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IRIS Summer Fieldwork Report 2021

The IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award I received helped me conduct international fieldwork in Udaipur district (India) for 6 weeks in July-August 2021. I worked closely with Hanuman Van Vikas Samiti, a community-based organization working in rural Udaipur since 1986 on various interconnected issues of community development and socio-economic well-being of marginalized communities. At present they are working in institution building by creating women's self-help groups which have been collectivized into village organizations and an apex women led federation.

While the focus of the organization since the past many years has been on financial inclusion and furthering the well-being of women by giving them access to affordable credit, the organization is keen on working beyond economic empowerment to engage on issues pertaining to social and political empowerment of marginalized communities. They plan to begin a project focusing on nutrition as well as gender issues with local community. My summer study on nutritional well-being will support them in their efforts to enhance their organizational programming to effectively meet community needs.

The two research questions driving this study were - how do local food cultivation practices shape women's understanding and awareness of nutritional well-being for themselves and their families; and how can women use collective action to catalyze change in local institutions. This exploratory fieldwork was aimed at creating an understanding of the status of agriculture in rural communities, change in traditional systems of doing agriculture, the role of women in agriculture as well as understanding women's perception towards nutritional well-being as it relates to their food consumption and the way they do agriculture. After gaining independence in 1947, India was grappling with the issue of food insufficiency. Agriculture productivity was low and ensuring that all citizens of the nation were well fed was gaining urgency. In the 1960s, the Green Revolution took shape to make the country food sufficient. The Green Revolution was characterized with the use of high yielding varieties of seeds, introduction of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and irrigation to increase land productivity. While providing short term benefits of increased yield and productivity from farmlands, the Green Revolution has led to severe problems in the long run. Deterioration in soil and farmers' health from increased use of chemical inputs, depleting groundwater resources, monocropping, and increased financial costs of doing agriculture are some of the issues that have emerged in the aftermath of the Green Revolution.

The summer study factors in this historical landscape while engaging in conversation with farmers.

I spent the initial few weeks travelling to surrounding villages with field coordinators. The women in these villages are members of non-registered groups, locally known as self-help groups (SHGs), which had meetings twice in a month. I spent time interacting with women in these meetings. This gave me an opportunity to witness the ways in which the meetings were conducted, the topics of discussion, and the participation of local women in the same. I was also able to introduce myself to the locals, have informal conversations with them and gauge responsiveness and willingness to participate in future interviews. These SHG meetings focused primarily on financial transactions, but it was a good starting point to have quick conversations with women on issues surrounding agriculture and sustainable practices that they engage in.

After acclimatizing myself to the local context and interacting with community members locally I chose a small sample of villages to focus on for my data collection. With the help of field coordinators and local community resource persons I conducted semi structured interviews with farmers, childcare center workers as well as school lunch workers. Since the geographic expanse of the Samiti was immense, I visited a small sample of villages and hamlets that provided sufficient demographic diversity as well as convenience of commute. The area in which the Samiti works consists of demographic groups that can be classified into Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes. Conventionally tribal communities are the most marginalized groups here, followed by SC and OBC households. Tribal households usually have the least landholding size, with 1-2 acre of land being cultivated by a group of brothers. Due to this mostly all tribal households heavily rely on wage labor for their income and to meet routine expenses. Compared to tribal families, other castes have a larger land area. While they also diversify their income sources, very few rely on wage labor rather they work in semi-skilled jobs or entrepreneurial ventures like general stores etc.

These findings will serve as starting points to have in-depth discussions with women farmers in the future to identify priority community needs which address intersecting issues related to nutritional well-being, food systems, and women empowerment. Future work will also focus on ways in which women can work collectively to address common problems in the local area. I am extremely grateful for the IRIS fieldwork award that made it possible for me to spend time engaging with community members on the ground and build deeper contextual understanding of the topics I am interested in studying.