Digesting Eating Out Behavior in Rural India: Children and Biscuits

Though eating in restaurants and buying convenience food may not be the first thing one thinks of when pondering rural diets, rural consumption of food outside the home was part of what I studied this summer. With the Tata-Cornell Agriculture and Nutrition Initiative, I travelled to India and worked with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid tropics. Here, I worked with a team of four other interns to validate a tool that measures dietary diversity of rural households in India, as dietary diversity is a key marker for nutrition. Few agriculture surveys account for nutrition, so this module was created to succinctly capture nutritional information in order to incorporate nutritional metrics into agriculture surveys. While last year’s batch of interns created this tool, our intern group worked on proving its validity and expanding the questionnaire to include questions on eating out behavior. This portion of the project was included in order to gather a more complete set of data and fill in missing links, as current metrics on rural eating behavior in India do not capture the whole story. While did not find a large consumption of outside food consumed by older generations, children across all socioeconomic statuses

In conjunction with exploring the impacts of eating out behavior on diets of the rural population, I also investigated how the diversity of goods available at the market. In looking at market level diversity, our team aimed to further link individual dietary diversity and eating out behavior and examine the role that the market plays in rural nutrition. This effort to survey the market included taking inventory of markets located near the villages we worked in, interviewing the owner of the village shop, and keeping track of if people sourced their goods from the market
or not. Along with these efforts, our module to measure individual dietary diversity included questions about when people ate outside the home and where those goods were purchased. While we expected to find eating out behavior consistent in some sectors, we found that women rarely eat out and men only eat outside the home if they work in the city, but food cooked in the home is the overwhelming source of nutrition. However, across all socioeconomic statuses, we uncovered that children were consuming packaged goods in an unprecedented amount.

Through interviews with families, mothers, and shop owners, the fact that children in rural settings are now consuming more packaged goods than ever was discovered. This discovery was fascinating for me but heartbreaking at the same time. When visiting a local medical clinic, the doctor in charge informed our group that 70 percent of children in that village were malnourished. Though the majority of children could not access a diet that fully addressed their nutritional needs, every day they were given between 2 and 5 rupees to spend on cookies and chips that supplied no nutritional value.

During interviews with vendors in local villages and large markets alike, vendors consistently reported that the largest change in goods sold was the development of more packaged goods for children. Whereas five years ago, few products were popular, now a wide variety of products have been developed that appeal to small children. When one product becomes popular, a cheaper knockoff is sure to follow shortly. Vendors say that children often come by on their way to or from school to buy a variety of sweet biscuits or salty chips, but rarely anything else. These cheap, widely accessible goods are appealing to children, with colorful packaging heavy advertising.

During focus group discussions, many mothers of young children attested to the huge impact of media and peer pressure in the purchasing of these goods. Their kids often requested
the most advertised goods. Some mothers said that they gave the kids small change for the
biscuits because the children would cry and cry if they did not have the opportunity to buy these
foods, as all of their friends would run to the local store to buy biscuits after school.

Not only did the mothers of small children show the impact of peer influence when
considering which goods to buy, but the children demonstrated this too. At a visit to a local
school, our team had an opportunity to talk with kids in a large group about their eating habits.
While this visit did not produce particularly useful data, this was one of the more fun aspects of
the trip. When asking the kids questions about which foods they preferred, many would raise
their hands for everything, simply for the fun of it and to follow what everyone else was doing.
We could see that the kids had so much fun joining with their friends to answer our silly
questions about food, and we could see that mentality expand to food purchases as well. When
someone requested a particular type of packaged good, other followed along.

Many government programs have been instituted to improve child nutrition, such as
nutrient-rich midday meals at schools and pre-school programs for children under five that
educate mothers, provide food for nursing mothers, and give meals to preschool aged children.
These programs have waivered in efficacy, sometimes improving nutrition, but other times not
making as large of an impact as hoped. During focus group discussions, many women said that
the food from these programs tasted different, so they fed it to the cows to make them more
productive. While all of these programs press forward, child consumption of packaged goods
continues to skyrocket. In these packaged good, I think an opportunity lies to create a more
nutritious biscuit, as children will already be purchasing these snacks.

Through this research project, I had the incredible opportunity of meeting with people in
their homes, learning about food practices in a culture outside of my own, and gaining research
skills while brainstorming new ideas to address nutritional concerns in India. The Tata-Cornell Initiative allowed me to gain valuable knowledge on data collection, the research process, and all that fieldwork entails. The most valuable part of this experience certainly was found in the homes of people I interviewed, as I was welcomed with open arms and got to learn about a different lifestyle while making new connections.