

A Sociological Study Of Dietary Transition In Kashmir Valley

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Abstract: *The Kashmiri cuisine is one of the distinctive features of the Kashmir Valley known to the world for centuries. Owing to its temperate climatic conditions, Kashmiris are culturally distinct with respect to dietary practices. But the wave of globalization engulfed every nook and corner of the world, making changes in the tastes and choices of people. The food habits, practices and choices of Kashmiris have changed to such an extent that the new generation, particularly in urban areas, is virtually ignorant about a number of traditional dishes and dietary practices of the Valley. The present paper will try to highlight the dietary transitions taking place in Kashmir and the sociological interpretation of such transition.*

Keywords: *cuisine, dietary practices, globalization*

I. INTRODUCTION

The developing world is in a phase of rapid economic and demographic transition. Per capita income has been rising steadily, life expectancy is increasing and birth rates are falling. The incidence of malnutrition and stunting has declined to a remarkable extent. A key feature of this remarkable period of growth has been the change in the nature of the diet of these countries. This includes change in the nature of diet as well as in the dietary practices.

Some of the underlying factors of this dietary transition include expansion of the middle class, higher female participation, the emergence of nuclear two-income families, a sharp age divide in food preferences (with younger age groups more susceptible to new foods advertised in the media), and a rapid growth of supermarkets and fast-food outlets. The nutritional implications of this dietary transition are, however, worrying (Kaicker I 2011) in terms of health and wellbeing.

Homogenizations and westernization of the global diet has increased the energy density (Drewnowski A 2000) and this is particularly a problem for the poor in all countries who are at risk of both obesity and micronutrient deficiencies.

As the world economy becomes more integrated and communication faster, diet transition in Kashmir, like in other developing societies, is also inevitable. But it is clear that during the most recent decades globalization has played an enormously important role in the transformation of food

consumption patterns of Kashmiri households as well. This is particularly evident in urban areas and among youth.

Under the increasing influence of electronic media particularly cable T.V and Internet, the people in Kashmir especially youth are showing greater inclination towards fast food and other ready-to-eat foods, quite oblivious to the older population of Kashmir. Further, the dietary practices of Kashmiris in terms of time and duration of having meals are also undergoing a major shift. All this coupled with the increasing luxury and decreasing labor has resulted in the emergence of lifestyle diseases like diabetes, stroke, hypertension, abnormal B.P, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, cancer etc. These lifestyle diseases have replaced traditional communicable diseases and are more concentrated in urban localities and among people with better socio-economic status.

II. MAJOR DIETARY CHANGES IN KASHMIR

A. HOME-MADE FOOD TO FAST FOOD

Healthy nutritious foods made in the family are rapidly being replaced by junk foods and fast foods in Kashmir's modern generation. A remarkable change in the dietary pattern of Kashmir is the shift of having meals from the home kitchen to the fast food outlet. Eating in the restaurant has become a craze for adolescents and a compulsion for working

population. The phenomenal growth of the fast food industry continues in Kashmir. Fast food restaurants in Kashmir appeal especially to adolescents, businessmen and working men and women. A noticeable feature of the pattern of fast food establishments is that they are concentrated near schools, colleges, universities and popular coaching centers luring adolescents.

In a Kashmir based study titled "Prevalence of Fast Food Intake among Urban Adolescent Students" in Srinagar city, Vaida (2013:355) observed that all of the respondents in the age group of 14-18 years eat fast foods. It was only in the age group of 19 years that 4.16 percent respondents were not eating fast foods.

B. SKIPPING MEALS

Like every other society, Kashmir is also becoming more and more profit oriented. More profit demands more time spent in work and less time for personal needs. This has led to a drastic change in the timing of meals. An important feature with respect to this change is the skipping of meals. Younger population especially student community tend to skip meals owing to the tight schedule. Vaida (2013:355) in her study observed that majority of the respondents in her sample do not skip lunch. However in the age group of 15-18 years around 50 percent of the respondents skipped lunch in urban Kashmir.

A noticeable manifestation of skipping meals is dieting. On the one hand, the content of sugar & fats is increasing in the population and on the other hand, youth, especially adolescent girls are increasingly skipping meals primarily to maintain body figure. Both have detrimental impact with respect to the health of the population.

C. INCREASING CONSUMPTION OF SWEET DISHES

Another change in the dietary pattern of Kashmir is the inclination towards sweet dishes. A noticeable feature with respect to the consumption of black tea in Kashmir is that it has become a trend in almost every family to take black tea with a good amount of sugar and milk at around 11 in the morning. What is more worrying is that it is taken with sweet biscuits or other supplementary bakery.

Traditionally, Kashmiri marriages were too simple in terms of expenditure. Sweets were not served to guests as it was not part of the culture. Instead, traditional Kashmiri bakery like Kulcha and Bakirkhani were mostly served and people would relish it. But now, different varieties of sweets are served in marriages and other occasions. All this adds to the sugar content of the people, thereby paving way to different lifestyle diseases most particularly diabetes.

D. CHANGE IN THE TRADITIONAL CUISINE

Kashmiris are known for meat consumption since centuries. But during the recent decades, the frequency of meat consumption has increased in the Valley. Most restaurants in the Valley serve dishes mainly of mutton and chicken. With the change in the traditional wedding in Kashmir, the Kashmiri cuisine has also undergone a drastic change. Kashmiri cuisine is mostly non-vegetarian since

centuries, but with the shift in the marriage system towards increasing extravagance and showoff as well as rising income of people, the number of delicacies of the traditional cuisine served in weddings has also increased.

Wazwan_ Kashmiri cuisine_ is an inseparable part of our culture however it has become a great hazard now. Earlier there were few delicacies that everybody used to relish but now the number of dishes drenched in unhealthy fat and spices is ever increasing and people boast about it before fellows with great excitement. Earlier it used to be served only on marriages but now it is served almost on all occasions _happy or sad, formal or informal. Earlier people would wait for the occasions to have it but now anytime you can order because of its easy availability in the market.

In the article "Wazwan the Kashmiri Cuisine – A Caloric Bomb," Ahmad (2013) reports for the first time on the high-caloric density of the ceremonial Kashmiri feast "Wazwan," a primarily meat-based cuisine served usually at weddings in the Valley of Kashmir. The authors randomly selected some wedding functions and studied 11 Wazwan dishes. Contemporary Kashmiri weddings purportedly serve more than 30 dishes – "the bigger the better" – which are commonly mixed with an unending entourage of chutneys and carbonated sugar-based beverages. More particularly, the Wazwan served in honor of the bridegroom (the "Mahraaz Saal") is accompanied by a series of baked delicacies and dried fruit (or nuts) prior to the initiation of the actual "meat feast." Based on their observations the authors concluded by aptly calling the Wazwan "a caloric bomb. Obviously, all these factors call for a closer sociological look affecting nutrition within households.

III. SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION OF DIETARY CHANGES IN KASHMIR

A. RISING INCOME

One of the factors of dietary transitions in Kashmir is the increasing income of people. During the past few decades, Kashmir's economic condition has improved to a great extent. There is diversity in study courses and employments. Local business community is competing with the global market. All this has led to rise in the per capita income. Increasing income leads to increasing status consciousness. Even the restaurant where a person eats is a determinant of his social status. Owing to lower prices and an affluent food supply, even the poor can afford more fat and animal products. Increased incomes or lower prices have led to the increased consumption of animal-based foods and processed foods. While those that are well educated can choose to adopt a healthy lifestyle, the poor have fewer food choices and more limited access to nutritional education.

B. MORE FAST FOOD OUTLETS

Supermarkets and fast food outlets etc. tend to target the middle-classes and so the location of these enterprises is likely to be in areas that are inhabited by or serve these higher income groups. A noticeable feature of the pattern of fast food

establishments in the Valley is that they are concentrated near schools, colleges, universities and popular coaching centers luring adolescents.

C. INCREASED ADVERTISING OF FAST FOOD

Influence of media is the major cause of changing dietary habits among adolescents in urban areas. Brand of a product is becoming all the more important than its nutrient quality. The value of a person is determined by the brand he eats and the restaurant he usually visits. All this is popularized by the daily advertisements of popular television programs and blockbuster movies. McDonalds, Coca-Cola and Pepsi have been able to broaden their appeal by linking their products either to specific films etc or personalities. Sports events that have global coverage are often sponsored by these big name food brands too. This has huge appeal in Kashmir particularly for the young market. The internet has broadened the advertising possibilities for these larger food companies. Younger generations are more influenced by new foods particularly when these are introduced through an advertising campaign that targets the group specifically.

D. SEDENTARY LIFESTYLE

As our economic condition improved, our lifestyle became sedentary. Urbanization increased. The consumption of fast food, red meat, sweets and fatty foods increased. Life became stressful and habits of smoking also grew. Encouragement towards motorized transport, increasing use of energy-sparing devices, increasingly sedentary employments, and the seduction of TV and video games resulted in dietary transitions in Kashmir as in other societies.

Due to more and more innovations entering the Kashmiri families, from garden to kitchen to drawing room, coupled with increasing income, they are more inclining towards sedentary lifestyles. These include watching T.V for hours together and being busy with social networking sites like whatsapp, face book and twitter. In addition, those who spend more time watching TV tend to have unhealthy eating patterns characterized by increased consumption of snacks, sugary beverages, and fast foods. The student community in Kashmir is heavily influenced by internet. They are mostly seen busy with cell phones & laptops. All this has a direct influence on the dietary patterns. Coffee and other sugary beverages, processed snacks and fast foods have replaced traditional dietary patterns.

E. WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN WORKFORCE

There is hardly any field where Kashmiri women have not entered. From traditional jobs like teaching and nursing to more technical like banking, IT and administration, Kashmiri women are proving their mettle. However, the traditional role of the Kashmiri housewife to be in charge of food preparation is slowly and gradually eroding. Whilst women may still have prime responsibility for providing the daily meals, the nature of these meals has changed. The consumption of readymade meals, or foods that cut the long preparation time of traditional

dishes, are likely to be a predominant feature of the diet for families where there is a high female participation rate.

Working couples with no children may enjoy on average higher disposable incomes and are thus likely to consume food outside the home on a regular basis.

F. NATURE OF HOSPITALITY

Kashmir is famous world over with respect to its hospitable people. A guest was served with deep love, care and sincerity, however modest the dishes served. However, this virtue has been replaced by extravagance and showoff. Hardly, we come across a woman (particularly non-working) in Kashmir who does not make at least one visit a week either to a friend, relative or neighbor. The reason being, firstly, it is a very well knit society and secondly, people in small towns have ample leisure. This is not a problem in itself. In fact it seems to be very good for the soul. But if it is only food-oriented then it plays havoc with health. Such people cannot regulate their food habits, cannot maintain a log of intake, and end up adding pound after pound. Generally the trend nowadays is that guest is served minimum 3-4 courses starting from fruit juice, dry fruit, black tea with all kinds of bakery, then a non-veg dish and finally the salted green tea (*namkeen chai*) with another set of bakery items adding more to the already high cholesterol level of the guest.

G. TOURISM INDUSTRY

Tourism is the backbone of Kashmir's economy. Annually, Kashmir is visited by millions of tourists across India and world over. Hill resorts, lakes, meadows, crafts and snowfall are the main attractions in Kashmir. On the one hand, there is a positive impact on economy and on the other hand, there is a diffusion of different cultures. Dietary patterns have gradually shifted to more westernized style. Tourists all over the world have different tastes and preferences, so the availability of a variety of edibles in restaurants, hotels and cafes, both indigenous and western becomes necessary. The inflow of different kinds of alcohol and drugs in Kashmir can also be partly attributed to the tourism industry.

H. NO CULTURE OF EXERCISE

Traditionally, Kashmiris are not accustomed to the habit of exercising. Even those who exercise are either prescribed by the doctor or feel that they have accumulated fat. Although urban people gradually turn to it, but rural population of Kashmir hardly do it. The situation of women folk is worse. They mostly remain busy with household work so they don't get time even to make a light walk in morning. They also feel shy to exercise owing to the conservative social environment.

IV. CONCLUSION

From a sociological viewpoint, the mushrooming of fast food outlets owing to globalization, growing competition, increasing per capita income and the prevailing socio-cultural structure of Kashmir plays a vital role in the transformation of

dietary patterns. The increasing women participation in work force and the consequent shift to nuclear family has become unavoidable in the wake of globalization. The digitalization of almost all the sectors of life_ education, banking, administration etc_ has also reduced the physical activities of people. So the need of the hour is to manage the dietary change in such a way which minimizes the chances of getting some chronic NCD's like diabetes and cancer. Regular exercising and cutting down the sugar and salt content and minimal use of saturated fats in our diet, and regular check-ups and most importantly being physically active can go a long way in reducing the risk of getting some lifestyle disease. More interdisciplinary research is needed for studying the dietary transformation in Kashmir to help Kashmiris adopt healthier eating attitudes for better health.

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