

Displaced Diets: Urbanization, Indigenous Marginalization, and Nutritional Vulnerability in the Patra Community of Sylhet, Bangladesh

Sheikh Mehzabin Chitra
Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

BACKGROUND

- Patra indigenous group lost land + forest access due to urbanization.
- Traditional foods replaced by low-quality market foods.
- Women, children, elderly most affected.



METHODS

- **Design:** Qualitative critical ethnography
- **Period:** Jan–Jun 2025
- **Site:** Khadimnagar Union, Sylhet Sadar
- **Participants:** 13 women, 12 interviews with men & youth & 3 key informant interviews
- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews, 2 FGDs, and participant observation (food practices, rituals, markets)
- **Ethics:** Verbal consent, anonymity ensured, approval from community elders

RESULTS

- **Dietary Loss:** Traditional forest foods, home-grown vegetables, fish, and herbal items have sharply declined; most households now rely on rice and cheap market foods.
- **Maternal & Child Nutrition:** Food taboos, low supplement use, and limited antenatal services contribute to poor pregnancy and child nutrition outcomes.
- **Food Insecurity:** Rising market prices push families to skip meals, reduce portions, and consume very little protein.
- **Knowledge Decline:** Younger members no longer recognize or use traditional edible plants or healing foods, reducing dietary diversity.
- **Service Exclusion:** Government nutrition programs rarely reach Patra settlements; their needs are not reflected in national data systems.
- **Gender Inequality:** Women consistently eat last and smallest portions, worsening their nutritional status.
- **Health Issues:** Diarrhea, anemia, and worm infections are common due to poor sanitation and limited access to healthcare.
- **Small Resilience:** Some households are reviving home gardens and small livestock rearing with NGO support, improving access to greens and eggs.

Table: Patra Dietary Shift

Before (Traditional System)	After (Market Dependency)
Forest foods, home-grown vegetables	Mostly rice + lentils
Fish, ducks, wild leafy greens	Very little protein
Herbal healing foods and rituals	Declining cultural practices
Low cost, self-sufficient	High cost, food insecurity

CONCLUSION

- Urbanization and land loss have pushed the Patra community from diverse traditional diets to low-quality market foods.
- Malnutrition is rising, especially among women, children, and the elderly.
- Exclusion from nutrition services and national data systems keeps their vulnerabilities invisible.
- Traditional food knowledge is declining, reducing dietary diversity and resilience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- Include indigenous groups in ethnicity-disaggregated nutrition data.
- Expand CHW outreach and mobile services to Patra settlements
- .Develop culturally tailored nutrition programs that integrate traditional food practices.
- Scale home gardening and small livestock support to improve dietary diversity.
- Ensure gender-responsive approaches so women gain better access to nutrition resources.