

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**PRIMARY SCHOOLS SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING PROJECT
AND SC AND HSC EXAMINATIONS FEES**

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr N. Bodha) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Minister of Education & Human Resources whether, in regard to Government decision to rethink its priorities in social protection to the needy, as announced in the Budget Speech, he will state the number of –

- (a) school children and schools benefiting from the Primary Schools Supplementary Feeding Project, and
- (b) beneficiaries under the subsidy for the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate Examinations Fees Scheme;

indicating, in each case, the estimated expenditure for the financial year 2005-2006

The Minister of Education & Human Resources (Mr D. Gokhool): Mr Speaker, Sir, the overall philosophy of the Labour Government has always been supportive of vulnerable sections of the population. In line with this philosophy, Government has set up the Welfare State, which is still thriving today.

In the present Budget, Government is further consolidating the concept of the Welfare State, with the clear objective of providing better support to the most under-privileged members of the Community.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance has said it in very clear terms in his Budget Speech that every rupee of the taxpayer money will be spent judiciously. In almost every area of public spending there is scope for improvement. And this Government is not saving money by cutting on the delivery of services. Nor is it putting into question the need to support the needy and the vulnerable groups. On the contrary what it is seeking to do is to reorient its social programmes so that those who are really in need receive yet greater and more effectual support from Government money.

It is obvious that our social net today comprises unfocused programmes that provide generous benefits for many that do not need them but fails to support many that do. The distribution incidence of such a policy is, therefore, largely regressive.

Mr Speaker, Sir, we are attaining the noble objective of helping the vulnerable but in a very costly way. Our present system of social net is dysfunctional and ineffectual. And most of all unfair to the neediest of our citizens.

Mr Speaker Sir, two thirds wealthiest Mauritians absorb over Rs200 m. more than half the benefits of the rice and flour subsidy programme that is meant for the needy. They also receive three quarters of the subsidy on SC and HSC examination fees. And the primary school feeding programme is also known for a certain amount of wastage and inequity. What is wrong with reorienting, the money spent on these programmes to increase the support given to the most needy? What is wrong with reorienting taxpayer money from where it is wasted and not needed to where it meets the needs of the neediest of our citizens and improves their welfare?

As stated in the Budget Speech, now is the time to stop irrationality that has characterised some of the programmes in our social safety net system for years and spend taxpayers' money in a way that really achieves our noble objectives. Now is the time to muster the courage, to reallocate these expenditures in ways that bring greater benefits to those who need government support the most.

Mr Speaker, Sir, as I said in my reply to PQ B/306, prior to the 1990s, primary school children were receiving milk, a loaf of bread, cheese and dried fruits in the context of the World Food Programme, which was introduced in 1970 by the then Labour Government to combat malnutrition and to improve school attendance and performance. However, with the gradual phasing out of this programme, after the year 1990, only a loaf of bread and milk were distributed to school children.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in 1989, the then Government agreed to the proposal of an Evaluation Mission of the World Food Programme to phase out gradually the project in view of increasing demands on the World Food Programme reduced development resources by more needy countries.

The World Food Programme definitely ceased its assistance to the School Feeding Project in Mauritius in December 1996. Government, consequently, decided to take over at its own cost the supply of bread to primary school pupils. Under this School Feeding Project, a bread is distributed to each primary school student.

As regards the number of schools which receive bread, I have the figures. The number of schools benefiting from Primary School Supplementary Feeding Project is as follows –

Mauritius	-	233
Rodrigues	-	12
Agalega	-	2

The total number of schools is 247.

The number of pupils benefiting from Primary Schools Supplementary Feeding Project is as follows –

Mauritius	-	19,913
Rodrigues	-	4,649
Agalega	-	51

Total number of schools is 14,613.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Budget provision for the School Supplementary Feeding Project for 2005-2006 was Rs26 m. The actual expenditure was Rs16.9 m approximately. This is the figure. So, this is with regard to the number of schools, the number of pupils and the Budget for the Primary School Supplementary Feeding Project.

Mr Speaker, Sir, with regard to part (b) of the question which relates to School Certificate and Higher School Certificate fees, I wish to remind the House that the previous Government had already decided - I hope that this reminds the Leader of the Opposition of the Budget Speech of 2004-2005 – to target the grant of 50% subsidy on SC and HSC exam fees.

(Interruptions)

The decision was there....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: We are talking about SC and HSC examination fees. This meant that at the end of the day only a particular category of students would have been eligible to the 50% subsidy. So, the targeting idea was already there in the minds of the previous Government.

Mr Speaker, Sir, one of our key objectives is to provide support to those who need it most. The philosophy of the Government is to provide support to those who are most in need of that support. In line with the philosophy of the Budget for greater solidarity and support towards the neediest members of the community, we are ensuring that all needy students obtain not 50%, but 100% of subsidy on SC and HSC students...

(Interruptions)

As stated in paragraphs 154 and 157 of the Budget Speech, I quote –
Paragraph 154 –

“Since our objective is to increase assistance to those who really need it as from 01 July, we will provide them with a monthly income support payment of Rs225, representing a 15% bonus.

Paragraph 157 -

“In addition, the scheme to pay half the SC and HSC examination fees will be discontinued except for the needy students. Government will continue to pay the other half of the fees for these needy students. Henceforth, the fees of these students will be paid in full by the Ministry of Social Security.”

Mr Speaker, Sir, as concerns the number of students who will be concerned with regard to 2005-2006, for SC the figure is 13,000, for HSC, the figure is 6,500 and the subsidy which was earmarked was Rs72 m.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, this is called *taillé, rasé!*

(Interruptions)

May I ask the Minister of Education whether this is not the unkindest of all the cuts in the social net? Are we not refusing a poor child a loaf of bread every day and a young student a passport for a better life?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have explained the philosophy of the Labour Party and Labour Government has always been to protect the neediest. The Leader of the Opposition is talking about care. I would refer him to the previous Government which, in the context of this project, had already decided that this feeding project should be targeted. To enlighten the hon. Leader of the Opposition, may I ask him to refer to a Parliamentary Question which was set to the then Minister of Education by hon. Mrs Labelle on this issue. To enlighten the House I would just like to quote - that was in 2002 - with your permission –

“At present, all pupils of primary schools are receiving a daily loaf of bread and this is financed from funds available under the “Primary School Supplementary Feeding” vote of my Ministry. It is feared, at the level of my Ministry that the distribution of a loaf of bread is not serving the purpose of the School Feeding Project which is meant for (....)”

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order please!

Mr Gokhool: Hon. Bérenger was saying that....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: I have not finished. Let me add...

(Interruptions)

So, the previous Government, looking at the project, stated that it was not serving the purpose of the School Feeding Project for which it was meant and, therefore, decided on a scheme. A scheme was therefore being worked out to target resources to pupils who are in dire need of supplementary...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: They were targeting the project...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Let the Minister finish.

Mr Gokhool: With regard to the SC and HSC examination fees, again the Leader of the Opposition is trying to imply that we do not care and we are not a caring Government. Let me remind the Leader of the Opposition what his leader had to say about the SC and HSC fees.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: Let me quote from the Budget Speech 2004-2005, par. 295-296 –

“A second fundamental reform that this Budget introduces is the targeting of Government transfers. Government transfers are simply not sustainable if they are universal and open-ended. This puts a limit on our capacity to do more for the poorer segment of the population. I believe that this is an issue that calls for a bold decision”.

The intention was there, but they did not have the courage to go and deal with the problem and provide the support to those who were in need.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: This is what the leader of the MSM said...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, I have not finished. Let me add what the Leader of the MSM had to say...

Mr Gokhool: This is what the ex-Minister of Finance stated –

‘targeting will also be extended

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, I said.

Mr Gokhool: Truth hurts, that is why they are not listening. Mr Speaker, Sir, this is what the ex-Minister of Finance had to say about fees.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, please! Listen to the answer.

Mr Gokhool: This is what he said - targeting will also be extended to the subsidy on SC and HSC Exam fees, which means that the idea of targeting was already there in the programme. The students were benefiting from a 50% grant in respect of the examination fees, irrespective of the income level of the parents.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister whether he knows how many children were denied a loaf of bread yesterday. Because, in some schools, this was not distributed.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, let me inform the Leader of the Opposition that, yesterday, I went to two schools - Lady Ringadoo Government School and Vuillemen Government School. In my presence, the bread was distributed.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

Mr Gokhool: I don't know about the information of the Leader of the Opposition because the programme of bread distribution goes up to 30th June.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Hon. Cuttaree, please! If the hon. Member has a question to put, he can put it later on. I don't know why people are so excited and there is so much heat in this House.

Mr Bérenger: It is because there was no distribution of bread yesterday.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Minister is answering. Let him answer.

(Interruptions)

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I inform the House that yesterday at Bambous Virieux Government School, there was no bread for the children.

Mr Speaker: Is the Minister aware that there was no bread yesterday at Bambous Virieux Government School?

Mr Gokhool: I am not aware of this, Mr Speaker, Sir.

(Interruptions)

How do I take it that what the hon. Leader of the Opposition is saying is a fact? I am not aware, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, why is it done when the Budget has not yet been voted?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I think the Leader of the Opposition should know, there are so many suppliers; there may have been a problem of supply, but as far as the distribution is concerned, it is going on.

Mrs Labelle: Mr Speaker, Sir, is the hon. Minister aware that on Thursday last, schools received calls from his Ministry stating that there would be no bread distribution as from Monday 19th June, that is, yesterday.

Mr Gokhool: If the hon. Lady is referring to calls that were made by my Ministry, I am not aware of these. But all I know is that the bread distribution programme goes up to 30th June.

Mr Guinness: Mr Speaker, Sir, can I know from the hon. Minister whether he has a report from his officers about the bread distribution yesterday?

Mr Gokhool: This is not a regular practice that we have daily reports. If there is any problem, then the schools will report through the Zone Directors and then we intervene and we take corrective measures. If the hon. Member is asking right now whether there is any report, I cannot say. I'll have to check.

Mr Cuttaree: May I ask the hon. Minister whether he has been made aware that in certain schools, especially in deprived areas, there were problems yesterday as a result of the fact that no bread was distributed? I'll give the example of my Constituency at Camp Leveux where the poorest of the people live. There was no bread distribution and school children spent the whole day without having even a bite of bread.

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Member is talking about the children who don't receive the bread. I have explained the philosophy. The project is being re-oriented.....

Mr Speaker: The question is a very direct question, hon. Minister: "are you aware that, in deprived areas, there was no bread yesterday?" This is straightforward.

Mr Gokhool: I cannot agree with the hon. Member because I am not aware of this.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Speaker, Sir, the aim of this school feeding project was to combat under nourishment in the schools. How would the hon. Minister guarantee that the income support payment that is effectuated, in fact, will be benefiting the children in terms of food items?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, the idea of the food income support is meant for all the needs of the family, including bread. This is how we have provided for the support so that the bread part is taken care of the income support which is provided.

Mr Cuttaree: Can I ask the hon. Minister whether he has inquired from social workers and been informed that the issue of the children going to school without any bread is very often – if not most of the time, due to the fact that the mother, often single parent family, leaves the house at 6 o'clock and the children go to school without any food. I hope that the hon. Members, on the other side, realise that I am talking of a humanitarian problem. I am not doing politics about that because they, themselves, in their own Constituency, have this problem. Has the Minister been made aware that a situation happened in the schools whereby....

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Please keep quiet!

Mr Cuttaree:children don't have any food and that in....

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member should put his question. What is the question?

Mr Cuttaree: ...certain cases, for example, in the Camp Levieux Government school, the teachers pooled their money together to buy bread and *du beurre pistache* to give to the children. If he is not aware, he should go and ask the Attorney General.

Mr Speaker: OK, is the hon. Minister aware?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, Camp Levieux is a ZEP school and, as far as the ZEP schools are concerned, the food programme is continuing. There is no problem with that. In fact, the hon. Member does not know.

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Cuttaree: May I ask the hon. Minister whether he is aware - I'll say it again and he checks it from the Attorney General, I am not used to lie in the House....

Mr Speaker: What is the question of the hon. Member?

Mr Cuttaree:that there was no bread in the school.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, the hon. Minister has already answered this question. Order!

Mrs Grenade: Est-ce que le ministre veut nous faire comprendre, qu'en privant nos petits enfants d'un pain, cela pourrait renforcer les caisses de l'État et est-ce que le ministre n'est pas en train de taxer l'appétit de nos petits enfants?

Mr Gokhool: I have already said, Mr Speaker, Sir, that our policy is to direct subsidies support to those who are neediest. This is our point.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, was such hardship worth a saving of only Rs16 m? This is my question to the Minister.

Mr Gokhool: In fact, this is not correct, Mr Speaker, Sir. Whatever is being saved will go to the Empowerment Fund. We are redirecting the income support to the Empowerment Fund to help those people who are unemployed, those who are jobless, those who want to start a small enterprise. We are helping them to stand on their own feet. This is what we are doing. We are giving them the means to earn their living and this is what we are doing.

Mrs Martin: In fact, by going to the Empowerment Fund, it is not serving the purpose that the school feeding programme is actually meant for, that is, feeding poor children. My question is: whether any study has been carried out, Mr Speaker, Sir, to determine the number of children who are really in need and how can we ascertain that they are, at least, guaranteed a meal a day now that the school feeding programme is being removed?

Mr Gokhool: As I have stated, as far as the ZEP schools are concerned, the food programme is continuing; and I have already explained the purpose of redirecting the subsidies to the income support and also to the Empowerment Fund.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, let me come to SC and HSC exam fees. The philosophy of the 2005/2006 Budget was that money should not be a barrier to education. Can the hon. Minister enlighten the House as to the exam fees for somebody sitting for SC and somebody sitting for HSC? I mean the full fees. Can he enlighten the House about that?

Mr Gokhool: I don't have the exact figures because, Mr Speaker, Sir, the fees change.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Mr Gokhool: The fees vary from one year to another.

Mr Bodha: Can the hon. Minister inform the House that, for the SC exam fees it is Rs9,000 and for the HSC exam fees, it is Rs16,000? The majority of the students are going to pay, Mr Speaker, Sir. Can I ask the hon. Minister what is going to be the budget allocated by Government for the payment of SC and HSC exam fees in the current budget 2006/2007 and for how many students will benefit in each case?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, as regards the issue of exam fees, they vary from year to year, depending on the number of subjects that students take.

(Interruptions)

Mr Guinness: Can I know from the Minister whether the children of a sugar industry labourer or a machinist working in a textile factory earning Rs5,000 to R6,000 will benefit from the payment of fees?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, I was going to answer a PQ, but I think it will be included in this PNQ. We have provided for 100% of fees being paid to those who are entitled to it. As a Government which is concerned with the students welfare, there are cases of students who are needy, we have set up a mechanism between the Ministry of Social Security and my Ministry to look at those cases which will be considered on a case to case basis.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! There are only two minutes left.

Mr Bodha: My one before the last question, Mr Speaker, Sir, is whether the Minister is aware that the payment of the SC/HSC fees is a one-off payment given in a deadline of 10 days and that it is going to be an undue hardship on about 80% of students sitting for SC and HSC.

Mr Gokhool: We have taken steps to ensure that these difficulties do not arise.

Mr Speaker: Last question from the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, we are talking about 4A+. Nous allons nous retrouver avec une catastrophe ...

Mr Speaker: 4A+ is not relevant to the question.

Mr Bodha: Est-ce que cela n'est pas une éducation à deux vitesses pour quelques privilégiés, contraire à l'esprit de l'éducation gratuite de Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam?

Mr Gokhool: Mr Speaker, Sir, the Leader of the Opposition is referring to l'éducation à deux vitesses. I am not sure whether he knows that our education system is characterised by diversity. We have different types of schools and systems.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Time is over. Order! Next item, 'Questions addressed to the hon. Prime Minister'!