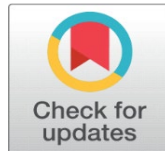
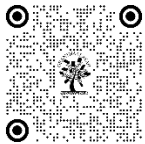


THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL DIETS VS. MODERN FAST FOODS IN ADOLESCENT HEALTH IN DHANBAD: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Chandra Prabha ¹, Dr. Chanchala Verma ²

¹ Research Scholar, University Department of Home Science Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University, Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India

² Assistant Professor, University Department of Home Science Binod Bihari Mahto Koyalanchal University Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India



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ABSTRACT

Dhanbad, often referred to as the "Coal Capital of India," is a city in Jharkhand that has seen rapid urbanization and economic growth in recent decades. This development has brought about significant changes in the lifestyle and dietary habits of its residents, particularly among adolescents. Traditionally, the diets in Dhanbad have been rooted in locally sourced, nutrient-rich foods, reflecting the agricultural heritage of the region. However, with increasing exposure to global food culture, there has been a marked shift toward the consumption of modern fast foods, which are often calorie-dense and low in essential nutrients. This comparative study aims to investigate the impact of this dietary transition on the health of adolescents in Dhanbad, focusing on the differences between traditional diets and modern fast foods. This study would look at the reason and factor behind changing food habits among the youth.

Keywords: Adolescent Health, Traditional Diets, Fast Foods, Dhanbad, Nutritional Transition, Mental Health

1. INTRODUCTION

Dhanbad was originally known as Dhanbaid, a name believed to come from the words 'Dhan,' meaning 'paddy,' and 'baid,' meaning 'land.' Together, Dhanbaid translates to 'The Paddy Land.' Over time, the name evolved and eventually became Dhanbad, the name by which the city is known today. In the rapidly changing urban landscape of Dhanbad, the dietary habits of adolescents are undergoing a significant transformation. Traditionally, diets in this region have been anchored in locally grown, nutrient-dense foods that reflect the agricultural roots of the community. These traditional diets, rich in whole grains, legumes, vegetables, and local spices, have long been associated with balanced nutrition and overall well-being.

However, the increasing availability and popularity of modern fast foods—characterized by high levels of sugar, unhealthy fats, and preservatives—pose new challenges to adolescent health. Fast foods, often seen as convenient and appealing, are becoming a staple in the diet of many young people, leading to concerns about their long-term impact on health and nutrition.

Adolescence constitutes a critical developmental stage that transcends mere biological maturity and encompasses a spectrum of multidimensional changes. Derived from the Latin term *Adolescere*, meaning "to grow into maturity," the notion of adolescence was scientifically articulated in modern psychology by G. Stanley Hall in 1904. Hall famously conceptualized this period as one of *Sturm und Drang* — or "storm and stress" — highlighting the inherent emotional turbulence, identity confusion, and psychological upheaval that characterize this life phase. Far from being a simple transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, adolescence represents a formative journey that involves an intricate interplay of emotional, cognitive, social, and physiological transformations. These transitions fundamentally shape an individual's emerging identity, value systems, aspirations, and long-term behavioral patterns.

This period is marked by rapid hormonal changes that affect not only physical growth but also mood regulation, impulse control, and interpersonal relationships. Cognitive development during adolescence also reaches a significant milestone, as individuals begin to engage in abstract thinking, question societal norms, and form independent judgments. Socially, adolescents begin to detach from their primary dependence on family and seek autonomy through peer interactions, digital engagement, and exploratory behaviors. This shift often brings them face to face with dilemmas related to conformity, rebellion, and self-expression, thereby reinforcing the psychological complexity of this stage.

In the context of a diverse and rapidly transforming society like India — where adolescents constitute approximately 22% of the total population — the relevance of examining this age group intensifies manifold. India's demographic dividend rests significantly on the shoulders of its youth, making it crucial to understand how adolescents are navigating their formative years in an environment characterized by both opportunity and challenge. The unique cultural, socio-economic, and educational landscapes of India shape adolescent experiences in varied ways, from urban high-tech environments to rural, resource-constrained settings. In such a heterogeneous milieu, the adolescent experience is far from uniform and demands nuanced, intersectional analysis.

The forces of globalization, technological advancement, and aggressive consumerism have brought profound shifts in the everyday realities of Indian adolescents. With the proliferation of smartphones, social media platforms, online gaming, and streaming content, the adolescent worldview is increasingly shaped by globalized narratives that often conflict with traditional Indian values. This digital saturation has led to a reconfiguration of identity formation processes, wherein adolescents must reconcile the rapid exposure to global lifestyles with familial and cultural expectations. For many, this results in a form of cultural dualism — a psychological tension between inherited traditions and the allure of modern autonomy.

Moreover, globalization has redefined parameters of success, beauty, popularity, and social capital, all of which deeply influence adolescent aspirations and self-esteem. The hypervisibility offered by social media compels adolescents to curate idealized versions of themselves, often leading to increased peer pressure, body image issues, and social comparison. Mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and eating disorders are increasingly surfacing among adolescents, yet awareness and access to appropriate psychological support remain disproportionately low in India. The stigma attached to mental health, combined with inadequate infrastructure in schools and communities, exacerbates these challenges.

From a lifestyle perspective, the rise of sedentary habits, irregular eating patterns, and dependency on packaged or fast foods have introduced significant risks to adolescent health. The nutrition transition — marked by the shift from traditional diets to calorie-dense, nutrient-poor food — is especially concerning. Adolescents are highly vulnerable to such dietary shifts, given their growing bodies and heightened nutritional needs. The consequences are visible in rising rates of obesity, diabetes, micronutrient deficiencies, and even early onset of lifestyle diseases. Urban adolescents, in particular, are increasingly drawn towards Westernized dietary preferences, often influenced by advertising, peer trends, and availability of convenience foods.

In contrast, adolescents in rural and semi-urban areas face a different set of challenges, including undernutrition, limited access to health services, and lack of reproductive health education. Girls in these areas are particularly at risk due to prevailing gender biases, early marriage practices, and restrictions on mobility and education. These socio-cultural barriers hinder their ability to make informed choices about their health and personal development, thereby affecting their long-term well-being and empowerment.

To support adolescents through this critical life stage, there is a pressing need for comprehensive policy interventions and community-based efforts. School curricula must integrate mental health awareness, nutritional literacy, reproductive health education, and digital citizenship. Parents and educators should be sensitized to the

importance of open communication, empathy, and non-judgmental support. Community health initiatives must prioritize adolescent wellness by offering safe spaces for counseling, mentorship, and peer engagement.

Adolescence is not merely a biological milestone but a deeply transformative chapter that lays the foundation for adult identity, behavior, and societal contribution. In India's rapidly changing socio-cultural fabric, the experiences of adolescents are becoming increasingly complex, demanding greater scholarly attention and systemic support. Recognizing the multidimensional nature of adolescent development — and responding with context-sensitive strategies — will be vital in shaping a healthier, more resilient, and socially conscious generation.

2. FAST FOOD CULTURE

Fast food, a term popularized in the 1950s in the United States, refers to food that is prepared and served quickly. While the concept can apply to any meal that requires minimal preparation time, it specifically pertains to food sold at restaurants or stores with preheated or precooked ingredients, typically served in a take-out format. Fast food establishments are often characterized by their drive-through service. According to Merriam-Webster, the term "fast food" was officially recognized in 1951.

Fast food usually includes items like chips, sandwiches, hamburgers, fried chicken, French fries, chicken nuggets, fish, pizza, and ice cream. Though many fast food outlets also offer less conventional options such as chili mashed potatoes or salads, most fast foods are highly processed and made using standardized ingredients and methods. This approach to preparation ensures that the food is quickly served in packaging like cartons, bags, or plastic wraps, aiming to reduce costs.

The fast food industry has experienced significant growth and is especially popular among individuals under 35. For those who consume fast food occasionally, its impact on overall nutritional adequacy may be minimal. However, for regular consumers, such as workers and teenagers who may dine at these establishments daily, the nutritional quality of their diet becomes a more critical consideration. The fast food culture is increasingly making its mark in smaller towns across India, such as Dhanbad.

3. TRADITIONAL FOOD OF DHANBAD

Dhanbad, located in the state of Jharkhand, is not only known for its coal mines but also for its rich and diverse culinary heritage. The traditional food of Dhanbad reflects the agricultural abundance and cultural diversity of the region, with dishes that are simple, nutritious, and deeply rooted in local customs.

One of the staples of Dhanbad's traditional diet is pakhala bhat, a rice dish soaked in water and often fermented, which is particularly refreshing during the hot summer months. The use of fresh, locally sourced vegetables is a hallmark of Dhanbad's cuisine. Dishes like saag (leafy greens), chana dal (split chickpeas), and litti chokha—a popular dish made from whole wheat dough stuffed with roasted gram flour and served with mashed vegetables—are common in households. Litti chokha is not only delicious but also highly nutritious, providing a balance of carbohydrates, proteins, and vitamins.

Dal bhat (lentils and rice) is another staple in Dhanbad, often accompanied by a variety of seasonal vegetables and achar (pickles). The simplicity of dal bhat belies its nutritional value, offering a complete meal that is both filling and healthful. Additionally, thekua is a popular sweet snack, often prepared during festivals like Chhath Puja. Made from whole wheat flour, jaggery, and coconut, thekua is deep-fried to a crispy texture and enjoyed by people of all ages.

Traditional food in Dhanbad emphasizes natural ingredients, minimal use of oil and spices, and a deep connection to the land. These foods not only nourish the body but also preserve the cultural heritage of the region, offering a wholesome alternative to the fast foods that are increasingly becoming popular in urban areas.

3.1. THE GROWING FAST FOOD HABIT AMONG THE YOUTH IN DHANBAD

In recent years, the rise of fast food culture has become a significant trend across India, including in Dhanbad. This shift in dietary habits among adolescents reflects broader global patterns but also has distinct local characteristics. As fast food outlets become increasingly prevalent and integrated into the daily lives of young people, understanding the

causes and consequences of this shift is essential for fostering healthier eating practices and addressing public health concerns.

Fast food, known for its rapid preparation and convenience, has gained immense popularity since the 1950s, when it first became prominent in the United States. In Dhanbad, this trend is no different. Fast food's allure lies in its accessibility and the promise of a quick meal, which suits the fast-paced lifestyles of today's youth. For many adolescents, fast food is not just a meal but a convenient solution amidst their busy schedules filled with school, extracurricular activities, and social engagements.

Several factors contribute to the growing fast food habit among young people in Dhanbad. Urbanization and economic development have increased the accessibility and affordability of fast food, often making it a more practical option compared to traditional home-cooked meals. The proliferation of fast food chains, particularly near educational institutions and residential areas, facilitates this trend. Additionally, aggressive marketing strategies and promotions significantly influence young consumers.

A critical factor driving fast food consumption is the pervasive influence of social media. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook play a vital role in shaping eating habits among adolescents. Fast food chains leverage social media to promote their products through visually appealing content, engaging influencers, and interactive campaigns. The constant exposure to curated images of indulgent fast food can create a sense of craving and desirability. Influencers, often young and relatable, showcase their favorite fast food items, which can sway their followers' choices and reinforce the social acceptability of consuming these foods.

The health implications of this growing preference for fast food are concerning. Fast foods are typically high in calories, unhealthy fats, sugars, and sodium, while being low in essential nutrients. Regular consumption of such foods is linked to obesity, diabetes, and other chronic health conditions. The frequent appearance of fast food in social media feeds, combined with its accessibility, may contribute to unhealthy dietary patterns among adolescents. Cultural shifts also reflect the impact of fast food on social dynamics. Fast food restaurants have become popular social hubs, where young people gather not just to eat but to socialize. This integration into social life, combined with the influence of social media, enhances the appeal of fast food as a trendy and desirable choice.

Addressing the rise of fast food consumption requires a comprehensive approach. Improving nutritional education in schools can help adolescents make informed food choices. Community initiatives that promote traditional diets and offer healthier alternatives are also crucial. Furthermore, public health campaigns highlighting the risks associated with excessive fast food consumption can raise awareness.

Regulation plays a vital role in this context. Measures such as restricting fast food advertising targeted at young audiences and enhancing food labeling can help mitigate the impact of fast food. Additionally, addressing the influence of social media by encouraging responsible marketing practices and promoting positive food choices can contribute to healthier eating habits.

3.2. CHANGING FOOD HABITS OF ADOLESCENTS IN DHANBAD AND THEIR IMPACT ON HEALTH

Adolescence is a crucial and sensitive phase of human development, marked by rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive transformations. In this phase, food is not merely a source of nutrition—it becomes a reflection of one's lifestyle, choices, and even psychological state. In the industrial and semi-urban district of Dhanbad in Jharkhand, the changing dietary patterns of adolescents have emerged as a significant public health concern.

Rapid urbanization, commercialization, and increasing exposure to modern technology have led to a gradual departure from traditional food habits in Dhanbad. Fast food, packaged snacks, sugary beverages, and highly processed items have replaced home-cooked meals and traditional nutrition-rich diets. The rise of mobile food vans, roadside fast-food stalls near schools and coaching centers, and the influence of advertisements and social media have shaped the eating behavior of teenagers to a great extent.

As a consequence, several health issues are emerging among adolescents. The most common are obesity, anemia, early signs of type-2 diabetes, gastric disorders, and mental health challenges such as irritability, fatigue, and poor concentration. Adolescent girls, in particular, are experiencing high rates of iron-deficiency anemia due to imbalanced nutrition and cultural neglect of girls' dietary needs.

Our research and discussions with local health professionals and teachers in Dhanbad revealed that skipping breakfast, frequent consumption of oily and spicy food, sugary beverages replacing water, and lack of intake of fresh fruits and vegetables are becoming the norm among teenagers. This dietary shift is worsened by decreased physical activity due to increased screen time, especially on mobile phones and social media platforms.

To better understand this trend, a survey of 300 adolescents (150 boys and 150 girls) was conducted in Dhanbad across various schools and coaching institutes. The objective was to identify the link between changing food habits and health conditions among teenagers. The findings are presented in the table below:

Statistical Table: Health Impact of Changing Food Habits in Dhanbad's Adolescents

Health Indicator / Condition	Boys (150)	Girls (150)	Total (300)
Junk food consumption (more than 4 times/week)	112	125	237
Overweight/Obesity (BMI > 25)	49	38	87
Anemia (Hemoglobin < 12 g/dl)	17	69	86
Indigestion/Gastric issues	56	74	130
Lack of physical activity (<1 hour/day)	103	118	221
Early symptoms of type-2 diabetes (lab findings)	9	5	14
Mental fatigue / Attention issues / Stress	61	88	149

This data clearly indicates that both boys and girls are affected by unhealthy eating habits and sedentary lifestyles, though the pattern varies. Girls are more prone to nutritional deficiencies like anemia, whereas boys show a slightly higher incidence of obesity and gastric issues. Overall, lack of physical activity is alarmingly high in both groups, which exacerbates the impact of poor diet.

Another alarming insight is that many adolescents do not recognize the seriousness of these health issues. For many of them, junk food is not only a preference but a symbol of trend, peer identity, and convenience. Most of them feel that health concerns can be postponed until adulthood. This perception is dangerous and calls for immediate interventions.

The role of parents and educators becomes extremely important here. They must work collectively to make adolescents aware of the consequences of their food choices and encourage healthy eating habits from an early stage. Schools can introduce nutritional education, ensure availability of healthy food in canteens, and promote physical activities and mental wellness programs.

4. CONCLUSION

The changing food behavior of adolescents in an industrial region like Dhanbad cannot be dismissed as a minor lifestyle preference. It is a serious public health issue that could lead to long-term chronic diseases, reduced productivity, and poor quality of life if not addressed promptly. There is an urgent need for a community-based intervention, stronger health education, and family participation to guide adolescents toward balanced nutrition and an active lifestyle. Only by tackling this issue holistically can we secure the physical and mental well-being of the youth, who are the foundation of the future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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