

Malnutrition rampant among State TE infants

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GUWAHATI, Oct 4, 2014 – Premjeet Murha is just five years old and suffering from multiple health complications. Unlike his friends, he does not play games. For he can neither stand on his feet properly nor talk properly. Of late, his vision also got blurred.

Admitted to the Greenwood Tea Estate hospital in Dibrugarh district, Premjeet is a case of acute malnutrition.

An underlining cause of child deaths, malnutrition or undernourishment is having a serious toll on the life of infants in a number of tea gardens of Assam year after year, and this has gone unnoticed and unaddressed.

In the last one year, nearly 183 children suffered from severe malnourishment in Dibrugarh district alone, with most of the cases originating from tea gardens. Not too many months ago, a child from a tea garden died after he developed a 'baggy pant appearance', an acute form of malnutrition.

Dibrugarh district, with the highest number of tea gardens (169) in Assam, has recorded the second highest cases of malnutrition cases, second only to Dhubri, which over the years has been at the receiving end of infiltration from neighbouring Bangladesh and of course, tardy pace of development and awareness.

In fact, in Assam where mortality rate of children is very high, malnutrition, especially among the tea garden population, is believed to be the underlining factor in most cases.

Records show that a number of malnutrition cases of children were detected from tea estates like Tiniali TE, Lengrijaan TE, Joypur TE, Maijan TE, Salmari TE, Tengakhat TE(block) and Tingkhat TE among others, raising serious concern about the health index of the children.

Arti Murha, mother of Premjeet, when asked, said, "Premjeet falls sick every now and then. Initially I overlooked it, but with the complications on his body becoming more evident, I decided to consult the doctor." Premjeet is the youngest of the four siblings.

"Merasmus (thin appearance), where the bones become prominent, is the most common form of malnourishment found among children from tea gardens," said Mandakani Baruah, a dietician with the Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) located in Moran (Dibrugarh).

She said, "We are striving hard to improve the level of awareness as per the Integrated Young Child Nutrition (IYCN) programme. The food habits most of the tea garden labourers follow are devoid of any nutrients or do not meet the parameters of nutrition."

"A few days after the baby's birth, the mother goes back to work without taking care of nutrient requirement of the child back home. The child is either looked after by his or her elder siblings who most often than not are young kids. Such practices are depriving the child of necessary amounts of nutrients. Be it during the early initiation of breast feeding, or during extra breast feeding (till six months), the child is deprived," she said.

No proper diet chart during initiation of complimentary feedings (after six months) and continuation of complementary feedings with breast feeding (till two years) only aggravates the

vulnerability of the children, she pointed out.

The economic status could be one reason but even when it comes to feeding the child with locally available cheaper food stuffs like soyabean or may be papaya after six months, they are found wanting. They just give pulse juice, rice or potato.

Those who get admitted (severely acute malnourished) here are given Rs 150 per day along with travelling allowance of Rs 100. But once they leave, only 10 per cent of them follow up with the diet.

“We on our part do follow up till a certain time period. But, as the prescribed household practice/diet is not followed, the same child turns up to be undernourished,” she added.

“The health issue related to mother and child needs special attention in tea gardens. If a woman is malnourished during pregnancy or if her child is malnourished during the first two years of life, the child’s physical and mental growth and development may be slowed,” said the doctor.