specified minority groups (SCs, STs and Muslims) are entitled to financial support (INR 500 for boys, INR 1,000 for girls per year) meant for school uniform, books and similar. My research revealed, however, that this is often not accessible to these families. It is, moreover, not sufficient to cover the necessary expenses.

Dalit cooks in MDMS kitchens

All over India 2.6 million cooks and helpers are engaged in the preparation and distribution of food to students under the MDMS (Mid Day Meal Scheme 2020). For analysis of the employment patterns of cooks under this scheme, a distinction must be made between school-based and centralised kitchens. These represent two quite different scenarios regarding the working processes and the employment regimes involved. The article will first briefly discuss the employment situation in school-based kitchens, before then turning to centralised kitchens and the example case.

Large-scale studies addressing the socio-economic background of cooks and their working realities conducted over the past decade or two have primarily pointed to the fact that the percentage of Dalits and members of other marginalised

14 Information on the caste identity of the children is not provided in a coherent manner, which makes the assessment of the caste composition a complicated exercise. In the registers only the caste terms are indicated, without information on the place of origin. Therefore, we have to bear with a few possible errors for the sake of the larger picture that is revealed. I used the government lists for SCs, STs and OBCs. These are the official categories on the basis of 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 given in one of the lists. The SC lists are accessible online at: <http://socialjustice.nic.in/UserView/index?mid=76750>; the OBC lists at: http://www.ncbc.nic.in/User_Panel/CentralListStateView.aspx.

communities has remained very low despite official guidelines on their preferential employment (Sabharwal et al. 2014: 175; Ramachandran and Naorem 2013: 49; Jain and Shah 2005: 5084; Nambissan 2009: 17). Ramachandran and Naorem (2013: 49) also found that if Dalit women were employed in the kitchen, this was mostly in the position of helpers. As a positive example, a study by the Centre for Equity Studies conducted in 2003 in the southern Indian state of Karnataka found that, at that time, already all cooks were women, half were Dalits and about one-quarter were widows (Drèze and Goyal 2003: 4676). The major factor that the authors identified as behind these employment practices was that the Government of Karnataka – like some other states – had issued clear guidelines for the selection of cooks. According to the latter priority has to be given to women, especially widows as well as other ‘women in distress’ and those from SCs and STs. Interestingly, these policy guidelines also specify that the cooks are to be paid more than double the amount of what the national guidelines suggest (see Government of Karnataka). Drèze and Goyal (2003: 4676), moreover, see the success of implementation in Karnataka as reflective of a widespread social acceptance of low-caste and Dalit women as cooks in schools there. However, a more recent news report paints a different picture: in a Karnataka village with a majority of STs, SCs and OBCs, after the appointment of a Dalit cook more than 80 per cent of students were withdrawn from the school – including children from the same caste as the cook (Kumar R. B. 2015).

There is not much literature available on the current situation. According to a report (Dixit 2019) published in the online media source *The Wire*, in Bihar mostly Dalit and tribal women are engaged as cooks – which might be read as a positive development. However, the report – which is based on conversations with 69 MDMS cooks across Bihar – found that these cooks were receiving extremely low and often delayed payment (an issue that is discussed in more detail later), and in many cases faced caste- and gender-based discrimination and harassment (Dixit 2019: 5). For instance, some teachers designated only high-caste individuals to cook food and made those from marginalised castes do the cleaning work, washing of utensils or even cleaning the whole school premises (Dixit 2019: 5, 6). Beyond discrimination against Dalit cooks in terms of the conditions of their employment and the way they are treated by school staff, the opposition also of parents hereto has been a recurrent issue in literature (e.g. De et al. 2005: 4; Human Rights Watch 2014: 22; Ramachandran and Naorem 2013: 49; Rampal and Mander 2013: 57). Spectacular incidents – where parents tell their children to refuse the meal, or where they even take action against Dalit cooks in schools or anganwadi centres – are also reported in the domestic news from time to time (see, for example, *The New Indian Express* 2019; *The Logical Indian* 2018).

These examples show that, besides other issues, parental opposition to Dalit cooks is a significant problem that poses a challenge to attempts to provide employment opportunities to Dalits via the MDMS. Notably, cases in which caste discrimination obstructs the running of the MDMS or countervails the employment

policy of the scheme occur in settings where the food is cooked in the school itself, and so it is obvious to the parents who cooks (and touches) it. In my research context and other centralised kitchens, however, where the food preparation happens far away from the schools, relations between cooks and parents are largely anonymous. In conversations with the latter, it became clear that many of them do not have a clear idea where the food is being produced.

Even the MDMS-responsible teachers only had a rough idea where the food comes from. None of the three who were in charge during my fieldwork had ever visited the kitchen, and neither had the principals of the two schools. This corresponds with Mr Thomas's statement that no one from the MCD schools visits the NGO kitchen. I also found this observation written in a monitoring report on the MDMS in Delhi (Vijaisri 2014: 50). While some parents are uneasy about this non-home-cooked food, the vast majority support or at least tolerate their children eating it, and even the children of the two parents who expressed explicit caste concerns about the provenance of the school meal do still eat it. This does not mean that parents are not generally more in favour of home-cooked food, with some (maybe more than those who actually said so) having their caste-based reservations. However, it seems that since their lives in the urban slums require that they adjust to the given circumstances to some extent, they also accept the situation that they do not know who produces the food exactly.

As a general finding, my research reveals that Bhojan Foundation is less engaged in offering employment to people from low castes, Dalits and women than is practised in many school-based MDMS kitchens. In fact, the guidelines that the NGO has received from the government on this aspect are ambiguous, if not contradictory. On the one hand, the set of terms and conditions for the selection of cooks and helpers, which I already mentioned, contain the clause: 'While engaging CCHs [cook-cum-helpers] priority should be given by the service provider to weaker section [sic] of the society like women, SC/ST, minorities, OBC' (Unpublished letter of the South Delhi Municipal Corporation 2016). On the other hand, the terms and conditions that Bhojan Foundation had to sign – along with the contract according to which the NGO has operated since March 2016 – only state: 'Voluntary Organizations should not discriminate in any manner on the basis of religion, caste or creed and should not use the programme for propagation of any religious faith/practice' (Terms and Conditions between SDMC and Bhojan Foundation).

Hence, according to Mr Thomas, the NGO does not keep records on the caste identities of its workers – except for lists of the female employees, which include their caste category (to which I will come later) – because they follow a policy of non-discrimination against workers on this basis. Based on my observations and information, I assume it likely that written details on the composition of the employee roster according to the minority categories are never officially asked for. In fact, this aspect is very imprecisely handled in the monitoring process. In the

MDMS monitoring report for Delhi 2013/14, for instance, the question is posed: ‘Social Composition of cooks cum helpers? (SC/ST/OBC/Minority)’ and the answer it gives is: ‘[MDMS] supplier has recruited helpers and cooks from economically weaker sections. They are Male or Females’ (Monitoring Report for Delhi 2013/14: 100). The answer obviously does not adequately address the question, as ‘economically weaker sections’ is a very vague formulation that does not have a direct connection to the minority categories mentioned in the question. Moreover, it is striking that no numbers or percentages are given for how many males and females are recruited. This might have to do with the fact that the report also found that in the supplier kitchens of the sample no records of ‘manpower’ working in the kitchens were available (Monitoring Report for Delhi 2013/14: 54).

With no comprehensive lists accessible, I attempted to obtain an overview of the composition of the staff of Bhojan Foundation according to caste, religion and other social indicators through conversations instead. According to Mr Thomas, avoiding records of these social indicators is part of a larger philosophy: ‘We are a multi-caste and multi-religion organisation. You will not find any gods here – working is our god you know, serving the humanity [...] is our god’ (Interview with Mr Thomas, part 1). He himself is Christian and allegedly employs Hindus, Muslims and Christians irrespective of their religion and caste. Following the noble goal to serve humanity, Mr Thomas says that he tries to accommodate people who come to him and say that they are needy. These are primarily men who come from the villages of northern and central Indian states where they faced drought and a lack of work.

In order to find out which castes the employees belong to, Mr Thomas said I would need to ask these individuals themselves. However, he also assured me that it is very unlikely that they will tell me the truth because those from low castes (and especially Dalits) try to hide their caste identity. His explanation for this phenomenon is that, generally, people from low castes tend to reveal their caste identity only in situations where this gives them access to any kind of benefit. Moreover, he assumes that in the kitchen they want to keep this information secret from their ‘boyfriends’ (Interview with Mrs Dash/Das and Mr Thomas). If one takes him at his word (their ‘boyfriends’), he talks of Dalits only among the female employees. One example that he gave is a woman who wanted to be registered with the surname ‘Dash’, while he is convinced that her real name is ‘Das’ – which he clearly identified as a Dalit surname.¹⁵

When he introduced me to the woman a short time later and left us alone to talk, her answer when I asked her name was: ‘[Dash]. Pandit me aata’ (‘[Dash]. Belonging to Pandit.’ Interview with Mrs Dash/Das, part 1; author’s own translation). Pandit is a Brahmin caste, and hence belongs to the highest category

15 While, as noted earlier, this is a fictive name, I tried to keep the pattern that it is a surname which can be understood as Brahmin or Dalit depending on just a small variation in the written (Devanagari) form.

of Hindu castes. While we were talking about the working processes and the food produced in the kitchen, she brought up her caste identity again. In fact, she told me that she usually brings at least some food from home when she comes to work, which she eats during the breaks because she does not like the food that is cooked here. When I asked why she does not like the food, she said: ‘Accha lagta hai khaane me lekin man ke wo nahi hota hai. Hum Pandit admi hai, na? To isliye aise lagta hai koi chu diya aise-taise [...]’ (‘I like the food, but I don’t feel like eating it. I’m Pandit, right? So therefore it seems as if someone has touched it and made it impure [...].’ Interview with Mrs Dash/Das, part 1; author’s own translation).

On my inquiry into what that means, she explained: ‘Matlab, hum Pandit admi hai to hamara ji nahi bharta. Matlab hum saaf suthara rehnewahle admi hai, na? Yeh matlab, choti jaat koi hai, jaise hai, wo hai, sab to aise na hai hamare jaise jaat. Isliye wahi problem hai aur koi problem na hai. Lekin kha leti hu, aise baat na hai’ (‘I mean, I’m Pandit so it doesn’t satisfy me. I mean, I’m a person who lives neat and clean, you know? I mean that there are lower castes like these and those, they are not all from a caste like mine. That is why this is a problem, otherwise there is no issue. But I do eat nevertheless.’ Interview with Mrs Dash/Das, part 1; author’s own translation). Her children, she tells me, also eat the food in their school and do like it. According to Mrs Dash/Das there are rather few Pandits among the kitchen staff. She asserted that the others are Yadavs and Muslims, for example. But when I asked about Dalits, she emphasised – repeating several times – that there was no one from such a low caste.

After many attempts to make sense of this conversation and what it tells us about caste and gender regimes within the NGO, I was able to access a list of female kitchen staff. According to it, eight of the 18 women employed at kitchen level are Dalits – including Mrs Dash/Das (on the list it says ‘Das’), one belongs to the ST category and the remaining nine belong to the ‘general category’. This information further complicates the picture. If we believe Mr Thomas and the list that Mrs Dash/Das is indeed Dalit, why did she tell me that she is Pandit even without me asking about her caste? Whether or not she is Dalit, it is striking that she puts so much emphasis on the Pandit identity, even by going into such detail as to explain to me her alleged pollution concerns regarding the food. If she really follows high-caste rules of purity as she said, this means that there is caste discrimination among the staff. If she is herself a Dalit, she clearly had a strong desire to convince me that she is not. What Mrs Dash/Das conveyed here is the impression that the kitchen is not a place where low castes/Dalits feel comfortable to reveal their caste. Hence, from this scene and the depiction of Mr Thomas it is clear that caste *does* play a role in the kitchen. On a more practical research level, the scene exemplifies the difficulties of assessing caste identities of workers and what role these play within the labour regimes of the NGO.

Food production processes and labour management

The above-described internal employment policy of Bhojan Foundation with its alleged humanitarian approach is, according to my observations, closely tied to the way the NGO kitchen is run as a business whose management is primarily concerned with ensuring smooth and efficient processes. In the course of our conversations, Mr Thomas emphasised several times that the staff roster is composed in a way that supposedly enables the most streamlined and peaceful co-working and minimises all possible tensions, with the overall aim to produce ‘safe food’. Mr Thomas was trained in food management by a renowned international hotel chain and combines his knowledge of food preparation with his experience in business management (he runs his own business too) in the handling of all of the NGO’s working processes.

Naturally, it requires a complex infrastructure and precise coordination of the various sections to prepare and deliver food to the different institutions in such a quantity, and following different menus. For the MCD schools alone, two to three different dishes are prepared for the morning shift and two for the afternoon shift,¹⁶ so that within one zone the morning and afternoon servings are never the same – a policy implemented to prevent the possible (re)distribution of leftover food from the morning round. So everyday rice, *poori* and three to five vegetable or lentil variations are cooked. The menu is planned by nutrition experts, and each dish is supposed to consist of 450 Kcal and 12 g protein for primary school classes (National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education 2006: 6; Mid-Day Meal Rules 2015) – this translates into 100–150 g rice/wheat or *poori*, with 80–100 g lentils or vegetables (Interview with Mr Thomas, part 1).

There are several spatially separated sections in the kitchen. In one building, which is also used for storage, a number of preparatory tasks are carried out. In one area, rice and other dry ingredients are cleaned of small stones and the like – which is done mostly by hand (during the time when I was there, because the large rice-cleaning machine was not functioning). Later, the rice is washed in water three to five times. Besides this, vegetables are peeled and cut with a machine; in another area of the kitchen, the empty food containers that have returned from the schools are washed. In the other building, a large room accommodates the actual cooking and *poori*-making processes. Here, three rice cooking pots – each with a volume capacity of 400–450 litres – and six pots – with a volume capacity of 250–300 litres each – in which curry, daal and similar are cooked are connected by pipes with two huge water boilers at each end of the room. For this water-steam system about 15 gas canisters (of household size) are simultaneously in use. The *poori* machine kneads the dough, rolls it and cuts out the circles, which are then fried in a large pot of oil. In the front of this room the steel containers, which are later

16 Some schools have separate timings for girls and boys who are taught in morning and afternoon shifts respectively.

delivered to the schools, are filled; in the case of certain dishes topped with a serving spoon of masala oil, closed and sealed before being taken outside and straight onto the transport vehicles.

To run all of these processes simultaneously, for the MCD school meals alone 399 people are involved.¹⁷ The bulk of them work in shifts, and are allotted to different sections of the kitchen such as the rice section, the poori section, the curry section and the section where utensils are cleaned. Some of the positions are fixed – these include the tasks of cleaning and cooking rice as well as the poori-making processes; one individual takes care of the curry-cooking procedure too. Apart from these positions, staff are both switched between the two kitchens and rotated among different positions within them. This is, according to Mr Thomas, a system supposed to prevent a routine way of working that can cause mistakes, but it is also from time to time used as a measure for disciplining too: if there were complaints about a certain dish, for example, the cook who was in charge of its preparation is posted somewhere else.

The processes have to be timed in a way to make sure that the food for the morning schools (which represents the majority of it) is ready by 7 a.m. so that the drivers can start their route. This means that a lot of work needs to be done at night. At 10 p.m., someone has to come and soak chickpeas in water; other cooking preparations start at midnight while the actual cooking of the curry starts by 6 a.m., for which the boilers need to be turned on an hour in advance. Accordingly, a particular form of staff management is part of the system. Most of the male employees are young migrant men, who live in dormitories that the NGO provides for them. As mentioned above, they come from rural northern and central India. There are, moreover, nine Christian refugees from Myanmar who came to work in the kitchen after someone from a refugee agency contacted Mr Thomas because he is Christian and he agreed to give them a job.

There are altogether ten dormitories in close proximity to the kitchen, in which about ten men (usually those from one particular area) sleep in shifts according to their working times. During the day, they can eat food from the kitchen; in the evening, they receive a hot meal prepared by a cook hired by the NGO for this explicit purpose. Hence, it is part of the overall system that the NGO management is interested in making people work long shifts – namely, several ones of four hours each in a row – and paying them more accordingly, instead of hiring more people – which would mean an increase in costs for accommodation and food. Therefore, it suits the business well that many employees are allegedly keen on working as much as possible.

This is a situation that has been observed by anthropologists in other parts of India as well. Donegan (in Shah et al. 2018), for instance, noted that migrant labourers

17 Figure derived from wage bills of October 2016, because no comprehensive list of kitchen employees was available.

working at a chemical industrial plant in Tamil Nadu regularly perform several shifts in a row in arrangements that are highly beneficial for the company. The workers themselves claim that they do this voluntarily, as the whole purpose of their migration was to work (Shah et al. 2018: 101). For these migrant labourers as well as ones at other sites that were studied as part of the same research project, we are faced with quite straightforward exploitation, where these individuals often do the dirtiest jobs as ‘low-skilled’ workers.

At this point the situation at Bhojan Foundation differs from the circumstances described in Shah et al. (2018) because the former’s male (migrant) workers are not those who work under the most precarious conditions. They are largely employed instead as so-called semi-skilled workers, which means that they allegedly have some kind of work experience in the food sector and are in charge of handling the various machines. The amount of salary they receive varies widely, ranging between INR 8,000 and INR 25,000 (which corresponds to between EUR 93 and 290) per month depending on their position, working hours, bargaining power and job performance.

Gendered labour and segregation

Part of the neatly controlled labour-division regime at Bhojan Foundation is also a very strict gender-segregation policy that goes beyond different working tasks creating entirely different employment conditions altogether. First of all, of the 399 employees in the kitchen (not including drivers and distributors) only 18 are women – which amounts to a mere 4.5 per cent of the staff at kitchen level. Clearly, besides not giving preference to low caste and Dalit cooks, the NGO also does not favour women in the food-preparation processes either. This corresponds with other studies, which have found that the aim to create employment opportunities for women, parents, low castes and Dalits is not met in Delhi’s centralised MDMS kitchens (De et al. 2005: 9; Khera 2006: 4746).

A statement on the website of the Annamrita Foundation, which provides MDMS food to 159 schools in Delhi, for instance, reveals the position to which women workers are confined in this particular NGO: ‘Local employment is generated by employing ladies of the village for sorting of grains and washing of utensils’. Alongside this statement is a photograph showing men cooking the food in large cauldrons (Annamrita Foundation Website). Similarly, the photographs on the website of the Ekta Shakti Foundation – an NGO that was founded ‘for the welfare of women and children’ and serves MDMS food to 99,471 schoolchildren in Delhi – shows men at the actual cooking devices and women cleaning cereals by hand and serving the food to students (Ekta Shakti Foundation Website). Akshaya Patra, India’s largest MDMS-supplying NGO, needs to be mentioned here too. It runs 52 kitchens, serving food to 19,039 schools across India, and also started cooking activities in Delhi in 2019 (Akshaya Patra Website). In 2014, I visited their kitchen in Jaipur, where I noticed that only men were doing the actual cooking.

There are, however, other examples too. One of them is another large NGO, Stri Shakti – which supplies MDMS food to 543 schools in Delhi (according to their own website). The organisation explicitly focuses on women’s empowerment and reducing gender inequality by encouraging women from ‘lower-middle-class sections of the society’ to join self-help groups that cook food under the MDMS (Stri Shakti Website). The Indcare Trust follows a similar approach: via a microfinance scheme, they support self-help groups formed by underprivileged women, who together supply food to 141 schools in Delhi under the MDMS (Indcare Trust Website).

At Bhojan Foundation, in contrast to the ‘male work’ already described, the 18 women employed in the kitchen are not allowed to handle machines, work long hours or night shifts, nor are they allowed to do any of the so-called ‘heavy’ or ‘dangerous’ work (such as moving large containers, loading or unloading the transporters, working at the poori frying pot and similar). Hence, they are mainly engaged in cleaning grains (as well as the machines and overall premises), and also in closing, sealing and wiping the already-filled containers of food and other such similar work. From time to time, they are also sent to schools to hand out food in case a distributor is absent that day (Interview with Mrs Dash/Das, part 1).

The prohibition on female staff handling machines is an internal rule of the NGO, and is represented as ensuring the ‘protection’ of these workers; as such, it does have a certain basis in legal regulations. The Factories Act of 1948 (Section 22.1) contained stipulations restricting women and children from carrying out certain tasks related to machines and limited the working hours for women to between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m. (Section 66.1b). Some amendments to this Act were inserted in its regulations in 1987 and again in 2014. However the time restrictions remained, and while the 2014 amendments made women equal to men in dealing with machines in particular contexts, the law overall still contains precautions against women handling machines instead of offering adequate protection to all workers irrespective of gender (see Sethia et al. 2015: 125). Hence, gendered differences in work that involves handling machines and nightshifts do have some legal basis, but the praxis of categorically excluding women from working with machines cannot be derived from this. Rather, the MDMS kitchen uses the argument that women need to be protected from potentially dangerous work to keep them outside of the actual cooking processes in jobs of low status and reward.

This points to a fundamental dilemma: the thin line between protection and subordination. According to Brown (2006), the roots of this dilemma lie in the fact that both historically as well as today masculine powers stand behind the politics of regulation and protection that shape women’s lives. So the argument that women need protection by and from men can also be a means to legitimate their exclusion from certain spheres and help foster the construction of female powerlessness and subordination. She formulates this paradox as follows: ‘Indeed, to be “protected” by the same power whose violation one fears perpetuates the very modality of

dependence and powerlessness marking much of women's experience across widely diverse cultures and epochs' (Brown 2006: 189). In the case of the kitchen, it might not be straightforward subordination or dependence that women face; clearly, however, the argument of seeking to protect women legitimises their exclusion from positions that are more stable and better paid.

Overall, the explanations for why women are paid less and why they are allowed to perform only 'unskilled' tasks – and thus not occupy positions working closely together with machines and men – reveal a certain argumentative pattern: women are blamed as being themselves the reason for this. The extremely prejudiced argument of the management, as represented by Mr Thomas, is that women generally are not able to do 'heavy work', that they are to be blamed in case of sexual affairs that could potentially disrupt the working routine and that the sheer numbers of women interested in employment naturally diminishes their bargaining power – and, hence, justifies the low salaries offered. These employment and management patterns demonstrate how female workers (also representing the only group of staff members who are potentially parents of students from MCD schools) ultimately only work on the margins of food production processes in this NGO's kitchen.

This unequal position is also reflected in the remuneration of female cooks. At Bhojan Foundation, the women working in the kitchen are, in contrast to the men, all employed under a provision for unskilled workers – with a fixed salary of INR 7,000 per month for ten hours per day, seven days a week, with two days off per month. This works out to about INR 250 for a ten-hour working day (if we calculate 28 working days per month). Although this is already a meagre salary, it should be noted that the official 'honorarium' to the CCHs in Delhi is even much less than that: INR 1,000 per month, excluding the two months of summer vacation (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2010). Hence, many of the women cooking (or assisting with) meals for schools work for about INR 35.71 for half a day's labour – or even for much longer work (e.g. INR 33 per seven hours of work in Punjab, see: Business Standard 2016; INR 37 for seven to eight hours in Bihar, according to Dixit 2019).

The extremely low salary of MDMS cooks is a huge issue in many states. Over the last few years large protests against this have only led to small payment increases (Khan 2019). The south Indian state of Tamil Nadu is an exception regarding the salaries provided to cooks. These range from INR 5,110 to INR 14,770, corresponding to three wage levels for the positions of Noon Meal' organiser, cook and cook's assistant (Government of Tamil Nadu). Besides the extremely low payment that the national guidelines and most state governments assign to cooks under the MDMS, the fact that the payment of cooks is officially called a honorarium says much about the value attributed to their work. These individuals are considered 'volunteers' and not 'workers' or 'employees', hence receiving an

honorarium instead of a wage. They also have no social security benefits or pension scheme (Dixit 2019: 3).

That the staff members at the kitchen of Bhojan Foundation get higher payments than the allotted INR 1,000 per cook/helper that the government pays to the NGO has to do with the entirely different organisational management and working processes on-site, which also include much longer working hours. The only position that is remunerated (to the tune of INR 1,000 per month) is that of the distributors, which I discuss in further detail below. Here, my aim is to show how the NGO has created highly unequal working arrangements that are segregated along the lines of gender.

While the male workers at Bhojan Foundation are provided with accommodation and dinner in addition to their wages, all female workers live in their own homes. Further, since their working day ends in the afternoon or evening (the main hours being from 7/8 a.m. to 5/6 p.m.), they do not receive dinner from the NGO. Usually, the female staff members start their day with cooking and cleaning at home for their family; after returning from work, they cook again for dinner (Interview with Mrs Dash/Das, part 1). Ironically, though women usually cook several times a day at home (unlike men), one explanation for why they are paid less, as expressed by Mr Thomas, is that they are employed as unskilled workers. The other explanation that he gave is that it is basically a matter of supply and demand: there are apparently so many women who approach the NGO for a job that those employed have absolutely no bargaining power, knowing exactly how easily they will be replaced if they do not comply with what is demanded of them. Hence, the inequality between female and male labourers at Bhojan Foundation is apparently not a matter of unequal payment for the same work; rather, men and women are channelled into different working sections, where entirely different regimes are at play regarding tasks, working conditions and remuneration patterns.

This corresponds to the findings of the 'India Exclusion Report' of 2015. According to that investigation, pay differences between women and men are as high as 20–50 per cent for 'casual work' in rural areas (Sethia et al. 2015: 130).¹⁸ The authors of the report identify the fact that women are often segregated in jobs that are categorised as unskilled, less valuable and with lower wages as one of the prominent forms of exclusion of women from just conditions of work (Sethia et al. 2015: 130). On the global level, according to the 'Global Wage Report' of 2018 published by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the 'gender pay gap' averages about 20 per cent (ILO 2018: 22).¹⁹ This report, too, found one of the

18 The CES report derives this figure from a report of the Ministry of Labour and Employment that uses National Sample Survey data from 2008/9 (Ministry of Labour and Employment, Labour Bureau 2010).

19 Depending on the measure used (mean hourly versus median monthly wages), the pay gap lies between 16 and 22 per cent (ILO 2018: 22).

underlying reasons for that pay gap in what they call ‘vertical occupational segregation’ – in other words, in the fact that men are disproportionately represented at the top of occupational hierarchies and women at the bottom thereof respectively (ILO 2018: 67). More detailed data analysis also revealed that there is a correlation between the proportion of women within a workplace and the average wage that employees receive – hence for the same educational background, work in occupations with a higher degree of ‘feminisation’ is paid less (ILO 2018: 75; see also, Tomaskovic-Devey 1993: 12; Weeden et al. 2018: 32).

Two sections of work situated on the periphery of the kitchen, ones which are also to some extent under the control of the NGO, demonstrate this segregation very clearly. These are the distributors, who distribute the food to the students in the schools, and the drivers, who deliver the food to the schools and bring the containers back to the kitchen.

The distributors of the meal

The position of the distributors is distinct from that of the employees working in the kitchen regarding the workplace, the kind of work done and the working conditions. Usually they are not in direct contact with the NGO, only interacting with the school staff and children. The INR 1,000 which they get from the NGO (via cheques, delivered to the school by the drivers) are handed to them by the principals of the respective schools; the latter are also the primary supervisors of their work. The task of the distributors is to be at school shortly before lunchtime, to bring the food containers to where they are needed, to serve food to up to 100 children and to put the containers back wherever they are stored. From my observation, this takes half an hour minimum, and a bit more than one hour maximum. There are 284 to 395 women and five men²⁰ in this position under Bhojan Foundation. The five men are an absolute exception – generally, it is a ‘female job’. This seems to have to do partly with the view that women, and especially mothers, are more suited to interacting with children in general, and that feeding children is widely understood as a female task. Moreover, many of the mothers (at least in my research area) do not work full-time in one job, but often switch workplace during the day – combining work inside and outside the home, so they can integrate this part-time job into their lives better than most working men.

The selection of the distributors is also made by the schools. In the schools of my research, if a distribution position is vacant, the school staff ask parents or tell students to ask their parents who might be interested. In RP Kulam School the two current distributors – Sushmita and Rani – allegedly were selected because they both appeared to be especially ‘needy’. Both are parents of students in the school

20 I have contradictory information on the figure: according to the bills from 2016 (on the basis of which I also calculated the number of kitchen staff) it should be 400 distributors. Mr Thomas told me that the current total number of distributors is 350; however, he could only find forms for 289 of them (five of which are men).

and live in the slum, which is located about five minutes' walk away. Sushmita's husband is the main income-earner for the family as a caretaker and she does not have other paid work besides the distribution job. They have three children, of whom one, a girl, is in class three at RP Kulam School; another, a boy, lives with his grandmother in a village in Uttar Pradesh; the third, a boy of ten, is intellectually disabled, and therefore needs special care. Rani lost her husband, the primary breadwinner of the family, three years ago and now has to take care of herself and her three children on her own. Two of them are in RP Kulam School and one lives in their home village in Madhya Pradesh. In view of Rani's very difficult financial situation, the teachers offered her the food-distribution job and also encouraged her to earn money by repairing and altering clothes again, as she had done earlier in her village. I witnessed how some of the teachers gave Rani clothes and explained to her what they wanted done, but generally, according to Rani herself, she does not get many orders these days.

Although the food distributors belong to the CCHs engaged by Bhojan Foundation and are paid by the NGO, the latter does not actually hire them on formal contracts (allegedly in agreement with the government). Instead, the NGO only collects some basic personal data on them, such as name, address, mobile number and bank account details. According to Mr Thomas, this is everything he needs in case anything goes wrong; he calls it 'police verification data'. While he assured me that it is the responsibility of the schools to select and oversee the distributors, and that they usually stay in their jobs even when the cooking NGOs change, he also made clear that he has the ultimate power to control and discipline workers in this position. As Mr Thomas himself told me, not employing them on a contract basis has the advantage that he can control them more easily:

Advantage is – there is labour laws and all that, so they can get into unions and then disturb the working. So [...] I'm a little bad when it comes to that, because I have to maintain the sanctity of the place there, you know? If someone is trying to be over-smart [...] I tell them to leave. (Interview with Mr Thomas, part 1)

He told me of a case where the distributor misbehaved by fighting with the school principal, taking aside food for herself before serving it (the rule is that they can take food home, but only if something is left over at the end) and beating children. This woman was thrown out, but her case allegedly remains a rare exception: "People know that they are not permanent and so they behave themselves" (Interview with Mr Thomas, part 1).

In the forms containing the personal data of the distributors, their caste category is also recorded. According to the 289 forms that I could access, the majority of them belong to the 'general category' (107), but SCs are almost as many in number (97). Further, 34 belong to the OBC category, 11 are Muslims and for 36 of them no information on caste or religion is provided. The three distributors of the two schools of my research belong to different caste categories. Ranchi, who works at Sir Balai School, is from the 'Nai' caste, which is recognised as OBC. Her husband

works as a barber – the traditional occupation of Nais – and Ranchi besides the distribution job and a bit of tailoring that she does at home occasionally also performs some ritual tasks at weddings in their locality, ones traditionally done by Nais. Rani, the distributor at RP Kulam School who lost her husband, is Pandit (as noted, a Brahmin caste), and thus belongs to the ‘general category’.

Sushmita is ‘Kanojiya’, a sub-caste of Dhobi, on which I have contradictory information. Dhobis, according to the official government lists of Delhi as well as of her home state Uttar Pradesh, can be both either SC or OBC. While Mr Thomas told me that Sushmita is Dalit, Mrs Sakshi (principal of RP Kulam School) said that she is OBC. Generally Dhobis, with the traditional occupation of washing clothes, are a low caste, and members of this group are usually referred to as ‘untouchable’ or Dalit. In view of possible ‘pollution’ concerns, it is, therefore, significant that it is Sushmita and not the high-caste Rani who not only distributes food to the students but also serves chai to the school staff. There is an internal agreement that Sushmita prepares chai during the lunch break, which she serves to the school staff once she is done with distributing the food. The teachers collect the money for the ingredients among themselves and give this to her, but they do not pay her anything extra for making the chai and washing the utensils (including the cups that she collects afterwards). Hence, Sushmita works up to two hours at the school per day for the same payment as the other distributors who are done with their work in half the time she is. Mrs Sakshi and some teachers assured me that the INR 1,000 per month is a fair payment for her tasks (including the chai-making), and also referred to the fact that Sushmita in turn takes home food – indeed, she often takes along a lunch box full of MDMS food for her son.

Although a little bit of food does not compensate for low payment, this aspect should perhaps not be underestimated. In a large-scale comparative study on the relationship between food security and occupational choice in low-income households in four countries, Floro and Bali Swain (2013) not only found that women are likely to earn less money than men but also that self-employed women of households vulnerable to food insecurity are more likely to work in food-related enterprises. They argue that this can be a strategy to try to secure access to food in a direct way (Floro and Bali Swain 2013: 97). For those women who are engaged in MDMS processes in settings where they are allowed to take leftover food, this consideration could possibly play a role in their job choice too. In the case of Sushmita, this might play a role in her acceptance of the extra amount of unpaid work. Mrs Sakshi also told me that she values Sushmita’s work at the school and as a small token of appreciation, including for the chai-making, she refrains from registering all holidays that Sushmita takes. This is relevant because the distributors are paid on the basis of the numbers of days that they actually work, with each holiday day causing a deduction of payment (Interview with Seema Sakshi).

That the staff of RP Kulam School drink chai prepared and served by someone from a Dhobi caste is an example of the liberal attitude towards caste that is cultivated in this school. However, this attitude goes hand in hand with an exploitative arrangement for Sushmita that the school staff have created without seeing it as a problem. On the larger level, the fact that about half of the MDMS distributors under Bhojan Foundation are Dalits shows that at these schools it is generally accepted that Dalits touch the food that the students eat. This may not be very surprising given that, at least in Sir Balai School, Dalit students regularly help serve the food. The point that I want to emphasize here is that, quite ironically, the only position within the MDMS processes for which poor and Dalit women are preferentially engaged in my research area (besides the 18 female workers in the kitchen), is also the only position in this setting where the question of social acceptance at the school level could potentially arise.

The drivers

There is one more section within the segregated labour regimes under Bhojan Foundation: the drivers, currently 19 in number. This job is exclusively done by men, about whose social backgrounds no information is provided in the records that the NGO has on them. In fact, they are not directly employed by the latter. Rather, the NGO hires the transportation vehicles from a company which provides them along with drivers, who always drive one particular van. Hence, the selection of them is the responsibility of this separate company, which does not follow a particular policy regarding the employment of low castes, Dalits or 'needy' people as far as I have been told. The NGO only reserves the right to reject drivers and demand a replacement in exceptional cases. The drivers get INR 9,000–10,000 per month from the NGO for eight hours of work per day, plus possible 'overtime payment' in case they work significantly longer – because of a heavy traffic jam, for instance. They start off from the kitchen with the food containers for several schools at 7 a.m. in the morning and deliver the food to the schools for which they are in charge (according to the size and location of the schools, one driver covers between 5 and 15 schools per shift). After a short time, they start collecting the containers again, along with lists of the daily attendance of students, and then deliver both back to the kitchen.

Recreation of 'durable inequalities'

The examples of the MDMS distributors and drivers show very clearly how certain tasks within the processes of food provision are systematically gendered, and also that these positions are highly unequal in many regards. Driving as well as unloading the containers is a 'male job', while the actual distribution of the food is a 'female job'. The distributors do not even have formal contracts, and work for only one to two hours a day – for which they receive low payment. The drivers, in contrast, have eight-hour workdays for which they earn more than the female

employees in the kitchen, even though the latter work ten hours per day. Hence, there is a significant pay gap between men and women within the NGO, which is even more obvious in the different salaries of the women and men on the kitchen level (as discussed above).

However, the major inequality that we observe here is not that they are paid less for the same work, but that they are employed in segregated jobs. The crux of the problem, therefore, is that women often have no chance to occupy the positions that are considered 'skilled' (or even 'semi-skilled'), with their better salaries and chances of promotion. This is not a situation specific to Bhojan Foundation or to the MDMS, but a trend that is widely recognised as a global phenomenon in fact (see, for example, Tomaskovic-Devey 2005; Blackburn et al. 2002; Tilly 2009; Bielby 1986; Weeden et al. 2018; ILO 2018; Floro and Bali Swain 2013).

Overall, the labour regimes at Bhojan Foundation provide empirical evidence of how 'durable inequalities' are recreated according to Tilly (2009). One of the basic mechanisms in the recreation thereof that this scholar is concerned with is 'exploitation', which he defines as: '[A] response to the situation in which some well-connected group of actors controls a valuable, labor-demanding resource from which they can extract returns only by harnessing the effort of others, whom they exclude from the full value added by that effort' (Tilly 2009: 66). This implies that in order to solve organisational problems (such as how to control access to certain resources and whom to hire), managers draw internal boundaries between the positions of the different workers (Tilly 2009: 14–19). These positions typically differ in terms of the tasks ascribed, the payment and the modalities thereof, the chances of promotion and similar. In my research context, this is most evident if we look at the boundaries established between the different jobs in the kitchen. The bulk of employees are 'semi-skilled' workers whose payment is at least to some extent negotiable (including the possibility of bonuses) and who generally have the chance to get promoted within the organisation eventually. In contrast, the 'unskilled' workers face only fixed payment (at low rates) and no possibility of promotion – instead, higher insecurity because they can easily be replaced.

Tilly argues that such internal boundaries that divide the highly unequal positions are typically matched with external, well-established and historically created social inequalities by the management of the organisation (Tilly 2009: 62). Bhojan Foundation aligns its internal boundaries with the widely established social inequalities between female and male, and partly also Dalit and non-Dalit (as a high share of Dalits is to be found only in the 'female jobs'). The tendency for organisations in these segregation processes to adopt categorical boundaries which already exist in other societal institutions/organisations Tilly calls 'emulation'. According to him, this functions so well because the categorical pairs (in my context female/male and Dalit/non-Dalit) are so deeply rooted in society as unequal categories: Dalits and women have far lower social status than non-Dalits and men do. Hence, using these categories in the organisational structure as well

bears low transaction costs and increases the stability of the NGO (Tilly 2009: 62). In the 'India Exclusion Report', Sethia et al. (2015: 121) also argue that historical gender inequalities as well as gender stereotypes – such as women's 'natural affinity' for caring tasks, subservient temperament and inability to perform intellectual or physically challenging tasks – are often translated into work realities. Thus, they determine the job chances, status and payment choices regarding women.

Of crucial importance to the described processes that channel women (or other groups) into particular types of jobs is an additional mechanism that Tilly calls 'opportunity hoarding'. It refers to the phenomenon that if a group of people have access to a certain resource (jobs in this case), there is the tendency for them to monopolise that access: only workers from the same group are recruited, which in turn contributes to the exclusion of others. In these processes community networks play a crucial role, as they transmit knowledge of vacancies as well as knowledge relevant for the work – the classic example here being migrant communities who occupy certain niches (Tilly 2009: 69).

Moreover, Tilly argues that the tendency to recruit only people from one social group for a certain type of job can create the impression that a particular group of people are especially suited to that work. This in turn further supports the tendency for people from one particular community to often be channelled into a specific type of job (Tilly 2009: 100). In fact, when asked why women only work in the 'unskilled' jobs in the kitchen, the argument of the NGO management, as mentioned earlier, especially stressed alleged physical differences (for lifting heavy objects, handling machines, and similar). Hence, implicit in the strict segregation of tasks is the perception that men are more suited to working with machines and hard labour than women are. Moreover, the latter instead need protection from 'dangerous' work and long work days or night shifts, while young men, in contrast, are assumed to be more robust and less in need of protection. Hence already-existing stereotypes go, as noted, closely together with the tendency whereby if a particular type of job is predominantly done by a specific group of people then the latter come to be seen as most suited to doing it.

The fourth mechanism which Tilly sees as supporting processes of exploitation and opportunity hoarding is 'adaptation', and refers to the fact that people tend to establish social networks corresponding to their position at work and hence to develop a certain interest in staying in this position, to which they adjust to some extent (Tilly 2009: 73). This could perhaps partly explain why Mrs Dash/Das, upon my question about whether she and the other women are also involved in cooking the food at the NGO kitchen, replied quite resolutely: 'Na didi, na. Khaana-waana nahi. [...] Hum log na bana payenge, na Didi? Bara-bara phufa hai na?' ('No, sister, no. No cooking. [...] We wouldn't be able to do this, right sister? The cookers are very big, right?' Interview with Mrs Dash/Das, part 1; author's own translation). Rather than assuming that she really thinks she and the other female

employees are unable to handle the pots, use the machines or fry pooris, I take her statement as a sign that she has at least to some extent adjusted her expectations to the position and the boundaries that have been assigned to her and the other women. The extent to which women in certain situations adapt to their unequal working positions is also revealed by Deshpande (2020), who focuses on various forms of ‘work from home’ done by women, including unpaid work at home (such as for family businesses) or low-paid labour (such as home-based work for factories). She argues that women who do this often see this work as an extension of their household chores, and therefore internalise the low worth that is ascribed to such tasks.

Generally, the recruitment patterns of women and men into their respective jobs at Bhojan Foundation show that women are excluded from the better positions and that their actual skills and abilities to do certain tasks are not the decisive factors in determining their employment positions. The ‘India Exclusion Report’ comes to a similar conclusion, with the authors arguing that the ability of women to access work and just employment conditions depends primarily on ‘social constructs’, such as patriarchy, that are external to their own capabilities and income (Sethia et al. 2015: 109). Sharma’s (2008) ethnography on the ‘Mahila Samakhya’ (MS) programme for women’s education offers an example that shows how deeply patriarchal norms are rooted in society and shape the imagination of ‘women’s work’. She reveals that even the MS programme, which is jointly run by the Indian government and feminist groups aiming at women’s empowerment, defines women who are a fundamental part of its organisational structure merely as ‘voluntary workers’. This, according to the author, relegates them to unpaid work and thereby reinforces gender inequalities and patriarchal exploitation (Sharma 2008: 57, 58). This paradoxical situation demonstrates that processes aiming at deconstructing inequalities and the processes that recreate them are not always clear cut or distinguishable, even at times being tied closely together.

The comparative study of Shah et al. (2018) provides much ethnographic evidence of the mechanisms that Tilly (2009) describes. The main argument of their book is that social and economic inequalities are based on caste and other identity markers, such as tribe, gender and region of origin – moreover, this does not change with economic growth. Rather, capitalist labour regimes explicitly build on existing inequalities – or, in other words, they reinforce ‘durable inequalities’. Donegan’s (in Shah et al. 2018) earlier-mentioned ethnography on the effects of employment at a chemical plant in a Tamil Nadu village on the situation of Dalits and Adivasis, for instance, found that the labour force in the factory is highly segregated according to particular social groups, with the less fortunate having little chances of improving their working conditions or wages. He observed that recruitment typically happens by recommendation, so that employment opportunities are monopolised by certain groups (Shah et al. 2018: 99). Further, Donegan found that for women, a higher educational level did not seem to enable them to access better jobs (Shah et al. 2018: 100). This corresponds with my observation at Bhojan

Foundation that the jobs of the women are not related to their personal abilities. Generally, according to Kannan (in Shah et al. 2018: 42), Dalits and Adivasis are the groups for which educational level has the least influence on their economic condition – for them, even with better education, it is extremely difficult to get better-paid work.

Conclusion

This article focused on employment practices and labour regimes in food production processes of the Mid Day Meal Scheme, asking: To what extent are inequalities reduced or reproduced in the production of school lunches? According to Supreme Court orders and official policy guidelines, women, Dalits, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes should be preferentially engaged in the jobs that the MDMS creates. The literature reveals that in school-based kitchens (as prevailing in rural areas), generally women are engaged as cooks and helpers. However, only a few states have framed clear rules on this and actually mandated preferences for Dalits, low castes and other disadvantaged groups being employed under the MDMS. Generally, there is a widespread reluctance to engage Dalits under this scheme; numerous studies and news reports have repeatedly revealed that in cases where cooks are Dalits they are often confronted with discrimination and opposition. In most states, moreover, cooks and helpers receive extremely low pay and no social security.

In the case of centralised kitchens (as prevailing in urban areas), like the one of my case study in Delhi, the interpretation of official employment guidelines seems to be left to the NGOs running them. The women at Bhojan Foundation, of whom about half are Dalits, work almost exclusively as distributors in the schools, while of the employees who work in the kitchen itself some 95.5 per cent are men. The caste identity of the male employees as well as of the drivers (all male) is allegedly not recorded.

Generally, at Bhojan Foundation I found employment tendencies that possibly reduce inequalities as well as ones that reproduce them too. The NGO itself, the system of the centralised kitchen in general as well as the social atmosphere at the schools allow for the recruitment of Dalits in the food-preparation and food-distribution processes. Workers of different religious backgrounds operate alongside one another, and at least among the 18 women in the kitchen Dalits and non-Dalits also do so. This has the potential to reduce religious and caste inequalities. The example of Mrs Dash/Das, however, demonstrates that at least some Dalits may attempt to hide their caste identity and that related prejudices do indeed exist in the kitchen. Moreover, a high share of Dalits is only recorded in the ‘female jobs’, which are less secure and less rewarded. In fact, very strict job segregation along the lines of gender is visible at Bhojan Foundation. Women are only in positions that are regarded as unskilled, with very short working hours (in

case of the majority of them, the distributors), low payment, high insecurity and no chances of promotion, regardless of their personal abilities.

Drawing on Tilly's (2009) concept of 'durable inequalities', and examining the typical mechanisms by which they are reproduced in institutions, I argued that the occupational segregation by gender and partly by caste that I found at the NGO is a result of such organisational mechanisms. This does not mean that managers are always intentionally discriminatory. Rather, the organisation – operating within a socio-economic environment where labour is already segmented by gender and caste – follows processes that serve to reproduce inequalities.

Following the overall aim to provide safe food in an efficient way, the working processes and labour management at Bhojan Foundation are tailored according to the internal priorities of the organisation. This includes labour processes in which unequal positions are filled according to well-established unjust divisions in society, such as gender and caste. For the large-scale food production and semi-automated working processes in the kitchen itself, a system of day and night shifts with partly flexible working times has been set up. The positions within this system of working in shifts and handling the machines are filled with male migrant workers who live in shared dormitories. Women are only engaged for the unskilled tasks of cleaning food grains, and the overall space, as well as of serving the food in the schools. It is ironic that the job of the cook – which is traditionally a female task, in school-based MDMS kitchens one also mostly done by women – has become a male domain in most centralised kitchens. This is an example that with more technological and specialised working processes in place, being connected to better remuneration, it is typically men doing these jobs – just like in the 'professional' domain of cooking, generally, the chefs are men.

Generally (apart from a few NGOs that engage women for cooking in centralised kitchens), the 'female jobs' under the MDMS are the cooks and helpers in school-based kitchens (who cover all tasks around food production, distribution and cleaning) and the distributors of the NGO-run kitchens, as well as a few kitchen employees who do cleaning tasks. All these positions correspond to typical gendered divisions of labour: cooking (mainly in smaller, school-based settings), feeding/caring (for children) and cleaning. The fact that women are expected to do these tasks for a meagre 'honorarium' without contracts or any kind of social security shows that their work is not even seen as worthy of salary, being rather a kind of part-time extension of the work they already do at home.

The mechanisms of institutional management also mean that job recruitment typically happens via well-established systems, which contributes to the fact that often members of a particular group are channelled into certain positions. These groups are then viewed as particularly suitable for the respective jobs. This makes it even more difficult for women to overcome the stereotype that they are less able to handle machines and hard labour than men are, a perception not only recreated by employment practices but also to some extent supported by the discourse

around the protection of females in the workplace. Moreover, the tendency for people who work in certain positions to establish their networks accordingly, and to reconcile themselves to their conditions to some extent, further contributes to the functioning of such systems.

To sum up, the state and NGOs as contractors have created a system in which women – of whom a large share are Dalits or members of low castes – are doing cheap labour in positions that correspond to historically produced gender and caste roles. There are certainly examples of employment practices that potentially contribute to reducing these inequalities. Overall, however, the latter are more often recreated within the employment practices under the MDMS.

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Appendix

Interviews directly referred to in the article (names of persons and institutions changed)

Sushmita and Rani, meal distributors at RP Kulam School, New Delhi, 9 October 2015

Ranchi (part 1), meal distributor at Ber Sarai School, New Delhi, 18 October 2015

Ranchi (part 2), meal distributor at Ber Sarai School, New Delhi, 18 October 2015

Sushmita (part 1), meal distributor at RP Kulam School, New Delhi, 6 November 2015

Sushmita (part 2), distributor at RP Kulam School, New Delhi, 6 November 2015

Mrs Sakshi, principal at RP Kulam School, New Delhi, 13 December 2015

Mr Thomas (part 1), manager at Bhojan Foundation, New Delhi, 27 April 2016

Mr Thomas (part 2), manager at Bhojan Foundation, New Delhi, 27 April 2016

Mrs Dash/Das (part 1), staff at Bhojan Foundation, New Delhi, 27 April 2016

Mrs Dash/Das (part 2), staff at Bhojan Foundation, New Delhi, 27 April 2016

Mrs Dash/Das (staff) and Mr Thomas (manager), Bhojan Foundation, New Delhi, 27 April 2016