

Research Communication

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Nutrition and Food Culture of Odisha through Tribal Perspective

Abstract: Odisha is one among the tribal states of eastern India, and home to numerous tribal communities having unique cultures, languages, customs, and traditional practices. The food culture of tribal communities is closely interlinked with their customary practices, lifestyles and beliefs. It plays a significant role in their overall well being, nutrition, and cultural identity. This review gives insights on how nutrition is interlinked and viewed in the prospective of tribal food culture in the tribal communities of Odisha.

Keywords: Traditional practices, Tribal communities, Cultural identity and Food culture.

Food is an innate element of the society and nutritional sketch of a nation. The relationship between food culture and nutrition is complex and multifaceted. Food culture refers to the customs, traditions, beliefs, and practices related to food within a particular society or group. It encompasses various aspects such as food preparation, cooking methods, eating rituals, and the social context in which food is consumed. On the other hand, nutrition refers to the science of how food nourishes the body and the impact of nutrients on health and well being. Food culture plays a significant role in shaping our dietary choices and nutritional patterns. It influences the types of food we eat, the combinations of ingredients we use, and the portion sizes we consume. Cultural factors such as tradition, religious beliefs, geographical locations, climate, historical influences, and socioeconomic status all contribute to the development of food cultures. The impact of food on nutrition can be both positive and negative. Tribal food culture refers to the customs, traditions, and dietary practices of indigenous or tribal communities. These cultures often have a deep connection to the land, local ecosystems, and traditional knowledge of food gathering, cultivation, and preparation. It plays a pivotal role in the nutrition and well being of tribal communities¹.

Tribes of Odisha: Odisha is one among the Indian states which is specifically known for having a great diversity of tribes and their proliferation of culture. The tribes of Odisha are residing in the lap of nature with their own cultural settings. Furthermore, the nature of the tribes in Odisha are varies from hunter gatherers to settled agriculturalists based on the basis of different geographical regions, remoteness, educational and technological backwardness. Odisha is home to 62 Schedule Tribes (STs) and 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) spread in 30 districts over 314 blocks who can speak as many as 74 dialects. As per 2011 census, Odisha has the third highest tribal population which constitutes 22.8% of total population of Odisha and contributes 9.14% of India's total tribal population. Though tribal are more intrinsic to nature, they have a closed proximity with the natural world depicting the panorama of life with an ease away from crowded urban settings. The real ethos, idealistic approach, world view, and a sensational affinity towards nature make them unique and significant. The major tribe of Odisha includes Santal, Munda, Paraja, Gadaba, Oraon, Munda, Sabar, Ho, Bhumij, Kondh, Gond, Koya etc. The isolated, vulnerable and backward PVTGs were initially recognized by Fifth Year Plan under Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) and recently recognized as PVTGs by govt. of India. They are Birhor, Bonda, Chuktia Bhunjia, Didayi, Juang, Kharia, Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh, Lanjia Saora, Paudi Bhuiyan, Lodha, Mankidia, and Saora².

The Nature-Nurture Concept: The Nature is always productive and dynamic also. Most of the tribal populations in Odisha are concentrated in western-southern and central part of Odisha where the Eastern-Ghat Mountain ranges are situated with perennial water fountains. The valleys are always productive for the tribes who sustain their livelihood options through numerous ways. Starting from collection of forest products to settled agriculture and horticulture, the tribes of Odisha engaged themselves with a great variety of workforce. Mother Nature plays a significant role in the due course of life for

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the tribal population often safeguarding from modern day urban life with a high economy. However culture has a distinctive role in amalgamation of the tribes with nature. The norms, values, and morals of the tribes are so high for the nature and nature based social constructs. Moreover, the tribes have more conjugation with forests, mountains, rivers, and valleys as these are the sources of their day to day life and subsistent economy. The Santals of northern Odisha worshipped *Marang Buru* (the great mountain) as a deity of all cause, the Dongria Kondh of Rayagada prays *Niyamraja* (the Niyamgiri hills) for their well being, and there are numerous examples where tribes of Odisha worshipped the natural entities as deities for the sack of livelihood choices, food, social well being and economic security. Tribes often developed cultures affiliated to nature and nature based sources to pay respect as well as sustainable practices for years to come.

Tribal Food Culture and Nutrition: Food is the basic and elementary need of human being for survival. The tribal food culture is highly rich and diversified. It varies with respect to availability of raw products, and topographical differences. The tribes of Odisha have developed numerous food based recipes, by sorting and combining the available items indigenously. Scientifically speaking the tribal food items and recipes are full of nutrients often developed by the trial and error which may have so much potential to fill the energy gaps as well as minerals and vitamins for various functions of our body. Research have shown that food items prepared through indigenous knowledge system by the tribes of Odisha has enormous impact on metabolism and enough to fulfill the requirements of protein, mineral and vitamins. Some of the important sections of tribal food culture are discussed below:

Traditional Cereals and Millets Variety: Koraput district of Odisha is declared as one of the Global Agricultural Heritage Site by Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). The main cereal is cultivated in Odisha is the Asian rice (*Oryza sativa* L.) and Koraput district is identified as one of the Agro-biodiversity hotspot as well as hub for many rice varieties³. The tribes of Koraput like the Paraja, the Gadaba, the Koya, and the Saora etc. are cultivating a number of traditional rice varieties which has so much potential to fulfill the nutritional security. The underutilized rice species like *Machakanta*, *Haladichudi*, *Para dhan*, *Muktabali*, and *Sapuri Umuriachudi* are non-sticky, nutritious often having slender grain property which can be used for Biriyani and Pulao. Similarly the varieties like *Kalajeera*, *Gangabali*, *Deulabhoga*, *Dudhamani*, *Nadiarasa*, *Kuyerkuling*, and *Lactimachi* are aromatic and

scented variety. Some of the rice varieties like *Bhatamalli*, *Kandulakath*, *Kalachudi*, *Mallimakada*, and *Beda Gurumukhi* are pigmented and having medicinal properties can be used in normal day to day life to avoid nutritional deficiency⁴. Koraput is also the homeland for different kind of millets such as Finger millet, Fox tail millet, Kudo millet, Proso millet, Little millet, and Shorgum millet. These millets are often consumed by the tribes of Koraput as well as tribes of adjacent districts which are very rich in minerals, vitamins and having high physico-functional parameters⁵.

Forest Based Food Resources: The tribes of Odisha and forest resources are having symbiotic relationship where tribes are using forest products for survival and in return they are protecting and conserving the forest as well. A number of food items are taken from forests like wild yam and tubers, leaves, fruits, flowers, nuts, and wild mushrooms which are rich in nutrition and can be used for nutritional security also. Various tribes of Odisha are collecting and consuming wild tubers like *Discorea oppositifolia*, *Discorea hamiltoni*, *Discorea hispida*, *Discorea bulbifera*, and *Discorea pubra* which are containing nutritional and anti-oxidant property^{6, 7}. Similarly some wild edible leaves are collected by the tribes of Odisha from different forest patches like *Bauhinia purpurea* (Orchid), *Sterculia foetida* (Wild Almond), *Butea monosperma* (Flame of the Forest tree), *Paederia foetida* (Skunk Vine), *Cassioides* (Jheli Tree), and *Andrographis paniculata* (Bitterweed), which have better nutritional and health benefits. Again wild edible fruits and wild edible flowers are identified by various tribes of Odisha have the great potential to combat nutritional deficiencies^{8, 9}.

Indigenously Prepared Alcoholic Beverages: Indigenously prepared alcoholic beverages refer to traditional alcoholic drinks that are crafted using local ingredients, traditional methods, and techniques specific to a particular region or culture. These beverages have a long history and cultural significance with indigenous communities. These beverages or liquors have a tremendous role in tribal life. It is used by the ethnic people of Odisha in day to day life as well as ceremonies and festivals in order to reduce the muscle cramps, dizziness, and to enhance the moods during the ceremonies, and festivals. Among the alcoholic beverages *handia* (fermented rice water), *tadi* (fermented date juice), *mahuli* (fermented juice prepared from Mohua flower), *Salap* (Juice of Salap tree), *landa* (fermented juice of finger millet) are important which are rich in anti-oxidants often helpful for digestion, gut health and relaxation of muscle cramps. Though some sort of adulteration of indigenous liquors is prevailing

among the tribal communities but the pure form of these liquors have rich nutritive values¹⁰.

Tribal Cuisine: It is important to note that the nutritional value of tribal cuisine in Odisha can vary based on specific recipes, ingredients used, and cooking methods. The traditional tribal diets often emphasize whole foods, diverse ingredients, and natural source. Overall, tribal cuisine in Odisha reflects the close relationship between communities and their natural environment; it highlights the use of locally available, seasonal ingredients that provide a range of nutrients and contribute to varied and balanced diet. When it comes to breakfast, the tribes of southern Odisha mostly relish on millet malt or millet porridge often called *Mandia Jau* which gives them enough strength and energy to start their work like cattle rearing, working on fields etc. But the tribes of northern, western and central India prefers water rice (*Pakhala*) which is a staple breakfast of Odisha rich in digestive friendly bacteria keeps the gut health better. Most of the tribal cuisines are based on milks, country chicken and mutton meat along with traditional rice. Some of the regional delicacies include the *Red Ant Chutney* and *Pancakes* made from black gram, mohua fruits, and rice flour among the tribes of northern Odisha which are rich in essential nutrients like carbohydrates and proteins. Likewise the boiled peanuts, local pigeon peas, and *Bada* made from rice are some regional diets of tribes in western Odisha¹¹.

Sacred Tribal Foods: Sacred tribal foods are specific types of foods that hold religious, spiritual, or ceremonial significances within tribal cultures. These foods are often considered sacred or holy and are used in rituals, ceremonies, and special occasions. The relationship between sacred tribal food and nutrition is complex, as it involves both symbolic and practical aspects. Sacred tribal foods are deeply intertwined with the cultural and spiritual beliefs of tribal communities. They are often associated with ancestral traditions, mythologies and believed to have spiritual power, connects individual with their ancestors and deities. Considering the nutritional aspects of sacred foods, these are nutritious and contribute to a balanced diet. They are usually derived from local resources and can include a variety of ingredients like grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables and animal products. These foods may offer essential nutrients, vitamins, minerals, and macronutrients necessary for good health.

Conclusion: While tribal food culture can provide a basis for a healthy and balanced diet, it is important to consider the challenges faced by the tribal communities of Odisha. Factors such as displacement, loss of land and resources, socio-economic inequalities, and limited access to healthcare can disrupt traditional food systems and impact nutrition. It is essential to empower and support our tribal communities in preserving their food culture, accessing nutritious foods, and addressing health disparities. Overall, tribal food culture and nutrition are intertwined, with traditional knowledge and practices contributing to the nutritional well being of tribal communities. Recognizing and respecting the importance of tribal food culture is crucial for promoting health and resilience of indigenous populations. □

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