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Q3(a)

How anthropologists assess the nutritional status of a community? Discuss the significance of intersectionality of ecology, culture, and social inequality in the study of nutritional anthropology

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Applications of Anthropology

12. Applications of Anthropology: Anthropology of sports, Nutritional anthropology, Anthropology in designing of defence and other equipments, Forensic Anthropology, Methods and principles of personal identification and reconstruction, Applied human genetics-Paternity diagnosis, genetic counselling and eugenics, DNA technology in diseases and medicine, serogenetics and cytogenetics in reproductive biology.

Core demand of the question

- Describe how anthropologists assess the nutritional status of a community
- Cover anthropometry, diet, clinical and biochemical routes as used in the field
- Discuss ecology, culture and social inequality as intersecting, not as three separate essays
- Show why the intersection matters for explanation and intervention

Revision summary

Assess with **stunting**, **wasting**, underweight, **MUAC** and BMI, plus diet recall and a seasonal calendar, plus clinical or lab signs where possible.

Always add ethnography of who eats what.

Community averages are not community status. Disaggregate by class, caste, tribe and gender.

Ecology is season, infection and soils. Culture is taboos, feeding rules and sharing. Inequality is class, caste, gender and displacement.

Intersection is drought times landlessness times gendered plates.

Intervention follows the join, not nutrition education alone.

Introduction

Nutritional anthropology measures what a community eats and what that eating does to bodies. Then it asks why the plate looks like that. Assessment without inequality gives a clinic without a village. Inequality talk without measurement gives a sermon without a prevalence.

Body

How status is assessed

Anthropologists combine biomedical tools with ethnography. No single index is "the nutrition of the community". **D. B. Jelliffe** and later field manuals made this mix standard; **J. S. Weiner** and IBP-style human biology also pushed comparable anthropometry.

- **Anthropometry:** Height-for-age (**stunting**) marks chronic undernutrition. Weight-for-height (**wasting**) marks acute undernutrition. Weight-for-age, **MUAC** and adult BMI complete the set. Ageing children accurately is part of the method.
- **Dietary methods:** Twenty-four-hour recall, weighed intake, food-frequency lists, seasonal calendars, market baskets and wild-food lists. Sharing and recall bias make the household, not the isolated individual, the usual unit.
- **Clinical and biochemical layers:** Signs of anaemia, goitre and rickets; haemoglobin, vitamin A and iodine where laboratories exist. Field anthropologists often partner with public-health surveys rather than running every test themselves.
- **Ethnographic overlay:** Who cooked, who fasted, who was weaned early, what counts as "food", famine foods and prestige foods. Numbers without this can misread ritual fasting as shortage.

Community means hide the landless household, the girl child and the displaced camp. Status is distributed.

Large Indian surveys such as **NFHS** and programmes such as **ICDS**, **PDS** and **POSHAN Abhiyaan** are the contemporary policy face of the same measurement.

Intersection of ecology, culture and inequality

- **Ecology:** Seasonality, drought, flood, soil micronutrients and infection. Diarrhoea can eat a diet. High-altitude hypoxia and malaria are nutritional stressors, not only "disease". A lean month after the monsoon fails is ecology on the plate.
- **Culture:** Pregnancy taboos, caste and community cuisines, child-feeding rules, alcohol, festival surplus and lean months. Culture can protect, as in breastfeeding norms and food sharing, or harm, as in early thin gruels or denying meat, eggs or milk to women.
- **Social inequality:** Class, caste, tribe, gender and displacement. **Intra-household allocation** - men and guests first - can turn a sufficient household into an undernourished woman. Markets and ration-shop access are political economy on the plate.

Intersectionality means these are not three boxes added at the end. A drought (ecology) hits sharecroppers (inequality) through a cuisine already low in iron (culture). **Stunting** in a scheduled-tribe hamlet beside a mine is not "tribal custom". Recent heatwaves, flood years and COVID-19 school-meal interruptions are current reminders that ecology, culture of care and inequality move together.

Significance

Assessment that only reports BMI will prescribe nutrition education. Assessment that traces ecology, culture and inequality together can prescribe land, wages, women's food, sanitation and micronutrients at once. That is the anthropological difference from a camp weigh-in.

Flow diagram

Assessment -> Anthropometry
 Assessment -> Diet
 Assessment -> Clinical and lab
 Ecology -> Nutrition outcome
 Culture -> Nutrition outcome
 Inequality -> Nutrition outcome

Conclusion

Measure widely with anthropometry, diet and clinical signs. Then explain the distribution through intersecting ecology, culture and inequality. Nutritional anthropology earns its keep when the girl who is stunted is not written only as a cultural type or only as a rainfall statistic, but as both.

Facts & figures

Stunting

Low height-for-age. It marks chronic undernutrition and repeated infection, not a single hungry week.

Wasting

Low weight-for-height. It marks acute undernutrition and often sits beside stunting in poor communities.

MUAC

Mid-upper arm circumference. It is a rapid field screen for acute undernutrition, especially in emergencies.

Intra-household allocation

Gendered and seniority rules of serving food can produce undernourished women and girls inside a household that looks adequate on paper.

POSHAN Abhiyaan

India's contemporary nutrition mission sits beside ICDS and PDS as the policy setting in which anthropological assessment now speaks.

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