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Akshaya Patra: A Leader in Battling Classroom Hunger

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Case Study



Akshaya Patra:

A Leader in Battling Classroom Hunger

Abstract

If children are our future, and an empty belly inhibits learning, then leadership in tackling food insecurities should be of paramount concern – globally. COVID has invariably created interruptions in normal food distribution, however, as economies recover and children return to the classroom, those regions in the world that tackle this subject may prove to offer the leadership needed in schools to be emulated on a universal basis. One such entity focuses on providing high-quality school lunches – the midday meal – for its students: Akshaya Patra.

Introduction

According to Indian tradition, a householder cannot eat until he feeds the hungry people in the vicinity of his home. Sharing is common across all civilised cultures. It is part of the concept of seeing everyone as the same god, even though we might not be equals socially. The spirit that resides in each person cannot be categorised as Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Similarly, hunger pangs cannot be differentiated. Everyone feels it the same way.

– Madhu Pandit Dasa, Chairman, The Akshaya Patra Foundation

Research over the decades has firmly established the correlation between the quality of school meals and learning objectives; food security and high nutritional standards are essential to any efforts by both governments and organizations to raise both educational equity and student performance (Thompson, 2020). Akshaya Patra successfully manifests human and spiritual values in the secular realm of organisational practices. By improving quality management, highlighting transparency in transactions, and raising quality standards in financial reporting, human resources, and daily operational routines, Akshaya Patra is adding value to stakeholder-relationships. The organization underscores investments in education – via enlarging infrastructure, raising educator salaries, providing educational resource materials, and ensuring nutritious school lunches – will all serve to promote effective learning.

The mid-meal meal provided in schools, especially in developing and underdeveloped countries, had been found to be the only nutritious meal for some students (Mendonsa, 2021). As such, Akshaya Patra addresses two of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): hunger and education (MDGs are discussed at <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>). Many of the employees of Akshaya Patra believe that they were doing nation's work. *“Food signifies unity, love..., so many people are involved. When it is a matter of food, we are no different... Whether*

it is offered to God or blessed by us, it is the same...”, mentioned Rev. Father C Moses, a parish priest, and also a manager at a school where Akshaya Patra provided mid-day meals (The Akshaya Patra Foundation, 2017). Referring to the ethos of serving food, the founders of the programme mentioned, “Food is the fundamental spiritual stuff that goes into everyone’s life. Food feeds praana... praana is life. Without life, there is nothing. So the first aspect of existence is food. And spiritual means spiritual existence. So food is very, very fundamental” (NDTV, 2017).

History and Inspiration

Madhu Pandit Dasa, associated with International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Bangalore, was one of the pioneers associated with the endeavour that began in mid-2000 (Swami Prabhupada is recognized as the founder of ISKCON, a faith-based organisation, also known as the “Hare Krishna movement”). The Akshaya Patra website mentions:

Looking out of a window, one day in Mayapur, a village near Calcutta, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada saw a group of children fighting with stray dogs over scraps of food. From this simple, yet heart-breaking incident was born a determination that no child within a radius of ten miles from our centre should go hungry. His inspiring resolve sowed the seeds of The Akshaya Patra Foundation.

Addressing the origins of the program, Madhu Pandit Dasa mentioned in an interview with the BBC in 2007 that: *We realized that this programme needs to expand to very large scale.... within a radius of 50 kilometers around this center here, there were 300,000 children, going to a school without a meal, in the afternoon.*

The word “AkshayaPatra” signifies a “Vessel of Abundance” in Sanskrit, from a legend in the Indian epic *Mahabharatha*. Akshaya Patra’s school lunch programme started in Bengaluru two years before the Government of Karnataka started the mid-day meal scheme in the state (an article in the *Scroll* stated that: *The origins of the midday meal scheme (in India) go back to the 1920s, when the then Madras Municipal Corporation in the Madras Presidency introduced the programme for disadvantaged children...*). In 1995, the Government of India adopted the idea. In 2001, the Supreme Court of India mandated that mid-day meal be extended to all government schools. The leadership at Akshaya Patra acknowledges the paradox that *India is a rich country with a lot of poor people. There is money in our country. The last-mile-delivery is the challenge.*

Scaling up the project required optimum usage of resources, both human and material. Akshaya Patra mechanized its kitchen facilities. A centralized kitchen was established to prepare food for all the schools in Bangalore that were associated with *Akshaya Patra*. This hub-and-spoke model was replicated in other regions of India when *Akshaya Patra* started offering its services there. The kitchen at Hubli (a city in the state of Karnataka, India) – considered to be one of the largest kitchens in India – cooked more than 180,000 meals daily. The total quantity of rice processed approached 15 tons (15,000 kgs) and 26,800 litres of *Sambar*, a lentil-based broth popular in southern India, was produced. Madhu pandit dasa explained: *Centralised control of food quality, hygiene, variety of taste, food safety, and fortification with micro nutrients are the specialisations that goes into producing an akshaya Patra meal* (PMO India, 2019).

The centralised kitchens provided Akshaya Patra with certain advantages including control

over distribution, storage, preparation, delivery, and maintenance. These kitchens were equipped with cauldrons, trolleys, rice chutes, and dal/ sambar tanks. However, when Akshaya Patra started serving rural schools, the centralised model of industrial design and automated efficiency became ineffective. This was due to the increased transportation costs associated with dispersed location of schools and difficulty of reaching these schools.

The concept of decentralization was adopted whereby small individual kitchens were built in villages to serve the local schools. *We ran a pilot to feed 600 tribal children in five villages of Baran district in April 2005; a self-help group of women was formed in each village and these women were trained in various aspects of cooking, hygiene and nutrition*, said Madhu Pandit Dasa (Akshaya Patra’s Success Story, 2016). This provided employment to impoverished women from the villages. The sourcing of food items from local areas also helped in improving the local economy.

Partnerships

Collaboration is key to marshalling organizational resources, stimulating new areas of capital investment, and recruiting new members into the workforce. Partnering with other entities gives each access to the others’ experiences and skill sets and gives both companies the opportunity to focus on a combined objective (Watenpaugh, 2018). Akshaya Patra does not enjoy a separate endowment but rather relies upon its team members’ ethereal contributions as well as outside donations. Chanchalapati Dasa, Vice-chairman of Akshaya Patra, explains:

We don't have a corpus. We don't have an endowment. Our endowment is, our confidence is, the goodness of people... We may have complex problems... but we have good people, talented people who can solve the problems. That's the optimism we have.

One example of a for-profit collaborator with Akshaya Patra is Los Angeles-based Tom’s Shoes. Founded by Blake Mycoskie (who had witnessed children in Argentina running on the streets without footwear), Tom’s Shoes set out to donate a pair of shoes for every pair of shoes purchased. During 2013-2018, Tom’s Shoes gifted more than 15 lakh shoes to Akshaya Patra beneficiaries across India.

Media reports referred to the project as a mutually-beneficial marriage of missionaries and business people. While the project had its roots in faith-based beliefs due to its association with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the implementation had been secular – the distribution of food (referred to as “*Prasad*” – a sacred offering to the Divine and thus blessed) was done at government schools and government-aided schools. A *Harvard Business Review* blog cites, *Akshaya Patra serves as a model for partnerships among public, private, and non-governmental organizations in India and elsewhere... . Table 1 sets forth some of the collaborating entities over the years.*

Table 1: AkshayaPatra Contributors

ORGANIZATION	MODE OF CONTRIBUTION
Cisco, US Navy, Wells Fargo, Amazon India, Ingersoll Rand, BillDesk	Employee Volunteering, Fundraising
Michael and Susan Dell Foundation	Health Screening and Health Education
Jamsetji Tata Trust, Infosys Foundation, Hans Foundation, Texas	Financial Grant/Giving

Instruments, Hyatt Palace Hampi, NMDC, VasudevAdiga's, Cisco, GE Healthcare, SAIL, NALCO, Odisha Mining Corporation, Kusuma Trust, RC Infinity Foundation, Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ, Ltd., GT Foundation, Diya Systems, Westbridge Capital, MTR Foods, Deutsche Bank, Bank of America, Ching's Secret, Saavn, Mini Nom Nom's, Axalta Coating Systems, VGL, BlogAdda	
Aris Global Software, BHEL, SAIL, HDFC Life, Texas Instruments, AUMA India, LIC, Syndicate Bank, Corporation Bank, Airbus India, Applied Materials Inc., Caterpillar Inc., IKOCL, State Bank of Travancore, Bosch, Union Bank of India, HPCL, SBI Mutual, Vista Equity Partners, Laurus Labs, Vimta Labs, Isuzu, Himalaya, Facilities and Building Solutions (FABS), DHL, Vijaya Bank, Gemini Edibles and Fats India Ltd (GEF India), BillDesk	Vehicles for Food Distribution
SBI Foundation	Insulated Vessels for Storing Food
MINT (SPMCIL) Hyderabad, Caterpillar Inc., SAIL, Alstom Foundation, Stichting HoogeWoert	Infrastructure Support (Reverse Osmosis Plant/ Steam Boiler, Waste to Energy Plant, Solar Plants, etc.)
Balkrishna Industries, ABB India, Franklin Templeton Investments, SBI Capital, United Way, Airports Authority of India (AAI), Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), Infosys Foundation, Gujarat State Petroleum Corporation (GSPC), Hans Foundation, Kusuma Trust, NALCO, Odisha Mining Corporation, RC Infinity Foundation	Centralised Kitchen
Ashok Leyland, Cisco, Kellogg's	Breakfasts for Children
HDFC Life, HDFC Bank, JP Morgan Chase	Academic Support
Jamsetji Tata Trust	Food Safety and Quality Control (FSQC) Laboratory
Infosys Foundation	Drinking Water

The menu is simple, nutritious, and suitable to the palate of the region. For example, the weekly menu adhered to by Akshaya Patra in Assam includes rice, mix dal, alu matar, rajma, veg pulao, kabuli chana, khichdi, kheer and rice cakes (pitha), whereas the menu in Gujarat includes dal dhokli, thepla, sukhdi, churmu, chakri, and cookies that are regionally popular.

Akshaya Patra's meal programme contributes to the health of the children (Sandhya, 2015). It has also been established that the mid-day meal programme furnished by Akshaya Patra results in encouraging children to continue schooling and education. The program has resulted in increased enrolment and retention of children and enhanced classroom performance by students, as the nutrition status has shown improvement. *Akshaya Patra* had been considered to be an effective "strategic intervention" that has enhanced the value of all prevailing governmental spending on children's education. This was because *Akshaya Patra* caters to the basic need of alleviating hunger, which if not taken care of, would retard any effectiveness on spending on textbooks, school building, and other educational-related infrastructure. *Akshaya Patra is one of those organizations that has taken up the important work of handling the nutritional requirements of below-the-poverty-line children in schools*

because unless your stomach is full, it is very unlikely you will be in a position to concentrate on what is taught, explained N. R. Narayana Murthy, co-founder of Infosys Technologies Pvt. Ltd. Murthy also credited Akshaya Patra as an organisation that has been continuously practicing *positive constructivism*. Mohandas Pai, former member of the governing board of Akshaya Patra and former CFO, Infosys Technologies, mentioned, *“We have wiped the tears off the eyes, of a million children. We have given them food. And our lives have changed, because we found new meaning in life.”*

CSR Alignment

India has been one of the few countries that has mandated spending on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Section 135 of India’s *Companies Act of 2013* mandated that at least two per cent of the average net profits of a company made during the three immediately preceding financial years needs to be channelized towards CSR endeavours and this is applicable for all companies having a net worth of rupees five hundred crore or more, or turnover of rupees one thousand crore or more or a net profit of rupees five crore or more during any financial year.

Akshaya Patra has enabled for-profit organisations to work in areas such as strategic philanthropy through funds and in-kind contributions. There have also been opportunities for cause-marketing initiatives, sponsorship of events, and innovative project solutions that benefitted children. The vision of Akshaya Patra that “No child in India shall be deprived of education because of hunger” addressed two of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – addressing hunger and poverty, and that of achieving universal education. As explained by the organization’s CEO, Sridhar Venkat, the vision of Akshaya Patra Foundation had twin objectives:

- *Ending classroom hunger, by providing nutritious mid-day meals in government schools and government-aided schools; and*
- *Making basic education accessible and encouraging more and more children to enroll in schools as a hot meal becomes an incentive for children to attend school and deter dropping out.*

As of 2018, 92% of total funds had been channelled toward programme costs and 8% toward management costs (*Table 2*).

Table 2

COST ELEMENTS	COST PER MEAL (RS)*
Program Costs (materials and utilities, distribution costs, and factory overhead including workforce, repairs, and other factory operational expenses)	11.42
Administrative Overhead (costs of activities relating to general management and administration)	0.42
Outreach Cost (Cost of publicity, communication, Donor Reporting, Advocacy and travel related)	0.62
Gross Cost per Meal (in Rs.)	12.46
Less: Subsidy from Government per meal	6.28
Less: Interest and other income	1.38
Cost to be absorbed by TAPF per meal through donations	4.8
National Average of school working days in an academic year	232
Cost to run the MDM program for 1 child per year (in Rs.)	1,113.96

Note: Refers to Rupees. As of November 9, 2021, 1 Rupee = USD 0.014.

Akshaya Patra acknowledges that its CSR partnerships with for-profit companies helped in augmenting its scalability as well as in developing sustainable models. By providing materials including web-banners and e-posters, Akshaya Patra provided opportunities for individual e-volunteering and fundraising campaigns associated with special occasions such as birthdays, marriages, and anniversaries. Individual fundraising helped in increasing commitment, familiarity, and accountability. The long-term focus of Akshaya Patra aligned with organisations that wished to associate with CSR projects having a multi-year perspective. Akshaya Patra also reached across multiple states and locations in India. In 2021, it had served 13 states and one union territory.

Quality Management

Serving 1.8 million children daily, Akshaya Patra's mid-day meal programme has been considered the world's largest mid-day meal programme managed by a not-for-profit organisation. When Akshaya Patra reached one million children, Barack Obama, former US President, sent a congratulatory note to "the largest mid-day meal programme in the world."

Cooking in the kitchens begins as early as 2:00 a.m. Food handlers and visitors to the kitchen must wear foot covers, masks, and head covers. Jewellery and loose metallic objects (such as hair-clips) are not allowed inside the kitchen. The Food Safety Management System (FSMS) ensures that hygiene standards at Akshaya Patra are met and even exceeded. FSMS parameters are considered as part of the supply-chain process, from the selection of suppliers to the actual cooking to the delivery of food. Supplier Quality Management System (SQMS) ensures quality of the supplies.

Practices such as "First In First Out" (FIFO) and "First Expiry First Out" (FEFO) are implemented during the usage of raw materials. Akshaya Patra prepares and distributes meals on the same day, while vegetables procured are used within a few days. Critical Control Points (CCPs) such as cooking temperature and temperature of the prepared food are checked and recorded at periodic intervals. Food quality is also ascertained through quality checks.

Labelling is added to the containers. Food storage vessels and the food storage areas in transportation vehicles are steam-sterilised. Vehicles are customised with a honeycomb structure in the storage area that holds multiple decks of storage containers in an upright position. The puffed body of the vehicles mitigates the temperature loss.

Feedback from schools has been solicited and received on a daily basis, and improvement actions initiated where necessary. Pamphlets advocating food safety and hygiene while serving meals were also circulated among the schools. GPS and the usage of path-optimising software not only helps in cost-optimisation, but also in the timely delivery of food to the schools. The vehicles recollect the vessels on their return journey.

The efficiency of Akshaya Patra emerged from its centralised kitchens. The organisation plans to increase its reach to 5 million children by 2025 – almost three times the number of school-going children it served in 2021. Akshaya Patra has not been adverse to adopting internet-enabled technologies in its daily operations in several of its kitchens (Mahadevan, Sivakumar, Dinesh Kumar, & Ganeshram, 2013; Chavan & Breyer, 2020).

Table 3 mentions some of the documents used at Akshaya Patra, in synchronisation with the

daily work flow:

Table 3

DOCUMENT	DATA PARAMETERS AND IMPLICATIONS
Food Delivery Register	Food requirement from the schools for the next day, number of vessels, date and time of delivery, collection of the food vessels (from the schools) used during the day
Food List	List of all the schools, the number of schools in a route, and the vehicle numbers associated with the route, menu for the following day, lunch time of schools, quantity of rice and dal required
Food Indent	Recipe, dal, masala oil, seasoning materials, required (food indent goes to store)
Grocery Sheet Data	Opening stock, quantity issued, daily consumption
Goods Receipt Note	Goods received, wastage noted; vendor assessment, if wastage is due to low quality
Vegetable Processing Record	Cutting and peeling, time-taken
Dal and Sabji Seasoning Document	Materials and quantity used in preparation of masala, time-taken
Rice Record, Sabji Record, and Dal Record	Number of cooking vessels, batch number, sterilisation, water addition, timing, and temperature
Packing Sheet	Quantity of boxes to be filled and packed; timing noted
Batch Wise Record	Boiler number and route number used to find which batch went to which school
Loading Register	Route-number, number of boxes to be loaded, time noted
Report and Daily Issue, Return of Distribution Vessels, and Gate Pass	Vehicle number, name of driver and helper, number and type of vessels, date and timings, route taken, reading of kilometres while leaving and entering the campus

Kaizen, Continual Improvement Process (CIP), Six sigma methodologies resulted in cost optimisation. Streamlining of processes across the value-chain was enabled through Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems. “*We have to use appropriate technology... technology that’s appropriate to our country, our situation...*”, explained Chanchalapati Dasa for the Akshaya Patra Foundation (2019a).

Advocate of Transparency

Higher standards in operational practices are visible across the operational spectrum. Akshaya Patra has been following the highest standards in financial transparency and has complied with International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), required since 2008-09. The organization won the ICAI Gold Shield Award for “Excellence in Financial Reporting” for five consecutive years beginning in 2008-09 and was then inducted into the “Hall of Fame” of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI). *Every donor expects transparency and accountability from an NGO. A corporate foundation would not partner an NGO that does not follow this principle. Since inception, Akshaya Patra has demonstrated and upheld the highest standards of transparency, accountability and trustworthiness*, mentioned Madhu Pandit Dasa (Noronha, 2018).

In India, similar to many other countries, not-for-profit organisations are not mandated by law

to publish their audited financial statements in the public domain. However, these organisations must file their annual financial returns with the governmental authorities. Transparency in financial reporting by Akshaya Patra occurred in an operating environment, where only ten percent of the not-for-profit organisations filed their returns with governmental authorities (as per a report made by the Central Bureau of Investigation, India's federal investigation agency, with the Supreme Court of India). Transparency helped the organisation in sustaining its partnerships with the governmental authorities. By making available the financial and annual reports in the public domain, Akshaya Patra went beyond compliance norms, and by doing so, Akshaya Patra was not just raising the bar in corporate governance practices amongst not-for-profit organisations in India, it was also communicating respect for all stakeholders, both external and internal. Existence of robust governance mechanisms helped the organisation to produce an annual report that has been credited as one of the best annual reports from the not-for-profit sector in India.

Attractive Workplace

Young people want ethical organisations, compassionate organisations, good governance, transparency... and if we provide these features, it has been our experience in Akshaya Patra that we are able to attract good people.

— Chanchalapati Dasa, Vice-chairman, Akshaya Patra (The Akshaya Patra Foundation, 2019a)

At Akshaya Patra, employees are rewarded for their suggestions, and these suggestions also fuel continuous innovation. Akshaya Patra was also certified as a “Great Place to Work” and has won recognition for its HR practices. It complied with the minimum wage requirement at all locations. In 2018, the government programme included an honorarium of ₹ 1,500-2,000 per month. Akshaya Patra personnel were paid an average salary of approximately ₹ 11,000. Almost 7500 people were employed (full-time and part-time) by Akshaya Patra. By providing jobs to many people who belong to the marginalised and disadvantaged sections of the society, Akshaya Patra was contributing towards alleviating hunger in their homes. One of the reasons that inspired some of the employees at Akshaya Patra, as cited by Shridhar Venkat at a TED talk, was that the employees’ children were also beneficiaries of the mid-day meals served by Akshaya Patra.

Conclusion

When COVID stuck India, schools were closed, and Akshaya Patra effected changes in its modes of operational delivery. Some of the initiatives of Akshaya Patra involved providing freshly cooked meals to people in need, supporting school children with essentials, supplying grocery kits to affected families, feeding homeless mothers, and supplying kits to expectant mothers (“Shakti kits”). According to Shridhar Venkat, Akshaya Patra CEO:

Whether it's people innovation, process innovation or technology innovation, Akshaya Patra has always taken steps to ensure that children will get a hot, nutritious meal, day after day ... Akshaya Patra could have built toilets. We could have gotten into teaching. We could have diversified into many other areas. But we stayed focused on providing a simple, hot, nutritious meal. We believe that simplicity is the key to scaling up.

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