

Food Choice in Indian Households in the Context of the Nutrition Transition

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Key Takeaways

- Accessibility, taste, and health perceptions are important drivers of food choice
- In remote parts of India, non-traditional foods were less favored than local foods and, consequently, infrequently consumed
- India's Public Distribution System may contribute to equalizing frequency of intake of staple food items (rice and pulses) for poor and non-poor households
- Urban residents had higher dietary diversity than rural residents
- Among urban residents, wealthier households consumed healthier foods such as fruits and dairy products while poorer households consumed more energy-dense items such as meats and snacks
- Rural adolescents were less likely to have ever seen or consumed global items compared to urban adolescents

Objectives

Grounded in the context of globalizing food markets, we have several project objectives. One was to identify the most salient considerations for food choice (e.g.: price, taste, reputation, etc.). A second was to quantify the role of food subsidies, specifically through the Public Distribution System, as drivers of food choice. A third objective was to identify conditions under which people select local vs. non-local Indian or global foods, examining differences between men and women and between adolescents and adults. A fourth objective was to measure how variations in food choice considerations relate to dietary intake.

Background

The globalization of food markets has facilitated the widespread availability of processed and packaged foods in nearly all parts of the Global South. Considering that India is home to nearly one-fifth of the world's population and may be experiencing a double burden of malnutrition, understanding decision-making around food in India is a high priority. This study aimed to generate data on drivers

of food choice in a remote but urbanizing region in South India. This includes assessing associations between access to subsidized staple foods and dietary patterns, as these subsidies may sway diets toward the consumption of less nutritious staple grains, particularly white rice. There may be differences in patterns of food preferences and intake between men and women and between adolescents and adults, and so these are quantified in this project. These approaches provide a fuller assessment of the implications of economic, cultural, and normative components of decision-making within households around food choice.

Methods

A bespoke quantitative data collection instrument was developed. The instrument included a picture-card component asking participants about food choices in place-of-origin categories (local foods, non-local Indian foods, and global foods) that hold similar roles in diets (snacks, fruits, condiments, etc.). A 71-item food frequency questionnaire was designed to measure nutrition transition among adults. Anthropometric measurements were taken.

Representative sampling was used to create a sample of households containing adolescents in urban and rural communities. Data were collected from three members of each household to allow for comparison across men and women and across adolescents and adults within and across households. Qualitative interviews were conducted to add depth and context to various components of the quantitative work, including PDS officials, shopkeepers, and beneficiaries and migrant families. These discussions add nuance to understanding people's perceived constraints, responsibilities, and decisions.

Results

Respondents universally consumed local foods on a daily basis and global foods infrequently. Dietary diversity and frequency of eating basic staples – rice and pulses – was similar between those who do and do not receive government food subsidies through the Public Distribution System. Urban residents had significantly higher dietary

diversity than rural residents. Among urban residents, wealthier households had healthier diets, consisting of fruits, vegetables, and nuts, while poor households consumed more animal-source foods, sugar-sweetened beverages, energy drinks, and snacks.

The most salient considerations in food choice were access, taste and perception of healthfulness for adults; for adolescents, price and taste were most salient. Adult and adolescent respondents showed strong preferences for local foods over non-local items. Few adults showed interest in replacing local foods with comparable non-local foods under differing conditions of food choice. Those who did show interest in trying non-local foods did so most frequently with respect to cereal and pulses. Adolescent were somewhat more interested in selecting non-local foods, especially if there were to have extra money and when looking for something tasty.

More Information

- “Food subsidies, nutrition transition & dietary patterns in a remote Indian district” By Cunningham S, Shaikh N, Datar A, Chernishkin A, Patil S. 5th Agriculture, Nutrition & Health (ANH) Academy Week, June 30 – July 2, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5gV_cuall8&feature=youtu.be
- “Food Vendors in India’s Changing Food Environment” By Doddihal C, Patil SS, Marad M, Shaikh NI, Cunningham SA. 5th Agriculture, Nutrition & Health (ANH) Academy Week, June 30 – July 2, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcR9gTihmPE&feature=youtu.be>
- “Understanding Food Choices in the Context of Globalizing Food Options.” By Cunningham, S.A. 4th Agriculture, Nutrition & Health (ANH) Academy Week, Hyderabad, India, 24–28 June 2019. https://driversoffoodchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/8B_Solveig-Cunningham.pdf
- “Public Distribution System as a Driver of Food Choice: Evidence from a District in South India.” By Doddihal C, Marad M, Datar A, Cunningham SA. 4th Agriculture, Nutrition and Health (ANH) Academy Week, Hyderabad, India, 24-28 June 2019.
- “Pocket money spending patterns among adolescents in India.” By Cunningham SA. 3rd Agriculture, Nutrition & Health (ANH) Academy Week, Accra, Ghana, 25-29 June 2018.
- **Project Page** - <https://driversoffoodchoice.org/research/project-descriptions/food-choice-in-indian-households/>

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