



Socio-cultural Dimensions of Malnutrition among Indigenous Peoples: A study among Irulas Community of Attappady, Kerala

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ABSTRACT: Malnutrition is one of the major concern and one of the most important reasons of morbidity and mortality at Attappadi in Palakkad district of Kerala. Despite in Attappady various projects and other developmental programmes were implemented by government departments and various NGOs, the particular problem still arising and also reporting the child death due to malnutrition. This is a cause of great concern. The aim of this study was to determine key socioeconomic and socio-cultural dimensions and practices affecting malnutrition among Irulas community of Attappadi. As it is a fact-finding investigation, descriptive research design is employed in the study. Because Adivasi people as we know they are very sensitive and they are not well communicated their problems as common people so the researcher decided to take data separately with interview schedule for getting socio economic profile and other health related aspects the community and in-depth interview for getting socio cultural dimensions of malnutrition and life of Adivasis in Attappady. The primary data were collected from the Irula community of Attappady, the tribal block of Palakkad district in Kerala. From data interpretation and the analysis of the research malnutrition in Attappady has several socio cultural dimensions such as lack of food and nutritional security, collapse of traditional system of Adivasi people, tremendous change the agricultural system, lack of education, lack of employability, lack of good transportation and sanitation.

Keywords: Socio-cultural, Malnutrition, Indigenous peoples, Irulas community, Attappady, Kerala



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1. Introduction

Malnutrition is still a major public health issue in the developing world and exist as the most significant risk factor for the burden of diseases (Haque, R. Kumar, B. Kumar, & Neetika, (2015) and its related illness of the people which living vulnerable condition in Kerala especially at Attappady in palakkad dustriect, child malnutrition and its related deaths are very severe issue which discussing as a one of the most serious public health problem in the contemporary society in local, national and international level. Of the numerous problems facing the country`s development, malnutrition is the most dominant. According to Gopalan (2003), nutrition is a crucial part of health and well-being of all individuals and good nutrition will help and individual to lead a socially and economically active life.

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An individual's nutrition is determined by a number of factors acting directly and indirectly. These include food availability, purchasing power of the people, distribution of income, food consumption pattern, intra family food distribution, level of nutritional knowledge, levels of employment, illiteracy or ignorance. Besides, factors like susceptibility to diseases, particularly diseases of the digestive system and to infestations as a result of unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation and unhygienic living conditions are equally important determinants/ contributing to what is called 'nutrition leakage' (Ali, 1992). The vulnerable community like Adivasis will always suffer with lot of problems such as above-mentioned problems. In Attappady, they have no more facilities to protect their health.

2. Attappadi and Adhivasis

Attappadi is one of the Adivasi settlement regions in Kerala which is situated in Palakkad district. It is a settlement of Adivasis, Indigenous communities in the state of Kerala, who are most vulnerable due to environmental degradation. This is geographically a hilly terrain in the district of Palakkad found between Coimbatore of Tamilnadu in the east and Mannarkadu of the Kerala state in the west. Irulas, Mudugas and Kurumbas are the *Adhivasi* or Indigenous communities of Attappadi. It has 183 *Adhivasi* hamlets of which representatives from 30 hamlets spreading the entire geographical area of Attappadi,

3. Irula Community

Irulas are a major tribal community in the state of Kerala. Majority of the Irula community reside in Attappadi village and in the Silent valley areas of Palakkad district. Almost 99 percent of the Irula population live in Palakkad district. The community is also having presence in Coimbatore and Pollachi districts of Tamil Nadu (Luiz, 1962; Ayyappan, 1965; Mathur, 1977). The word Irula has been derived from the Tamil word, Irul either implying the dark complexion of the Irulas or their being constantly spotted by villagers in the ancient past as distant silhouettes in the forests. There are 171 tribal hamlets in Attappadi out of which 135 are Irula hamlets (villages). The hamlet legislature of Irula community consist of a Moopan- the chief of the hamlet, a Vandari - treasurer, Koordala- something like the chief's attendant (Luiz, 1962).

4. Malnutrition: A challenging issue

Malnutrition is one of the major challenging issue in the contemporary society, especially in the developing world. Malnutrition does not happen with any single reason it has several reasons such as socio-cultural, political as well as economical directly or indirectly. In the Kerala state the malnutrition and its related deaths had reported from the Attappady. Over the past two years such a crisis has come to light in the Attappady region of Kerala where over of 39 deaths had been reported from Attappady tribal block in Palakkad district between April 2012 and May 2013 and 14 children till as on November 2014 due to malnutrition (Suchitra, 2015, July 04). The research problem rises based on this particular issue that had reported child deaths due to malnutrition in Attappady.

The present study focuses on the socio-cultural dimensions of malnutrition among Irulas of Attappady. Adivasis are generally living in a particular geographical area with a common platform

and self-reliant group. However, now the Adivasi communities mostly depend on others for their life. The government introduced several programme to tackle the issues to reduce the nutritional issue of Attappady with less significant change in nutrition based harms or infant death. In this context, the researcher investigates to understand the socio-cultural dimensions of malnutrition among Irulas of Attappady.

5. Life of Adivasi People in Attappady

Majority of Adivasis in Attappady have no basic amenities necessary for a secure and dignified life. There still exist many strong hindrances in establishing a standard way of life for Adivasis like providing good habitat, sanitation, potable water, food, dress, primary education. According to Manojan (2018), the system of schooling is unsuccessful in accommodating the indigenous children and the children often find it hard to relate themselves to the practices at their school which stands as a hindrance for the students' active participation.

After conducting interviews with the Mooppans of Irula Adivasis in Nakkupathi, kavundikkal, Manthimala, Thazhe moolamkombu, Nadumoolamkombu, Cheerakkadavu, Veettikkundu, Vallakkulam, Moolaghanghal hamlets of Agali, Puthoor and Sholayar Grama Panchayats of Attappady, it was observed that there is a shift in the way of life of Adivasis. They used to cultivate food crops for their own and were hunting animals for food. Thus, they were self-sufficient and kept their homogenous culture. They lost their agricultural land because of various factors like shift in the pattern of usage of land, cultural diffusion, government policies, and various laws. As a result of these factors they not only lost their agricultural land but became more dependent on mainstream society. They even began to find food items from common market. That made their life complicated and they found it difficult to garner sufficient nutrients as compared to their indigenous food habits.

They were heavily dependent on forest produces and wild animals for their daily life. They were able to make use of various varieties of mushrooms, fruits, leafy vegetables, tubers, meat products of wild animals and birds, fishes, crabs, molluscs, and herbal medicines. Nowadays, they can't rely upon this diverse food culture which is in tune with their traditional life style. But the ban on hunting, modernization of agriculture like usage of chemical pesticides which leads to elimination of natural vegetation, extinction of many living species and the loss of traditional labour made their life difficult. These changes destructed their peace life and they could not get more nutritional food which leads to bring more health problems among the Adivasi people and also leads to the nutritional deficiency.

In the past history of Attappady the whole family, including women and children, were actively participated in agricultural labour. Thus, they were able to retain their physical health. But the periodical shift in agricultural habits alienated women and children from mainstream Adivasis Society. In their opinion, they don't get even one fourth of the products that they used to receive earlier from agriculture because of the menace of wild animals, water scarcity and the shift from organic farming to chemical farming. Adivasis were experts in farming, perennial as well as seasonal crops; and sharing the produce among them.

Health is one of the serious problems among all tribal communities. Various measures are taken for timely medical attention to Scheduled Tribes. Since the tribal settlements are situated far away from hospitals and health centers; the STs are not able to make use of available medical

facilities. According to the people from the community, they are suffering from several kinds of diseases such as TB, Leprosy, Scabies, and waterborne diseases. In spite of the health facilities already existing in tribal areas, people from Indigenous communities of certain localities are found to be suffering from communicable as well as malnutrition based diseases. The tribal people also reported that they are facing severe problems including inability to get timely treatment for patients who need emergency treatment. The problem of malnutrition deaths is plaguing the tribal belts of Attappady in Palakkad district in the State.

Over the past few months and still there have been recurring deaths of scores of children in Attappady due to malnutrition. Excessive consumption of alcohol, tobacco, ganja and superstitious beliefs were also indicated by the community people as playing a vital role in death, directly or indirectly.

They were used to depend on indigenous medicines and herbs during diseases and outbreak of epidemics. However, they now point towards the scarcity of these herbs and their indigenous medicine system is now almost lost. As a result, they move onto public health care provided by the state, which is actually in a perilous condition due to lack of medicines, manpower and infrastructure. This contributes to the health problem of Adivasis. The road to hamlets in Attappady is dilapidated and therefore they are nearby cut away from the mainstream society. It would have been a blessing if they were self-sufficient, but it is difficult for them now because of their dependency to the outside world.

6. Summary and conclusion

Some of the senior members of the community emphasized that the Adivasis were self-reliant and now the reality that most of them are skipping the food and their consumption of food one or two times in the day. It is negatively influencing well-being of their children and other members of the community.

As we know the Adivasi people always facing lot of problems, especially due to their social location. Repeatedly it has been noted that alcoholism is rampant in the area and that this is one major cause for the present crisis. Several persons have stated that most of the family members are addicted to alcohol even alcohol is banned in Attappady, illicit liquor is brewed by adivasis in numerous *oorus*. Also bottled 'english' liquor is purchased from across the border from Tamil Nadu. The excessive use of alcohol and addiction is contributing to several health issues. There are many structural barriers in front of them which restricts them to access the various government benefits. The present crisis in Attappady reflects the collapse of the health system, Local Self Governments and other government departments such as ITDP and social justice in addressing the issues faced by the Irulas community.

The decline of agricultural system of people of Adivasis of Attappadi leads to the nutritional insecurity of the community and also brings more shortage of nutritional food. It is clear that the supporting system of the empowerment of the tribal people they couldn't get adequate health services from the state institution and other funding institutions. Sasidharan (2017) suggests that the participation of indigenous people in the project formulation is crucial in protecting the culture of Indigenous communities. The irregular functioning of the AWCs has also leads to not getting supplementary food like eggs, milk, bananas, etc. to them as regularly. Most

of them opined that they don't get the nutritional food items from the ration shop and Anganwadis. It is revealed that the inefficiency of the administration of most of the government offices and its departments are responsible for the lack of nutritional supplementary food items to Adivasis of Attappadi.

Even most of the respondents consulted in the Public Health Centers opined that there is no effort to reduce the health problems of the Adivasi community and malnutrition. There should be an urgent attention to various socio-cultural issues faced by the Adivasi communities in order to wipe out the malnutrition among the Indigenous population. The social workers working with the Indigenous peoples have to use their advocacy to bring changes to the life of Adivasi people.

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