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FOOD SECURITY AND HEALTH STATUS AMONG TRIBAL AND NON-TRIBAL POPULATIONS OF AMRAVATI DISTRICT, MAHARASHTRA

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The right to food and freedom from hunger reemerged during the 1990s. The historical World Food Summit was held in Rome in 1996, in which 185 countries participated and signed the 'Rome Declaration on World Food Security'. The Rome Declaration reaffirmed the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food. Consequently, the right to adequate food is recognized as a fundamental human right. The world communities further pledged in 2000 to cut the number of the world's hungry people to half between 1990 and 2015, as a Millennium Development Goal (United Nations, 2008).

Food security is an important means to realize the right to food. It means the access to adequate food to all members of the household throughout the year. The Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen has provided a framework of food entitlement in order to understand the access to food and the genesis of hunger. According to him, own production, stored wealth, employment, kinship and government transfers are all possible sources of food entitlement (Sen, 1981). Also, food availability is a key to reduce poverty (Bhagat, 2000).

Economists have given serious attention to the study of food security at the national and regional levels (Dreze and Sen, 1991), but the studies on food security at the household level are scarce. This study makes an attempt to examine the food security among the most vulnerable section of the Indian society i.e. the Scheduled Tribes.

The project focuses on the availability of food among the tribal population through their own production, access to land and forest resources, animal husbandry and Public Distribution System (PDS). It also assesses, to what extent purchases are made by household from the open market. In a situation of food scarcity, what are the household strategies undertaken to cope with hunger? Are they migrating? What is the role of Government programmes, like PDS in meeting the food needs of tribal population? The condition of tribal population is also compared with that of the non-tribal population placed in similar situation.

Sampling and Methodology

The study was conducted in nine villages of four selected tehsils from Melghat area of Amravati District in Maharashtra. The villages of the tribal and non-tribal tehsils were stratified into plain and hilly areas. Four tribal (80% and more of tribal population) villages and two non-tribal villages were selected from the plains and two tribal and one non-tribal villages were selected from the hilly areas. From each village, a sample of 100 households were drawn systematically i.e. a total of 900 households representing 600 and 300 households belonging to tribal and non-tribal groups respectively. Before selecting these households the investigators have done a house listing in all the selected villages and the required number of 100 households were selected using systematic random sampling at an equal interval.

Data was collected through interview schedules canvassed to the head of the household in selected villages. Information was collected on household production of food, the procurement of food from the market and PDS shops. Adequacy of food was also examined asking a question similar to that of NSS 55th round such as "Is the households getting enough food everyday throughout the year, only some months of the year or not even some months?" (NSSO, 2001).

Findings and Conclusions

- Fifty five percent of the head of households in tribal villages and 52 percent of the heads of household in non-tribal villages were illiterate; 26 percent of heads of household in tribal villages and 20 percent of the heads of household in non-tribal villages had completed primary education. Eight percent of the heads of household in tribal villages and 17 percent of the heads of household in non-tribal villages had education of high school and above. This shows that the heads of

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household in non-tribal villages were better educated as compared to their counterparts in tribal villages.

- Forty three percent of children in tribal villages and 35 percent of children in non-tribal villages had never attended school. The main reasons for never attending school were: school far away (20%); required for household work (18%); not interested in studies (13%); and working to help and maintain the family (10%).
- About 50 percent of children in tribal villages and 40 percent in non-tribal villages were getting mid day meal. Sixty four percent of all households reported that mid day meal at the school was adequate. However, this proportion was higher (73%) in non-tribal villages compared to that of tribal villages (60%)
- Sixty two percent of households in tribal villages and 37 percent in non-tribal villages reported that at least one person migrated during the last one year and majority of them migrated for less than three months duration. This shows the seasonal nature of migration in the study area. Majority of the migrants reported work (41%) and earning money (40%) as reasons for their migration. Besides these, other reasons reported by the households for migration were grazing (11%), education (9%) and shortage of food (1%).
- At village level food grain production was deficit in most of the villages if we assume per capita annual food grain requirement of about 166 kg (450 gm per capita daily), however per capita food grain consumption was adequate in both the tribal and non-tribal villages. This was due to the supply of food grain from the PDS as well as households were able to purchase food grains from the market. However, the fact remains that food intake is extremely deficient in food diversity (i.e. non-inclusion of vegetables, fruits, milk, sugar, oil and other food items). So, while households were virtually free from hunger, this did not guarantee nutritional security due to lack of consumption of vegetables, fruits in the study villages. Thus, the observation of other researchers is pertinent to quote here. It is said that “the pattern of malnutrition does not reflect an absolute deficiency of food in the family; rather it suggests either a lack of satisfactory foods for young children or other deficiencies in care” (Osmani, 1992).
- About 20 percent of both the tribal and non-tribal households were not receiving food grain from the PDS, and majority of these households reported of having no ration cards.
- At perceptual level, a direct question is asked “whether they are getting enough food every day throughout the year”; about 43 percent of tribal households and 29 percent of non-tribal households reported in negative.

This is in contrast to what they had reported about actual food grain consumption.

- The crude death rate is close to 8 per 1000 in tribal villages compared to 9 in non-tribal villages. Hence, there was no difference in death rates between the tribal and non-tribal villages. About one-fifth of household has reported of some type of morbidity in the study villages. In the occurrence of morbidity there was not much difference between the tribal and non-tribal villages and also by gender during the last one year preceding the survey. The age pattern of morbidity shows that more children have fallen sick in tribal households, whereas elders from non-tribal households reported more sickness. Most importantly, those who reported of sickness, up to 40 percent have sought treatment both from the tribal and non-tribal households. Tribal households sought treatment more from public facilities (54%) compared to that of non-tribal households (21%).
- The lack of differentials in many aspects of food security and health aspects between the tribal and non-tribal groups may be seen in the context wherein both groups were situated in more or less similar socioeconomic and geographical situations.

Policy Issues

There is a need to achieve nutritional security along with food security in the rural areas. This requires awareness and education among rural population about the need of eating vegetables, seasonal fruits and milk etc. The awareness should also be accompanied by a strategy of promoting the production of these food items at the household level. During our fieldwork, we have observed large land lying uncultivated around the habitation. The courtyards of most of the households are also not used for kitchen farming. Public distribution system particularly the *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* is an important source of food along with mid-day meal in the schools. These programmes should not only continue, but need to be strengthened.

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