

They Do Not Have Nutrition's Foods:**A History of Nutritional Deprivation among the Tribal Communities of Vizianagaram District, Andhra Pradesh, c. 1900–2023****SATYANARAYANA NEKURI***Lecturer in History,**Government Degree College, Veeraghattam, Andhra Pradesh, India*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the first to open up a discussion in TH archives on the enduring problem of undernutrition among the Scheduled Tribe communities in the Vizianagaram district, located in the northeastern segment of the Eastern Ghats in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Drawing on the ITDA administrative records, the Census of India data (1901–2011), the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) tribal surveys, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) district fact sheets and on the District Gazetteer of Vizianagaram (1982; revised 2004), it is argued that the severe malnutrition of the tribal communities Jatapu, Konda Dora, Savara, and Gadaba in particular - in the district is not merely a failure of the present day governance; but is rooted in the much longer history of alienation that these people have had to endure since colonial times land alienation, forest reservation, exclusion from markets, and the structural sociopolitical oppression of the hill tracts through the Agency system. However, the article contends that a continuity of undernourishment from the 1920s to the 1960s can be observed, despite numerous drivers having shifted imperceptibly during that era as historical depictions of these communities' reveal. It is apparent from the recorded accounts on the eating habits of poverty-stricken rural dwellers that a Ragi malt based diet, low in dietary diversity, did persist in the face of upheavals spanning over a century; and at the same time undernutrition (stunting above 40%, anaemia above 59% among children, and chronic energy deficiency among more than 50% of adult women) remains one of the largest public health issues and a historically most deeply embedded crisis. This paper proposes that history, in one sense, has functioned as a straitjacket preventing the full moderation of how the structural origins of deprivation in the tribal region of Vizianagaram is enmeshed in its future articulations might be thought through if history were seen as its structurally relevant problem.

Keywords: *Vizianagaram; tribal history; nutritional deprivation; Eastern Ghats; District Gazetteer; ITDA; colonial agrarian history; Jatapu; Savara; food insecurity; Andhra Pradesh; NNMB; NFHS*

I. INTRODUCTION: READING HUNGER HISTORICALLY

It seems like a rare moment of institutional honesty in the official profiles on tribes available through the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) of Vizianagaram district the following sentence about the Jatapu, the largest Scheduled Tribe group in the district, making up 44 per cent of its tribal populace makes an appearance everywhere. The Jatapu, the record baldly says, 'do not eat nutrition's foods.' This refreshing, albeit stark, bureaucratic comment is captured in government documentation that can be accessed from the district's official web portal, and is the point of departure for this article. It considers what a reading of history through the lens of documents such as these can reveal about how and why the tribal populations of Vizianagaram came to sustain themselves for generations on a diet so deficient that its deficiency had to be formally recognised by bureaucracy itself.¹

Vizianagaram district, the northernmost district of Andhra Pradesh was formed on 1 June 1979 from Srikakulam and Visakhapatnam districts. Its topography is sharply divided between the coastal plains along its southern and eastern borders and the forested hills of the Eastern Ghats along its northern and north western borders, a division that has historically been linked a social and economic division between the sedentary, plains-oriented, market connected population and the isolated, forest enmeshed hill population. It is in this hill tract encompassing the district's eight Scheduled Area mandals that the Jatapu, Savara, Konda Dora, Gadaba and related tribes have lived, cultivated their shifting podu fields and gathered the forest produce on which they have subsisted.

The food deprivation indulged in in the tribal area of vizianagaram is not something which has been written about in a focused historical manner until now. It draws on some archival and official material, viz. The Vizianagaram District Gazetteer (1982; rev. 2004), the ITDA administrative records, the decennial Census series from 1901, onwards, the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) tribal surveys, and National Family Health Survey (NFHS) district fact sheets along with a handful of peer reviewed nutritional and field studies-these are modest, but are the only studies that the author has ever come across that focus on the lives of the Tribals of that particular region. The premise of the article is a particular epistemological assumption that "nutritional" data produced through contemporary epidemiological surveys cannot be adequately examined apart from the historical narratives that are found in archives and gazetteers.²

The case is untreated in four stages. It reconstructs the contexts of tribal land-holdings, forest-rights and economic marginalization under colonial and early post-colonial-period in the hill regions of Vizianagaram by situating these historical chapters of the Gazetteer against the land revenue and agency files. Secondly, it introduces the tribal communities of the district and their identity/identities, and the habitat/geographical location of these tribal people along with their means or way of livelihood as presented in the ITDA reports and gazetteer ethnographies. It analyses nutrition data from almost 40 years of consecutive surveys (1985–2023), transforming these 'numbers' from mere clinical data to historical narratives - of persistent structural (mal)nutrition. Finally, it gives an overview of the macro determinants of nutritive deprivation tracing their historical genealogy right back to colonial political economy in the hill tracts.

The article does not claim to be grounded on any original primary field survey. It is an intervention in interpretation and synthesis to place nutritional statistics in historical times, and to maintain that the communities whose hunger is quantified by these statistics are historical subjects, whose present situation is one that has a history, and that is a history which is routinely elided in policy documents and public health reports.

II. THE COLONIAL MAKING OF HUNGER: LAND, FOREST, AND THE AGENCY SYSTEM***The Agrarian History of the Hill Tracts***

The Vizianagaram District Gazetteer records the administrative history of the hill tracts from the Kalinga period through the successive dynasties of the Nandas, Mauryas, Satavahanas, Eastern Gangas, Eastern Chalukyas, to the early modern period of the Pusapati Rajas, who had their capital at Vizianagaram city was founded by Raja Vijayaram Raj. But it was the colonial period – and the imposition over the hill tracts of the 'Agency system' in particular – that the Gazetteer defines as the great severing of the hill tribes from the land and forests that sustained their food security.³

Under the Madras Presidency, the tribal hill tracts of the later Vizianagaram district were administered as 'Agency Tracts' and customary tribal land use was protected, at least in theory, by the Agency Tracts Interest and Land Transfer Act of 1917. The Act was intended to stop the encroachment on tribal land by non-tribal moneylenders and merchants from the plains, nonetheless, as the Gazetteer openly states, it was 'routinely circumvented through debt bondage and informal transfers.' The entry of traders from the plains into the weekly shandies of the hill mandals, where tribes traded forest produce for basic necessities, wove a web of indebtedness that steadily stripped tribal households of their rights to podu cultivation and access to forests.⁴

The 1830s Rebellion in a British administrative correspondence which is available in Andhra Pradesh State Archives is recorded in the Gazetteer as 'started only by the tribes of the hill mandals who were unable to bear the oppression of British taxation and forest restrictions.' And this is interesting as not merely an articulation of tribal agency vis-à-vis colonial extraction but as an early indicator that the hill tribes' relation to forest and field was already, in the 1830s, becoming sufficiently strained to precipitate organized resistance. The declaration of large stretches of what was an unsaid community forest, into Reserved Forest, restricted tribal access to wild tubers and leaves, fruits and game that had long cushioned tribal diets through the seasonal adversities of dry land millet farming.

Forest Rights and the Erosion of Dietary Buffers

History of forest policy in the Eastern Ghats is a history of the gradual enclosures. The colonial Forest Acts 1878 and 1927 institutionalized the framework of Reserved, Protected and Village Forests which subordinated tribal customary use to the demands of state revenue. In the Vizianagaram hill tracts,

¹ITDA Parvathipuram, Tribal Community Profiles and Administrative Data (Parvathipuram: Integrated Tribal Development Agency, 2023), accessed via Vizianagaram District Official Website, <https://vizianagaram.ap.gov.in/itda-tribes/>, 2024. The ITDA shifted its headquarters from Vizianagaram to Parvathipuram in 1982.

²Vizianagaram District Gazetteer (Hyderabad: Government of Andhra Pradesh, State Gazetteer Department, 1982; revised 2004). The Gazetteer documents the administrative history of the district from its formation on 1 June 1979 under G.O.Ms.No.700/Revenue(U) Department, dated 15 May 1979.

³Vizianagaram District Gazetteer (2004), ch. 1, 'History.' The Rebellion of the 1830s is documented in British administrative correspondence preserved in the Andhra Pradesh State Archives, Hyderabad, under the 'Agency Tracts' series.

⁴Agency Tracts Interest and Land Transfer Act, 1917 (Madras Act I of 1917). For its application in the Vizianagaram hill tracts, see the Gazetteer's chapter on 'Land Tenure and Revenue.'

as in the whole of the Eastern Ghats, this enclosure was taking place side by side with the commercialisation of forest products – cashew, timber, bamboo, beedi leaves, for which the Gazetteer notes considerable plantation activity. The tribes that practiced swidden cultivation these forests, subsistence became, under the new order, both, dispossessed forest dwellers and, in many cases sheer wage labourers in the plantations that supplanted their commons.⁵

The post-independence era enabled constitutional safeguards through the Fifth Schedule and subsequent tribal sub-plan regimes, yet the core ecosphere of dispossession remained. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 which sought to address the 'historical injustice' as recognized in the preamble remained a partially implemented piece of legislation in the TSP mandals of Vizianagaram where a large portion of individual and community claims to forest rights were yet to be settled at the end of the period under the study. At the same time ethnobotanical surveys of the hill tracts (erstwhile part of Vizianagaram until the formation of Parvathipuram Manyam district in 2022) reveal 150 plant species belonging to 123 genera and 65 families used by the tribal communities as food and medicine a diversity of subsistence knowledge rapidly eroding as access to forests shrinks and younger generations are less and less likely to have or practice traditional ecological knowledge. The ITDA records, are a curious artifact about the economic ramifications of this history. The Jatapus "are preyed upon by Petty trades of Plain areas and Local money lenders. They are not getting remunerative prices for their products. They are depending on other plain area people for Anything." This is not ethnographic description but institutional confession, recognition by the welfare state that the market relations its tribal charges participate in are systematically exploitative, and that the administrative apparatus charged with protecting them has failed in that mission.⁶

III. THE PEOPLES OF THE HILL TRACTS: COMMUNITY, LANDSCAPE, AND SUBSISTENCE

The District Gazetteer and ITDA records of administration are at the core of five major ST communities in the district along with language, landscape, livelihood and degree of access to the plains Market economy. Any historical study of nutritional deprivation in the district must take off with this differentiation as the nutritional vulnerabilities of these communities are not the same: the hill-dwelling, forest-dependent Savara and Gadaba, labelled by the Government of India as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), encounter a food insecurity that is qualitatively more severe than the more plains-proximate Konda Dora.⁷

Community	% of ST Pop.	Habitat & Mandals	Primary Subsistence	Vulnerability Status
Jatapu	44% (largest)	Forest & hill — GLPuram, Kurupam, Komarada	Podu cultivation (Red Gram, Ragi, Jowar, Bajra); NTFP collection; barter	Scheduled Tribe
Konda Dora	24%	Plains & transitional — Saluru, Pachipenta, Makkuva	Settled agriculture; fishing	Scheduled Tribe
Savara	13% (~31,983)	Hilltops & hill streams — GLPuram, Kurupam	Podu cultivation; terrace farming; NTFP; horticulture	PVTG
Gadaba	9.5% (~19,164)	Saluru, Pachipenta, Jiyammavalasa, Parvathipuram	Podu cultivation (Ragi, Red Gram, Niger); NTFP collection	PVTG
Gondu/Mali & Others	~9%	Across TSP mandals	Agriculture; wage labour	Scheduled Tribe

Table 1: Principal Scheduled Tribe Communities of Vizianagaram District — Gazetteer and ITDA Profile (Source: ITDA Parvathipuram Administrative Records, 2023; District Gazetteer, 2004; Census of India, 2011)

The Jatapu, constituting nearly half the district's tribal population, occupy the forested hill areas primarily of GLPuram, Kurupam, and Komarada mandals. Their dwellings were traditionally constructed from forest timber and mud — a material record of their intimate dependence on forest commons that official housing programmes have begun to modify where road connectivity permits. Their agricultural system centres on podu cultivation: the seasonal burning and cultivation of forest clearings for red gram, ragi, jowar, and bajra, a form of dryland farming that produces adequate food in years of good rainfall but fails catastrophically in drought years, of which the Eastern Ghats belt has seen many.

The Savara, inhabiting the highest elevations and most isolated hamlets of GLPuram and Kurupam mandals, represent the extreme of isolation and food insecurity within the district's tribal geography. The ITDA records characterise them as living 'in interior and hill top areas' with 'very low literacy rate.' Their PVTG classification reserved for communities defined by a pre-agriculture or early-agriculture stage of economic development, stagnant or declining populations, extreme literacy deficits, and subsistence-level economies signals a degree of deprivation that aggregate district statistics systematically conceal. Similarly, the Gadaba of Saluru and Pachipenta mandals, whose traditional council structure (headed by the village headman or 'Kulapedda') preserves a degree of communal social organisation that has not translated into improved food security, remain heavily forest-dependent and are exposed to the same market exploitation as the Jatapu. The dietary commons of all these communities the wild tubers, uncultivated greens, mushrooms, berries, tamarind, honey, and seasonal game that historically served as dietary buffers between harvest and the March May lean season are documented with unusual specificity in ethnobotanical surveys of the Eastern Ghats tribal zone. These records of dietary biodiversity are at once a testament to the ecological knowledge of the hill tribes and an indictment of the policies that have progressively criminalised or commodified the commons upon which that knowledge depended.⁸

IV. FOUR DECADES OF HUNGER: READING THE NUTRITIONAL RECORD, 1985–2023

Sources, Method, and the Problem of Aggregation

The systematic nutritional survey of tribal populations in Andhra Pradesh's Eastern Ghats belt began in earnest with the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) tribal surveys of the 1980s, conducted under the aegis of the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) in Hyderabad. These surveys periodically updated in 1998–99 and 2008–09 provide the most longitudinally consistent dietary and anthropometric data for the tribal populations of Vizianagaram's ecological zone. They are complemented, from 2015–16 onwards, by district-level disaggregations in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4 and NFHS-5), and by the primary cross-sectional survey conducted by Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) Rastakuntubai (ANGRAU) in four tribal villages of the district in 2019–20 (Bilquis, Neelima, and Vihari, 2020; n = 450).⁹

The historian working with these sources faces a methodological challenge peculiar to nutritional epidemiology: the data are aggregated at levels that routinely obscure the communities most at risk. NFHS district fact sheets report averages for Vizianagaram district as a whole, thereby averaging the nutritional indicators of remote Savara hamlets in the GLPuram hills with those of households in the semi-urban outskirts of Vizianagaram town. The KVK survey, conducted specifically in tribal villages, consistently records worse nutritional indicators than the NFHS district aggregate a divergence that is itself historically significant, since it reveals that the most isolated communities suffer most, and that the improvement trends visible in district-level data are driven partly by the better-connected plains populations, not by any genuine amelioration of conditions in the hill tracts.

The Dietary Record: A Century of Ragi Malt

The most striking feature of the dietary data across four decades of comparable surveys is not change but continuity. Table 2, synthesising NNMB survey data (1985–2009) with the KVK Vizianagaram field study (2019–20), documents a dietary pattern of remarkable historical stability: ragi and sorghum as

⁵Vizianagaram District Official Website, 'About Vizianagaram District' (2024), <https://vizianagaram.ap.gov.in/about-district/>. The district's total forest area of 1,11,978 hectares constitutes 17.8% of its geographical area. Livestock Census data (2007) cited therein.

⁶Parvathipuram Manyam District Website, 'Tribes in Parvathipuram' (2024), <https://parvathipurammanyam.ap.gov.in/tribes/>. The passage on Jatapu exploitation — 'are exploited by Petty trades of Plain areas and Local money lenders. They are not getting remunerative prices for their products' — appears verbatim in both the Vizianagaram ITDA records and the Parvathipuram Manyam district site, indicating its origin in official ITDA documentation.

⁷Ibid. The Gadaba and Savara are officially classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) by the Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The Savara population in the district is recorded at 31,983 (13% of ST total); Gadaba at 19,164 (9.5%).

⁸WJBPHS, 'Ethnomedicinal Plants Used by Primitive Tribes of Parvathipuram Manyam District, Andhra Pradesh,' World Journal of Biology Pharmacy and Health Sciences 13, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjbphs.2023.13.2.0082>. The study documents 150 plant species across 123 genera and 65 families used by tribal communities in the area formerly part of Vizianagaram district.

⁹National Institute of Nutrition / NNMB, Diet and Nutritional Status of Tribal Population — Andhra Pradesh, NNMB Technical Report No. 19 (Hyderabad: NIN/ICMR, 1985); NNMB Technical Report No. 22 (2003); NNMB Technical Report No. 24 (2009). For the foundational NIN observation that energy (not protein) deficiency is the primary driver of childhood malnutrition, see National Institute of Nutrition, A Century of Service (Hyderabad: ICMR-NIN, 2019).

the overwhelmingly dominant caloric source; severe under-consumption of pulses, vegetables, fruits, milk, and animal-source foods; and a persistent energy deficit of 27–33 per cent below the Recommended Dietary Allowances of the Indian Council of Medical Research.

Dietary Parameter	NNMB 1985 (AP Tribal)	NNMB 1998–99 (AP Tribal)	NNMB 2008–09 (AP Tribal)	KVK Survey 2019–20 (Vizianagaram)	ICMR–RDA 2020
Energy (kcal/day)	~1,480	~1,520	~1,590	~1,610	2,200
Protein (g/day)	~36	~38	~41	~42	56
Fat (g/day)	~16	~18	~20	~21	50
Cereals & millets (g/day)	~430	~420	~415	~405	270–370
Pulses & legumes (g/day)	~28	~31	~34	~36	85
Green leafy vegetables (g/day)	~35	~40	~38	~41	100
Fruits (g/day)	~18	~20	~22	~18	100
Milk & milk products (g/day)	~15	~12	~18	~20	300
Iron (mg/day)	~10.8	~11.2	~11.6	~12.1	17 (women)
Vitamin A (µg RAE/day)	~145	~155	~170	~175	600
Calcium (mg/day)	~290	~305	~318	~322	600

Table 2: Dietary Intake Trends among Tribal Populations, Vizianagaram Zone, 1985–2020 (Sources: NNMB Technical Reports Nos. 19, 22, 24; Bilquis, Neelima & Vihari, 2020; ICMR-RDA 2020)

The ITDA records’ description of the Jatapu diet ‘Ragi malt, Mango seed malt and other vegetables’ is not merely an ethnographic footnote. It is confirmed, quantitatively, by four rounds of nutritional survey data spanning nearly four decades. The mango seed malt noted in ITDA records is of particular historical significance: it represents the mobilisation of a tree product the seed of the mango, ordinarily a waste product as a caloric supplement during the lean season, a practice that speaks to the depth of food insecurity rather than to the richness of the forest food system. Ragi (finger millet, *Eleusine coracana*) has genuine nutritional merits a calcium content of 344 mg per 100g that exceeds most other cereals but its anti-nutritive factors (phytates, tannins) reduce iron and zinc bioavailability, producing a cruel irony in which the staple that sustains life also compounds the micronutrient deficiencies that debilitate it.¹⁰

The near-total absence of dairy products from the tribal diet (milk and products averaging 12–20 g/day against an RDA of 300 g) is historically explicable: the hill tribes have had little access to dairying cattle, the livestock wealth of the district being concentrated in the plains, and no tradition of milk-product processing appropriate to their environment. The near-absence of eggs and flesh foods from the regular diet despite the ITDA’s note that Jatapu families eat beef and pork on festival occasions reflects not cultural aversion to animal foods but poverty and irregular access: slaughter is possible only when animals are available, and small animals (poultry) are kept where road access and markets permit sale rather than subsistence consumption.¹¹

Anthropometric Evidence: The Bodies of History

Anthropometric data measurements of height, weight, arm circumference, and derived indices translate the dietary record into its human consequences. Among children, the most widely used indices are height-for-age (stunting: low for age, indicating chronic undernutrition) and weight-for-height (wasting: low weight relative to height, indicating acute undernutrition). Among adults, Body Mass Index (BMI) is the standard summary measure. The longitudinal data for Vizianagaram district, drawn from NFHS rounds and the NNMB tribal surveys, record a picture of historical undernutrition that has improved modestly but remains, by any international standard, severely elevated.¹²

Indicator	NFHS-3, 2005–06 (AP Tribal)	NFHS-4, 2015–16 (Vizianagaram)	NFHS-5, 2019–21 (Vizianagaram)	KVK, 2019–20 (Tribal Villages)	National Avg. (NFHS-5)
Child Stunting (< -2 SD, HAZ)	~52%	44.3%	40.9%	~46%	35.5%
Severe Stunting (< -3 SD)	~24%	~22%	~19%	~20%	~16%
Child Wasting (< -2 SD, WHZ)	~28%	25.1%	22.6%	~27%	19.3%
Child Underweight (< -2 SD, WAZ)	~48%	38.5%	35.4%	~41%	32.1%
Child Anaemia (6–59 months)	~69%	63.8%	59.2%	~63%	67.1%
Women BMI < 18.5 (underweight)	~59%	53.2%	51.8%	n/a	~23%
Maternal Anaemia (non-pregnant)	~62%	56.4%	54.1%	n/a	~57%

Table 3: Longitudinal Undernutrition Indicators — Vizianagaram District, 2005–21 (Sources: NFHS-3, NFHS-4, NFHS-5 District Fact Sheets; Bilquis et al., 2020; NNMB AP Tribal Sub-sample)

The stunting trajectory is the most historically revealing of these series. A stunting prevalence of approximately 52 per cent in the NFHS-3 tribal sub-sample (2005–06), declining to 44.3 per cent in NFHS-4 (2015–16) and 40.9 per cent in NFHS-5 (2019–21), represents measurable improvement over fifteen years but remains, as of the latest data point, above the World Health Organisation’s threshold of 40 per cent for ‘very high’ public health significance. The KVK village-level survey of 2019–20 conducted specifically in tribal habitations rather than in a representative district sample records a stunting prevalence of approximately 46 per cent, a figure that would have been statistically plausible for the district’s TSP mandals in the NFHS-4 period. This divergence between district average and tribal-village reality is historically characteristic: administrative aggregations have consistently obscured the depth of deprivation in the most isolated communities.

The baseline for women’s nutritional status was established in a landmark 1993 study by Kuppathai and Mallika, who measured women of the Khond, Gadaba, and Porja tribes of Andhra Pradesh groups closely related to Vizianagaram’s tribal communities and found mean heights of 147–151 cm and mean weights of 39–42 kg, producing BMI values of 17.4–18.2 kg/m².¹³ These measurements are those of women chronically and severely undernourished: heights reflecting stunting in the maternal generation, weights reflecting the caloric restriction of the adult diet. The NFHS-5 district figure of 51.8 per cent of WRA with BMI below 18.5 kg/m² approximately 2.5 times the national average for women’s underweight is consistent with the 1993 baseline, suggesting that the nutritional status of tribal women in this region has improved very little over three decades.¹⁴

The Hidden Hunger: Micronutrient Deficiencies in Historical Perspective

The NNMB Technical Report No. 19 (1985) documented Bitot’s spots the conjunctival sign of clinical Vitamin A deficiency in 2.5–4.8 per cent of pre-school children in Andhra Pradesh’s Eastern Ghats tribal belt, a prevalence that placed the region in the WHO’s category of public health significance for VAD. Three decades later, the KVK survey found dietary Vitamin A intake at approximately 29 per cent of the ICMR Recommended Dietary Allowance, and the NFHS-5 district data record anaemia prevalence of 59.2 per cent among children under five years. The continuity of micronutrient deprivation across this period is not a

¹⁰ICMR, Recommended Dietary Allowances and Estimated Average Requirements for Indians — 2020 (Hyderabad: ICMR-NIN, 2020). For the Indian Food Composition Tables used in dietary analysis, see National Institute of Nutrition, IFCT 2017 (Hyderabad: ICMR-NIN, 2017).

¹¹A. Bilquis, A. Neelima, and M.A. Vihari, ‘A Study on Nutritional Status of Tribal Families of Vizianagaram District,’ International Journal of Current Microbiology and Applied Sciences 9, no. 10 (2020): 2082–2091, <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcmas.2020.910.253>.

¹²IIPS & ICF, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: District Fact Sheet, Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh (Mumbai: IIPS, 2021); IIPS & ICF, NFHS-4, 2015–16: District Fact Sheet, Vizianagaram (Mumbai: IIPS, 2017).

¹³U. Kuppathai and N. Mallika, ‘Nutritional Status of Adult Women Belonging to Khond, Gadaba and Porja Tribes of Andhra Pradesh,’ Indian Journal of Nutrition and Dietetics 30, no. 7 (1993): 173–179. Mean anthropometric values: heights 147–151 cm; weights 39–42 kg; BMI 17.4–18.2 kg/m².

statistical coincidence: it reflects the unchanged dietary pattern ragi-dominant, dairy-absent, fruit-scarce, meat-occasional that NNMB surveys have documented since the earliest rounds.¹⁵

Anaemia is the most pervasive of the district's micronutrient deficiency disorders. Its aetiology in the Vizianagaram tribal context is multi-causal in ways that underline the interconnection between dietary history and environmental history: low dietary iron bioavailability from phytate-rich millet diets; negligible Vitamin B12 and folate from near-absent animal and dairy foods; high hookworm and helminth burden from open defecation (only 18.5 per cent of Vizianagaram households had toilet facilities as of the 2007-08 DLHS survey); and haemolytic anaemia from malaria, for which the Eastern Ghats hill mandals are hyperendemic. Each of these contributing causes has a history in the dietary poverty of the hill tracts, in the failure of sanitation delivery, and in the persistence of malaria in a zone that public health authorities have struggled to penetrate.

V. THE LEAN SEASON AND THE MARKET: STRUCTURAL FOOD INSECURITY

The District Gazetteer's account of the agricultural calendar of Vizianagaram's tribal belt is laconic but precise: the agricultural season runs from June to March; the months of March to May constitute a lean season in which grain stocks are depleted, forest produce is minimal, and peak out-migration for agricultural wage labour occurs. This seasonal rhythm of subsistence and shortage is the experiential ground of food insecurity in the hill tracts, and the data produced by nutritional surveys which typically capture a single moment in time systematically understate the depth of lean-season deprivation.¹⁶

The ITDA records document that the Jatapu and Savara communities exchange non-timber forest products tamarind, gum, hill brooms, firewood in weekly shandies for essential commodities including salt, kerosene, cloth, and, when funds permit, rice and pulses. This barter-adjacent market relationship, conducted through intermediaries against whom the ITDA's own records acknowledge systematic exploitation, is the primary mechanism through which hill tribe households access food commodities beyond their own production. Its fragility dependent on NTFP availability, on shandy access (roads permitting), and on the exchange rates set by plains traders is the fragility of the tribal food system itself.

Dimension of Food Insecurity	Evidence from Archival and Survey Sources	Historical Root
Lean season food gap (March-May)	Grain stocks depleted; NTFP yields minimal; peak out-migration; KVK survey records substantially reduced child feeding	Podu cultivation's seasonal production cycle; absence of storage infrastructure
Market access barrier	Hill mandals (GLPuram, Kurupam, Komarada) accessed only by weekly shandis; incomplete road connectivity across TSP mandals	Colonial failure to integrate hill tracts into plains market; post-independence road deficit
PDS delivery failures	38-40% of BPL households report irregular PDS access; ration basket limited to rice/wheat, excluding pulses and edible oil	Logistical challenge of hill geography; bureaucratic inertia in ration basket reform
Land and tenure insecurity	Podu lands not legally recognised; Forest Rights Act claims pending; historical alienation through debt bonding	Colonial Land Transfer Act; post-independence land ceiling evasion; FRA implementation gaps
Wild food erosion	58% of KVK survey households report reduced NTFP collection vs. a decade prior; forest access restricted by policy and commercial interests	Forest reservation (1878, 1927 Acts); commercial plantation expansion; FRA non-implementation
Intrahousehold food inequality	Cultural norms disadvantaging women in food distribution; ITDA records note low female status across hill communities	Patriarchal household structure; low female literacy (40-48% of tribal women illiterate per NFHS data)

Table 4: Structural Dimensions of Food Insecurity — Vizianagaram Tribal Households (Sources: District Gazetteer, 2004; ITDA Records; KVK Survey, 2020; NFHS-5 District Fact Sheet; Census, 2011)

The Public Distribution System (PDS) the post-independence welfare state's primary food security mechanism has reached the hill tracts of Vizianagaram incompletely and inadequately. The KVK survey found 38-40 per cent of BPL card holding households reporting irregular PDS access; the IIPS district household survey of 2007-08 found 87.3 per cent of rural Vizianagaram households holding BPL cards, a figure that simultaneously reveals the depth of poverty and the limitations of a system that formally identifies this poverty without reliably addressing it. The ration basket distributed through the PDS in Scheduled Area mandals typically rice and wheat only, with no provision of pulses, edible oil, or micronutrient-dense foods fails to compensate for the precise dietary deficits that the district's tribal population most acutely suffers.

VI. THE HISTORICAL STRUCTURE OF DEPRIVATION: A MULTI-LEVEL READING

The framework most commonly used in nutritional epidemiology to organise the determinants of malnutrition the UNICEF model of immediate, underlying, and basic causes acquires a different character when read historically. The immediate causes (inadequate dietary intake, high infectious disease burden) are not ahistorical processes: they are the precipitates of the underlying and basic causes. And the basic causes the political economy of land and forest, the failures of welfare delivery, the low social and economic status of tribal women are not background conditions: they are the products of identifiable historical decisions and processes whose documentation is precisely what gazetteers, administrative records, and census archives preserve.¹⁷

The immediate dietary inadequacy documented across four decades of nutritional surveys energy intakes at 68-73 per cent of RDA; Vitamin A at 29 per cent; iron at 70-75 per cent for women of reproductive age is the caloric and micronutrient expression of a dietary system shaped by centuries of dispossession. The crops that dominate the tribal diet (ragi, jowar, bajra) are crops of marginal, dryland cultivation: they are grown because they can be grown on podu fields with limited inputs and reasonable drought tolerance, not because they constitute an optimal diet. The diversity of the historical forest diet documented in ethnobotanical surveys suggests that before progressive enclosure, the caloric monotony of millet staples was offset by a biodiversity of supplementary foods that is now largely inaccessible.

The infection burden that compounds dietary inadequacy in the hill tracts is similarly historically produced. Open defecation practised by more than 80 per cent of TSP mandal households as of Census 2011 data is not a cultural choice but a material consequence of poverty and the absence of sanitation infrastructure. The high malaria endemicity of the Eastern Ghats hill mandals reflects decades of inadequate vector control in geographically inaccessible habitations. The low rates of institutional delivery and ante-natal care coverage that contribute to low birth weight and maternal anaemia reflect the persistent failure to staff and supply health facilities in the hill tracts — a failure with its own administrative history.¹⁸

The role of maternal education as a cross-cutting determinant of child nutrition well established in the Indian public health literature and confirmed for the Eastern Ghats tribal belt by Varadarajan and Prasad (2009) and Meshram et al. (2012) is itself historically rooted in the failure of educational provision in the hill tracts. The ITDA records note very low literacy rates among Savara women in particular; the NFHS data confirm that 40-48 per cent of tribal women in the district are illiterate. These are not natural conditions: they reflect the historical and continuing failure to provide accessible, culturally appropriate schooling in isolated hill habitations.¹⁹

VII. HUNGER WITHOUT HISTORY, HISTORY WITHOUT HUNGER: A SCHOLARLY ASSESSMENT

The nutritional literature on tribal populations in India has produced substantial and valuable empirical documentation. The NNMB tribal surveys, the NFHS district disaggregations, and the small number of primary field studies conducted in Vizianagaram's tribal belt (most notably Bilquis, Neelima, and Vihari's 2020

¹⁵NNMB Technical Report No. 22 (2003), 'Prevalence of Micronutrient Deficiencies.' Bitot's spots prevalence of 2.5-4.8% in pre-school tribal children of AP's Eastern Ghats belt is reported in Technical Report No. 19 (1985).

¹⁸International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), District Level Household Survey-3 (DLHS-3), 2007-08: Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh (Mumbai: IIPS, 2009). The survey covered 1,232 households in 41 villages.

¹⁹I.I. Meshram et al., 'Trends in the Prevalence of Undernutrition, Nutrient and Food Intake and Predictors of Undernutrition among Under Five Year Tribal Children in India,' Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition 21, no. 4 (2012): 517-526.

survey, and the older studies by Kupputhail and Mallika and by Laxmaiah and colleagues in comparable eastern AP tribal populations) constitute a body of evidence from which the patterns of nutritional deprivation can be clearly read. What is absent from this literature is history.

The nutritional epidemiology of tribal malnutrition in India characteristically treats the communities it surveys as if they arrived at their current dietary and economic condition without a past as if the dependence on ragi malt and the exclusion from dairy, protein, and diverse vegetables were natural features of a given ecology rather than the accumulated consequences of colonial dispossession, post-colonial institutional neglect, and the ongoing operation of market relations that the state's own welfare agencies have documented as exploitative. This article has tried to restore the historical dimension to the nutritional record — to read the data not merely as evidence of a present condition but as evidence of a historical process.

The comparison with the Visakhapatnam tribal agency area and with comparable Eastern Ghats communities in Khammam district (documented by Laxmaiah et al., 2007) reveals that Vizianagaram's nutritional profile is regional rather than locally idiosyncratic: the entire Eastern Ghats tribal corridor presents a consistent pattern of ragi-dominant, protein-poor, micronutrient-deficient diets and elevated undernutrition indicators. This regional consistency is itself historically significant — it suggests that the structural determinants operate at the level of the Eastern Ghats as a political-economic zone, not merely at the level of individual districts. Coordinated, historically informed policy across the corridor is required, not merely district-level welfare delivery.²⁰

The invisibility of the Savara and Gadaba PVTGs in the nutritional literature is a scholarly and administrative failure of the first order. These communities defined officially by their pre-agricultural economic stage, stagnant or declining populations, extremely low literacy, and subsistence economies are precisely the communities about whom least is known and for whom the nutritional crisis is most likely to be most severe. The absence of community-specific, remoteness-stratified nutritional surveys for Savara and Gadaba habitations in Vizianagaram's hill mandals is a research gap that this article identifies as the most urgent priority for future nutritional historical inquiry.

VIII. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A HISTORICAL NUTRITION POLICY

The ITDA's blunt institutional note that the Jatapu 'do not have nutrition's foods' has been sitting in government records for decades. This article has tried to take that observation seriously: to ask what historical processes produced a condition that the welfare state acknowledged but could not alter, and what a historically informed response to that condition might look like. The evidence reviewed from the District Gazetteer's account of colonial land alienation and the agency system's failure to protect tribal land rights, through the NNMB's four decades of dietary surveys documenting an unchanging pattern of ragi-malt subsistence and severe nutrient deficit, to the NFHS's district-level anthropometric data showing stunting above 40 per cent and anaemia above 59 per cent in children converges on a single historical verdict: the nutritional deprivation of Vizianagaram's tribal families is severe, chronic, structurally produced, and historically persistent. It cannot be understood as a failure of individual food choice or community practice. It is a consequence of historical processes dispossession, enclosure, market exploitation, and the uneven delivery of post-independence welfare for which the historical record provides ample documentation.

A historically conscious nutrition policy for Vizianagaram's tribal belt would need to address, simultaneously and with genuine urgency: the recognition and operationalisation of community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act of 2006 enabling legal restoration of the dietary commons from which enclosure dispossessed tribal communities; the reform of the PDS ration basket in Scheduled Area mandals to include the foods most absent from the tribal diet (pulses, edible oil, double-fortified salt); the filling of Anganwadi worker vacancies and the establishment of satellite centres in isolated hill hamlets; the provision of malaria prophylaxis and helminth control alongside nutritional supplementation; and, above all, the investment in girls' and women's education in the hill tracts that decades of administrative neglect have deferred. None of these is technically difficult. What they require is historical consciousness the recognition that the hunger of the Jatapu, Savara, and Gadaba is not an accident of geography or culture but the product of a history that the state's own gazetteers and administrative records have long documented and which it now falls to historians, alongside nutritionists and policymakers, to address.

Historians of modern India have written with great sophistication about colonial agrarian history, about tribal rights movements, about the politics of forest reservation, and about the post-independence developmental state. They have written less about hunger as a historical condition about the quiet, chronic, invisible malnutrition that does not generate rebellions or famines but persists across generations, written into the bodies of children who are short for their age and women who are too thin, and into NNMB data tables that await the historian's reading. This article is an invitation to that reading.

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²⁰A. Laxmaiah et al., 'Diet and Nutritional Status of Tribal Population in ITDA Project Areas of Khammam District, Andhra Pradesh,' *Journal of Human Ecology* 21, no. 2 (2007): 79–86.