



Children of a government school enjoying a mid-day meal prepared by the Akshaya Patra Foundation

Food For The Soul

The Akshaya Patra Foundation, with its motto of “feeding the hungry when it matters”, has come a long way from serving wholesome food to just 1,500 poor children across five schools to being the world’s largest not-for-profit mid-day meal programme

By Bindu Gopal Rao

Not so long ago, the “Ice Bucket Challenge” took on a new meaning when Hyderabad-based Manju Latha Kalanidhi said that India needs to take the “Rice Bucket Challenge” instead and donate a bucketful of rice to feed the poor in the locality. But for quite some time now, Akshaya Patra Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation headquartered in Bengaluru, has been doing something similar in the form of its Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme in government and government-aided



Sambar being prepared at a centralised kitchen in Bengaluru



Children at the Government Primary School in Jaipur



Rice being taken in a container from the cauldron

Ever since it was started, Akshaya Patra has worked towards providing more and more children with wholesome food every single day

schools. The organisation strives to fight problems like hunger and malnutrition in the country and by implementing the Akshaya Patra scheme, aims not only to fight hunger but also get more children to go to school.

Humble beginnings

It was in June 2000 that the foundation started the MDM Scheme in Bengaluru, Karnataka. Shridhar Venkat, CEO, shares how it all began. “Looking out of the window one day in Mayapur, a village near Kolkata, his divine grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada saw a group of children fighting with stray dogs over scraps of food. From this heart-wrenching incident was born a determination that no child

within a radius of ten miles from our centre should go hungry. His steely resolve helped in making Akshaya Patra Foundation what it is today,” he recalls.

The early days of implementation were not smooth sailing for the organisation. But soon, help came in the form of Mohandas Pai, Chairman of Manipal Global Education, who took the initiative of donating the first vehicle to transport food to schools and Abhay Jain, Advisor, Group Corporate Affairs, Manipal Education & Medical Group, who promised to rope in more donors to contribute towards further expansion of the programme. The foundation started on a modest scale, serving mid-day meals to a small number of children in some government schools in Bengaluru. Ever

since, the organisation has worked towards providing more and more children with wholesome food every single school day.

Expanding reach

Akshaya Patra continuously leverages technology in order to cater to millions of children. In fact, the foundation’s state-of-the-art kitchens have become the subject of study and attract curious visitors from around the world in droves. Venkat informs: “In partnership with the Government of India and various state governments, and inestimable support from several businesses, philanthropic donors, and well-wishers, we have grown from feeding just 1,500 children across five schools to being the world’s largest

(not-for-profit run) mid-day meal programme serving wholesome food to over 1.4 million children across 10,845 schools in 10 states of the country.” The organisation runs on a Public Private Partnership (PPP) model and interacts closely with respective state governments. Based on requests raised by schools, the latter are supported through MDM.

Funding a cause

The foundation has different modes of generating funds. “We have set up a system and a team to track funds from individual donors, philanthropists and corporates. There is steady support from the Government of India, various state governments, and associated organisations. This has enabled the programme to grow by leaps and bounds. Akshaya Patra, with part support from the government, also depends on corporate funds, philanthropic donors, volunteers and well-wishers for managing such a massive operation. The nitty-gritty of operations includes technological innovations, quality standards, delivery vehicles, and interaction with various stakeholders,” explains Venkat.

The organisation is highly transparent and makes available to the public not only information related to finances but also intellectual property. The organisation believes that there is dire need for Akshaya Patra’s operations to be replicated so that it realises its vision i.e. “No child in India should be deprived of education because of hunger.” Hence, the foundation makes available all information to other organisations, the government and enthusiasts.

Food matters

The foundation is active in 24 locations across 10 states in India. It operates through centralised kitchens or large kitchen units with the capacity to



Sridhar Venkat, Chief Executive Officer, The Akshaya Patra Foundation

BEYOND THE MID-DAY MEALS



Akshaya Patra undertakes many other feeding and social initiatives other than its well-known Mid-Day Meals Programme

Anganwadi feeding

Feeding in old-age homes

Disaster relief

Meals for expecting and lactating mothers

Feeding in special schools

Food for runaway children

After class tuitions

Community health camps

Health check-up camps

typically cook up to 100,000 meals. These kitchens are automated so as to ensure hygiene during the cooking process. They serve a set of schools located around the unit. By contrast, in locations where difficult geographical terrain and poor road connectivity do not support creation of centralised infrastructure, the decentralised kitchen format is the ideal solution. Such decentralised kitchens are run by women’s self-help groups (SHGs).

Hope springs eternal

Feeding the hungry when it matters can also change perspective towards education and the foundation has proved this. Take for instance the Padua High School in Nanthur, Mangaluru, which is a beneficiary of Akshaya Patra Foundation and has 408 students across different castes and communities.

Ramesh, a Standard X student and sports enthusiast from the school is grateful for the mid-day meal served to him every day, “Many of us here come from poor backgrounds. The administration is really good and our teachers teach us really well. It is great that we have a school like this,” he says. Meanwhile, here’s hoping that the foundation realises its dream to reach out to 5 million children by 2020. ■