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**SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING NUTRITIONAL STATUS
OF STUDENTS FROM POOR ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS IN NADIA,
WEST BENGAL**

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ABSTRACT

Household practices, income, dietary preferences, healthcare, all affect nutritional status of the students. For the ones belonging to poor backgrounds, these factors are more practically felt. These students lack awareness about the ways in which care is to be done for their health. Affordability towards quality practices, food, and sanitization is lacking. Mocking, taunts from advantageous groups devalue their confidence of performing well academically. Equality is lacking in mentality towards providing basic access to nutritious foods, knowledge, access, among others. Favoritism and biases are there in offerings which needs to reduce for ensuring good health and wellbeing for all.

Key words: social, cultural, influence, factors, nutrition, status, students, poor, economics, background, Nadia, west Bengal

1. INTRODUCTION

Things in the surrounding of the people are influenced by certain factors. For example, pollution is caused from the smoke emitted from the vehicles and factories. Cutting trees is done with the purpose of building sky rise buildings. This is also applicable for nutrition of students from poor economic backgrounds. These students lack affordability towards the food items available. Parents of these students do not have high incomes, due to which, there are constraints in buying the things for daily sustenance (Patsa & Banerjee, 2018). In this matter, they themselves jostle for a respectful living, and in addition to this, taunts and mocking from others aggravate their problems. It is the incapability which becomes a burden for themselves and for their children.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section consists of detailed overview on sociocultural factors exerting influence on nutritional status of students, especially from poor economic backgrounds in Nadia district of West Bengal, India. Focus of this lies on influences, which sketch dietary practices, growth, health outcomes, and school performance in case of these students.

2.1. Household and food

Low income is one of the main drivers of poverty. Due to low income, people lack affordability to buy healthy foods. Families with limited economic resources are most vulnerable in terms of affording diversified, nutrient-rich diets. Dubey, (2022) stated that this unaffordability restricts children's access to calorie enriched foods, increasing issues of micronutrients. Low family income reduces quality of food purchased, quantity consumed, and most importantly, food security. Affection by these is a directly impact on children's nutritional outcomes. Studies have revealed that poor households are heavily rely on staple cereals, which is mostly rice. With rice, proteins, fruits, and vegetable consumption is inadequate. As a result of this, members suffer from undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies (e.g., iron deficiency anemia). Low incomes also lead to irregular meal patterns, reducing diversities in dietary habits and preferences. For families in Nadia, poorer strata experience income limitations. Majumder and Chowdhury, (2020) argued that such constraints degrade diversity in diets, making the people underweight, stunt. In case of students, the impact is serious in the form of anemia.

2.2 Parental education and knowledge on nutrition

Education level of mothers, influences children's nutrition. For this, food choices, meal preparation, hygiene practices, are prioritized for analyzing the health behaviors of students. If the education of mothers is low, then students are highly undernourished. On the contrary, mothers who are conscious of the health of students, tend to select diversified diets. These mothers understand nutritional needs of the students. Understanding the needs, they access health services provided by the healthcare institutions, care homes and others. For parents, who went to school less, lacks awareness of essential nutrition practices. They reinforce poor eating patterns in their daily practices. As per the arguments of Biswas, Mondal, and Khan, (2018), it has been seen that in rural and economically poor parts of West Bengal, like Nadia, literacy rates among caregivers are low. This lowness significantly affects nutrition, which acts as a sociocultural barrier.

2.3 Family structure, size and gender roles

Large family size seems inadequate for the meagre resources, which the earning member purchases. Children in larger poor families receive less of the foods, which are nutritious food. This states that foods per capita, increases risks of undernutrition. In addition to this, there are gender norms and discrimination, which are complicated, yet shape intrahousehold food distribution patterns. In some cultural settings, boys receive more in terms of nutrition, as compared to girls. As a result of this, girls suffer from undernutrition (especially micronutrient deficiencies). Some studies lack dramatic effects of preferences, which sons get in terms of nutritious foods. Tabrizi et al., (2024) stated that these results affirm the fact that gender norms are a valuable social determinant of nutritional outcomes, considered in Indian contexts broadly.

Caste and social stratification are also to be considered here. Social hierarchies such as caste (Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes) conglomerate with economic disadvantages. These disadvantages influence nutrition. Groups who are stated low in terms of status in the society experience poverty and social exclusion. This generates poor access to nutritious food, healthcare, and social services. Studies on nutrition in the context of West Bengal reflected undernourishment among the lower castes as compared to more advantaged groups. In Nadia, Bramhankar et al., (2023) linked caste and social stratification consistently contribute to

social and economic life. In such a life, sociocultural factors compound greater effects of poverty on student's diets.

2.4 Local food culture and dietary practices

Traditional dietary habits are formed from cultural views, religion, and affordability. External influences affect quality of nutrition, which are received by the students. Diets of the students from poor economic background center on high-carbohydrate staples, which have limited protein or micronutrients. Consumption of these foods causes deficiencies. It is the culture of Bengal to have animal proteins especially fish. Values are such, which limit household budgets. Food cost constraints reduce consumption quantities. Judijanto and Aslan, (2025) was of the view that cultural norms decide what is proper for children. Norms also affect intake patterns and frequency at which students consume meals.

2.5 Health knowledge, hygiene practices and community norms

Sociocultural norms on hygiene and health behaviors are important for nutrition in case of the students, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds. Students from poor economic background are exposed to poor sanitation. They cannot do anything to reduce the harmful impacts, as they have limited awareness of hygiene. As a result of this limitation, infection risk increases in the form of diarrhea and parasitic diseases. These issues in turn disrupt nutrient absorption. Chelak and Chakole, (2023) opined that, practices for food preparation and feeding influences nutrition, which is something beyond food availability. It is really pathetic that economically poor rural communities like those of Nadia has gaps in sanitation infrastructure. Health awareness reinforces cycle of poor nutrition among the students.

2.6 School environments

School is one of the important social settings influencing nutrition directly and also indirectly. Mention can be made of government programs like Mid-Day Meal Scheme (PM POSHAN Abhiyaan) which provide meals supplementing inadequacies among students from poor backgrounds. After getting these meals, improvements have been noticed in their attendance and nutrition. Bennett, Bardon, and Gibney, (2022) argued that community norms around schooling

especially gendered expectations, early work participation is expected to affect student's time allocation and food intake patterns, especially among girls.

2.7 Gender and Adolescence

Among adolescents, girls are vulnerable as their nutritional needs rise with puberty. Gendered expectations de-prioritize girls' eating habits which can cause iron deficiency and undernutrition. Studies have shown higher anemia rates among adolescent girls as compared to boys in West Bengal. According to the arguments of Al Husaini and Shukor, (2022), these are influenced by gender and poverty.

2.8 Synthesis of these factors in Nadia

Students from poor economic backgrounds in Nadia are subjected to multiple overlapping sociocultural influences. Students from poverty lines receive less foods which are not of standard quality. If parents have low literacy rates, then their nutrition is degraded. Family and social norms which are followed, sketches food distribution and gender roles. The ones who are outcasted are at a disadvantaged position within the social constructs. Cultural norms affect dietary habits, food preferences. Hygiene practices in local areas define the health status. Institutions, through support systems, organize mid-day meals. Community norms shape school nutrition outcomes. Patsa and Banerjee, (2018) stated that these interacting factors, collaboratively lead to undernutrition (underweight, stunting), micronutrient deficiencies (like iron deficiency anemia), and reduces educational performance among economically disadvantaged students.

2.9 Contextual references of policies and programs

Nutrition education for parents and communities have been roped in by the government for framing policies on nutrition and health in rural areas. Aim of these policies are to strengthen school feeding programs. Goal is to address socio-cultural gender and caste norms affecting the dietary intake of students. Program includes integration of sanitation and hygiene interventions with nutrition services. These approaches help colleges, universities and schools to deal with sociocultural barriers on the students from economic disadvantaged sections. As per the arguments of Dubey, (2022), planning helps in improving students' nutritional status in Nadia and similar contexts in West Bengal.

3. METHODOLOGY

Deductive approach is justified in this context for deducing the social and cultural factors affecting nutritional status of the students from economically poor backgrounds. Study area is Nadia, West Bengal. Essential data is collected from secondary sources like books, journal articles, reports, government websites and others. Collected data is analyzed through themes, cases and narratives expanding scope, arena and dynamics of the study.

4. CONCLUSION

Reviewing the aspects, it can be concluded that household incomes, dietary preferences, cultural and social norms contribute to nutritional status of the students from economically poor backgrounds especially rural areas like Nadia, West Bengal. Dietary preferences is foods, which are enriched in carbohydrates like rice. Side dishes are the ones which are low in calories. Most of the people lack affordability to buy nutritious foods, due to which students are not fully fit and healthy. The impact of this is seen in their academic performance, which is poor. Universities prefer advantageous students more as compared to the ones who come from economically poor backgrounds. This is the culture in Bengal, where boys are preferred in all aspects, including food provisions. They are served more as compared to girls, which causes undernourishment and nutritional deficiencies among them. This is unethical as equality is not there. Need is alteration in the mentalities, as everyone needs to be knowledgeable on the dietary practices which could lead to better health outcomes, irrespective of cultural backgrounds.

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