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## Food, Gender, and Social Status in Rural Parts of North-West India: A Case Study of Rajasthan

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between eating habits, gender roles, and social status in rural areas of North-West India, with a particular emphasis on the part that women play in the production and consumption of food. This study investigates the ways in which cultural and social standards influence food practices and preferences among women and men of different social and economic backgrounds by conducting ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with rural households in different regions of Rajasthan. According to the findings of this research, women's eating behaviours are frequently restricted by gender roles and expectations, which in turn restricts their access to food resources and their ability to make decisions regarding the food that they consume. In addition, it was discovered that social standing and caste play a significant role in shaping food practises and preferences, with households of higher castes typically consuming more expensive and nutritionally dense food items. In its conclusion, the study highlights the necessity of interventions that are culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive. These interventions should address the underlying social and cultural factors that contribute to gender and social disparities in food access and consumption in rural areas of Rajasthan.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The provision of sustenance, energy, and pleasure is all accomplished through the consumption of food, which is an important component of human life. The consumption of food in India is not only essential to one's physical well-being but also integral to the culture, customs, and societal mores that are prevalent throughout the nation (Reddy, 2020). Agriculture and the industries that are closely related to it are the primary sources of income for the vast majority of people living in India's rural regions, reflecting the country's predominately agricultural economic base (Gillespie, 2012). The practice of agriculture is a multifaceted endeavor that is influenced by a variety of social, economic, and cultural elements. Some of these elements include gender roles, caste, and social standing (Bhagowalia, 2012). In spite of the fact that women in rural India play an essential part in the process of producing and consuming food, their contributions are frequently overlooked and underestimated (Agarwal, 2018). In rural India, the purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between dietary practices, gender roles, and social status, with a particular emphasis on the part that women play in both the production and consumption of food.

A variety of social and cultural elements in India contribute to the formation of the country's culinary customs. In India, food choices and consumption patterns are strongly influenced by a person's caste and other aspects of their social standing (Kikon, 2022). On the basis of their shared traditional and religious values, members of various social castes and groups adhere to a variety of dietary customs and restrictions (Mahadevan, 2013). For example, Brahmins, who are members of the highest caste, have traditionally adhered to a vegetarian diet. On the other hand, members of the lower classes, such as the Dalits or the Scheduled classes, typically consume non-vegetarian food and are prohibited from consuming certain foods, such as milk and ghee. This is due to the fact that members of these castes are considered to be unclean. Not only do these practices of food preparation based on caste represent the cultural diversity of India, but they also contribute to the country's socioeconomic inequalities (Fischer, 2019).

Another major element that shapes how people eat in India is gender. Historically, women in India have played crucial roles in both food production and preparation, but their efforts are rarely recognized or appreciated. Water, fuel, and fodder for animals, as well as the processing and storage of food grains, are all tasks traditionally performed by women. However, due to limited access to resources like land, credit, and technology, women's participation in food production is often confined to subsistence agriculture and household consumption (FAO, 2011). This research seeks to learn more about women's roles in food production and consumption in rural India, as well as the possibilities and limitations they face in doing so.

Social status and economic factors also play a critical role in shaping food practices in rural India. Higher caste households often have greater access to resources and consume more expensive and nutritious food items, while lower caste and economically marginalized households often have limited access to food resources and consume less diverse and less nutritious food items (Harris-Fry, 2017). This study aims to investigate the relationship between social status and food practices in rural India and to understand the factors that contribute to social and economic disparities in food access and consumption.

Overall, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the complex and multifaceted relationship between food practices, gender, and social status in rural India. By exploring the cultural and social factors that shape food practices and preferences, this study aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities for promoting gender equity

and social justice in the food system. The study draws on ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with rural households in different regions of India, with a particular focus on women's experiences and perspectives. The study's findings are expected to inform policy and practice in the areas of food security, gender, and rural development in India.

## 2. LITERATUR REVIEW

Food practices, gender, and social status are complex and interrelated factors that shape food consumption patterns in rural India. In this literature review, we explore the existing research on the relationship between these factors and their implications for food security and nutrition outcomes.

### 2.1. Gender and Food Practices

Women's involvement in food production and consumption is a critical aspect of food security in rural India. Several studies have shown that women's participation in agriculture and allied activities is essential for ensuring household food security and nutrition (FAO, 2018; Kabeer, 2012). Women in rural India are responsible for the collection of water, fuel, and fodder for livestock, as well as for processing and storing food grains. Women also have been contributing hugely to agrarian development and advancement through their inclusion in crop production, cultivation, creature cultivation, fisheries, etc (Patil, 2018).

Research has shown that women's empowerment and gender equality are essential for improving food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India. A study by Agarwal et al. (2014) found that women's empowerment was positively associated with better dietary diversity and nutritional status among children in rural India. Similarly, a study by Kadiyala et al. (2014) found that women's empowerment was associated with better maternal and child health outcomes in rural India.

Moreover, studies have highlighted the importance of addressing gender-based social norms and cultural practices that restrict women's access to resources and decision-making power in food production and consumption. For instance, a study by Quisumbing et al. (2015) found that interventions that aimed to challenge gender norms and empower women in agriculture had positive impacts on food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India.

However, despite their significant contribution to food production and consumption, women face several constraints that limit their participation in these activities. One of the primary constraints is their limited access to resources such as land, credit, and technology. Studies have shown that women's access to land is limited in many parts of rural India, which restricts their ability to engage in productive activities (Kabeer, 2012). Women also have limited access to credit, which makes it difficult for them to invest in agriculture and allied activities (FAO, 2018). Moreover, women's participation in agricultural extension services and training programs is often limited, which further restricts their ability to adopt new technologies and practices (Patil, 2018).

In addition to these constraints, women's participation in food production and consumption is also shaped by cultural and social norms. Studies have shown that gender-based divisions of labor, where men are primarily responsible for cash crops and women for subsistence crops, limit women's access to income-generating activities and restrict their involvement in decision-making related to agriculture and allied activities (Kabeer, 2012). Furthermore, cultural norms around food preferences and taboos also limit women's access to diverse and nutritious food items (FAO, 2018).

## 2.2. Social Status and Food Practices

Caste and social status are critical determinants of food practices in rural India. Different castes and social groups have distinct food habits and restrictions based on their cultural and religious beliefs. For instance, the Brahmins, who belong to the highest caste, are traditionally vegetarian and avoid consuming meat and fish. On the other hand, the lower castes, such as the Dalits or the Scheduled Castes, often consume non-vegetarian food and are restricted from consuming certain food items such as milk and ghee (Chakrabarti, 2016).

Caste-based discrimination and social exclusion can have significant impacts on food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India. A study by Chandrasekhar *et al.* (2017) found that households belonging to lower castes had significantly lower food security and dietary diversity than those belonging to higher castes in rural Odisha. The study also found that social exclusion and discrimination further exacerbated food insecurity and malnutrition among marginalized communities.

Moreover, studies have shown that economic factors, such as poverty and income inequality, can also shape food practices and preferences in rural India. For instance, a study by Bhagowalia *et al.* (2012) found that poverty was negatively associated with dietary diversity and nutrient intake in rural India. The study also found that household income and assets were positively associated with dietary diversity and nutrient intake.

Studies have shown that social status and economic factors play a significant role in shaping food practices and preferences in rural India. Higher caste households often have greater access to resources and consume more expensive and nutritious food items, while lower caste and economically marginalized households often have limited access to food resources and consume less diverse and less nutritious food items (Patel *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, caste-based discrimination and social exclusion can further exacerbate food insecurity and malnutrition among marginalized communities (Chakrabarti, 2016).

## 2.3. Food Security and Nutrition Outcome

Food practices, gender, and social status have significant implications for food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India. Studies have shown that gender-based disparities in food access and consumption can lead to malnutrition and poor health outcomes, particularly among women and children (Shetty, 2017). Furthermore, social and economic disparities in food access and consumption can exacerbate food insecurity and malnutrition among marginalized communities (Patel *et al.*, 2018).

Several interventions have been proposed to improve food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India. One approach is to promote sustainable agriculture practices that are gender-sensitive and socially inclusive. For instance, a study by Rao (2013) found that promoting diversified cropping systems and improving access to agricultural resources among smallholder farmers in rural India had positive impacts on food security and nutrition outcomes.

Another approach is to address social and economic inequalities that limit access to food and nutrition resources among marginalized communities. For instance, a study by Raghunathan *et al.* (2017) found that providing targeted food assistance to socially marginalized households in rural India had positive impacts on dietary diversity and nutrient intake.

Several interventions have been proposed to address these challenges, including promoting women's participation in agriculture. The literature on food practices, gender, and social status in rural India highlights the complex interplay between these factors and their impacts on food security and nutrition outcomes. Women's empowerment, social inclusion,

and sustainable agriculture practices are essential for improving food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India. Addressing gender-based social norms, caste-based discrimination, and poverty are critical for promoting equitable access to food and nutrition resources among marginalized communities.

### 3. METHODS

The sampling strategy using a stratified random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 125 households from the five villages. The village with the highest population was selected from each these five districts i.e Jaipur, Alwar, Nagpur, Udaipur and Jodhpur. These five districts were selected for study as these have highest rural population in Rajasthan. Stratification was done based on caste, income, and geographical locations to ensure that the sample is representative of the rural population in India.

The data was collected through a combination of methods, including a survey questionnaire and focus group discussions. The survey questionnaire included questions related to gender roles in food production and consumption, food preferences, and consumption patterns. Additionally, questions related to caste and income were asked to examine the relationship between social status and food practices. Focus group discussions were mainly done with women in the community to explore their experiences and perceptions of food practices and the role of women in food production and consumption. Qualitative data analysis was done based on different themes and Nvivo was used for reaching conclusions.

The findings from the study were interpreted to draw conclusions and to make recommendations which can contribute to the existing literature on food practices, gender, and social status in rural India. The research provided insights into the relationship between gender and food practices, including the role of women in food production and consumption. It also examined the impact of caste-based discrimination and poverty on food security and nutrition outcomes. Finally, the study was able to identify the factors that influenced the food preferences and consumption patterns in rural India, including the role of cultural practices and social norms.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For first objective, the study found that caste-based discrimination significantly affects access to resources, such as land, water, and credit, which impacts food production and consumption. Marginalized communities, such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, face significant discrimination and have limited access to resources, affecting their food security and nutrition outcomes. The study also found that poverty is a significant factor that affects food practices in rural India. Poor households have limited access to nutritious food, leading to malnutrition and health problems.

The study found that there is a significant relationship between social status and food practices in rural India. The study found that social status is a critical factor that affects access to resources and agency in food practices. Marginalized communities, such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, face significant discrimination, limiting their access to resources and agency in food practices. The study also found that women from marginalized communities face additional barriers to accessing resources and agency in food practices due to gender-based discrimination.

There is a need to address caste-based discrimination and poverty to improve food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India. The study recommends interventions that address caste-based discrimination, such as affirmative action policies, to improve access to resources for marginalized communities. The study also recommends interventions that address

poverty, such as food subsidy programs, to improve access to nutritious food for poor households.

Gender-sensitive interventions that promote women's empowerment in food practices should be encouraged. Women from marginalized communities face additional barriers to accessing resources and agency in food practices due to gender-based discrimination. Interventions that address gender-based discrimination and promote women's empowerment in food practices can improve food security and nutrition outcomes for women and their households.

Overall, it could be seen that complex and interrelated issues of social status, caste-based discrimination, poverty, and gender-based discrimination exists in food practices in rural India. Interventions that address these issues comprehensively and in an integrated manner can improve food security and nutrition outcomes for marginalized communities in rural India.

For third objective, the study findings highlight the factors that influence food preferences and consumption patterns in rural India. The study found that food preferences and consumption patterns are influenced by various factors, including cultural practices, social norms, availability of food, affordability, and taste. The study also found that cultural practices and social norms play a significant role in determining food preferences and consumption patterns.

The study findings also emphasize the role of cultural practices and social norms in determining food preferences and consumption patterns. Cultural practices, such as religious beliefs and traditions, play a significant role in determining food preferences and consumption patterns. Social norms, such as gender roles and expectations, also influence food practices in rural India.

It was found that there is a need to consider cultural practices and social norms in designing interventions to improve food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India. Interventions that recognize and respect cultural practices and social norms can be more effective in promoting behavior change related to food practices. For example, interventions that promote the use of traditional crops and cooking methods can be more effective in promoting healthy eating habits than interventions that promote Western-style foods.

Interventions are needed that improve access to nutritious food and promote healthy eating habits. The study found that availability of food and affordability are significant factors that influence food practices in rural India. Involvements that improve access to nutritious food and promote healthy eating habits, such as school feeding programs and community gardens, can improve food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India.

Overall, the study findings highlight the complex and interrelated factors that influence food preferences and consumption patterns in rural India. Interventions that consider cultural practices and social norms and improve access to nutritious food can improve food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study aimed to investigate the relationship between gender, social status, and food practices in rural India, with a focus on the role of women in food production and consumption. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study found that gender and social status significantly affect food practices in rural India and that cultural practices and social norms play a crucial role in shaping food preferences and consumption patterns.

The first objective aimed to examine the relationship between gender and food practices in rural India. The study found that women play a critical role in food production and consumption, but they face significant gender-based barriers to accessing resources and

agency in food practices. Gender-sensitive interventions are needed to address these barriers and promote women's empowerment in food practices.

The second objective aimed to investigate the relationship between social status and food practices in rural India, with a focus on caste-based discrimination and poverty. The study found that caste-based discrimination limits access to resources for marginalized communities, affecting their ability to produce and access adequate and nutritious food. Poverty also limits access to food, leading to malnutrition and health problems. Interventions are needed to address caste-based discrimination and poverty to improve food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India.

The third objective aimed to identify the factors that influence food preferences and consumption patterns in rural India, including the role of cultural practices and social norms. The study found that cultural practices and social norms play a crucial role in shaping food preferences and consumption patterns. Interventions can leverage cultural practices and beliefs to promote the consumption of nutritious foods and address social norms that hinder access to adequate and nutritious food, particularly for marginalized communities.

Overall, the study highlights the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to address the complex and interrelated issues of gender, social status, cultural practices, and social norms in food practices in rural India. Future research could focus on exploring the effectiveness of various interventions aimed at improving food security and nutrition outcomes in rural India, including gender-sensitive interventions, interventions to address caste-based discrimination and poverty, and interventions that leverage cultural practices and beliefs to promote the consumption of nutritious foods.

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