

Working paper



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Attendance for Entitlement?

An Analysis of the
75% Attendance
Conditionality
to Avail School
Entitlements in Bihar



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December 2014

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An Analysis of the 75% Attendance Conditionality to Avail School Entitlements in Bihar

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1. Executive Summary

Since 2012/13, the Government of Bihar made the disbursement of various benefits at the school level conditional on the student maintaining at least 75% attendance between the months of April and September in a given academic year. The aim of this conditionality was to incentivize students to attend school more regularly. To study the implementation of this rule and potential caste-based exclusion that might arise from this conditionality, the IGC conducted a survey of 120 schools and 1600 students across 4 districts in Bihar. Results from the survey demonstrate that although the scheme is implemented well, there is some evidence of inflation in actual attendance rates and leakages; however, some of this inflation can be attributed to seasonal factors, so the importance of inflation in attendance should not be overstated. We also find evidence that some students from marginalized social strata face exclusion from the scholarship programme despite fulfilling the attendance criteria.

2. Background

Since India's independence, both the central and state governments have made efforts to improve the situation of education in the country. Aside from big-ticket central schemes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, state governments across the country have introduced several independent initiatives to improve the status of education. Given the socio-economic conditions in Bihar, the Government of Bihar has introduced targeted schemes to encourage education amongst especially vulnerable groups- a prime example being the *Mukhyamantri Cycle Yojana* (which was initially limited only to girls, but upon its unprecedented success, was scaled up to include boys as well).

Similarly, the government offers money to students to buy uniforms, and also provides cash incentives ('scholarships') to all girls, and students belonging to backward castes (BC/EBC/SC/ST). While these initiatives were previously free from any conditionality, since 2012/13, only those students who attain a minimum of 75% attendance across the months of April to September in a given year are offered these benefits. This is primarily aimed at motivating students to attend school regularly, which in turn can improve the learning outcomes of children.

3. Introduction to this Study

As mentioned in the last section, the attendance conditionality scheme was introduced in Bihar to incentivize students to attend school regularly. However, there have been concerns expressed from certain quarters regarding the increase in corruption and systematic exclusion of students belonging to backward classes from these benefits by use of the attendance conditionality. Moreover, now the conditionality has been in existence since 2013/14, an evaluation of the scheme is critical to shed light on its functioning and effects.

Research Questions and Methodology:

The primary research questions of this study are summarized as follows:

- i. *Implementation:* How well is the attendance conditionality being implemented on the ground? Do teachers in schools actually take attendance every day, and are records properly

maintained? What are the awareness levels of students and their parents regarding the attendance conditionality?

- ii. *Caste- based Exclusion*: Are certain sections of the society being systematically excluded from availing these benefits because of the attendance conditionality? (i.e., is there any evidence of caste-based discrimination in disbursement of incentives since the introduction of the attendance conditionality?)
- iii. *Trend of Attendance*: Has there been a change in the trend of attendance since the introduction of the attendance conditionality?

To answer the first two questions, we rely on primary data collected by our survey team. We conducted spot-check surveys of primary and upper-primary schools via surprise visits, where the school authorities weren't informed in advance that a survey team will be visiting to check their records. Across all the schools surveyed, our teams studied the method of maintenance of attendance registers and beneficiary lists, interviewed school authorities, and did classroom visits to check the level of actual attendance and interact with the students. To understand the level of awareness amongst students and their parents regarding the benefits and the mode of operation of the attendance conditionality, we also conducted household-level surveys in houses of students studying in primary schools, and student-level surveys in upper-primary schools. (*Henceforth, for simplicity, we term both household and student level surveys as student surveys*).

To answer the third question, we use secondary data obtained from the Bihar Mid-Day Meal Directorate, which collects daily data regarding students being fed via the Mid-Day Meal Scheme in each school across the state. We use this MDM requirement data as a proxy for school attendance.

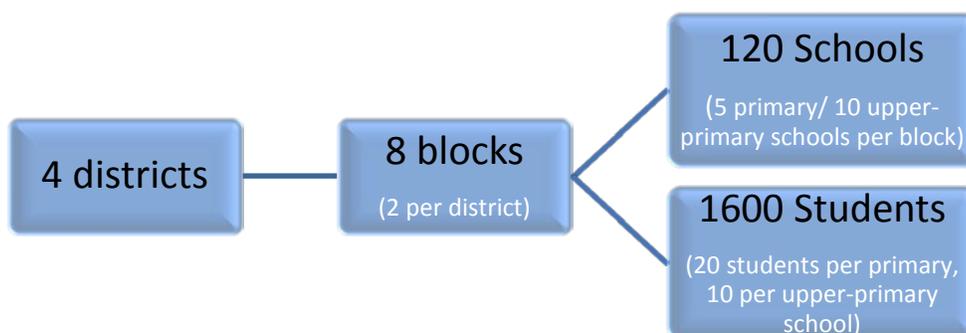
Description of the Sample:

The study was conducted across 4 districts in Bihar: West Champaran, Bhojpur, Purnia, and Banka. To ensure a broad sample, we ranked all the 38 districts of Bihar on the basis of their per-capita income, and divided the resulting list into four roughly equal divisions. Subsequently, we picked one district from each of these divisions, also ensuring that there were two districts each from north and south Bihar to ensure fair geographic representation.

Further, in each district, we selected two blocks to conduct our surveys; once again, to ensure fair representation, we chose one block in each district close to the district centre, and one far away from it (the assumption being that the blocks closer to the district centre are likely to be more

developed and the functioning of government programmes is better monitored than the ones farther off).

In each block thus selected, we randomly selected 5 primary schools, and 10 upper-primary schools for the school level survey. In each primary school, we conducted 20 student-level surveys, and in each upper-primary school, 10 student-level surveys. Thus, our survey exercise yielded a rich dataset of 40 primary schools, 80 upper-primary schools, and 1600 student-level surveys. This is summarized below:



Regarding student surveys, it should be noted that for logistical reasons, we decided to only survey Standards 3 and 4, while in upper-primary schools, we limited our survey to Standard 7. Surveying students from each class would have been very time consuming and given the time constraints, we wanted to cover more schools rather than doing an exhaustive survey in a limited number of schools. It's unlikely that a school would implement the programme differently across grades but the quality of implementation is likely to vary across schools. Thus, surveying more schools is likely to generate greater variation in data, as against surveying more classrooms within the same school.

4. Key Findings

4.1: Implementation

Finding 1: Documents are maintained well, but there is some evidence of inflation in actual attendance

Amongst the 120 schools visited, 96% of the schools had taken the attendance on the day of the survey, and also shared a copy of last year's list of beneficiaries under the uniform and scholarship schemes.

There was, however, some discrepancy between the number of students marked present in the register, and the number of students actually present in the classroom. Below, we present the extent of inflation in attendance: the column 'Register' shows the percentage of total enrolled students who were present according to the attendance register. The column 'Actual' shows the percentage of total enrolled students who were actually present in the classroom when the school was visited by the surveyor. The survey was conducted over two weeks in the month of November, and therefore all the schools were visited roughly on similar days.

Table 01: % Attendance as per Register v/s Actual Attendance

	Primary		Upper Primary	
	Register	Actual	Register	Actual
Banka	64	54	47	42
Bhojpur	72	60	55	39
Purnia	59	40	50	41
Champanan	74	64	66	57

Thus, there is consistent evidence of inflation in attendance to the tune of around 10%. This implies that school authorities sometimes mark attendance for more students than are actually present,

possibly in a bid to avail larger funds for mid-day meal from the government (however, this is simply a conjecture). It should, however, also be pointed out that the actual attendance might have been lower than what was marked in the register because of seasonal effects- the survey was conducted during the paddy harvesting season, and it is possible that some of the students who came to school in the morning (when the attendance was taken) had left to help in the fields by the time the survey team visited. Also, some of the survey teams conducted classroom visits after the mid-day meals had been distributed; it is possible that some students had left after the meal.

The level of inflation, however, has been fairly consistent across districts. While some of it might be due to student attrition due to harvest/ mid-day meal, some of it is likely to be actual inflation of figures.

Finding 2: There is some evidence of monetary leakage, but not of demand for bribes from eligible students

The government mandates specific amounts to be disbursed (according to the standard that a student belongs to) for uniform and scholarship schemes. The following table summarizes the mandated amounts against average reported amounts:

Table 02: Mandated v/s Actual Average Disbursal

<i>Rupees</i>	Primary		Upper Primary	
	Mandated	Reported	Mandated	Reported
Uniforms	500	496	700	694
Scholarships	600	566	1800	1150

Thus, it can be seen that the amounts received by students (as reported by them) are roughly equal to the government mandated amounts for the uniform programme but significantly lower in case of scholarships in the Upper Primary Schools. The students surveyed in Standard 7, who should have received Rs. 1800, but reported receiving only Rs. 1150 on average. This might be the result of confusion regarding the exact amount of entitlement- till Standard 6, students are eligible to get Rs. 1200 under the scholarship scheme, while in Standard 7, the entitlement increases to Rs. 1800. The

school authorities might be utilizing this confusion to divert some of the money away from the students.

However, when the students were asked whether they had to pay any bribes/ cuts to receive these benefits, less than 5% of the students reported having had to pay a bribe.

Finding 3: The level of awareness among the students and their families regarding the attendance conditionality varies considerably across primary and upper-primary schools

Amongst the students surveyed in primary schools, only 56% knew the exact attendance conditionality, while in upper-primary, the positive response rate was much higher at 84%. This shows that older students are more aware of the exact condition.

Another factor that goes to show the level of awareness in the larger community regarding the attendance conditionality is the fact that when headmasters were asked whether there had ever been any form of coercion from the students’ parents or the village community for manipulation of attendance, around 30% of the headmasters said that they had faced such coercion. Thus, there is some evidence for community awareness, which would imply the threat of collective action against school authorities in case of regular and systematic exclusion.

4.2: Caste-Based Exclusion

Finding 4: According to disbursal lists maintained in schools, there is little evidence that specific castes are being favoured/ discriminated against in disbursal of benefits

The percentage shares of different castes in enrolment closely mirror their percentage shares in disbursal of money for uniforms and scholarships, for both primary and upper-primary schools, as shown below. Each column shows the percentage share of a given caste category in the total. For instance, the column ‘Uniform Beneficiaries’ shows that of the total number of students benefitting from the uniform programme, 18% were SC, 10% ST, 39% BC, 27% EBC, and 6% General, and so on.

Table 03: % Caste Shares, Primary Schools

	Enrolment	Uniform Beneficiaries	Uniform non-beneficiaries	Scholarship beneficiaries	Scholarship non-beneficiaries
SC	16	18	9	19	9
ST	10	10	10	12	6
BC	41	39	53	40	46
EBC	26	27	20	25	28
GEN	7	6	8	4	11

Table 04: % Caste Shares, Upper-Primary Schools

	Enrolment	Uniform Beneficiaries	Uniform non-beneficiaries	Scholarship beneficiaries	Scholarship non-beneficiaries
SC	18	17	19	16	20
ST	8	8	6	6	10
BC	37	39	32	45	29
EBC	25	26	24	27	23
GEN	12	10	19	6	18

If a particular caste was being systematically discriminated against, we would expect to see those castes showing a higher percentage share in non-beneficiaries. However, this is not borne out by the school records in our sample.

Finding 5: There are some eligible students who do not receive money for scholarships; hence, there is some evidence of exclusion and leakage

Among the students that we surveyed, there were some students who reported receiving money for uniforms, but not for scholarships. If an BC/EBC/SC/ST student receives money under the uniform scheme, it means that she must have attained 75% or more attendance. By extension, she should automatically be eligible for the scholarship which is available only to BC/EBC, Dalit and ST students (except for upper caste girls) who maintain 75% or more attendance. However, in our sample, 17%

of the student respondents from BC/EBC/SC/ST castes reported having received money for uniforms, but not for scholarships.

Given that these are students who were eligible to receive scholarship money, their not having received it implies some degree of leakage from the system. A potential reason for this could be that disbursement under the two schemes usually happens at different times of the year, thus giving the school authorities some leeway towards creating opaqueness in the disbursement mechanism and thereby cause diversion of funds.

The caste breakdown of these students is shown below: each column shows the percentage share of a given caste category in the total. For instance, the column ‘Excluded students’ for Primary shows that of the total students denied scholarship, 8.5 % are SC, 29% are ST, 35.5% are BC, and 27 % are EBC.

Table 05: % caste shares for Primary and Upper Primary

Caste composition	Primary		Upper Primary	
	Excluded students	Enrolment	Excluded students	Enrolment
SC	8.5	16.3	14	18
ST	29	10.4	20	8
BC	35.5	41.4	44	37
EBC	27	25.9	22	25

Thus, it can be seen that among the excluded students, there is evidence for the exclusion of STs whose share in excluded students is disproportionately higher than in the enrolment. The caste shares also show that most of the excluded students were BCs and EBCs, but it is in line with their percentage shares in enrolment.

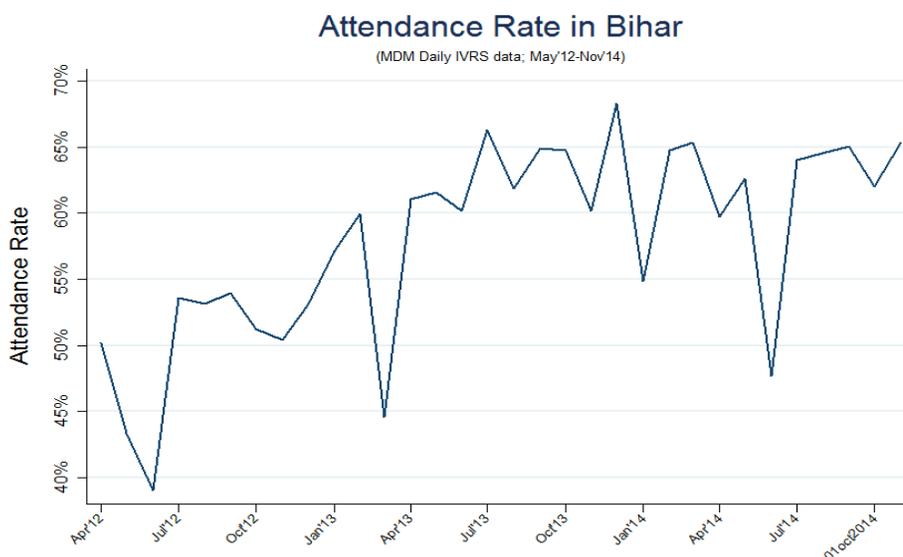
The fact that 17% eligible students were denied scholarships suggests that that adding conditionality creates confusion amongst the beneficiaries and provides greater scope for corruption. The uniform programme, which is universal, seems to perform reasonably well in terms of coverage rate and lower leakages but the functioning of scholarship programme is far from satisfactory as it’s only for specific category of students.

4.3: Trend of Attendance

A motivation behind the attendance conditionality was to motivate students to attend school more often. While it is near impossible to ascertain the effect of the conditionality alone on the trend of attendance rates, we can still compare the attendance rates prevalent before and after the introduction of the conditionality, and see if there is a marked shift, some of which might be attributable to the conditionality.

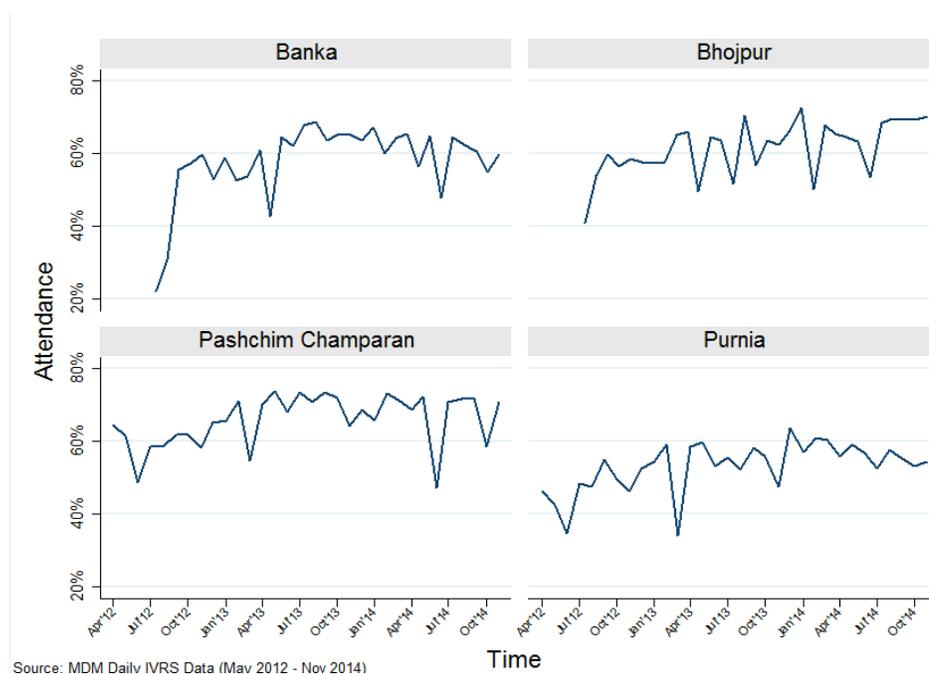
For this, we collected data from the Mid-Day Meal Directorate; average monthly attendance rates from May 2012 to the present for the entire state are displayed in the graph below:

Figure 01: Trend of Attendance, Bihar



Average monthly attendance rates from May 2012 to the present for the 4 sample districts are displayed below:

Figure 02: Trend of Attendance, Sample Districts



As can be seen from the graphs, the data does show some upward trend, but is inconclusive. It should be noted that there are sharp annual dips in the MDM requirement data (which we’re using as a proxy for attendance) - these dips are consistent across individual districts (i.e., all districts show similar dips at the same time of the year. See the graph summarizing monthly attendance data in Appendix 6.2). Thus, these dips are systematic, and might be caused due to external factors such as school summer/ winter vacations, and should be ignored.

Thus, there is some weak evidence for improvement in attendance rates since the introduction of the attendance conditionality. One interesting fact to note is that when we asked headmasters what they thought the effect of the attendance conditionality was, 96% of them said that attendance rates had increased since the introduction of the conditionality. This, however, is simply a perception, and is not backed by data. However, even if such a trend increase exists, it cannot be attributed solely to the conditionality since there must be several factors exogenous to the particular scheme affecting attendance in general.

It is worth mentioning that the primary driving force behind introducing conditionality scheme was not entirely to create a filter (in way to limit number of students getting benefits). The scheme was universal in nature when conditionality was implemented assuming it will act as an incentive for students to attend school regularly (or at least 75% of the time). Looking at above two figures, one can observe that attendance in reality didn’t go display a significant positive trend.

5. Conclusions and a Caveat

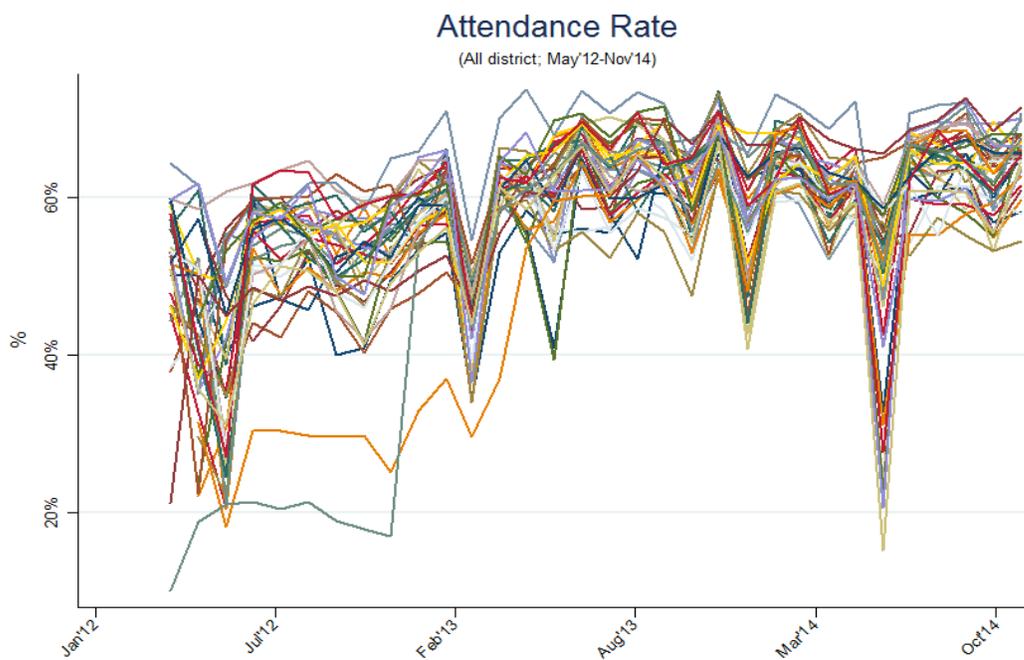
The attendance conditionality, according to our sample of 120 schools and 1600 students, seems to be well implemented for the uniform programme but there is some evidence of leakage and exclusion in the scholarship programme. The students of upper primary school seem to be aware of the various facets of the conditionality but the awareness level is considerably low when it comes to children attending primary school. **It is noteworthy that a significant section (about 17%) of children from BC/EBC/SC/ST were denied scholarship despite fulfilling the attendance conditionality.** The relatively poor performance of scholarship programme suggests that imposing additional eligibility criterion tends to reduce transparency and increase corruption. Joining this observation with the fact that the upwards trend in attendance in past few years is inconclusive, one may suggest that a better incentive for increasing school attendance could be improving quality of education, and investment as a public good.

While interpreting these results, it should be kept in mind that these results are based on a small sample of the overall schools and students in Bihar, and any generalization of these results to the entire state should be avoided.

6. Appendix: District-Wise Attendance Trend

As mentioned before, almost all districts in Bihar show some upward trend in attendance since 2012. There are also consistent annual dips in the MDM requirement data (our proxy for attendance) in almost all districts, which are likely to be due to seasonal factors. The graph below shows the monthly attendance rates since April 2014 for all 38 districts:

Figure 03: Trend of Attendance, All Districts



As can be seen, there is a general upward trend, and also consistent dips across almost all districts.

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