

ImpactIndia

Case Study:
Akshaya Patra
By Brandon Keim

Published by *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, The Bridgespan Group, and Dasra



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TECHNICAL INGENUITY AND PRIVATE FUNDING ENABLE AKSHAYA PATRA TO SERVE HOT, HEALTHY LUNCHES TO 1.4 MILLION INDIAN CHILDREN EVERY DAY.

■ BY BRANDON KEIM

Fifteen years ago, at a Hare Krishna temple in Bangalore, India, worshipers noticed that children often came to eat the meals that the temple customarily served at the end of religious services. The kids should have been in school. But for them, as for millions of other Indian children, getting enough food was a more pressing priority than getting an education. Instead of giving out meals at the temple, some of the worshipers started bringing food to a nearby school. The kids who had been showing up on the temple steps now showed up in class. “This was just one small temple, solving the food problem in its community,” recalls Binali Suhandani, head of resource mobilization at the Akshaya Patra Foundation, an organization that emerged from the efforts of those Hare Krishna worshipers. Akshaya Patra has come a long way since then. Today the organization maintains a network of high-efficiency kitchens that enables it to serve hot lunches to 1.4 million children at more than 10,500 schools in 10 Indian states.

The work of Akshaya Patra takes place under the auspices of the Mid-Day Meal scheme, an initiative to ensure that every child in every Indian public school receives a nutritious meal every school day. Enacted by the Indian federal government in 1995, the MDM scheme gained the force of a Supreme Court order in 2001. Despite that legal mandate, however, the federal government has failed to provide adequate funding and logistical support for the program. A variety of local and state governments, along with various charitable organizations, have moved to fill that gap. Progress has been considerable but far from complete: Today more than 100 million children receive food through the MDM scheme. Yet India still has a child under-nutrition rate that places it 120th out of 128 countries on the Global Hunger Index, and nearly one in three Indian children is underweight.

The leaders of Akshaya Patra (the term means “inexhaustible vessel” in Sanskrit) say that its mission isn’t simply about providing food to hungry kids. It’s about social development. It’s about

fulfilling the educational potential of children who otherwise would struggle to learn on an empty stomach. It’s about bridging the deep divides of caste and class by creating a daily occasion when children can sit down to a shared meal. Madhu Pandit Dasa, founding chairman, was one of the worshipers who attended that little temple in Bangalore in 2000. Akshaya Patra, he said in a 2007 speech, is “more than a school meal program. It’s a hunger-eradication program. It’s an education program. It’s a social project. It’s a nation-building effort.” Matching

that lofty mission is a lofty goal: Akshaya Patra aims to serve five million children by 2020. To meet that objective, the organization will need to leverage the well-functioning systems that it has built. And it will need to overcome several challenges that it faces.

OUT OF THE KITCHEN

At schools in the United States and other wealthy nations, paid staff members typically prepare school lunches on site. In India, that approach is often impractical. Many schools have no kitchen facilities. In the early days of the MDM scheme, it wasn’t uncommon for people to cook meals in makeshift sheds or even in classrooms; overwhelmed cooks would sometimes ask schoolchildren for help. The leaders of Akshaya Patra realized that it would be more efficient to cook meals at a centralized kitchen and then distribute them to schools. (That idea came to the founders naturally: Several of them had backgrounds in engineering. Dasa, who studied at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, designed the organization’s first kitchen.)

Akshaya Patra now runs 23 cooking facilities. The kitchens, which operate from Sunday evening through Friday morning, present a model of industrial design and automated efficiency. In the north of India, where local diets are grain-rich, bread-makers can produce 60,000 pieces of flatbread in just one hour. In the south, where rice is a staple, cookers can heat 250 pounds of rice in 20 minutes. On average, the kitchens can produce 150,000 meals in less than five hours.

Such efficiency didn’t happen overnight, according to Vinay Kumar, head of operations at Akshaya Patra. He and his colleagues standardized processes across multiple facilities. They also implemented systems to share innovations across the entire chain of kitchens. “Each of our decisions is data-driven. Anything we implement should be measured by data, replicable in another place, and standardized,” says Kumar. Kitchen workers know exactly how long it takes to cook each meal. They know how much kitchen capacity is

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required to make that meal. They know which raw materials are in hand and which materials need to be purchased. The commitment to efficiency doesn't stop at the kitchen door. Akshaya Patra uses path-optimizing software to plot the delivery routes between each kitchen and each school that it serves.

Sameer Prasad, professor of operations management at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, has studied Akshaya Patra and its systems. The organization, he notes, has taken supply-chain management practices developed in the business world and applied them to a nonprofit endeavor. By optimizing its kitchen systems, Akshaya Patra has made its operation highly cost-effective: Its average annual per-child cost is only about \$30. It has also been able to ensure that its meals are fresh. Cooks use vegetables within just a few days of procuring them, and the organization prepares and distributes its meals on the same day.

INTO THE FUTURE

Until now, Akshaya Patra has focused on serving schools in urban locales, where its distribution system is most effective. In rural areas, where schools are far apart, the efficiency of that system decreases dramatically. Yet 70 percent of India's population is rural, so reaching children in those areas is vital to the organization's mission. Kumar aims to develop high-efficiency kitchens to serve rural and semi-urban areas over the next three years, but meeting the standard of efficiency that Akshaya Patra has established in urban areas will be difficult. "Their model works only when it's in a more densely populated place, and there are economies of scale," Prasad argues.

A bigger challenge involves funding. Akshaya Patra has an annual budget of \$35 million, and 60 percent of that comes from the Indian government in the form of cash or donations of food. The other 40 percent comes from corporate and private donors, such as Desh Deshpande, chairman of Akshaya Patra. (See "Q&A with Desh Deshpande" on page 12.) Despite support from high-profile companies—among them Adobe Systems, Caterpillar, and the State Bank of India—raising funds is a constant struggle. Recently, according to Suhandani, the organization has made headway by focusing on its online efforts and by gaining celebrity endorsements. But raising money is only part of the fundraising equation. Equally important is being able to raise it at a steady pace. "Making our income more predictable while scaling up is a challenge," says Sridhar Venkat, CEO.

The volatility of food markets in India exacerbates that challenge. Over the past decade, the country has experienced not only regular price spikes but also long-term inflation that has outpaced

overall economic growth. To manage that volatility, Akshaya Patra now procures some of its produce from commodity brokers, with whom it can sign long-term contracts. But that's no guarantee of price stability.

Underlying those challenges is a more fundamental question about the Akshaya Patra model: Are public-private partnerships the right approach to meeting a basic need like feeding schoolchildren? "The midday meal program is a right. It has to be provided by the government," says Biraj Patnaik, a member of the steering



Workers at an Akshaya Patra kitchen in Hubli, India, prepare rice for delivery to schools.

committee for the Right to Food Campaign, an advocacy group. Patnaik also warns against the potentially outsized influence that private interests can have when the government relies on public-private partnerships.

Today, Akshaya Patra leaders are concentrating on the goal of feeding five million children by 2020. They're also dealing with hard choices about how to leverage the organization's resources. In a recent collaboration with the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, for example, Akshaya Patra provided not only meals but also optical, dental, and general health checkups to schoolchildren. Given the reach of the organization's distribution network, such projects make sense. But Venkat worries about trying to do too many things too quickly. "Akshaya Patra could have built toilets. We could have gotten into teaching. We could have diversified into many other areas," he says. "But we stayed focused on providing a simple, hot, nutritious meal. We believe that simplicity is the key to scaling up." ■

This article is based on "More Than a Meal," an article that first appeared in the summer 2015 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.