Food Consumption Behavior of People Living in Rural Nepal: A Case Study of Bhujung Village, Lamjung

Dipendra Prasad Sharma

Department of Development Studies, Pokhara University, Nepal

ABSTRACT

Food is an essential element for humans to live and sustain life. Every person needs to have an adequate diet to lead an active and healthy life. Food consumption is a key determinant of nutritional adequacy and overall health of the population of a country. Food consumption simply refers to the attitude and behavior shown in consuming food. Food Consumption behavior is one of the important issues because food is an essential element for humans to live and sustain life and a key determinant of nutritional adequacy and overall health of the population of a country. This study was conducted in Bhujung village of Lamjung district. The total sample size for this study was 60. In this study, descriptive and cross-sectional research design was adopted. The socio-economic and demographic data reveal that the majority of respondents were female and belonged to the Gurung community, with Bon being the most practiced religion. Agriculture was the primary occupation, and nearly half of the respondents had a monthly income between NPR 10,000-20,000. Most respondents consumed four meals a day, with tea, maize, and other basic food items being the common choices for breakfast. Lunch primarily consisted of rice, lentils, and vegetables, while tiffin included maize, tea, and biscuits. Dinner was dominated by rice, followed by vegetables, meat, and pulses. Over the past seven days, all respondents consumed grains, pulses, vegetables, fruits, and tea, while 90 Percent consumed meat, spices, and dairy products. Additionally, a significant portion of respondents consumed eggs, alcoholic beverages, and tobacco.

Keywords: Food consumption behavior, rural food habits, nutritional patterns, dietary practices, food security, traditional diets, Nepalese rural communities,

INTRODUCTION

Consumer behavior refers to the attitude that the consumer shows during the search, purchase and consumption of a certain product. Studying consumer behavior is a multidisciplinary phenomenon as it covers every aspect such as health, economic, marketing and others. Food Consumption behavior is one of the important issues because food is an essential element for humans to live and sustain life and a key determinant of nutritional adequacy and overall health of the population of a country. The food consumption of a group of people/community can be described as the reasons for eating, the methods used while eating, the types of food eaten, and the mode of storage. Food consumption has a major impact on society and the development of nutritional status and culture. In most cases, food consumption behaviors are subjected to age, gender, environmental changes, acculturation, religious beliefs, personal health, and the financial status of an individual. Food consumption may vary from one individual or family to another.

Since rural and urban areas are socially, economically, naturally and culturally different from urban areas, the food consumption behavior of rural areas is also different from urban areas. Generally, in the context of the world, the people living in rural areas tend to consume fresh and internally produced foods as com-

pared to urban areas.

Food consumption pattern in rural areas of Nepal is also quite significantly different from the food consumption pattern of urban areas. Annual household survey of Nepal and study conducted by other independent researchers found that the amount of consumption of food in rural areas is slightly less than urban areas and people of rural areas has been consuming products (like meat, alcohol, rice) in a large quantity. However, NLSS III found that household consumption expenditure on food in rural areas is 65.6 percent which is far greater than urban area (46.0%). This data concludes that households in rural areas tend to spend more on food as compared to urban. Furthermore, it is generally found that in rural areas people are suffering from food insecurity and children are usually suffering from malnutrition as compared to the urban areas. Therefore, it becomes inevitable to study the food consumption pattern of rural areas.

Food is an essential element for humans to live and sustain life. Every person needs to have an adequate diet to lead an active and healthy life. Food consumption is a key determinant of nutritional adequacy and overall health of the population of a country. A healthy population provides human capital and productive labor force essential for fueling economic growth and productivity. However, currently about one-eighth of the total world population suffers from chronic hunger. Food is any substance that is taken by a living being to help in the production of energy and growth. This definition addresses only the biological side of food, but there are other aspects of food. The pertinent question is why people eat. People eat for various reasons other than for metabolic purposes. Such reasons include eating to pass the time, having fun, bonding, and celebrating. In addition, food can be used as a remedy for stress, among other reasons. Owing to such reasons, food plays an important role in people's lives beyond the biological processes.

Food consumption is a periodic behavior. It is triggered at various moments of the day by a number of converging factors (time of day, need state, sensory stimulation, social context, etc.).

Food consumption behavior patterns are defined as the quantities, proportions, variety or combinations of different foods and beverages in diets, and the frequency with which they are habitually consumed. Commonly, the food consumption behavior is described as the food that is shared by populations, individuals or households in specific communities. It also reflected nature, quality, quantities, and proportion of different foods and drinks that are consumed in a diet. Accordingly, there are some aspects the influencing the food consumption pattern among them; the ecological niches, physical environment, traditions, religions, or choices. The food consumption pattern is expressed by the local food that is available in the specific region or country.

Nepal is a developing country with geographical hurdles. The unequal development practice of Nepal has given birth to the inequality between rural and urban areas of Nepal. Human Development Index of rural areas is 0.561 whereas HDI of urban areas is 0.647. This shows that there is a huge discrepancy of development between rural and urban areas of Nepal. Similarly, Gross National Income per capita of urban area is 3550 (US $) whereas GNI per capita of rural area is 2217 (US $). These indicators show that rural areas are far behind urban areas. The social, economic and cultural conditions of rural areas have significant impact on the food consumption behavior of people living in rural areas. Since food is an essential component in our life as it determines the nutritional status and overall development of a person's anatomy. The social, economic and cultural conditions of rural areas have significant impact on the food consumption behavior of people living in rural areas. Since food is an essential component in our life as it determines the nutritional status and overall development of a person's anatomy. Studying food consumption behavior is very important in the context of development studies. The behavior of food consumption in rural areas helps to determine the overall nutritional status of people living in rural areas; the level of dietary intake followed by rural areas; overview of the food consumed by rural people and more importantly the food security status of rural areas. However, all these mentioned things are not directly addressed by this study, but they are the latent variables that this research tends to highlight. Similarly, the people living in rural areas are highly dependent on agriculture but due to the growing trends of foreign employment and urban migration, there has been a significant structural change in every aspect of rural settings and rural people. Therefore, there is a huge issue of analyzing the overall food consumption pattern of people living in rural areas with different occupations and furthermore different caste/ethnicity and other social indicators backgrounds.

Methods of Study

The study was conducted in Bhujung. Bhujung is a small and beautiful village that lies in the northwest part of Lamjung district on the south facing slopes of Lamjung Himal. Administratively, Bhujung is located in Khuwolosthar Rural Municipality of Ward Number 2. In this research, cross-sectional, exploration and descriptive research design was adopted. This study was especially framed to examine the overall food consumption pattern of rural people. Both qualitative and quantitative information was collected. By descriiptive research design adequate information based on fact was collected. Whereas exploratory research design was applied to know in depth study of the respondents. Furthermore, cross-sectional research design helps to collect data of one time. This study was mainly based on primary data. The primary information was collected from the field survey. Both Quantitative and Qualitative data was collected for this research. For the study, primary sources of data were collected using structured questionnaires with closed-ended questions. Similarly, qualitative data was also collected using a semi-structured checklist that was used in Key Informant Interview (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Furthermore, in this study, secondary sources of data have also been utilized to search literature review related to food consumption and also gather information regarding Bhujung village. The questionnaire was pre-coded, but in case of open-ended questions, coding was done after the completion of field work. All the collected quantitative data was edited, filtered and entered in SPSS version 26 for the analysis. Descriptive statistics were used for further analysis. Output was shown by using frequency, percentage, cross tabulation, pie-chat, mean, minimum value and maximum value. Similarly, qualitative data was analyzed by using thematic analysis focusing on core arguments obtained from KII and FGD.

Results and Discussion

Regarding the results of this research, the result was decom-

posed into two parts. One deals with the socio-economic and demographic part whereas another dealt with the food consumption information part.

## Socio-Economic and Demographic Status of the Respondent

Socio-economic and demographic status of the respondents in the research includes the frequency and percentage distribution of variables related to socio-economic and demographic (age, marital status, gender, etc.) of the respondents.

Majority of the respondents were female (51.7%) as compared to their male counterparts (48.3%). One fourth of the respondents were from the age group 20-30 followed by 30-40 (23.3%), 11(18.3%), 60-70(15%), 40-50(10%) and 70-80(8.3%) respectively. Majority of the respondents followed Bon religion (48.3%) since Bhujung is characterized by Gurung settlers followed by Hindu (43.3%). Majority of the respondents belonged from Gurung community (65%) while the rest of the people belonged from Dalit community (35%). Major occupation of the family determines the economic status of family and the economic status. More than fifty percent of the respondent's major occupation was agriculture. Similarly, one fourth of the respondents' major occupation was business which was primarily homestay since Bhujung has been into the transition of becoming tourist hotspot. About half of the respondent's family's monthly income was between NRs. 10000-20000 followed by slightly more than one fourth of the respondent's family income was less than NRs. 10000 **[Table 1]**.

Food Consumption Habits

Number of Meals Consumed by Respondents: Majority of the respondents (53.33%) stated that they consume four meals (breakfast, lunch, tiffin and dinner) in one day followed by respondents who stated that they consume every meal except breakfast and lastly respondents who stated that they consumed only lunch and dinner **[Figure 1]**.
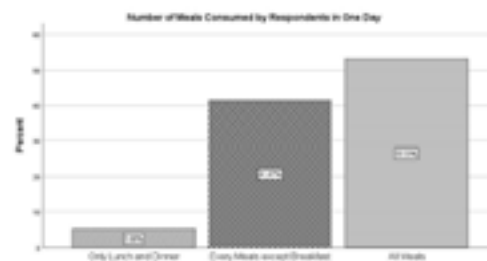
Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents by number of meals consumed by them in a Day

Breakfast: About half of the respondents stated that they do not consume breakfast whereas more than 1/4 of the respondents stated that they consume breakfast at 7:00 AM in the morning followed by 8:00 AM, 7:30 AM and 6:00 AM **[Figure 2]**.
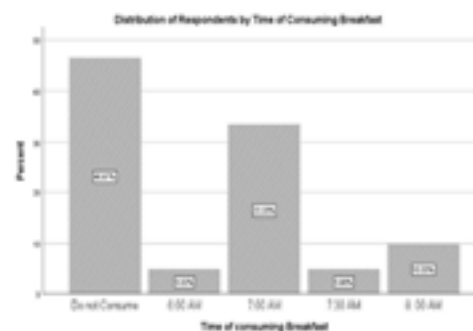
Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents by Time of Consuming

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by their Socio-Economy and Demography

Variable Name	Gender	Number	Percent
Gender	Male	29	48.3
	Female	31	51.7
Age Group	20-30	15	25.0
	30-40	14	23.3
	40-50	6	10.0
	50-60	11	18.3
	60-70	9	15.0
	70-80	5	8.3
Religion	Hindu	26	43.3
	Bon	29	48.3
	Christian	5	8.3
Caste/Ethnicity	Janajati	9	65
	Dalit	21	35
Educational Attainment	Illiterate	11	18.3
	Informal Education	19	31.7
	Basic	9	15.0
	Secondary	15	25.0
	Higher	6	10.0

Occupation	Agriculture	39	65.0
	Business (Homestay)	15	25.0
	Service	3	5.0
	Others	3	5.0
Monthly Income	<10000	16	26.7
	10000-20000	29	48.3
	20000-30000	6	10.0
	40000-50000	3	5.0
	>50000	6	10.0

Breakfast: Majority of the respondents stated that in their breakfast they had tea followed by maize and other food items. Very few respondents stated that they had millet in their breakfast **[Table 2]**.

Lunch: Majority of the respondents had rice in their lunch followed by pulses, vegetables, millet and meat **[Table 3]**.

More than half of the respondents stated that they usually consume their lunch at 9:00 AM followed by respondents who stated

Table 2: Food items consumed by respondents in Breakfast one day before interview.

Food Items	Number	Percent
Maize	14	36.8
Millet	3	7.9
Tea	35	92.1
Other Food Items (Biscuits, Noodles, Bread etc.)	12	31.6

Table 3: Food Items Consumed by Respondents in Yesterday's Lunch.

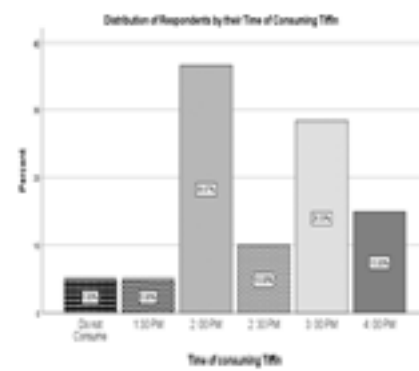| Food Items	Number	Percent
Rice	52	86.7
Millet	23	38.3
Pulses (grams, Lentil, and Beans,)	43	71.7
Vegetables	43	71.7
Meat	22	36.7

that they consume their lunch at 10:00 AM, 11:00 AM and 10:00 AM **[Figure 3]**.
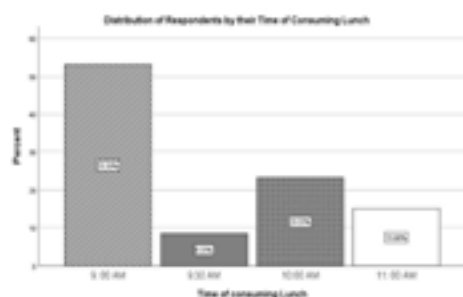
Figure 3: Distribution of respondents by their response on time of consuming lunch

Figure 4: Distribution of respondents by their response on time of consuming tiffin

Tiffin: Almost half of the respondents stated that they consumed maize in their tiffin followed by other food items, tea, vegetables and millet. It is to be noted that other food items mentioned in this table include chowmein, momo and biscuits.

Majority of the respondents stated that they had their tiffin during 2:00 PM followed by respondents who stated that they had their tiffin during 3:00 PM, 4:00 PM, 2:30 PM and 1:30 PM. However, there were some respondents who stated that they do not have any kind of tiffin in their meals **[Figure 4]**.

Dinner: About half of the respondents stated that they had their dinner at 8:00 PM followed by respondents stated that they had their dinners at 7:00 PM, 9:00 PM, 8:30 PM and 7:30 PM.

Majority of the respondents stated that they had rice for their dinner followed by vegetables, meat and pulses.

Consumption of Food Items in the Past Days

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the food consumption behavior, the research has tried to classify those food items

consumed by the respondents in the past 7 days (or in a week). All of the respondents stated that they consumed grains (rice, maize), pulses, vegetables, fruits and tea. Similarly, about 97% of the respondents stated that they consumed other grains (primarily millet0), slightly more than 90% of the respondents stated that they consumed sweets in the past 7 days. 90 per cent of the respondents stated that they consumed spices, milk & milk products and meat (primarily hen meat) in these past 7 days. Other than the food items, respondents also stated that they consumed other food items (65%), eggs (65%), tobacco (60%), alcoholic beverages (55%), non-alcoholic beverages (48.3%), Dry Fruits (46.7%) and Fish (3.3%).

Food Consumption Related Habits

Food consumption related habits refer to the repeated and regular behaviors, patterns, and practices that individuals engage in regarding the consumption of food. This can include things like meal timing, frequency of eating, portion sizes, food choices, food preparation methods, and more. In this research, food consumption related habits have been asked in the form of multiple questions in order to obtain results.

All respondents stated that they eat fruit and vegetables and also consume foods that contain protein, vitamins and energy. About 95 of the respondents stated that they consume foods that have been produced at home. Similarly, more than 4/5 of the respondents stated that they take their meals regularly on time. Slightly more than 3/4 of the respondents stated that they do not drink any alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Furthermore, respondents also stated that they Drink at least 2.5l of water a day (68.4), Perform physical exercise every day (35.1), Avoid salty, spicy and sweet foods (35.1) and follow fasting in every month (15.8) [1-11].

Conclusion

Food consumption is an inseparable aspect of human life with deep roots in physical and mental health and cultural identity. The survey reveals the diverse eating patterns and food consumption habits among the population, with positives and concerns. A majority (53.33%) of the population surveyed reported eating four meals a day, i.e., breakfast, lunch, tiffin, and dinner. This eating pattern reflects cultural adherence to eating at specific hours, which is typically healthy for maintaining energy and overall wellbeing. However, the survey also reveals irregularities in the timing and food consumption, which can have severe implications for long-term wellbeing.

One interesting fact is that half the population forgets breakfast, the meal generally considered the most important meal of the day. Of the population that does eat breakfast, the timing is irregular, with the most common being at 7:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. Tea was the most popular breakfast food, with maize and other foods following. While tea provides an immediate energy boost, it does not offer the ongoing nutrition required to start the day off in the right direction. Relying on maize, the food staple, reflects the people's cultural and economic background but also reflects the presence of a gap in food variety, particularly in protein- and vitamin-rich foods.

Lunch habits also show the dominance of grains in the diet among the respondents, with the most eaten food being rice, followed by pulses, vegetables, millet, and meat. Surprisingly, more than half the respondents were eating lunch at 9:00 a.m.,

which is really early by international standards. This could be because of work schedules or cultural practices, but it does bring into question whether such an early lunch provides the energy the rest of the day needs. Vegetables and pulses are added, which is positive because these foods are nutrient dense. But the fairly poor consumption rate for meat and other protein sources shows that some people could be lacking protein.

Tiffin, the light meal consumed during the afternoon, is another indispensable part of the diet for the respondents. Most of the respondents consumed tiffin at 2:00 p.m., with the most popular tiffin food being maize. Other tiffin foods were tea, vegetables, and millet, with some also consuming snacks like chowmein, momo, and biscuits. While tiffin is the opportunity to include more nutrients in the diet, the consumption of maize and processed food items like biscuits indicates the need for more variety in the diet. Additionally, the finding that some of the respondents do not consume tiffin at all indicates skipping meals is also a common problem.

Dinner timings are more standardized, with most of the samples taking dinner at 8:00 p.m. Rice is the most common food at dinner, with vegetables, pulses, and meat coming next. Vegetables and pulses are part of the diet, which is a positive feature, since these are healthy foods. However, the relatively low consumption of meat and other protein sources at dinner further indicates the need for the sample to consume more protein.

The survey also provides information about overall eating habits. All the interviewees consumed grains (maize and rice), pulses, vegetables, fruits, and tea, proving the strong existence of traditional plant-based foods. However, the trend for the consumption of other nutrient groups like milk and milk products, meat, and eggs is less consistent. While 90% reported the consumption of spice, milk products, and meat in the past week, only 65% reported the consumption of eggs, and only 3.3% consumed fish. It shows that animal-based proteins, which are extremely crucial for repairing muscles and overall body health, are possibly not being consumed by most interviewees on a regular basis. Additionally, the consumption of unhealthy food items like tobacco (60%) and alcoholic beverages (55%) is alarming and shows the need for greater awareness about the detrimental effects on the body due to the consumption of such food items.

The survey also indicates food production habits. Most of the respondents were reported to produce grains, vegetables, and milk at home, which is a positive indication of self-sufficiency and availability of fresh produce. But pulses, eggs, spices, and tea are purchased primarily from the market, which indicates the utilization of external sources for certain food. Partial production and purchase of meat also indicate the complex dynamics of self-sufficiency and market dependence in rural settings. Such observations indicate the importance of the promotion of local food systems and increasing rural people's access to affordable and nutritious food.

Despite some gaps in dietary diversity, the survey reveals some positive eating habits. For instance, 95% reported eating home-cooked food, which is typically healthier than food eaten at restaurants or in the form of processed food. Additionally, more than 80% reported eating at regular intervals every day, which is favorable for digestion and metabolism. Additionally, 68.4% reported taking at least 2.5 liters of water per day, and 35.1%

reported exercising every day. Such eating habits are favorable for overall health and show compliance with the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle. However, the observation that only 15.8% reported fasting every month shows that fasting is not practiced by this population.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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