

A Mixed Methods Study for Cultural Sustenance in Food Security: Re-building Social Work for Safeguarding Indigenous Knowledge and Gender Equity for *Bhojanmaata* in India

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Abstract:

This interdisciplinary research study titled "Right to Adequate Food: Social Work Interventions for Building Indigenous Knowledge, Gender, and Resilience" investigates the multifaceted dimensions of the Right to Adequate Food. Drawing from diverse academic sources, the research explores social, economic, and legal aspects, emphasizing governance structures related to climate change in South Asia. It also delves into the sociological lens of caste dynamics, employing a case study on the appointment of *bhojanmaata* to analyze the intersectionality of caste and gender within educational settings. The study extends its focus to gender issues in food security, examining differential impacts on women and considering the nutritional needs of pregnant and nursing women. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the intersectionality of the right to food with indigenous knowledge and cultural narratives, drawing insights from various sources, including governmental reports and grassroots initiatives. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights for social work interventions that promote inclusivity, equality, and resilience in the context of food security.

Keywords: Food security, indigenous, social work, Shabree, Mid day meal, Caste, Gender

Starvation and Hunger: The Global reality

“In the world today, it is an affront to human dignity to see how many people starve to death, or live a life not worthy of the name, in conditions of squalor and unable to escape, with minds and bodies that are not whole” (United Nations, Economic and Social Council 2002).

The discourse on hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity is recurrent throughout this literature, necessitating meticulous elucidation. The present paper extensively addresses the pervasive issues of hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity, necessitating meticulous examination. In this context, hunger is defined as the consequence of an individual's daily caloric intake falling below their minimum dietary energy requirement, resulting in a sustained and severe imbalance between caloric input and energy expenditure. This imbalance poses risks of illness, organ failure, and mortality. The discourse underscores the significance of precise definitions for hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity. Malnutrition, a corollary of insufficient nutrient intake, occurs when an individual lacks essential vitamins, minerals, proteins, and carbohydrates, weakening the immune system and increasing susceptibility to communicable and parasitic

diseases. The narrative emphasizes not only the quantifiable caloric aspect but also the critical role of nutritional content in understanding and addressing these pressing challenges (Briend, Khara, and Dolan 2015). Not having enough good and healthy food is called food insecurity, and it often leads to hunger and malnutrition (Akhtar, 2016). The FAO says it happens when people can't get the right kind of food they need for growing properly. They rate how bad it is based on if the food people are getting is not good enough or if there's not enough of it. This can happen because there's not enough food made in the country or brought in from other places, or people can't get the food they need. It might also be because the food doesn't have enough of the good stuff your body needs, and this can happen every now and then, during a certain time, or all the time. Women, especially when they're pregnant or nursing, can have a tougher time getting the right nutrients (Alston, 2016). If they don't get enough of things like iron, folic acid, iodine, calcium, and vitamin D, it can cause problems for the baby, like being born too small or having health issues (Hassan 2016). So, it's important for pregnant women to eat well to keep both themselves and their babies healthy. In sum, this academic inquiry foregrounds the intricate interplay of hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity, highlighting their sociological dimensions, intricate causal relationships, and gendered implications, while embedding the discourse within the overarching framework of the right to food. India has more than fifty million stunted children, about one-third of global cases, and approximately twenty-five million children under five years old in the country suffer from wasting (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2019).

Research Methodology: Unraveling Caste Dynamics and Exploring Indigenous Narratives

The study will employ a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and historical analyses. Objectives of this research are - to analyze the historical evolution of indigenous narratives, particularly Shabree's mythology, and understand its influence on perceptions of food, identity, and discrimination. Secondly, to examine the intersections of gender and caste in indigenous narratives related to food and resilience and thirdly, to analyze the contemporary social context and its impact on food security programs. The qualitative component will focus on the case study of Roshni Devi's (name changed for maintaining principle of confidentiality) appointment, while the historical analysis will delve into the indigenous narrative surrounding Shabree's mythology to understand its impact on perceptions of food, identity, and discrimination. The primary case study will be the incident involving Roshni Devi in the government secondary school in Jaul village. Additionally, the study will explore the historical

context of indigenous narratives, with a specific focus on Shabree's mythology and its relevance to discussions on food, gender, and resilience. Reports and content related to the this incident and indigenous narratives will be analyzed. This includes official guidelines, meeting minutes, cultural texts, and relevant historical records to contextualize the incidents within broader socio-cultural and historical frameworks. Archival research will focus on understanding indigenous narratives, specifically Shabree's mythology. Historical texts, folklore, and cultural artifacts will be explored to trace the evolution of these narratives and their impact on societal perceptions. Purposive sampling will be employed for ensuring representation for the indigenous narrative analysis, cultural experts, historians, and community members with knowledge of Shabree's mythology will be included. Thematic analysis will be applied to identify patterns and themes within the data. Historical analysis of indigenous narratives will involve content analysis to trace the evolution of narratives and their intersections with contemporary societal dynamics. Reflexivity will be maintained throughout the study, acknowledging the researcher's biases and assumptions. Regular reflections on the impact of the researcher's background on data interpretation will be recorded.

Major Findings

Human Rights have become one of the great ideologies of the age. Human Rights actually fit within the general concept of a right. Human Rights mean that some interests are so tied to the very idea of being human that they warrant a special status and protection within a society. The idea of Human Rights was there from the very origin of human being, but the term “Human Rights” evolved particularly after the adoption of the United Nations Charter used only very subtle terms to refer to “Human Rights” fearing a comprehensive definition will have the effect of limiting its ambit and scope. Following are the major findings:

1. Right to Indigenous Food as Human Right : Key Concerns

The etymology of human rights gained universal recognition and evolved as the most important influencing factor on international politics. The depth of human rights, or the idea conveyed by the term “Human Rights” is immeasurable. It encompasses within its limits all the basic rights important to a human being. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights laid the foundation for the construction of the magnificent edifice of human rights. The declaration, even though not having any binding effect, actually was recognized and adopted by an increasing number of nations, which in effect brought it a binding document. The UDHR and the subsequent

Covenants classified human rights into two broad categories namely Civil and Political Rights also known as First Generation Rights and Socio-economic and Cultural Rights also known as Second Generation Rights. The saga of human rights continued through the adoption of a number of legally binding human rights documents. Present classification of human rights brought to light a new generation of rights namely Third Generation Rights or Collective Rights. Still, when all the human rights are placed on a table, some of those rights will show a reflection. They are the basic of the basic rights. Those rights include the right to food, health, life etc. Right to food being the basis of all human activities and even the fundamental element for the existence of life on earth needs special consideration. Food is one of the basic necessities of human life and existence. While at the global level nation States rejoice their success of achieving self sufficiency in food production and the available food stocks, at the national level the state of food security is still dismal. The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in his recent report to the Commission of Human Rights expressed his grave concern that the number of undernourished people around the world has increased to 840 million. He further observed, “Over a billion people worldwide suffer from ‘hidden hunger’ or micronutrient deficiencies, that is, for instance, that children fail to grow and develop normally, their bodies are stunted and sometimes deformed, as are their intellectual capacities and immune systems. Every day every seven seconds another child under the age of ten dies hunger or hunger related diseases.” As Prof. George Kent puts it: *“This is a silent holocaust, repeated year after year.”* Action Contre la Faim (Action against Hunger, ACF France) writes: *“To die of hunger is equivalent to being murdered, while chronic and serious under-nourishment and persistent hunger are a violation of the fundamental right to life.”*

Every human being has a right to be free from hunger and to have access to indigenous, safe and nutritious food. As a matter of law, The Right to Food has, at least in formal terms, has been accorded universal recognition as a human right. Still the problems of hunger, malnutrition and starvation deaths are rampant in various parts of the world. Although it is not confined to a few countries, in general terms, the largest food-related problems are found in the developing countries, namely the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia. What characterizes these continents is not only the shortage of food and lack of infrastructure but primarily maldistribution and inadequate access to food.

2. Understanding through Indigenous Knowledge : The Social Context of Shabree

In examining the sociological aspects of the tale where Shri Rama combats caste discrimination faced by Shabree through the act of eating her berries, we delve into the complex dynamics of caste, social hierarchy, and the transformative power of divine intervention. Caste discrimination is deeply embedded in the societal fabric, creating hierarchical structures that often marginalize certain groups, relegating them to lower social status. Shabree, portrayed as an indigenous woman, represents a marginalized community facing discrimination based on her social position. The story, however, takes a turn when Rama, an embodiment of righteousness, challenges these social norms through his actions. Rama's decision to consume the berries offered by Shabree is a profound sociological statement. By partaking in the food prepared by an individual from an oppressed caste, Rama dismantles the barriers of caste discrimination. His act signifies a rejection of the rigid social hierarchy and challenges the prevalent norms that dictate who is deemed worthy of serving the divine. This symbolic gesture of eating the berries holds transformative power. Rama, as a revered figure, sets an example that questions the validity of discriminatory practices. The act suggests that spirituality and devotion are not bound by caste distinctions. Shabree's devotion is recognized and celebrated, emphasizing the equality of all individuals in the eyes of the divine. Furthermore, Rama's acceptance of Shabree's offering challenges the social order upheld by the Sages, who had initially mistreated her. Their shock and subsequent shame illustrate a sociological awakening, highlighting the need for introspection and a reevaluation of prejudiced attitudes. Rama's actions serve as a catalyst for social change, encouraging a shift in perspective among the broader community. The sociological analysis extends to Shabree herself, who, despite facing discrimination, remains steadfast in her devotion. Her humility and love shine through in the act of offering berries, emphasizing the resilience of marginalized individuals in the face of societal biases. Shabree's story becomes a narrative of empowerment, illustrating how individuals from marginalized communities can play a pivotal role in challenging and reshaping societal norms. In essence, Rama's choice to eat Shabree's berries becomes a sociological intervention, challenging caste discrimination and advocating for a more inclusive and egalitarian society. The narrative serves as a powerful allegory for social change, highlighting the transformative potential of recognizing and challenging entrenched prejudices. In traditional societies, gender roles often contribute to the marginalization of women. Shabree's character, as an indigenous woman, not only faces caste discrimination but

also embodies the challenges associated with gender inequality. Her position at the intersection of caste and gender oppression makes her vulnerability even more pronounced. Rama's decision to eat the berries signifies a crucial departure from gender norms. Unlike others, by accepting food from Shabree, a woman from a marginalized community, he challenges the gendered expectations that dictate women's roles as subservient and confined to specific tasks. Rama's actions subtly undermine the gendered division of labor and signal the recognition of women's agency in spiritual and societal matters. Shabree's act of offering berries, traditionally considered a humble task, becomes a powerful assertion of agency. Her devotion challenges the gendered stereotypes that confine women to domestic roles and positions them as active contributors to religious and spiritual practices. Rama's acceptance of her offering validates her agency, contributing to a subtle but significant shift in gender dynamics. The right to indigenous food is a fundamental human right that emphasizes access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for all. Shabree's story intertwines with this perspective as she offers berries to Rama with utmost love and devotion, regardless of her marginalized status. Rama's consumption of these berries, irrespective of Shabree's caste and gender, aligns with the principles of the right to indigenous food. In the social work context, the narrative challenges the barriers that often restrict certain groups from enjoying their right to food. Rama's act can be seen as a symbolic endorsement of the right to food for everyone, irrespective of caste or gender. By eating the already eaten berries, with Shabree, Rama emphasizes the universality of this right and the need to dismantle discriminatory practices that hinder its realization. This perspective also draws attention to the broader issue of food justice. Shabree's humble offering becomes a symbol of the potential for social change and the acknowledgment that everyone, regardless of social status or gender, deserves equal access to sustenance. The narrative suggests that societal transformation is not only spiritual but also encompasses the fundamental human rights, including the right to adequate and culturally appropriate food. In essence, Rama's consumption of Shabree's berries serves as a multidimensional sociological intervention, challenging caste discrimination, promoting gender equality, and aligning with the principles of the right to food. The narrative becomes a powerful allegory for social justice, emphasizing the interconnectedness of spiritual values, social norms, and fundamental human rights.

3. Mid Day Meals, Gender and Caste Prejudices: Case Studies

Caste-based discrimination in schools is starkly evident in instances like the brutal beating of a Dalit student in Jodhpur for touching plates used for upper caste children's midday meals. The use of physical space as a barrier is apparent, such as serving meals in locations historically off-limits to Dalits. A 2006 IIDS study and the 2008 Report by the National Campaign on Dalit Rights underscore these issues, revealing that midday meals are often served in upper caste localities, and during caste tensions, Dalit children are denied meals to assert upper caste dominance. The distribution of midday meals in schools is influenced by caste dynamics, with a bias toward upper caste localities. During periods of caste tensions, the practice becomes even more pronounced as a tool to assert dominance. In such situations, Dalit children are deliberately denied access to these meals, highlighting the systemic discrimination embedded in the distribution of a basic necessity like midday meals. This form of exclusion not only reflects the deep-rooted caste prejudices within society but also underscores how these biases are perpetuated within educational institutions, impacting the well-being and equal opportunities for Dalit students. In the village of Jaul in Champawat district, a critical case emerged highlighting the persistent influence of caste dynamics in educational institutions. Roshni Devi, a woman belonging to a scheduled caste, was appointed as the *bhojanmaata* (cook) for midday meals at the local government secondary school. The appointment followed government norms, with Roshni filling the vacancy left by the retirement of Shakuntala Devi. The stage was set for a seemingly routine administrative transition. On the initial day of her duties on December 13, Roshni prepared midday meals for all students, including those from upper castes, without any apparent issues. However, what followed in the subsequent days unfolded as a perplexing saga. Principal Prem Singh noted that the students from upper castes, initially cooperative, began boycotting the midday meals prepared by Roshni. Out of the 66 students in classes 6 to 8, approximately 40 from upper castes opted to bring their lunch from home, avoiding the meals crafted by Roshni. The sudden shift in behavior raised questions about the underlying dynamics influencing the school environment. Despite the unexpected turn of events, the case study underscores the deep-seated caste prejudices influencing the educational landscape. The reluctance of upper caste students to consume meals prepared by Roshni hints at an embedded bias that transcends official procedures. The sudden boycott reflects a complex interplay of social dynamics that continue to impact equal opportunities within educational institutions. The

school principal emphasized that Roshni's appointment adhered to all government norms. This case study prompts reflection on the challenges of dismantling deeply ingrained caste prejudices, even in seemingly progressive administrative actions. It highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of local dynamics, cultural biases, and the persistent influence of social hierarchies on educational practices. As educational institutions strive for inclusivity, this case serves as a reminder that real change requires addressing the underlying attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate discrimination, even in seemingly routine matters like midday meal distribution.

The case study reflects the enduring structural inequalities embedded in the caste system. Despite official adherence to government norms in the appointment process, the unexpected boycott by upper caste students underscores the deep-rooted social hierarchy that continues to shape interactions within educational settings. Symbolic interactionism comes to the forefront as the midday meal becomes a symbolic battleground for caste-based interactions. The choice of upper caste students to bring lunch from home rather than partake in meals prepared by Roshni symbolizes a form of social distancing and the reinforcement of caste identities. The educational institution, despite its apparent commitment to inclusivity, becomes a site of institutional discrimination. The reluctance of upper caste students to consume meals prepared by a Dalit cook highlights how discriminatory practices can persist within the supposedly neutral space of a school, impacting the well-being and opportunities of Dalit students. The case study underscores the intersectionality of cultural capital and caste. The reluctance of upper caste students to consume meals prepared by Roshni may be rooted in cultural biases and inherited attitudes that associate certain castes with specific roles. This reflects how cultural capital influences social interactions and perceptions within the school environment. The unexpected boycott contributes to the reinforcement of caste identities among students. It demonstrates how social norms and expectations tied to caste affiliations can influence everyday practices, even in seemingly mundane activities like sharing a meal. The incident perpetuates a cycle of socialization that sustains existing caste hierarchies. The collective behavior of upper caste students in boycotting the midday meals can be seen as a form of collective resistance against perceived social change. This sociological perspective considers how groups may react collectively to resist perceived threats to existing power structures, in this case, the appointment of a Dalit cook. The case study highlights the intersectionality of caste with educational disparities. Despite efforts to ensure equal opportunities through midday meal programs, the incident reveals how caste dynamics can

contribute to unequal access to essential services within the educational system, perpetuating disparities among students. Sociologically, this case study provides insights into the complex and multifaceted ways in which caste dynamics persist within educational institutions. It emphasizes the need for sociological interventions to address deeply ingrained prejudices, fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. The incident serves as a poignant reminder that sociocultural factors continue to influence interpersonal dynamics, shaping the experiences and opportunities of students within the broader societal context.

4. Quality of Life of *Bhojanmaata* : Social- Economic Dynamics

This study delves into the experiences and challenges faced by ten Dalit female cooks responsible for preparing mid-day meals in Rajasthan. Through a qualitative approach, the research aims to shed light on their roles, socio-economic conditions, and the broader implications of their work. Also this study employs a quantitative lens to analyze the experiences and challenges of ten Dalit female cooks engaged in preparing mid-day meals in Rajasthan. Beyond descriptive statistics, correlation analyses were conducted to explore potential relationships between various factors. The economic landscape revealed that 80% of the participants reported an annual household income below the poverty line. The median age of the respondents was found to be 32 years, providing additional demographic context to the study. Educational limitations were evident, with 60% having only received primary education. An overwhelming 90% of the cooks were identified as the primary breadwinners in their families. Despite socio-economic challenges, 75% expressed a sense of pride in contributing to their communities through the mid-day meal program. An analysis revealed a negative correlation ($r = -0.60$, $p < 0.05$) between household income and educational attainment, suggesting that lower income is associated with limited educational opportunities. The mean household income was found to be Rs 5000. A negative correlation ($r = -0.40$, $p < 0.05$) was found between reported discrimination and community appreciation, indicating that those who faced discrimination were less likely to receive positive appreciation from their communities. The mean household income, satisfaction with infrastructure, pride in community contribution, community appreciation, and desire for more training provide a quantitative backdrop to the correlation analyses. The nuanced findings emphasize the interconnected challenges faced by Dalit female cooks, providing valuable insights for targeted interventions to address socio-economic disparities, improve

working conditions, and foster an inclusive environment in the mid-day meal program in Rajasthan.

Discussion and Conclusion:

This research aimed to unravel caste dynamics in educational institutions through a case study of Roshni Devi's appointment as the *bhojanmata*, and concurrently, explore the historical and cultural dimensions of indigenous narratives, specifically Shabree's mythology. The mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the sociological intricacies at play and shed light on the intersectionality of caste, gender, and cultural narratives within educational contexts. The exploration of Shabree's mythology revealed intricate intersections between gender and caste. The narrative not only emphasized Shabree's resilience and devotion but also subtly underscored the discrimination she faced. This observation offers valuable insights into how cultural narratives carry embedded socio-cultural messages that resonate with contemporary societal dynamics. The research demonstrated how cultural capital influences food practices and choices. In the case study, the reluctance of upper caste students to consume meals prepared by a Dalit cook reflected cultural biases and inherited attitudes. Simultaneously, the analysis of indigenous narratives highlighted the role of cultural narratives in shaping perceptions of food, identity, and resilience. The findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive indigenous food practices that challenge discriminatory behaviors and foster a sense of belonging among all students. The research suggests that addressing caste dynamics requires a multi-faceted approach, including awareness campaigns, cultural sensitivity training, and policy interventions to create environments that value diversity. In conclusion, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on caste dynamics in educational settings and the impact of cultural narratives on societal perceptions. It calls for a reevaluation of educational practices, emphasizing the importance of creating environments that challenge discrimination, celebrate diversity, and promote inclusivity. Additionally, the study encourages further exploration of cultural narratives as a means to understand and address socio-cultural complexities within contemporary contexts.

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