

Re-Casting Food: Ethnographic Enquiry into the Pre-school Supplementary Nutrition Programme, Gujarat, India

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Abstract

This study is an ethnographic enquiry into the pre-school Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP), in India's western Gujarat state. The broad objective was aimed at understanding the institutional barriers and sociological process that had led to the exclusion of families and children under the age of six from the SNP. This study was undertaken because despite enthusiastic State investment in human resources and food funding, the uptake of SNP was poor. The study method involved multi-sited ethnographies conducted in four rural villages of Gujarat. The research concluded that caste and religious identities shaped dominance and control, restriction of social interactions, and food commensality. The authors situate these compelling findings within the broader discourse of food as a process of 'othering,' and stigmatised identities as they relate to consumption of 'polluting' food, the symbolic role of food when coupled with caste, and association of religion with food. Observations of SNP delivery sites suggest that spatial and moral dimension of societal caste conflicts directly influence local 'biologies' by reproducing and amplifying such tensions in the *Anganwadi*¹ health centres. Crucial symbolic and cultural markers of food, nutrition, distribution, and consumption are rendered invisible to official health providers resulting in failure of the SNP programme. Current research on global health advocating 'scaling up of models' is an ethical violation if it glosses local ecologies that shape poor uptake of SNP by the affected communities.

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Introduction

Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is the principal State-sponsored programme in India that addresses the issues around child development, malnutrition, and pre-school education. A package of services – including the Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP), pre-school education, immunisation, health check-ups, referral services, and nutrition and health education – are provided through an Anganwadi Centre (AWC) with an Anganwadi Worker (AWW) and an Anganwadi Helper (AWH) for roughly every one thousand people.

From the mid-1990s, there have been successive efforts on the part of the Central (federal) Government to universalise ICDS, and there has been a multi-fold increase in the funds allocated to this programme between the 8th Five-Year Plan (1992–93 and 1996–97) and the 12th Five-Year Plan (2012–17) (Sinha, 2006; Planning Commission, 2013). However, the utilisation of all services under ICDS continues to be grossly low. Close to 75 percent of children aged 0–71 months (up to six years of age) in the areas covered by AWCs did not receive any supplementary food from the centres, and less than 12 percent of children received supplementary food ‘almost daily.’ For children aged 36–71 months or 3–6 years this figure is 15.5 percent. More than 80 percent of children were not weighed at all (IIPS, 2007). It has been reported that children belonging to economically backward and socially marginalised families, including Dalit, tribal, and religious minorities, are excluded from utilising these services through unfavourable institutional rules and structural factors (Ramachandran, 2005; Kabeer, 2006; Thorat and Sadana, 2009; Saxena, 2008, Mandar and Kumaran, 2006; Borooah, Diwakar, and Sabharwal, 2014). Further, members of well-off families do not avail the services provided by AWCs – especially the SNP – for under-6 children (IIPS, 2007).

To identify the reasons behind poor utilisation of AWCs, especially the SNP services, a multi-sited ethnographic study was conducted in four villages in Gujarat. The study aimed to understand everyday experience of households around the SNP in rural settings. The ethnographic approach provided an opportunity to study AWCs as institutions embedded in the context of village cultural life. The authors hypothesise that a study focusing on AWCs could serve as an illustrative case to highlight challenges in implementing other entitlement-based programmes.

Methods

The study was carried out in four villages of Gujarat as short, focused, multi-sited ethnographies. Trained postgraduate researchers were placed in four villages for three months. The villages were selected from the Kutch, Bhavnagar, Dahod and Tapi (Fig 1 districts of Gujarat state). The villages represent regional differences, heterogeneity in population composition, and a familiarity of the researcher with the region, its dialects and local culture. The rural sites were deliberately chosen because, in Gujarat state, rural people are the largest users of ICDS services (IIPS, 2008).

Each ethnography was allowed to evolve independently. Yet, a certain degree of uniformity was maintained by prescribing certain essential domains of data collection

and by retaining the focus on the study's broad aim. These domains include both structural and functional dimensions of the SNP, its staff and potential beneficiaries. The minimum data collection prescribed consisted of a series of interviews with care givers of the children in the target age group from all community groups and settlements; interviews with AWWs and AWHs; observation of the functioning of AWCs; and village mapping. Data was collected through many modes: some as verbatim, and some in the form of field notes from informal and unstructured interviews and observations at field sites. Researchers were encouraged to maintain detailed notes in the form of field diaries and to periodically mail their notes and reflections to the lead investigators. Data was collated and organised by two coordinators, who were supervised by the lead investigators.

Feedback on these notes was provided via e-mail or telephone. In addition, researchers periodically met for de-brief meetings with the principal and co-investigators, in person or through video-conferencing facility. The multi-sited ethnographic method implicitly lent itself to both data and methodological triangulation. The investigator triangulation was achieved through regular Skype and e-mail interactions amongst the three lead investigators and the ethnographers, as well as random field visits by one of the lead investigators. This

ensured an inductive and iterative process of supported and supervised fieldwork as well as a robust process of concurrent analysis. Periodically, summarised topical notes, short memos, case-lets, charts, and diagrams were made on selected topics which, shaped subsequent data collection, as well as facilitated progressive development of four separate ethnographies. In keeping with principles of ethnographic research, the researchers resided in the community. Data was collected over a period of three to four months after gradually gaining entry into – and acceptance within – community. The findings were collated and structured along the themes abstracted from the ethnographic findings.

This research was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Public Health Foundation of India (ID No: TRC-IEC-125/12).

Results

Caste, Religion and Ethnicity – Community Dynamics Across the Villages

All the four villages portrayed strong community dynamics along caste, ethnic, and religious lines. The villages in Kutch and Bhavnagar districts were typical multi-caste villages representing a wide spectrum of the caste hierarchy. For the purpose of convenience the terms 'upper' and 'lower' castes will be used in the remainder of this paper when referring to caste groups. The two terms are not synonymous with the conventional Hindu *Varna*² terminologies and relate more to the local social hierarchy of dominant and subordinate caste groups. In keeping with local categories, the term caste-Hindu will be used to refer to communities who belong to non-dalit, non-Brahmin castes at the study sites. The term ethnicity is used in the context of 'scheduled tribe' communities as they are not included as part of caste hierarchy in the strict sense.

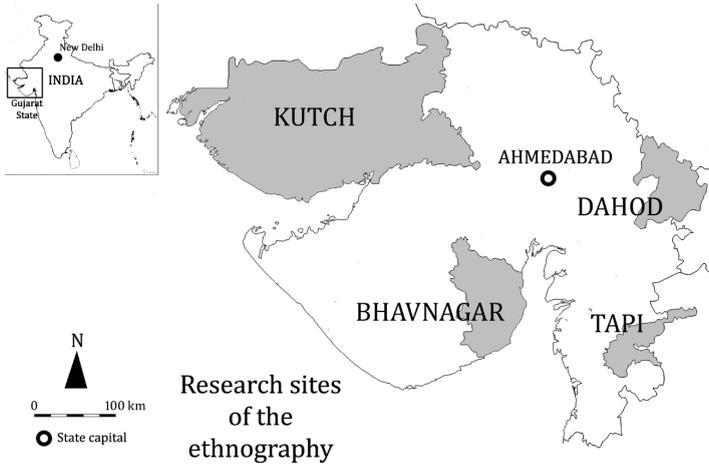


Fig 1. Research Sites of the Ethnography

The Kutch village had a numerical, social, economic, and political dominance of the Patel community. The lesser socially powerful Dalits and Kolis were other numerically large caste groups in the village. Brahmins and other Hindu caste (non-brahmins) groups such as Soni, Lohana, and Baniya, were each represented by a handful of households. Samma (an 800-member community that migrated from Banni region), Notiyar, and Sumra, and a few Pathan households represented the Muslim population in the village.

In the Bhavnagar village, Aahirs, Kolis and Kharaks dominate numerically, economically, and politically. Aahirs owned the bulk of the cattle population while the Kharaks owned most of the agricultural land in the village. The Brahmins were numerically few but occupied an influential position in politics and representation in government-run agencies in the village. Dalits, Devipujaks, and Tai Muslims were other groups with numerical significance. Bharwad, Jogi, and Mali communities were represented by a few households. As in any other caste-based village, in these two villages discrimination in social interaction and commensality operated at every level of the social hierarchy. The Muslim communities were loosely positioned somewhere at the lower end of this hierarchy, just above the Dalit communities.

In the Dahod village, Kolis and Bhils (a 'scheduled tribe' community) dominated numerically. In addition, there were a handful of other caste-Hindus (artisans) and Dalit households. In the recent past, the entire Muslim population of the village had migrated elsewhere after an episode of communal clashes. The village was spread over a wide area with clusters of houses scattered along the roads and inside agricultural lands. Most households owned small pieces of land and ownership was higher among Kolis and Bhils. A sizeable number of households seasonally migrate for wage labour. Caste discrimination was relatively less articulated as compared to the Kutch and Bhavnagar villages but not completely absent. The Koli community claimed ritual superiority over the rest. The priest of one of the important temples in the village belonged to this community.

In the Tapi village, Gamit and Chowdhary (both 'scheduled tribe' communities) dominated numerically and economically. The third largest group was another 'scheduled tribe' called Kotwadia. Socially and economically it was the most backward

community in the village. Almost all families were landless, depending exclusively on agricultural wage labour and bamboo craft work. The vast majority of this community resided on the outskirts of the village and were perceived to be marginal as far as community affairs were concerned. Other caste-Hindu households were very few. Many families had converted to Christianity.

Dominance and Control

In all the four selected villages, households from economically and politically dominant groups had wrested and exercised control over AWC (*Anganwadi* centres), associated resources, and their functioning.

The selection of AWWs and AWHs was fraught with politicking at the village level. Though these appointments are made by the ICDS department, names of potential candidates are recommended by the local *panchayat*. The local elite had a strong say in the final selection of AWWs and AWHs. This meant that either a woman from a relatively dominant community or family, or a woman with the blessings of the local leader got selected. The AWW is the face of the programme in the village and has first-hand access to all the resources around the AWC. However, being a woman often obliged to the local political elite for help she received from them in gaining her position (such as a recommendation), the access to the resources did not necessarily translate into control over all of those resources. Her community background and the power enjoyed by the community in the village also determined the control and influence that she could enjoy in the village and in discharging her duties.

Similarly, decisions on the identification of space for a new AWC, or the renting of a premise for an AWC were made largely with the involvement of the local elite. The location of AWCs was decided on the basis of where the government was able to procure the required land. This was either given away by an affluent villager, or an existing public space was utilised. When no government-built structure was available, an AWC was run from a rented premise. Whatever may have been the situation, the final location of an AWC was decided by convenience mediated by political consideration. This translated into convenience for some groups at the expense of others.

In the Bhavnagar village, the Brahmin community was a numerical minority, and the deputy *sarpanch* (village head)³ of the village was from this community. His wife and sister-in-law were two of the four AWWs in the village while his cousin was one of the AWHs. His wife helped all the other AWWs in keeping records and financial accounts and wielded strong influence and power among all other AWWs, AWHs, and generally in the village. She had been influential enough to mobilise local resources to refurbish her AWC building with a perimeter wall, a small garden, chairs for the children, and painted walls. This was in stark contrast to the AWC intended for Dalit children, which was located in a room rented out by her husband from which he ran a fertilizer business. This showed that this extended family had a strong grip over the functioning of all four AWCs in the village. A young dalit woman commented thus:

“Tuition classes run in the evening and the Deputy Sarpanch and his father-in-law run their fertilizer business from the same room. When the panchayat and the AWC people who come for inspection are not bothered about it, what can a few people do?”

(Young dalit woman, Bhavnagar village)

In the Dahod village, one of the six AWCs was located adjacent to a politically influential Koli household whose head was a former *sarpanch* of the village. Land for that AWC was donated by the family. It was observed that the main sitting space in the AWC was occupied by a cot that was being used regularly by this family. For a major part of the duration of the field work, this room was filled with harvested corn ears or other agricultural produce. A water tap meant for the AWC was built midway between the AWC and the former *sarpanch's* house, facing the house.

In the Tapi village, two AWCs had approximately equal representation from Gamit and Chowdhary communities. Both groups were landed 'schedule tribe' communities who enjoyed more or less equal status and political dominance in the village. AWWs and AWHs of both AWCs belonging to these communities were located amidst a cluster of settlements of these communities. The third group, Kotwadia community had no say on location and representation of AWCs.

Although the AWH, also known as *tedagar*, had to bring the children to AWC and take them back, she was selective about collecting children. While she was able to offer this service to children living nearby or along the road, children from far-off households were left behind. In the Kutch village, of the three AWCs only one had an AWH. In the Tapi village, members of households located far from the two AWCs often complained that the helper did not come to fetch their children:

“No one is coming to fetch our kids. They come to houses near the AWCs but are not interested in coming to houses that are far away and so sometimes parents are not interested in sending the children”

(A Gamit woman, Tapi village)

“No one comes to take the children; it (AWC) is far from my house It is difficult to walk to the AWC therefore I do not want to send the kids.”

(A Kotwadia woman, Tapi village)

The walls and surroundings of AWCs were often dumping areas for farm produce, fertilizers, fuel wood, and cow-dung cakes; animals are tethered there by households living near the AWC. By default, this privilege was for those groups that had managed to secure an AWC in their settlement. Further, only landed households or those with animals had the need to encroach AWC space, unlike households without assets.

Groups also competed for a range of resources associated with supplies such as flour, rice, pulses, and packed take-home rations received from government agencies.. These competing groups also had a say in procurement of items such as fresh fruits, vegetables and spices that were locally bought.

In all the four villages, members from different communities expressed views over such supplies getting embezzled by AWWs or people associated with them. Either the AWWs diverted the supplies for their personal use or exchanged them for other benefits. Another very common complaint was that supplies, including take home rations, were diverted to commercial and farm use. In response to enquiries about such uneven resource allocation, one mother commented:

“All kinds of mischief went on in this AWC as there was no one to question.”

(A Samma woman, Kutch village).

Community members might have given an exaggerated picture of the extent of siphoning off of supplies. Nevertheless, based on interviews it was clear that misappropriation of varying degrees did happen in selected AWCs in all villages. This took place in connivance with the local political elite in exchange for personal favours. Though this may appear to be an insignificant aspect in the larger scheme of things, within the village such political leverage assumed a great significance.

It is ironic that groups which controlled the resources often did not feel the need for AWC services – they sent their children to social welfare crèches (SWC) or private nursery schools. Food supplied from the AWCs was found unfit to feed the children:

“The upma packets were not good and I used to feed it to the cattle we had at my father’s home.”

(An Aahir woman, Bhavnagar Village)

“If no one eats, we give it to the animals or sometimes throw it away.”

(A Gamit woman, Tapi village)

“AWW does not cook and whatever she does is not nice. It is raw and tasteless and so children do not like to eat... most often it was ‘sheera’, ‘thepla’ or sometimes ‘khichdi’

(Young mother, 19 years, married outside her community to a Samma widower, Kutch village)

On the other hand, for others who had little control over working of the AWCs, the food provided was an essential component to ensure and secure their household food security:

“We live in poverty. (We) have only one member with regular income and many children to feed and hence we have no option but to send the children, young as well as old, to AWC.”

(A Young Koli man, Bhavnagar village)

“Children from Muslim families coming to the AWC ran with their own bowls. Even older girls from Muslim families came to take snacks.”

(A Young Koli woman, Bhavnagar village)

To sum up, the resources that were up for grabs included: recruitment of personnel, infrastructure, supplies and procurement; amenities like cooking gas and water connections; and control over the day-to-day functioning of the Anganwadi centre.

If one group controlled merely the selection of AWWs and the location of AWCs, it largely completed the process of seizing control. The rest followed as a corollary. Beyond all these, and perhaps most importantly, the AWC being a state-run facility, control over its functioning at the village level gave recognition and legitimacy to the dominance of certain groups over others.

Restrictions on Social Integration

The AWCs usually enrolled children based on the principle of neighbourhood: children from all the households residing in the area were expected to enrol in the nearest AWC.

Families usually preferred to send their children to the nearest AWC. However, it was observed that this was not always the case. An overriding factor was the caste composition of the rest of the children as well as that of the staff in the AWC. Based on the spatial distribution of different communities and the social backgrounds of the AWWs and AWHs, the communities willingly or unwillingly reached an arrangement whereby children from groups sharing roughly equivalent status get assigned to AWCs in a manner that complied with the caste norms which prohibit social interactions. Situations where such an acceptable arrangement was not possible would lead to discord between communities: children would be sent to distant AWCs, removed from the register, or withdrawn. Additionally, relationship between the AWW or AWH and the households turned sour.

For instance, in the Bhavnagar village, the general pattern of the four AWCs was as follows: one largely meant for Dalit children, one for Muslims, one for the dominant Aahir community, and one for the relatively 'upper' caste groups. Although this was not a water-tight division, it was observed to be an overall pattern. For example, within the same village, Devipujak (*wagri*) children came to the AWC which was largely attended by Muslim children; these families did not want to send their children to an AWC that was largely meant for Dalit children. On the other hand, Devipujak children were not welcomed in the other two AWCs meant for Aahir, Bharwad, and Brahmin children.

The AWC devoted largely to Dalit children was located within a non-Dalit settlement in a rented building owned by the deputy *sarpanch* belonging to a Brahmin household (Fig 2). It had an AWW of Dalit caste. It also had on its roll a small number of children belonging to the caste-Hindu groups. Dalit and non-Dalit children huddled separately and non-Dalit children were observed to have restricted interactions with Dalit children. A few households residing in this area sent their children to other AWCs in the village, with the convenient arrangement that an AWH of another AWC, who happened to live in the area, would escort their children, each morning, on her way to the AWC.



Fig 2. AWCs for 'Upper' Caste (Top Row) and Dalit (Bottom Row) Children Respectively

In the Kutch village, the pattern of the three AWCs was as follows. One was earmarked as the AWC for Dalit and Muslim children. Although almost the entire 'upper' caste Hindu families resided in that area, they preferred to send their children to the village Social Welfare Centre (SWC). The second AWC was being run especially for children of the migrant Samma community. The third AWC was meant for Muslim, Koli and other 'lower' caste Hindu families. Here too there were a few Patel and Lohana families who sent their children to the SWC. A number of Muslim families sent their children to an AWC across a main road, falling under another village where a sizeable number of Muslim children attended.

Interestingly, the SWCs were run by a non-governmental organization (NGO) but funded by the Department of Women and Child Development, the same department that funds AWCs. They also catered to the same age groups of children as AWCs. Unlike AWCs, these centres collected a nominal monthly fee and were more focused on day-care and pre-primary education than on the distribution of food or other health care services. This was an example of a State supported two-tier service – one tier for the elite and another for the rest– with an NGO serving as the conduit. The caste composition and the hierarchy within the NGO were not studied in this research.

In the Kutch village, Muslim households mentioned that they were never informed or called to attend educational sessions by the AWWs. One AWW reportedly said that "they are arrogant, either they don't listen to what is being said or even if they listen they forget whatever they are told, hence it is a waste of time." This AWC was located well inside the Kutch village settlement, hence the AWW had apprehensions and reluctance to serve these families.

One of the mothers in this community said that the "AWW scolded the children, saying that they were dirty. Only if she taught them, would they know how to keep clean."

(A Young Samma woman, Kutch village)

In the Tapi village, an entire settlement of about fifty households belonging to the Kotwadia community refused to send their children to the existing AWCs. They had long been demanding a separate AWC in their own settlement.

In the Dahod village, a handful of households belonging to 'Chamara,' a Dalit community, lived along the main road but far from the AWC. None of them sent their children to the AWC that is located in the settlement largely inhabited by the Koli community.

In all the four villages it was observed that for a section of affluent households, belonging to the dominant communities, the AWC was completely irrelevant as far as providing services for their children was concerned, although some of these households held a strong control over the resources associated with AWCs. In the Tapi village, households belonging to the Chowdhary community and owning large pieces of land sent their children to a private nursery school located a few kilometres away. In one of the Kutch villages, all the households belonging to the Patel community sent their children either to a SWC in the village or to private nursery schools outside it. In this village, entry into the SWC is strongly regulated. It was largely meant for the children of Patel, Lohana, and a handful of other 'upper' caste-Hindu households. There was a token presence of one or two Muslim and non-Dalit 'lower' caste-Hindu families who managed to push their way either through recommendations from influential people or

by being strongly vocal. Members from some of these households expressed a sense of contempt for the idea of sending their children to AWCs, as they were perceived to be meant for the poor. This was a benchmark that was progressively emulated by increasing number of households from all sections.

“There was no one to drop her and bring her back home. Once the child is three years, I will put her in Social Welfare Centre as that was the only place in the village.”

(A Young Dalit woman, Kutch village)

To sum up, the composition of each AWC is more or less a microcosm of the village divided along caste and community lines. Across the different AWCs in a village, groups manoeuvre to retain the boundaries of social interaction as per the prevailing caste norms. This not only preserved and reproduced the established social differentiation and hierarchy; it also facilitated the dominant groups to maintain exclusivity for a privileged position in terms of greater access to better-run AWCs – with staff from the same or an acceptable community background– than the ‘lower’ or minority groups. Alternatively, dominant affluent groups may even create or access institutions parallel to AWCs – state-funded or private – to maintain their distinct caste identities.

Restrictions on Commensality

Restrictions in inter-dining and exchange of food constituted a defining element of caste system. SNP being a food based programme it naturally gets enmeshed with issues around restrictions in commensality in multi-caste village settings. This element has a strong overlap with the previous two aspects that were identified. Nevertheless, it merits a separate consideration not only because food is the central element of the SNP but also because food and exchange of food symbolise and powerfully reflect the ideological and material contradictions in the social life of these villages.

In two multi-caste villages, with the presence of communities that could be located along a much wider spectrum of the ritual scale, ranging from Brahmin-Patel communities to Dalit/Muslim groups, such practices were more pronounced and articulated. Many of the Patel households in the Kutch village were staunch followers of a particular sect within Hinduism which prescribed observation of stiff norms related to ritual purity and commensality.

Restrictions on commensality ran from the top to the bottom rung of the caste hierarchy. The ‘upper’ caste Hindu communities accepted raw vegetables, fruits, grains, milk, curds, buttermilk, and food that did not need cooking from other caste communities. In the middle of the caste hierarchy there was a tradition of ‘upper’ caste households giving buttermilk to ‘lower’ caste households free of cost. In Bhavnagar village the Kharak, Aahir, Mali, and Koli families practised this tradition between them, but not with other caste groups below them. None of these groups accepted any form of food or water from ‘lower’ caste groups like Devipujak, Dalit, and Muslim households. Even at the bottom, the Rawal-Jogis, Devipujaks and dalits observed restrictions in commensality. Similarly in the Kutch village the Samma enjoyed an equal relationship with other Muslim communities in the village but they did not share food or water with the Koli or Dalit communities.

On the other hand, in the two villages with predominant 'scheduled tribe' populations, such practices did not dominantly occupy the social life of the village. In the Dahod village all households partook food in a temple festival that involved the sharing of food items. Similarly, in the Tapi village the Kotwadia community members get invited to the family functions of the Gamit and Chowdhary households. However, one noted a spatial segregation of the most backward 'scheduled tribe' community or the few Dalit households in these two villages.

Most Dalit families, a few other 'lower' caste Hindu families, all Muslim families and most 'scheduled tribes' across the four villages consumed eggs and meat. Individual families from other caste groups may consume these foods too. This becomes an additional reason to justify restrictions in food commensality across groups, although it does not fully explain the practice.

It is often not the binary arrangement of accepting or not accepting food, but a hierarchy of food types with different degrees of pollution (or purity) accorded to the act of receiving it from a 'lower' caste. For instance, it is less polluting to receive uncooked food grains from the hands of a 'lower' caste compared to receiving a cooked meal from the same person.

Zimmerman observes that the arrival of vegetarianism emplaces 'a new type of opposition between ... pure and the impure and a hierarchy of castes' replacing the opposition based on the "alimentary violence" between the strong and the weak, the predator and his prey' (Zimmerman, 1999, p.1-2) Similarly, here too different food categories, even devoid of human touch, are arranged in a ritual scale of social value – ghee, milk and water at the one end and meat of certain animals at the other. This ritual hierarchy of food gets overlaid on groups which consume or avoid the respective groups of food items. The food here, thus, serves as a potential marker of social identities constructed around consuming and sharing food.

The practice of restriction in food commensality effortlessly subsumes the process associated with preparation and distribution of SNP food in the AWC. Likewise, these practices influence the decisions households make regarding choosing and sending their children to specific AWCs. A seemingly innocuous food distribution programme implemented through the AWCs effectively, thus, becomes a marker of social privileges and discrimination across the dimensions of caste, religion, and ethnicity, and it affects the utilisation of this service.

Two key but closely related aspects that shape a number of variations in AWC food distribution processes are (a) that AWWs or AWHs belonging to the Dalit community are not allowed to provide cooked food to children from caste-Hindu families, and (b) that families of the 'upper' caste do not want their children to have food alongside children of Dalit or other 'lower' groups. As a result, families belonging to different communities adopt different strategies to manoeuvre these conditions of restriction within the given material conditions like resource, distance, and time.

Affluent families of 'upper' caste groups completely withdraw their children from the AWCs and send their children to relatively more exclusive private schools or to a SWC. Communities manage to secure for their children an SWC that practices a great degree of exclusivity. Many families handled the situation by successfully locating one or more AWC within their settlement or far from settlements of 'lower' sections. It was also managed by working through the enrolment process wherein children from 'lower' sections were assigned different or far-off centres. Another form of exclusion that happens more subtly is the differential behaviour of AWWs and AWHs towards children from 'lower' vis-à-vis 'upper' caste groups.

However, not all families were able to cope ‘successfully’ with this situation. There were households that practised restrictions in commensality with Dalits but sent their children to AWCs attended by Dalit children as well. These situations get addressed through a variety of strategies as follows:

- a. For one of the Koli families in the Bhavnagar village, food prepared by a Dalit AWH was acceptable if it was cooked in AWC utensils in the AWC, and not in the Dalit AWH’s own utensils in her home.
- b. Families accepted a Dalit AWW or AWH giving a snack purchased from a local shop to their children instead of food cooked by her.
- c. Some children were allowed to consume food prepared from the ready-to-eat packets by the AWW but not freshly prepared food.
- d. Some families sent food and water from home in containers which their children consumed sitting in the AWCs.
- e. Water was maintained separately; children carry their own water or avoid drinking water in the AWC.
- f. Children did not eat from plates that were in the AWC (or in schools). Instead, they brought their own plates or containers.
- g. Some families sent their children to the AWC for a few hours but these children did not consume anything on the AWC premises.
- h. A few mothers or old women had also stated that they do not believe in such discriminatory practices or that given their economic situation, they could not afford to observe such practices.

“There are Dalit and Muslim children coming to AWC and we avoid touching Dalit or Muslim people. We do not share food or water with them and hence I prefer my children carrying water from home even to SWC.”

(Mother from caste-Hindu community in Kutch village)

It was also observed that AWC-related aspects spill outside its boundaries to inflict humiliation on ‘lower’ sections. In the Bhavnagar village some caste-Hindus expressed the view that Dalit women visited the AWC only to eat. Referring to Dalit women approaching the AWC, a caste-Hindu woman commented, “*see these Dhedh women have come to eat.*” On the other hand, in the Kutch village one of the AWWs belonging to the caste-Hindu community had alleged that the “*Samma members ‘steal’ things; they are to be feared/ not trusted. One should not come here alone.*” Similarly, in the Tapi village one of the AWWs had repeatedly mentioned that “*members of Kotwadia community keep demanding more food and even adults come to collect*” food that was meant for children. Such comments further reinforced the devalued and stigmatised identity placed on these groups. This process further impacted their fuller participation in everyday village life beyond the sphere of food. With select communities self-excluding from using these services or by securing exclusive AWCs or SWCs for themselves, the AWCs as a collective institution and their activities got discredited progressively.

Discussion

In keeping with findings in sociological literature in India, all the four villages embody wider community dynamics along traditional dimensions of caste, ethnicity and religion (Navsarjan., 2014; Perez, 2004; Berman, 1974; Tambs-Lynche, 2010).

The AWC-based services were not only perceived as an entitlement by some, but the associated resources were also part of village-level politicking for others. Equally, food and the sharing of food still operated as an important marker of identities and boundaries – and the SNP exemplifies this social process.

Though the SNP is a state-run programme and its stated mode of implementation presumes an apolitical and non-partisan nature, in reality it acquires the characteristic features of the social life of the society in which it is implemented. Like any other institution, the AWCs and SNP operate within the contours shaped by existing ideological and material contradictions in the society (Aloysius, 2005). Dominant social institutions such as caste and gender inscribe their characteristics on to the programme and subvert its functioning in favour of select groups.

Certain groups were able to stay unaffected and indifferent to this programme, some appropriated it, and some were deprived of it. This occurred along the lines of caste, religion, and ethnicity. These social identities operated as an important determinant of access to power and resources surrounding AWCs. This has a major impact on perception, utilization, provision, exclusion and self-exclusion from the SNP, composition of individual AWCs, people who get recruited as AWWs or AWHs, and those whose houses are rented out for the AWC. In summary, the differentials in access to the programme incorporate and reflect the prevalent social hierarchy and social exclusion faced by select communities in the villages.

Sharing of food is an expressive act permeated with meaning (Douglas, 1972, 1966; Fraser, 1996; Freed, 1970) conveying degrees of familiarity and ‘personal feelings’ (Freeman, 2003), as well as the social status of the groups involved (Zimmerman, 1999). The practices surrounding commensality are an important way through which social hierarchies, power and dominance are expressed and understood in these villages. Food and the exchange of food across households of different communities were found to be strongly associated with community dynamics, either as symbolic of, or as a substantive component of, politicking. Welfare programmes involving the distribution of food reflected these issues. This relates to what Fraser refers to as the ‘misrecognition effects of redistributive policies’: any redistributive proposal, which is often in the form of a welfare scheme, will have ‘intended or unintended, explicit or implicit, overt or subliminal’ recognition effects. The welfare and the actions around it have an ‘irreducible dimension of expression’ that ‘institutionalise cultural norms around the entitlements and construct distinct, often unequally valued, subject positions or identities’ of beneficiaries and the rest, the former stigmatized and the later valorised (Fraser, 1996). A public food distribution programme such as the SNP would qualify as one such entitlement, the social imagery around which stigmatises and violates the autonomy of the beneficiaries to restrict their full and equal participation in social life.

Despite the stated intent and design of a programme like the SNP, its success will finally depend to a great extent on the strategies of delivery at the local level. In reality, however, these strategies become occasions for power struggles. As a result they get circumscribed and co-opted by, local social and political configurations, strengthening existing power relations.

This study did not examine how gender and patriarchy mediate and intersect with caste-based discrimination and mark its importance on the way AWC-based programmes function as a marker and producer of social disadvantages. Additionally, the issues around promoting exclusive breastfeeding till the sixth month of infancy and subsequent introduction of complementary feeding and home visits by an AWW remain unaddressed.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study revealed critical elements of caste-based organisations of social life which permeate the structure and function of the AWC/SNP.

Caste divides communities into groups arranged hierarchically in terms of social status, privilege, and honour. It simultaneously permits some groups to wrest control over material and symbolic resources while actively excluding others from accessing these resources. This extends seamlessly in the way AWC functions. Politically or ritually dominant caste groups exercise a strong control over the AWC as an institution and reconfigure it to their advantage, at the expense of other groups.

Caste identities shape and regulate degrees of social interaction across communities. This is replicated in the domain of the AWC/SNP by the dominant groups' control over enrolment of children into different AWCs.

Practices surrounding food commensality are an important way in which social hierarchy is expressed and understood in a society configured along caste. Thus, SNP, a seemingly innocuous food distribution programme, assumes the status of a symbolic marker of identities and boundaries of caste.

The authors argue that the SNP and AWCs are not simply a case study of nutritional intervention or food distribution, but a case study of control over resources too. Controlling a state-run facility like an AWC gives recognition and legitimacy to the dominant groups over the rest, giving them the ability to display a real or putative access to state machinery. This display may well lead to accrual of political benefits within and outside the village. The SNP fails because the groups that have the greatest need for its services have the least representation in almost every aspect of the programme.

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Notes

1. Anganwadi or 'courtyard shelters' are mother and young children (0-6 years) care centres established by the government in 1975 under the Integrated Child Development Programme to combat child hunger and malnutrition.
2. Varna is any one of the four traditional social classes in India, viz. Brahmins (Priests), khsatriyas (warriors), Vaisyas (traders), and Shudras (farmers and unskilled labourers such as sweepers, cleaners, tanners, etc. The latter are also called ati-shudras, officially called Scheduled Caste or Dalits)
3. Sarpanch is the head decision maker of the village-level constitutional local governance body called gram sabha. He/she along with other decision makers (panchs) are elected by the villagers directly.