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RESEARCH ARTICLE

COMMUNITY MESS AS A DEVELOPMENT NEED OF NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Mess is a concept related to providing healthy, food or meal at relatively low cost. Observation of mess run by Prof. Kshitiz Upadhyay-Dhungel, Think Tank Foundation (TTF) initiated this opinionated study. A series of interview, focused group discussions, available literatures were used as a tool to draw any opinion related to mess. The concept of mess in the beginning was found to be an out of the box idea, but it was gradually acknowledged Community mess was shown to facilitate life of job holders, senior citizens. It helped in women empowerment. Mess also provided answer to manage degradable waste. It created job opportunities at local level. It helped to increase awareness about food safety and behavior. Mess, helped people enjoy and recall the almost forgotten family meal time. It also helped to create bond in communal level which provided platform to share stress and anxieties. Mess can be a solution to uplift living quality of people of broad spectrum of age. Mess can contribute to sustainable development and it should be incorporated in national development plan too.

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INTRODUCTION

Mess is a concept related to providing food or meal. Its literal meaning is related to Old French "mes" meaning portion of food or a course of meal put on the table (World Wide words, n. d.). Mess, basically, is a communal eating place where a group of people eat together at the same table (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Mess service is prioritized in areas where relatively large group of people need to eat at similar time. Mess concept was originated in military camp to facilitate a large mess eat their regular meals (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Gradually, this concept has been extended to other social settings like police, schools and even community. The history of mess dates back long ago. In fifteenth century, mess meant a process where group of people usually four sat together and eats from same dish. Gradually, the concept was related to a group eating together. For example, in warships, a group of a dozen or so men would usually sit together at one table and were served from the same dishes; this was one mess, and those who habitually sat together were *mess-mates*; the room was often called a *mess-room*, a space that contained a set of messes (World Wide words, n. d.). The pattern of consumption of food and associated behavior has changed with modernization. (Beardsworth & Keil, 1990; 1997) It is observed that with growth in income, people tend to spend proportionally less on food and opt to eat out. Increase in expenditure on eating out is a feature seen in food consumption pattern of developed countries. (Lopez, 2011). The motive for this is mainly because cooking food on regular basis at home is not a prime job of any members of the house. This emphasizes the importance of mess concept even more. Mess concept and restaurant business; however, are not for the same objective. Mess

is a low profit, service oriented center where as restaurant is a profit motive business which can be a tourist destination.

(Chang & Hsieh, 2006). As the society is growing fast where jobs are more competitive and time demanding, employees are bound to find a regular eating solution outside their home kitchen. However, studies in medical and epidemiological fields have shown concern with consequences of eating out, mainly related to obesity. The resultant solution can only be a regular, healthy eating place which can be a substitute for home meal (Mancino, Todd, & Lin 2009; Oliver, Wardle & Gibson 2000).

Background of the study: The importance of proper eating place on regular basis has been clearly seen as the demand of today's fast moving society where neither male nor female are trained or brought up to be confined to kitchen as the prime responsibility. Mess concept serving community can provide an answer to the social issue. Hence, a study was planned to outline the importance of mess for sustainable growth of a community.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive and exploratory study design was used to carry out this research. There is a mess operated by Think Tank Foundation at Besigaun, Gokarneshwore 8. It is open to school students, residents, community for complete meal from AM to PM. A focused group discussion was carried out with mess members who have been a consistent member. Various separate interview sessions were

conducted with mess staff, mess members and community people. The qualitative analysis method was used as previously used (Dhungel, 2020). The data were generated and was qualitatively analyzed by recording, transcribing, and reading and re-reading by tallying with observation. After that data were grouped under different headings which were later on thematized.

Limitation of the study: We, researcher could not find any other mess which provided whole meal facility to broad spectrum of people like school/college students, school staff, community residents and the occasional guests as well. Also, one of the author-himself is one of the responded of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented in different themes which were generated during analysis of data which are discussed under following headings:

Mess for empowering skilled human resources: A question regarding why mess was founded was asked to founder of TTF mess, Prof. Kshitiz Upadhyay-Dhungel, keeping in mind that such low income generating, service motive business with no mono sodium glutamate content in food, in an era where people are drawn to fast high calories food, had a lot to compete. He founded this Mess Since 2015. During his stay in South Korea for his PhD, he heard the story of Park Chung Hee (Brazinsky, n. d), how he achieved economic growth in South Korea during his presidency. The story by a Old-man having a small cheap food court revealed that mess concept had helped people give more time to job which in turn had tremendously helped the country to develop. Another point was, in this high time of gender equality and equity debate, the environment to allow female to select their choice of prime work is important. There should be choice, especially to married woman who are taught and brought up to devote time to job outside home. They are qualified human resources and cooking every meal for everyday was not their prime choice of work. This also helped senior members of the house to enjoy their meal with pride and not the feeling of dependency in any other. He stated that; *"Mess could solve problems of many people who can step outside home, find employment, and empower themselves and family. Moreover, mess can relief many from stress, anxiety and irritation of devoting majority of the time to the job they are not trained for."*

It was found that his opinion was in coherence with the members eating in mess, especially females. They felt lots of their socially obliged duties were taken care of. They found themselves more relaxed at home and at workspace as well. In a query that if the taste of fixed mess menu, could satisfy all members of the mess, the approach was to prepare a side dish as per the taste by mess members themselves for the satisfaction of taste buds. Some were found to bring "ghee", pickles, papads, salads etc. They even stated that these types of facility are envied by contemporaries at workplace. A statement is quoted, *"My friends did not believe at first that I had a permanent solution to cooking hassle, rush to work, stress of managing groceries..... When my work at office is done, I can relax and join family. I can freely spend time with my kid like my husband. Mess has brought gender equality."*

However, an initial hesitation to join mess was honestly stated by a few members. They were not sure about how society, peers at community and workplace take it. Moreover, they were not sure if they would enjoy their family time meal in the presence of another group of people. This problem was addressed by TTF mess by scheduling time just that people who are at comfort zone with each other were set to dine at one sitting. Gradually, mess was acknowledged by members and visitors as its importance were experienced.

Importance of family meal time: Mess not only facilitates the eating process of a group, it has various positive social, physical, psychological and spiritual impacts too. Using data from nearly three-quarters of the world's countries, a new analysis from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that students who do not regularly eat with their parents are significantly more likely to be truant at school (The Atlantic, July 2014). Average truancy rate in the two weeks before the International Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test administered to 15-year-olds by the OECD and used in the analysis as a measure for absenteeism, was about 15 percent throughout the world on average, but it was nearly 30 percent when pupils reported they didn't often share meals with their families (Layton, 2015). Lack of family meal time, can have impact on child's health. The numbers of children who are overweight and obese are increasing (Hussain et al, 2014). Layton (2015) referring to a research presentation given at the European Congress on Obesity in Bulgaria writes that children who do not eat dinner with their parents at least twice a week were 40 percent more likely to be overweight compared to those who do. On the contrary, children who do eat dinner with their parents five or more days a week have less trouble with drugs and alcohol, eat healthier, show better academic performance, and report being closer with their parents than children who eat dinner with their parents less often, according to a study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (Layton, 2015). A common time for family meal can have positive impact on health of children and adolescents. Sharing 3 or more family mealtimes per week has been strongly recommended; benefits include a reduction in the odds for overweight (12%), eating unhealthy foods (20%), and disordered eating (35%) and an increase in the odds for eating healthy foods (24%) (Layton, 2015).

The emphasis here is, if eating meals together can bond families, help to release stress, improve students' academics, bring positive and progressive change in life then these benefits should be extended to boarder level where community share same food. This will help to bring mutual respect, bonding, tolerance and acceptance in community. Spiritual literatures have also stated that people who eat meal from same kitchen develop similar thinking pattern overtime. It means, mess can help community be spiritually connected. This definitely creates a huge positive impact to build sense of belonging towards each other. It will also increase public participation in community work like waste management, road cleaning, pollution control etc. as the entire community people become one extended family and community a big home. The cultural tradition in Nepal is that the cook in the family mostly eats at the end. She serves all the members and then eats at the end. Mess, can help her join family in meal time.

Mess and women empowerment: Rapid population growth is a burning problem today. It has created negative impact on social, economic and environmental aspect. Women empowerment is accepted as indirect method of population management (Phan, 2013). Women are the major force behind people's participation in the life of society today. Women's participation meant their close involvement in economic, social, cultural and political process (Zaman, U et al., 2008). For this, women need freedom to make their daily routine and priorities. Mess concept is a huge problem solver in this regard. If a family joins mess, then female members of the family can spare time from cooking and kitchen management. This will help them find employment outside home which increases their social, mental and economic security. This in turn helps women participate in decision making activities in the family. This will help to increase the living quality of the entire family. A focused group discussion with people eating in Think Tank Foundation mess was done. The founder, Prof. Kshitiz Upadhyay Dhungel explained the objective of the mess as to empower females who are high skilled human resources outside

the boundaries of kitchen. The female members in the focused group stated their work efficiency increased and this was not just in their job. They found themselves spending more relaxed and fun filled time with their children and family. Their stress was better managed. Their life was more organized.

Mess for young employee living alone: In another focused group discussion with young male dwellers of Kathmandu city, question was asked about their source of daily meals. This group of males had migrated to Kathmandu and was living singly for work related purposes. They stated that though they enjoyed occasional sitting for junk food, they would love to join a regular home kitchen concept eating venue. Mess can be a solution to their search for proper meals. Mess, as a tool, to empower human resource is evident from progress of South Korea where the independent age group needed to find employment and they had all their meals managed in mess. The simple idea of not having the burden to think of kitchen resources helped uplift the Gross Development Product of the entire country.

Mess to help build good companion: Loneliness is a huge social problem in today's world. Though people are connected globally through various Social Medias and internet, the essence of bonding and sharing has been evidently missing. People, today, are not as expressive as they ought to be. They hesitate to share problems and lack good listening ears. Loneliness increases the amount of cortisol (stress hormone) in human body. This can affect immune system and increase risk of sleep issues, obesity, heart problems. Prolonged loneliness can affect mental health, too. It can also factor into the development of serious mental health conditions, including depression. Mess can bring people of different families to one dining area. This will help initiate chat, sharing and bonding. The probability of finding "like minds" increases and can help reduce loneliness, depression and even suicide rates.

Addressing the need of senior citizens: The rate of independent age group population, aged 15 to 59 years and migrating out has been alarmingly increasing in Nepal. Current trend has shown that dependent age group of 0-14 or age 60 above will represent the major population in the country. Young kids are left with grandparents by people migrating out. The major categories of people moving out are of two types. The one category of people are moving for labor work to Dubai, Qatar, Japan, Korea and so on whereas next category of people are moving to country like America, Europe, Australia as a student or career seeker (Upadhyay-Dhungel, 2011; Dhungel et al., 2013). COVID has also restricted non-resident Nepalese from planning to settle back to Nepal. In such situation, where managing four eating sessions per day can be a demanding task for senior citizens, community mess can be of great help. In an interview with a couple, aged 60 above who occasionally joined mess as a guest of a mess member, they said that mess concept could solve their every days' hassle, however, they emphasized that after retirement they may not adapt to time bound eating schedule. This, however, can have a very simple solution of managing regular routine by mess staff.

Mess and non-resident Nepalese: Mess could also provide an answer to the group of non-resident Nepalese who had sold their land and housing at the time of migrating abroad. They tend to pay occasional visit with the intention to quest their nostalgia of the country, its culture and cuisine. Staying in hotel and having restaurant food was not the drive that brought them back to homeland, neither does their self-esteem allows them to be a guest at relative for a lengthy time as the culture of Nepal would ask the host to prepare surplus food at regular time interval for the guest who is considered as god. A visitor of similar situation, who resided at a relative but joined mess stated how comfortable he was due to the mess concept. He could enjoy his stay in Nepal, have the regular Nepali meal without being burden to anybody.

Mess for judicious use of non-renewable energy: Surprisingly not many mess staffs were needed. A coordinator, cook, cleaner and a fodder collector were enough to provide meal to 20+ people. This highlights a very important issue that many resources including human resource, fuels, electricity, and water could be saved if communal eating is practiced. Hence, mess could be an answer to rational use of non-renewable resources.

Mess as a destination for employment: Considering the socio cultural background of the country, people enjoy serving meals and mess staff were found to be doing that. Hence, mess can be a prominent space for employment of many people who are considered undereducated and under qualified elsewhere but have a knack of preparing and serving food with efficiency. The daily work they do at home, with a little training of food safety and hygiene can create job opportunities for many. During the interview, staff did self-reflect and shared that her talent of cooking, exploring cooking and serving food with affection had earned her a living. Nepal is a country where many "aamas" are known for making special pickles, sweets. If these could be commercialized through mess, not just people entire country can see better Gross Development Product.

Mess connects community: The operation of mess has helped to create a strong bond and mutual benefit between small cash crop growing farmers, local grocers, cow-keepers and fodder collectors. Wastage of food is a major problem today. A little food wasted every day from every kitchen sums up to a huge mass of food wastage. An estimated 1.3 billion tons of food is wasted globally each year, one third of all food produced for human consumption according to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The amount of food lost or wasted costs 2.6 trillion USD annually and is more than enough to feed 815 million hungry people in the world (FAO, n.d.). When food is wasted, it is not only food, but also water used in irrigation, fuels used in transportation of food products, soil minerals are also wasted. Though wastage of food cannot be made obsolete, it can be definitely minimized by proper planning and management.

An interview was taken with a farm keeper at Besigaun, Jorpati. She is a regular fodder collector at Think Tank Foundation, mess. Her observation clearly stated that the amount of fodder collected before COVID pandemic was less as compared to the fodder during COVID pandemic. To minimize the sampling error, the fodder from existing mess members was only taken into account. Due to COVID pandemic, mess has been temporarily closed and previous mess members are eating in their own kitchen. The leftover food and wastages collected during the COVID pandemic has significantly increased. Hence, mess eating can help to reduce overall food wastage. In addition to this, various mechanisms have been suggested in literatures to minimize and manage wastage of food in mess. The fodder collector also grows a few cash crops in the farm. Another observation came to surface during the same interview with her that when mess was operating the vegetable skins/peels were collected more but as people are eating separately in COVID, they tend to throw away the vegetable peels in garbage as it is not considered of significant weight. This has reduced the chances of production of local organic manure, which in turn means the quality of crops and vegetables grown in farm may have been compromised with the use of chemical fertilizers.

Mess: food safety and public awareness: One of the member of the mess mentioned '*As a member of mess TTF, and also being a microbiologist, I would like to state a few food safety contributions through mess. Mess helps to raise public awareness more effectively about food safety and consumer behavior. If one unit of kitchen staff is given education and awareness regarding kitchen hygiene, food and water borne disease, a whole lot of group of people eating in the mess of that community can be protected from such food and water borne disease like cholera, typhoid.*' This holds a significant value in developing and underdeveloped country where such communicable

disease is endemic and the risk of outbreak with epidemic is always prevalent. Likewise, the issue related to mess and quality of food also needs to be discussed. The concept of mess is to provide meals as substitute for home meals at relatively low cost. It does not intend to provide junk food or fast food. With increased public awareness the concept of creating high skilled team of active mess workers with nutritionist and hygienist as part of team members can help improve as well as monitor mess food. The concept of mess had emerged from military camp where health and fitness is of prime importance and it is a fact that food that goes in is directly related to fitness so it cannot be denied that mess does not comprise on health and fitness.

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted with one mess as a reference point. Lack of such mess brings to surface a question that why are not such mess facilities easily available which could help skilled human resource devote their time to sustainable development of country like Nepal. Why fast food and junk food consumption rate is rapidly increasing when mess could have solved the problem of finding meal in a very healthy and nutritious way. Importance of mess in big city with employment adds to economy. It helps the women to empower themselves by adding upto GDP. Mess can help young employees living singly; it can address the meal hassle of retired senior citizen living just by themselves. Mess can help manage degradable waste and convert it into fodder or fertilizer. Mess, itself, can create employment to locals which can contribute to sustainable development locally and nationwide. The concept of mess, however, has not been much discussed. It needs to be a part of development plan of every community as a model mess like TTF mess has clearly shown how it can support the life of people of any age. This Mess Concept established by founder of Think Tank Foundation, Prof. Kshitiz Upadhyay Dhungel not only provides hygienic food in low cost but helps to establish a bond among members. The age of mess members ranges from toddler to 75 year old senior citizen, homemaker to employees, students to occasional community guests who enjoy mess when cooking hands at home are scarce due to various reasons. Mess and its operation needs to be broadened and mess needs to be accessible nationwide. It needs to be incorporated in national development plan for sustainable development of the nation.

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