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INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

Food Beyond Counting: Insights Based on Local Knowledge from the Field

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Food is a source of health, it is also a source of pleasure, and it can be the reason for illness.” These are the words of an elderly participant from the village of Badnotta. This was his response to my questions on the importance of food for health as per local knowledge. This paper presents local knowledge and values on “eating food” from fieldwork carried out for a larger study to understand the local knowledge of food and health in a food system.

2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

I collected data through fieldwork consisting of 14 in-depth interviews with traditional knowledge-holders between November 2021 and February 2022. The participants were aged 60–98 years. Of the 14 participants, 8 were women and 6 were men. Of these, two were traditional healers.

Badnotta is located in a mountainous region in Kathua district in Jammu and Kashmir. It is quite remote with poor road and infrastructure connectivity. The major sources of livelihood are labour and farming. Young men are mostly involved in labour, while old men and both young and old women are involved in activities like farming and shepherding; the women also manage domestic work. People practise farming using the resources found in their surroundings, for example, by using the dung of animals as manure.

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Here, I discuss and reflect upon some of the important insights into their values and ideals related to eating food.

3. COUNTING FOOD: IS IT REALLY IMPORTANT? EATING BEYOND NUMBERS

Food and nutrition insecurity, the triple burden of malnutrition, and hidden hunger are important global concerns. Various policies and programmes have been initiated to address these concerns. At an individual level, the minimum prescribed food consumption standards (recommended dietary allowance, RDA) define the quantity of food or calories required to provide energy for moderate to high physical activity. However, there are views that stand in stark opposition to these standards. For instance, discussing Ayurveda in the context of food and health, Kumar and Kaur (2017) mention eight factors listed by Acharya Charaka in the *Ashtavidha Ahara Visheshayata*. These factors describe different conditions to be considered while consuming food, such as quality, processing, combinations, time, quantity, habitat, directions of use, and individual constitution. Further, Charaka explains a whole list of eating norms. Sujatha (2002) discusses local peoples' (from a village in Tamil Nadu) eating norms—one among which is constancy in the quantity of food. She further explains that, as per the locals, the quantity of food to be consumed daily is not a fixed amount; rather, it depends upon the amount of physical work done. It is also based on the capacity of the stomach to hold food. She further explains that while constancy may appear to be a common criterion, the “capacity of the stomach to hold” is localized to specific conditions. The other two factors are regulation and moderation, where regulation stands for regularity in meal timings, while moderation stands for flexibility in the maximum number of meals eaten in a day.

3.1. Local Understanding of Eating Food

Here, I share the views of locals on minimizing consumption beyond “a particular amount and the practice of counting calories”. An elderly lady stated, “Don’t count what you eat. In fact, never count what you eat, and eat as per your hunger. If you count, you won’t digest the food well. Eating without counting is based on listening to your own hunger rather than listening to someone else’s instruction.” Another lady said, “Contentment after eating plays a major role in digestion and your body will tell you when to stop, so there is no need to worry about numbers.”

On further probing, they explained that food is not only needed to fill the stomach; instead, its purpose should be to provide health so that one is able to work. I asked her and a few others what matters in deciding how much should one eat and whether there was any standard rule. “There is no such standard regarding how much one should eat, but whatever you eat should bring an end to hunger. One must be able to do the required physical work, which creates satisfaction after eating, and so taste in food is very important,” I was informed. According to them, tastes can be of different types: sweet, sour, salty, astringent, and pungent. They further added that, “Taste should be controlled and regulated in two ways: first, avoid repetition of the same type of taste or an excess of a particular taste in a meal, and second, maintain the process of preparation, which can be adjusted according to the season.” Giving an example, another elderly lady, referring to the eating habits of her grandchildren and others of younger generations, said that, “When we were children, at least one meal of the day was different for different days in a week, but today I see that children don’t have time; they cook fast and keep feeding themselves with a particular type of taste for a long time.” She pointed out that this is where our discussion had begun—on “contentment after eating” being important for complete digestion. Her statement also matched that of a traditional healer who said, “If you have three different tastes on a plate and you eat one kind of taste in excess, it will create problems in your digestion and later lead to illness if not treated on time.”

I finally asked them if there was any time when taste was not considered important or a priority. To this a man said, “When you have food, you must think of taste, but when you do not have food, you should first think of ending hunger.” Citing past incidents, he shared that people remember the harsh times when there was scarcity of food and they were left with no choice but to consume whatever they got, such as uncultivated greens from the forest. In such instances, taste did not matter much.

4. REFLECTIONS

From these interviews, I classify the amount of food intake based on three factors: availability, variability, and uniformity. Availability is simply the amount of food available to be consumed. Variability refers to variations in food taste; when they say, “to avoid repetition of taste”, they mean repetition of the same taste over days or weeks, which is believed to lead to illness. Uniformity is maintaining the process of preparing food; there should not be a lot of changes in the method of preparation, and uniformity should be practised by adhering to set recipes over time, with changes made

according to the season. In relation to the eight factors given by Kumar and Kaur (2017), citing Charaka, I assume that taste/satisfaction is another important factor in the local context. Further, Sujatha's argument, regarding eating according to the capacity of the stomach to hold food rather than predetermining the amount you eat, is partially relatable to my field insights. These factors decided by people are based on their knowledge, observation, and lived experiences. These play a crucial role in their autonomy of food choice, which they believe positively affects their health and wellbeing.

5. CONCLUSION

The understanding of locals regarding how much to eat is based on fulfilling two needs: the physical requirement and satisfaction/contentment. The latter depends on taste, which is important only if food is generally available. Once enough food is available to eat, then there is the consideration of taste, which is regulated by uniformity and variability. Even when they eat according to the type of physical work, they do not rely on counting calories but on satisfaction/contentment as the guiding principle. Their knowledge reflects their understanding of food, which ranges across factors like availability, capability to do physical work, and taste. Given the context that at the local level, multiple factors determine the amount of food intake rather than it simply being a fixed amount, the primary question that arises is to what extent can localized principles be generalized on a national scale?

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