

Malnutrition in a tribal context: A political ecology approach

Abstract

In India, malnutrition is a problem that has perpetuated for several decades and is argued to be a manifestation of social and economic deprivation. It is located in extreme and chronic forms among tribal communities mostly living in and around forests. Recent studies argue that there is a need to make other developmental programs and policies nutrition sensitive especially those related to agriculture in order to improve conditions of chronic forms of malnutrition. Furthermore, past scholarly works and government reports on tribal population suggest that these communities have been confronted with political struggle related to the acquisition of land which has led to changes in not only social and economic conditions but has also affected the local ecology. It is in this backdrop that this dissertation examines the problem of malnutrition.

The dissertation is motivated by the existing literature which argues that change in control over environmental resources may have deep resonance on the health and well-being of the tribal communities. This is because livelihood, as well as food practices in tribal communities, are dependent on forest. Several tribal communities in the country are confronted with developmental programs that might lead to loss of access to land and forest further exacerbating their situation. While tribal culture and identity have been the anchor for some of the social and environmental movements resisting land acquisition, it has been argued that within these movements, culture has been understood as a constant entity or an artefact and hence, such an understanding provides limited scope to analyse the tribal community as subjects. This has also stymied the development of a concrete political understanding of tribal communities. Therefore, this dissertation builds a political understanding of the tribal community witnessing tensions within, and with external actors of development, while also struggling with alarming conditions of malnutrition.

The objective of this dissertation is to recognise the tribal community as subjects. It proceeds with an understanding that tribal culture is a changing idea determined through discursive politics. To

understand this politics this dissertation analyses the policies and discursive practices of State, market and NGOs acting on the community as well as the way in which the community members develop their views and exercise their choices as subjects. The change in choices studied here are in relation to food production and consumption which is understood to be impacting nutrition, as expressed by the people in preliminary interactions. For the purpose of analysing the political processes changing the material conditions of living and discursive understandings of nutrition and health in the community, this dissertation adopts the framework of Political Ecology of Health and Body. This enables to look at nature-society-health interrelationships as a political process that shapes subjectivities in a tribal community.

The analysis is done based on finding from fieldwork done in the *kondha* community in the Niyamgiri forest area in Odisha. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of 17 months during which semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members- farmers (n=40), mothers (n=28), adolescent children (n=8), senior citizens (n=5) and non-tribal families (n=13) in two villages. In addition to this government officials at the village, block and district level of agriculture (n=3), health (n=3), nutrition (n=5) and forest (n=7) department were interviewed to understand the state initiatives and plans at the local level. Also, elected members (n=4) at different levels were interviewed. In addition to this, NGO functionaries from two NGOs (n=7) were interviewed to know about their interventions in the area. Focusing on the case of two villages with high levels of malnutrition that are also encountering changes in their environment in different ways, as implied from the extent of State and NGO intervention and market forces, this dissertation explores two things:

- *How do changes in access to forest resources and farming practices translate into dietary changes and impact both nutrition outcomes and perceptions of such outcomes in the community?*
- *How does the representation of the problem of malnutrition in multiple discourses (civil society discourse, official nutrition policy etc.) shape the subjectivity of the community members with regard to food and health?*

This dissertation uses the concept of 'place', 'landscape' and 'body' within the political ecology of

health and body framework to locate health experience in a changing tribal landscape and examines the role of discourse in shaping food-body relations. In doing so, it first builds a place-based understanding of health and nutrition as it uses a relational understanding of place to help understand the structural context that might be producing malnutrition. It analyses the impact of the food production and consumption changes on relations between State, market and community and community and ecology, giving rise to a new tribal landscape, within which experiences of health are situated. It is argued within the dissertation that these changing relations lead to further marginalization of tribal communities making them vulnerable to malnutrition in the long run. Bringing out the conflict between the goals of State policies related to forest, agriculture and health, this dissertation analyses the barriers to effective linkage between policies across multiple sectors that impact malnutrition.

Furthermore, using the concept of 'body', Foucauldian discourse analysis is done to understand the ways in which different perceptions related to health are created. Using the Foucauldian understanding of bio-power in the dissertation, State policies and practices in the area of forest, agriculture and nutrition along with development programs of the NGOs are analyzed as part of a discursive field in which power operates. It is demonstrated how the strategically linked discourses by way of dominance or resistance, impact both at the level of individual body- through the creation of new food preferences and at the level of social body-by changing ways in which local ecology is valued. This dissertation brings out the complex capillary forms in which power functions as multiple State policies, NGOs and industry strategically link together to shape the social fabric and lifeworlds of communities based on the dominant understanding of food and forest that also drives the State policies. As it develops a political ecology analysis of health and body using the case of a tribal community this dissertation contributes to the existing understanding of malnutrition by bringing out the policy conflicts and examining an alternative understanding of food and nutrition. Furthermore, by analysing the subjectivity formation process through changing choices of food consumption, this dissertation provides platform to examine the tribal community as subjects in transition as they encounter several developmental programs of the State and NGOs.