

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

Meal-less Mornings for School-going Children: An Insight into the Food–Health Interface in the Remote Mountain Region of Kathua, Jammu and Kashmir, India

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1. INTRODUCTION

Transformations in food systems feature in the current global agenda to tackle problems that lie at the intersection of health, climate change, and food insecurity (World Bank n.d.). Food and nutrition insecurity also feature in this agenda as important goals. In this context, food intake is presented as either subject to food availability/affordability or food preferences. However, complex socioeconomic relations at play in specific locales may also influence food availability/affordability or preferences. The possibility of such a thesis emerged during a larger study¹ on understanding local food health knowledge in landscape-based food systems—through interviews with several female respondents—wherein the issue of school-going children missing morning meals came to the surface.

The primary subjects of this study were school-going children. The study site was the remote mountainous region of Kathua, which is located in the Pir Panjal range, Jammu and Kashmir. The data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted between January and July 2023. The

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¹ This refers to the first author's fieldwork as part of his Ph.D. dissertation, which is in the publishing stage. The current paper is an insight developed while collecting data while doing fieldwork.

participants included eight mother-child pairs (each pair from the same household), two shopkeepers, and two doctors, totalling 20 subjects.

2. MISSING MORNING MEALS:² NUANCE IN A MOUNTAINOUS VILLAGE SITE

“Food is an inseparable part of our identity, culture, and health. However, when it is not taken on time, it leads to severe health consequences.” These were the words of an elderly respondent from the village of Machhedi in Kathua. She added, “Our children have changed their habit of eating morning meals, or they do not eat at all, which is going to lead to serious health concerns and a decline in our cultural heritage as well.”

The main sources of livelihood in the region are farming and labour. Most men, who do not find any source of livelihood within the village, find work outside of the region while womenfolk take care of farming, shepherding, and domestic work. The village has a primary school as well as a high school. Children from villages that are located 5–10 km away also attend the high school in Machhedi.

One of the respondents said, “Our fields are small, we do not earn much from them, so to maintain our livelihood, the male member from our family must stay out of the village for days; some even go daily to the nearest town and return during the night. All activities—from household maintenance to working on the farm, preparing food for the children, and purchasing necessary groceries from the market—must be done by us only. So, we do not have time to cook traditional food for our children, as that requires more time to prepare.”

Another respondent reported the following about her daily routine: “After waking up, we must collect food for the livestock and fuel for food preparation. For this, we must go to the nearest forest by 6:00 am, from which it takes around two hours to return. After returning, we must feed the animals, clean the home, and start preparing food, which takes another hour; only by 9:00 am can we provide food to our children, but by that time, they have already left for school. The schools start at 9:30 am, and to reach on time, our children must leave early.”

A subject from another village added, “My girl walks for 7 km daily to reach school, and she leaves at 8:00 am to reach school. Her grandmother is at home only, but to give her millet, vegetables, or wheat, it takes time to

² For our understanding, we define “meal” as per locals’ conceptualization: home-cooked food, which includes *roti*, *sabzji*, and *doodh* (milk), *dahi* (curd), or *lassi*, all taken together.

prepare the *chulha* (stove), knead the dough, and prepare vegetables; by that time, she has already left for school.” She further added that the family follows this routine for four days a week, but on other days, when they can cook and provide meals, the children do not prefer home food. Likewise, many other female respondents mentioned that several children from other villages walk for about 7–10 km just to reach school.

In this specific, localized context, due to the excessive burden of domestic and outside work on women, they lack the time to prepare food in the morning. Thus, migration of men driven by the need to earn a livelihood can be construed as an indirect reason that contributes to children missing morning meals. Another important aspect observed here is the changing food preferences among children, to which we turn next.

3. LIFESTYLE, STATUS, AND LOCALIZED ASPECTS LEADING TO MISSING MORNING MEALS

To understand the dynamics of preference and availability, the respondents were asked about the food items available in their homes. One of them said, “[From last night], only milk is available,³ but sometimes, it also gets stale due to being kept outside, especially in the summer season.” Other respondents added, “Even in other seasons, when it does not smell, our children still do not prefer to drink it. On their way to school, they buy something from the local grocery store such as biscuits, chips, juice, etc.; they do not prefer to consume milk.”

Children acknowledged their preferences for chips, biscuits, and juice over milk. A child reported, “I do not like to drink milk early in the morning; it makes me nauseated. I rather eat biscuits, as I can digest them.” Another child added, “I started consuming biscuits and juice daily because my friends were consuming them.”

A discussion with a shopkeeper confirmed the children’s statements: “My daughter doesn’t eat home food and takes biscuits and juice early in the morning despite food being available, because every other child is doing so,” he said. A grocery shop owner added, “On average, I sell 50–60 packets of biscuits every day in the morning to school-going children.”

It appears that an aversion to milk—as children reported an inability to digest it properly—and other traditional foods in addition to a lack of

³ There were other items kept in stock, such as pulses, grains, and spices, but since they require more time to prepare, milk was considered the only item available from last night.

money to purchase commercially available food also plays a role in children missing meals.

The mothers of these children were asked if they could afford certain daily expenses to take care of morning meals. They reported that those who travel from far-off villages do not consume anything at all. They walk on empty stomachs because they cannot afford to purchase food. One of the mothers shared, “Only children from those families where male members stay outside and send good money back home, or which have other income sources—like they have a shop or they work as labourers in the village only—purchase daily from the shop.”

When children were asked about how do they feel walking long miles on an empty stomach, their response on this matter was interesting:

We do not care about health as our parents and their parents used to walk more than us daily. We do not have any problem walking long miles on an empty stomach. We directly have our first meal at mid-day meal in the school, which is served at 12:00 pm.

Doctors from the nearest primary health centre (PHC) said, “These people do not educate their children about the importance of eating food in the morning and other lifestyle aspects, and these children feel pride in walking as their parents did, but they do not understand that their parents had a healthy routine and good quality of food.” The PHC staff further argued, “It is due to this lifestyle that these children are having problems such as gastritis, indigestion, and nutritional deficiencies. It has such an impact that many of them are not able to digest milk, ghee, maize, and other local food items, which their parents could easily.”

4. CONCLUSION

At the outset, reasons such as availability and affordability of food seem to play a significant role in consumption, but the underlying factors are specific to different locales. In this study site, more than food availability, the lack of time to prepare food can lead to missed morning meals. This can be attributed to the fact that many tasks that are typically performed by men—such as collecting fuel and fodder and rearing animals—are now done by women, as men have migrated for livelihood reasons.

Changing food habits and a preference for processed food available in the market were the other trends observed in Kathua. However, only households of a relatively better economic status could afford these

behaviours. On the other hand, it was noted that walking long distances on empty stomachs was a matter of ‘pride’ among children.

These findings highlight how meals in mountain regions are affected by factors beyond a simple matrix of economic status and food availability. Understanding such local complexities is important to fulfil the larger agenda of food systems transformations.

Ethics Statement: I hereby confirm that this study complies with requirements of ethical approvals from the institutional ethics committee for the conduct of this research.

Data Availability statement: No data was used in this paper besides the information from the primary survey.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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