

HABITAT report on the Health, Nutrition and overall Well Being programme taken up with Adivasi Jan Utthan Trust

Background:

The experience of Habitat Ecological Trust is that health, nutrition and overall well being is at the heart of any programme that aims to make the women the centre of development and the concrete basis for their empowerment. Research of Habitat Ecological trust across the country identified Two hundred and twenty four edible species, more than eighty species used for fodder and over Eight hundred species used for medical purposes among the more than fifteen hundred species studied in seven locations across four States of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Considering this Habitat ecological Trust took up intensive programmes for the promotion of awareness of the importance of biodiversity in the life support systems of people in general and tribals in particular. Habitat Ecological trust identified the region where Adivasi Jan Utthan Trust is working as being in the confluence zone of three major mountain systems of the country, namely the Aravalis, Satpudas and the Sahyadris. Elements of vegetation types of these three mountain ranges have been found here. The research taken up here has so far identified more than eight species in this region. The detailed technical reports on the ecology and forests of the region have been prepared earlier. However based on the experience of working in other regions, one of the first programmes taken up by Habitat Ecological Trust in the region was on Environment Education with children where with the help of the mothers, the children were assisted to explore their own awareness and knowledge of the biodiversity of the region. These preliminary reports were then the basis for development of understanding of the gram sabhas and the basis for discussion on the need to protect the forests and submit claims regarding Community Forest Rights and the People's Biodiversity Committees. These two aspects will be taken up separately, right now it will suffice to say that the concern was not to arbitrarily form committees and complete the paper work required for legal recognition of rights, rather the effort was to instil confidence in the local community in their own abilities.

As part of the effort in this region, the following major activities were taken up

- a. The introduction of the Kankrej Cow from North Gujarat to improve the milk intake of the children studying at the Ashram and also its use as cow dung for composting.
- b. The installation of a portable biogas plant to improve the composting process and provide biogas for cooking purposes.
- c. Incorporation of Jeev Amrit (a product of the biogas plant) into the farming process as a means to improve the natural fertility of the soil and deal with the question of soil health as well.

The relevance of local foods for nutrition, health and overall well being:

While participating in a local health camp by the health department at Bhekadiya in January 2020, it became clear that the department was relying on soya bean as a means of introducing

protein into the diet of local communities. Earlier on during visits to the villages, it was found that the mobile medical van of the government was promoting the use of iron tablets by children to deal with issues related to sickle cell anaemia and the lack of iron in the diet of the local community. While the latter resulted in a campaign to create awareness of the iron available in local foods like drumstick, mahua flowers and wild creepers and plants found in the jungle, the former stimulated a deep discussion with the women's group of Bhekadiya, to take up a programme related to the promotion of use of local foods and incorporation in the diet of the mid day meal scheme as well. Accordingly when the team went to meet the collector regarding permission for the Maha Yatra which was to take place from 9th to 16th January 2020, this aspect was raised as well. The collector showed interest in the programme and hence following the Maha Yatra, a training programme was organised to show the different type of dishes that could be prepared by them. A sample was taken to the Collector who showed appreciation and asked for the Mahila Mandal to prepare a proposal for its implementation in the mid day meal scheme. Various issues internal to the organisation and related to the question of having a suitable women fellow to anchor this programme emerged. In short these prevented the programme from being implemented immediately, later COVID 19 put restrictions of free movement and the resultant closure of schools resulted in this programme being put on hold. However every school and Aangawadi centre has one or two Moringa trees, discussions with those which AAJ is in touch with indicate that they are incorporating the leaves into the diet of the children. This aspect will be more closely monitored in future.

With the easing of the restrictions, meetings related to the relevance of local food in the diet have been held in the villages of Munglavat, Patadiya, Dandaniya and Mandvada. The meeting focused on the importance of drum stick leaves as a diet supplement for protein and incorporation of iron in the diet from some of the local vegetables and creepers. In the meetings, the women pointed out how these were in use earlier but now the system has broken down due to the change in life style patterns, reduction of the use of forest produce in the day to day life style and incorporation of pesticide and urea in agricultural production. An experiment is underway at the Ashram where stall fed Kankrej cows have been introduced. While the programme related to the upkeep of the Kankrej Cows and provision of milk to the children is on track, there are a number of hiccups related to the production of Bio-gas and use of Jeev Amrit in the agricultural fields. This programme is sought to be put on track by dedicating someone full time to this activity. The report on the progress is awaited.

Separately it has been noticed that donors and supporters of the Ashram were indirectly promoting the use of Bt Cotton seed oil in the diet given to the children, a number of meetings have been held to create awareness about the long term harmful effects on the community in general and children in particular. Currently the economics of Bt Cotton, prevent large scale implementation of a ban on the use of Bt Cotton seed oil, however the overall economics of cotton cultivation in general and the specifics of Bt Cotton production are being pointed out to the local community. An attempt is being made to improve the marketing potential of organic produce by tying up with a trader in Ahmedabad. Producers of organic produce are getting better prices for their products as a result. This work is in the

process of being systematized with the promotion of the use of Jeev Amrit as a cheap and effective way to ensure the fertility of the soil through ensuring soil health as well. The work is in fledging state but is picking up slowly. A report on the progress on the same is awaited.

Campaign against Hunger:

In collaboration with PRATYeK, New Delhi, the children of AAJ will be participating in the campaign against malnutrition. The first task is to prepare a report on the status of nutrition in the villages and the functioning of the mid day meal scheme as part of this process. Meetings have held at Mandvada, Patadiya, Dandaniya and Munglavat highlighted the issue and as pointed out above highlighted the relevance of local foods in the diet as a means to deal with malnutrition issues. Due to the exams at this time of the year, the progress has been slow. The Campaign Note is given in Annexure 1 below.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST MALNUTRITION

BACKGROUND

India is home to 46.6 million stunted children, a third of world's total as per Global Nutrition Report 2018. Nearly half of all under-5 child mortality in India is attributable to undernutrition. Poor nutrition in the first 1000 days of a child's life can also lead to stunted growth, which is associated with impaired cognitive ability and reduced school and work performance. Malnutrition in children occurs as a complex interplay among various factors like poverty, maternal health illiteracy, diseases like diarrhoea, home environment, dietary practices, hand washing and other hygiene practices, etc. Low birth weight, episode of diarrhoea within the last 6 months and the presence of developmental delay are often associated with malnutrition in India.

Malnutrition among under-five children is an important concern for the health authorities in India. The aim of the present review was to assess the burden of under-nutrition and over-nutrition, its determinants and strategies required to tackle malnutrition among under-five children in India. Distribution of various types of risk factors and its influence on nutrition status of children in a given set up should be analysed for planning the control measures.

AGGRAVATING NUTRITION AS A RESULT OF COVID -19

COVID-19 induced changes: one cannot comprehend the damage that the pandemic had inflicted on children, albeit indirectly. Since the outbreak, the long-term damage the cascading effect is likely to cause in children – through inadequate health services, broken medical supplies, interrupted access to nutritious food and income loss in families.

In a recent Lancet study, the UNICEF has warned that three lakh children could die in India over the next six months due to disrupted health services and surge in child-wasting, a form of malnutrition when the child is too thin for his/her height. India is expected to bear one of the heaviest tolls of this preventable devastation, partly because its record in managing malnutrition among children was grim even in pre-COVID-19 times. India is home to half of the “wasted children” globally, reckons the recently launched Global Nutrition Report 2020.

The nutrition insecure backdrop of India makes it dangerous to live through an extreme adversity like the pandemic without proper planning for protection of our vulnerable population. The entire country in lockdown mode to contain the infection which has brought economic activities to a complete standstill

and resulted in income losses. Mid-day meals, the main source of nutrition for millions of children had to be suspended with schools shut, and congregations banned. Though some states are trying to substitute it with dry ration but sharing of food by other family members in such trying times could not be ruled out.

STATUS OF MID-DAY MEAL SCHEMES AND ANGANWADIS

Over the past few months however, anganwadi workers have had a different routine – as frontline delivery agents of Covid-19 services, conducting door-to-door visits, awareness checks and delivering essentials. While these are important emergency services, the lack of child services created an enormous problem. Over 120 million children in India are served by the midday meal scheme, just over half of whom get it in anganwadi centres. The others get it in school. These meals are crucial both for child nutrition and cognitive development.

For children in anganwadis and government schools in India, the mid-day meal is an important part of their daily dietary intake. A study by the Indian Council of Medical Research's National Institute of Nutrition says that two out of three deaths of children in India are associated with malnutrition. Malnutrition affects the health and economic productivity through a person's lifetime.

Anganwadi centres are also an important source of nutritional services for pregnant women and new mothers. With child nutrition already a big concern, the closure of schools and anganwadi centres due to the lockdown had a deep impact on these children, particularly when school meals were absent. In April 2020, the Central government announced that food security allowance, or dry rations could be given in lieu of school meals even during school closures. However, there has been very dismal progress implementing this. The fact that many of the anganwadi centres were not functioning with their usual services has also made it difficult for parents with young children to take up employment: many depended on these centres to care for children while they were at work.

NEED FOR NATIONWIDE CAMPAIGN TO CREATE AWARENESS

The persistent high levels of undernutrition and the slow pace of its decline is a major concern for the nation.

A campaign need to be designed. The campaign objective should be as follows:

- Creating awareness about nutritional challenges, the importance of optimal nutrition and creating an enabling environment to mobilise communities to prevent malnutrition.
- Promoting home-level care and behaviour orientation for appropriate infant and young child feeding practices, child care and development, optimal nutrition and care during pregnancy & lactation, and better utilisation of available services.
- Reaching out to families, pregnant women, mothers, caregivers, adolescent girls, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), teachers, opinion leaders and the community at large.

The objective of this nationwide campaign against malnutrition is to address issues of status of women, the care of pregnant mothers and children under two, breastfeeding and the importance of balanced nutrition and health. The focus is on women between 13 and 35 years of age and their family members.

DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILDREN LED DATABASE ON FUNCTIONING OF MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME & ANGANWADI (CHILDREN)

The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) improves health and education of the poor children. The scheme has the mandate to ensure one-third of the nutritional requirements of child for which the administrative and logistical responsibilities are enormous. The scheme however, proves nutrition is a complex issue, many a times MDM has low nutritional value in comparison to the daily requirements and much lower in nutrients such as protein, fat, iron and iodine in relation to the meal quantity in particular. Moreover, nutrition is also linked with health and hygiene, students require Vitamin, Folic Acid, Iron, even de-worming medicines and micro-nutrients.

In Delhi, we can start with PRATYeK's area of operation with its Children Parliament involving active senior students in the locality. To develop a database, major activities are as follows:

- Count the exact number of children who are present in school every day
- Monitors the cleanliness by ensuring that every child washes his/her hands properly before taking
- MDM and wash the plates and keeps at proper place afterwards.
- Ensure that all the children sit in rows and help members to distribute MDM.
- Children Parliament checks the material of MDM. It ensures that the waste material is thrown in the Garbage pit.