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Food Practices And Sustainability: A Study Of Oraon And Kisan Tribes In Sundargarh

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Abstract: This article delves into the intricate dynamics of *Adivasi* food practices in Sundargarh, examining their profound connection to culture, ecology, and resilience. Highlighting sustainable resource management and traditional knowledge, it explores how tribal communities cultivate a diverse array of foods, deeply rooted in their environment. *Adivasi* cuisine, characterized by seasonal variations and reliance on forest resources, serves as a vital expression of identity and community bonds. Yet, amidst the richness of tradition, contemporary challenges such as globalization and environmental degradation threaten these age-old practices. Initiatives like the Millet Mission aim to revive traditional knowledge and promote sustainability, offering hope for the future. By empowering communities to reclaim and celebrate their culinary heritage, this article also talks about cultural preservation. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of preserving the indigenous food system for a brighter and more sustainable future.

Index Terms - Oraon (*kurukh*), Kisan (*kunha*), Tribal food practice, Ecology, Cultural Perpetuation, *Adivasi*.

INTRODUCTION:

Food holds a central place in the cultural fabric of tribal societies, serving as a conduit for the expression of identity, spirituality, and community. Across diverse tribal societies worldwide, the intricate tapestry of food traditions reflects not only a deep-rooted connection to the land but also a profound understanding of sustainable resource management. This relationship is characterized by an nuanced interplay between traditional knowledge, environmental stewardship, and cultural heritage. Tribal food practices embody a holistic approach to sustenance that prioritizes harmony with nature and respect for biodiversity. Drawing upon centuries of accumulated wisdom, these communities have developed sophisticated techniques for hunting, gathering, agriculture, and fishing, which not only sustain livelihoods but also maintain ecological balance. Embedded within these practices are principles of conservation, resilience, and adaptability, essential for navigating the complexities of dynamic ecosystems. Moreover, Rituals and ceremonies surrounding food consumption are imbued with symbolic significance, forging bonds across generations and reinforcing cultural continuity. Beyond mere sustenance, food embodies a repository of knowledge, tradition, and social values, fostering a sense of belonging and collective belonging. Yet, amidst the richness of tribal food traditions, contemporary challenges loom large. Pressures stemming from globalization, environmental degradation, and socio-economic change pose existential threats to these age-old practices. Therefore, preserving and revitalizing tribal food practices is not merely a matter of cultural preservation but a vital imperative for fostering resilience and promoting sustainability in an increasingly interconnected world.

Sundargarh is a region rich in cultural heritage and biodiversity. It is predominantly inhabited by various tribal communities who have preserved their traditional way of life amidst modernization. The district is renowned for its lush forests, picturesque landscapes, and significant mineral resources, contributing to its economic significance. Sundargarh District has various landscapes like open areas, forests, and hills. Administratively, it comprises three sub-divisions, 16 Tehsils, 17 Blocks, and 262 Gram Panchayats. The climate is marked by hot summers and cool winters, with an average rainfall of 1230 mm, impacting crop production. Located in the north-western corner of Odisha, Sundargarh shares its borders with the Raigarh district of Chhattisgarh to the west, Jashpur district to the north-west, and Simdega and West Singhbhum districts of Jharkhand to the south. To the east, it is bordered by Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Deogarh, and Angul districts. Rourkela, the district's largest urban hub, serves as its focal point. Traversed by major river arteries such as the Brahmani, Sankha, Koel, and Ib, Sundargarh boasts a rich natural landscape, nurturing diverse ecosystems. With abundant mineral reserves including iron ore, limestone, and manganese, the district stands as a hub of industrial potential. Its scenic charm is further accentuated by extensive forest cover spanning 4232.57 square kilometers, highlighting its ecological significance and allure.

Tribal communities have inhabited Sundargarh for centuries, fostering a unique cultural tapestry. These communities have distinct languages, customs, and belief systems, deeply rooted in nature worship and animism. Traditional art forms like folk dances, music, and handicrafts reflect their rich cultural heritage. The tribal communities of Sundargarh rely heavily on agriculture, forest products, and traditional crafts for their livelihoods. Paddy is the most important crop of the district and occupies 85% of the total cultivated area. Among other cereals grown in the district mention may be made of maize, jower, bazra, and ragi. Green gram (*mung*), black gram (*biri*), horse gram (*Kurthi*), and *arhar* are also cultivated in the district. Various tribes hold unique beliefs in nature. The ancestors of different tribes worshipped uniquely. Like, the Oraons worshipped the Sarul tree, while the Kissan community prioritised paddy fields and cultivated seeds, marking the Nua Khai or *Punna Onna* festival. These diverse practices underscore the profound connection each tribe has with nature and their ancestral customs, shaping their way of life and cultural identity.

Objective of the Study:

This paper delves into *Adivasi* food practices, emphasizing seasonal variations and reliance on forest resources. It underscores the dynamic bond between *Adivasi* communities and their environment for sustenance, recognizing the nutritional and health benefits of traditional foods.

Sundargarh's Tribal Culture:

Sundargarh district is renowned for its vibrant cultural mosaic, embracing forty distinct tribal communities spread across its vast terrain. Among these, the Oraon, Munda, Kisan, Khadia, Bhuyan, and Gond tribes hold prominence. Particularly fascinating are the Kisan and Oraon tribes, which share deep-seated affinities in identity, language, culture, and heritage, tracing their roots back to the *Kurukh* (Oraon) and *Kunha* (Kisan) origins. The historical Mukherjee Settlement formally acknowledged the Kunha (Kurukh) community as Kisan, cementing their unique cultural practices, notably in traditional dances and matrimonial customs. Over time, the lifestyle of the Oraon and Kisan communities in Sundargarh has undergone significant transformations, largely influenced by globalization and modernization. These socio-cultural changes have not only impacted the Kisan and Oraon groups but also rippled across other tribal communities within the district. Moreover, the spread of Christianity has introduced additional dimensions, reshaping the way of life of certain recognized tribal groups in Sundargarh.

Background on the Oraon and Kisan Tribes:

Oraon Tribe:

The Kurukh or Oraon alternatively spelled Uraon or Dhangad (Kurukh: Karkḥ and Orāṅ), constitute a Dravidian-speaking ethnolinguistic group primarily inhabiting the Chhotanagpur Plateau and its surrounding regions, predominantly within the Indian states of Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and West Bengal. Their rich linguistic heritage is primarily rooted in the Kurukh language, which belongs to the Dravidian language family. Additionally, in Maharashtra, this group is recognized as the Dhangad community. According to findings by the Indian Anthropological Society, it implies that the Kurukh tribes originally hailed from the Konkan region, subsequently migrating to settle in the Chota Nagpur Plateau. This migration has played a significant role in shaping their cultural identity and historical trajectory, contributing to the diverse tapestry of India's ethnic mosaic.

Kisan Tribe:

The Kisan are a tribal group found in Odisha, West Bengal, and Jharkhand, known for their traditional farming practices and food-gathering activities. They primarily speak Kisan, a dialect of *Kurukh*, as well as Odia and Sambalpuri. This tribe predominantly resides in northwestern Odisha, particularly in the districts of Sundargarh, Jharsuguda, and Sambalpur. Additionally, smaller populations are present in the Malda district of western West Bengal, and Latehar and Gumla districts of western Jharkhand. They also reside in Nepal's Jhapa district in small number.

Food Practices of the Oraon and Kisan Tribe:

The agricultural sector constitutes the primary occupation for the Kisan and Oraon tribes residing in the Sundargarh district. Access to irrigation facilities significantly enhances their capability for double-crop cultivation. Typically, the Kisan and Oraon tribes rely on the monsoon for Kharif cultivation. In addition to agriculture, a portion of the Kisan and Oraon population are engaged in government and private sector employment, which contributes to augmenting their standard of living. Paddy stands out as the primary crop cultivated during the rainy season in agriculture. Traditional cultivation methods persist among the Kisan population, with wooden ploughs and bullocks serving as the primary agricultural implements. Implements such as *kodali*, *khurpi*, and sickles are utilized for vegetable cultivation. Commonly cultivated cereals among the Oraon and Kisan tribes include paddy, *arhar*, black gram, red gram, horse gram, and oilseeds (til).

The Oraon and Kisan community rears domestic animals such as cows, goats, pigs, sheep, bullocks, and buffaloes, with dung collected for agricultural purposes. Their diet practices include the consumption of goat, pig, sheep, and chicken for meat, often accompanied by rituals involving the sacrifice of goats, chickens, and roosters during community feasts. A significant portion of the Oraon and Kisan population occupies land of fertile quality inherited from their ancestors. However, the absence of forested environments deprives them of access to forest products and opportunities for hunting wild animals and birds. Additionally, although the Oraon and Kisan engage in the preparation of baskets, brooms, mats, ropes, and other handicrafts, the scarcity of raw materials hampers their production. In the realm of agriculture, the yield from land harvests is gradually diminishing due to irregular monsoon patterns and soil fertility depletion.

The Rich Tapestry of Adivasi Food System:

Many vegetables are uncultivated, the Adivasi people get them from forests. They incorporate various vegetables and tubers, wild or cultivated, to enrich their diet and fulfill their requirements of calcium, iron, minerals, and vitamins. Studies reveal that Adivasi food provides a high level of immunity against diseases and deformities. The realm of medicinal plants and herbal products is even more extensive. According to the All India Coordinated Research Project on Ethnobiology, tribal communities are familiar with the use of over 9,000 species of plants, including food plants. Additionally, for healing purposes, they are knowledgeable about the use of around 7,500 species of plants. A few distinct features can characterize the Adivasi food of Sundargarh. Food choices are influenced by physiological needs and geographical conditions, which are

closely linked with the habitat. This means that food habits are guided by locally available resources. Adivasis typically consume boiled food such as rice, pulses, herbs, saag, and meat. On some occasions, animal or bird meat is roasted over a fire. Due to these consistent food habits based on locally available resources, instances of serious diseases are considerably lower among Adivasis.

Salubriousness Valuable Food: The ingredients used in Adivasi food are not only rich in taste but also provide exceptional nutritional benefits. Studies have shown that Adivasi cuisine offers high immunity against diseases and safeguards against deformities. Foods such as tubers, shoots, berries, and nuts serve as excellent sources of protein and fat. Moreover, the consumption of meat, fish, eggs, and shellfish provides quality protein along with essential vitamins and minerals. The regular consumption of widely available wild or cultivated tubers fulfills their dietary requirements for calcium, iron, mineral elements, and vitamins.

Medicinal Value: In addition to their nutritional significance, Adivasi foods also possess curative medicinal properties. Adivasis possess a vast repository of traditional knowledge regarding the use of various herbs and plants for treating ailments.

Adivasi Food Heritage (Adivasi Cuisine): A distinctive aspect of Adivasi cuisine is its simplicity and diverse range, which includes numerous green leafy vegetables, most of which are uncultivated and harvested from forests. A typical Adivasi meal consists of boiled rice, leafy vegetable stew or urad dal, mashed items such as *leto*, and chutney, and various non-vegetarian dishes ranging from meats, local fish, and crabs. During festive occasions, various types of *peethas*, which are rice flour dumplings served with pulses, vegetables, or meat stuffing, are added to the plate.

Habits of Cooking Method and Equipment: As the food is simple, so are the cooking methods and equipment used in its preparation, which helps preserve the nutritional quality of the food. Cooking techniques involve low heat slow cooking and shallow frying with minimal oil. Boiling and steaming are common methods, and many dishes are prepared by either hand-mashing or grinding with stone tools such as *silbatta* or *dhekki*. Common food-processing equipment includes a wooden pounder for breaking rice or millets, a round double stone grinder (*janta*) for breaking pulses, a stone slab with a mortar (commonly used for making chutneys), and a wooden mortar (*samat*) for grinding spices. It is worth mentioning that the use of traditional equipment helps minimize nutrient loss as they do not generate unnecessary heat or pressure like mechanized equipment in factories.

Food from the Forest: In Summer season types of food found are:

- **Demta:** *Demta* Chutney, also known as "Red Ants and the Eggs," boasts a tangy, cheesy flavor that rivals popular dishes. A cherished delicacy among the Sundargarh tribal community, it contains formic acid, known for its antibacterial properties, enhancing digestive health. Kai Chutney(*demta*) of Mayurbhanj got GI (Geographical Identification) Tag on 2nd January 2024.



- **Kendu** (Summer fruit): It is known for its potent antioxidants, it offers a wealth of nutrients including protein, fiber, and essential vitamins (A, C, E, K, B6,) and potassium. It is rich in carbohydrates, calcium, phosphorous, and carotene, and has the potential to combat malnutrition in tribal areas. Traditional healers in Sundargarh district utilized dried *kendu* powder to treat urinary, skin, and blood

disorders. Additionally, *kendu* seeds are recommended for alleviating heart palpitations and nervous breakdowns. This combination makes it an ideal choice for promoting overall health.



- **Char/ "Chironji"**: a type of wild berry, that is edible, and its seed kernels are utilized as confectionery items sold in local markets. It is a medicinal herb that treats gastric, manages diabetes, and aids wound healing. Offers holistic health benefits with potent therapeutic properties.



- **Honey (Maudh rash)**: Honey collected by the tribes from the deep forest of wild bee. Honey has specific physical and chemical characteristics. It heals mouth wounds, boosts immunity, and reduces stress. Its antibacterial properties aid healing, antioxidants strengthen immunity, and its soothing qualities promote relaxation, embodying nature's holistic remedy.



- **Chench Bhaji (Summer)**: *Chench Bhaji*, or wild spinach is low in calories and high in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, making it beneficial for overall health and well-being.



- **Dori Oil/ Mahua Oil:** A pain reliever with added benefits for hair. It Eases discomfort while enhancing hair health and shine.



Spring Season:

- **Jilhor Phool** (Jan-March): is known by many names in and around Adivasi areas. It is well known for its potent ability to lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels effectively.



- **Sanai Phool** (Oct & Nov): “Sennai” herb, cultivated by tribes and occasionally found in open areas, is renowned for healing skin diseases and external infections, known for its traditional medicinal use.



Monsoon Season:

- **Mushroom:** *katho rohi*, *bali chotu*, *pootu* and chanterelle etc. are different kinds of mushroom. It is not cultivated by tribal people, it is naturally found in deep forest, or the areas where paddy is grown.



- **Bamboo Shoot Curry:** Bamboo shoots, known as *hedua* or *kardi*, serve as a staple ingredient in many Adivasi cuisines. They are often utilized to prepare delectable curries seasoned with local spices, herbs, and sometimes meat or fish. It is a good source of carbohydrates, fiber, and vitamins, and may help regulate blood sugar levels and aid digestion.



- **Kochu (Monsoon):** *Sakhin Kanda*, or taro root, is harvested during the monsoon season. It is rich in fiber, vitamins, and minerals, and may help support digestion, boost immunity, and regulate blood pressure. Its leaves are also useful.



Winter Season:

- **Kulthi Dal (Winter):** Nutrient-rich Kulthi Dal, harvested in winter, boosts health with high protein, fiber, and minerals. Benefits include cholesterol regulation, blood sugar control, weight loss aid, and improved menstrual health. It also enhances hemoglobin levels.



- **Gethi Kanda / Bulbiferous:** It belongs to the family of potatoes and is distinct for its higher content of fat, protein, fiber, and minerals compared to cultivated tubers. Bulbiferous roots have been traditionally utilized for various medicinal purposes, including the treatment of diarrhea and kidney stones.



Adivasi Snacks:

- **Dhuska:** also known as *Dubhni Roti*, stands out as the quintessential all-weather, all-time snack. Originating from the Munda and Khadia communities, (where it is also known as *Ayo Roti* or *Dubhni Roti*), this deep-fried delicacy has transcended its roots to become a beloved treat among various tribes in the Sundargarh district. Composed of a rice-based batter, and paired with a variety of accompaniments such as chutney or *ghugni*. Its flavor truly shines when accompanied by mutton or desi chicken curry, making it a staple food during marriage rituals, particularly the bride's seeing-off ceremony. While the fundamental essence of *Dhuska* remains consistent across communities, slight differentiations emerge in its preparation. Adivasis adhere to a traditional recipe comprising a blend of rice and urad dal, whereas non-adivasis make the batter with chana dal as well.



- **Burra:** a popular dish rooted in Adivasi cuisine, has gained widespread praise and popularity. Made from batter of urad dal, these small balls are fried until golden brown and it pairs wonderfully with various types of chutneys.

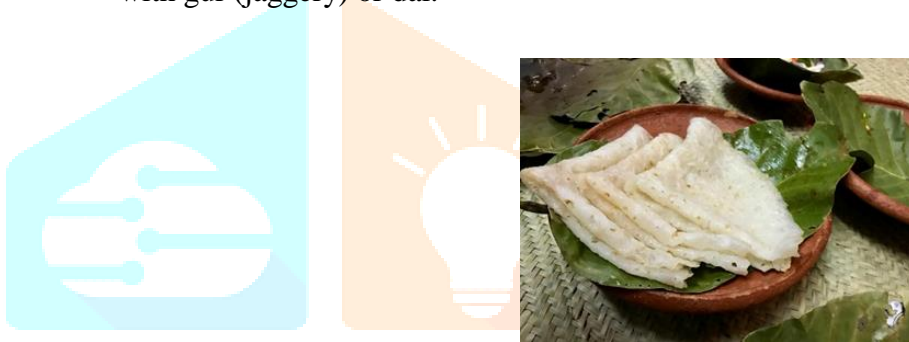


- In Adivasi households, alongside popular choices such as *Dhuska* and *Burra*, there's a rich array of seasonal snacks that add variety. Boiled peanuts, sweet potatoes, and flattened rice (dry *chuda*) are particularly cherished during specific times of the year. These snacks provide a satisfying crunch and are perfect accompaniments for various activities like work, chatting, or simply relaxing.

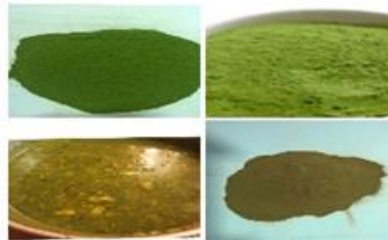


Timeless Culinary Classics:

- **Chilka Rotis:** are crepes made of either rice or *madua* flour. *Peetha* is a delicacy enjoyed at various times, including festivals. These can be made of rice / *madua* with vegetarian or non-vegetarian stuffing, cooked using steaming or roasting methods. Some variations are meat-based, while others like *thakua peetha* or long *peetha* (made by Oraons) are normally stuffed with gur (jaggery) or dal.



- **Chutneys:** are common side accompaniments in Adivasi cuisine, made from dried leaves, fresh green leaves, small local crabs, or small fish ground with spices on a stone slab.



- **Bharta:** mashed items prepared from local fish, dried leaves, and fresh ingredients, are regularly consumed in Adivasi households.



- **Non-Vegetarian Food:** The non-vegetarian food basket of Adivasis is notably diverse, encompassing micro food sources such as ant eggs, small fishes, and different types of meats. Local fish, abundant in various seasons, are commonly prepared as curries or mash. Among

meat options, pork stands out as a prominent choice due to its local availability, affordability, and the feasibility of raising it within tribal dwellings.



Summer Season food: Summer brings forth special culinary delights:

- **Bothal Bhaat:** a watery rice dish, is prepared using freshly cooked rice mixed in equal parts with starch and water, ideally made with traditionally processed red rice. Known for its soothing effect on the body and provision of all-day energy, it complements laborious work under the scorching summer sun. It pairs well with dry saag fry, potato or *bharta*, *chench* bhaji, and *phutkal* chutney.



- **Dubki Tiyan:** a typical Oraon dish, that features small balls made from urad dal batter immersed in a bubbling curry. As urad dal is locally cultivated by Adivasis, it serves as a popular choice of pulse. Dishes like *munga* saag cooked with urad dal provide a complete meal, especially when paired with pork.



- **Dry Leaf Powder (Gudda):** This is a powdered blend derived from green leaves such as *munga*, *matha*, *chekh*, etc. It is known for its potential to help control high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and similar conditions.



- **Leto:** a staple in Adivasi cuisine, refers to mixed porridge, constituting a comprehensive meal on its own. In hilly regions, Leto comprises *mahua* cooked with dal and various beans, while diverse variants exist across Adivasi communities. It holds significance during the time of new seed cultivation (*bunai*) in the small village areas.



- **Madua Roti:** *Madua*, also referred to as finger millet or ragi, holds a prominent place in the diet of Adivasi communities. It is commonly used to make rotis (flatbreads) that are not only rich in nutrients but also possess a distinct earthy flavor.



- **Fish Preparations:** Many Adivasi communities residing near rivers or coastal areas exhibit a rich tradition of fishing and preparing fish-based dishes. These dishes exhibit significant variation based on the local fish species, cooking techniques, and regional flavors.



- **Mandia Pokoda:** Camps provide training in preparing various dishes using millets, including khichdi, pakora, mixtures, laddu, kheer, and papad.



These all foods are free of Chemicals and Pesticides. It has no side effects. It's imperative to recognize that Adivasi cuisines maintain a deep connection with nature, often utilizing locally available ingredients, wild edibles, and traditional cooking methods. Exploring the diverse range of *Adivasi* foods offers a captivating glimpse into their cultural heritage and culinary practices. In addition to these specialties, various types of *kheer*, a traditional rice pudding, are prepared across different regions, and Odisha is no exception. The tribal communities here prepare *kheer* from nutritious millets, adding to the richness and diversity of their culinary collection. The Development Agency for Poor and Tribal Awakening (DAPTA) initiated the Millet Mission in Odisha as part of a value-addition program. The aim was to educate tribal communities on maximizing the potential of millet for both personal consumption and commercial purposes. Through this initiative, tribal individuals have broadened their culinary horizons and can now produce popular millet-based products that are easily marketable.

For generations, tribal communities have gathered a diverse range of tubers, roots, leaves, mushrooms, seeds, beverages, honey, and herbs from forest areas. Younger generations learn to identify these plants and their uses by accompanying their elders into the forests, fostering a deep connection with the land and its bounty. There is significant overlap in the ripening periods of different species, ensuring year-round availability of wild fruits. These uncultivated plants and products play a vital role in ensuring the food and nutritional security of the community and contribute to the animal food web. "Native food lies at the heart of Adivasi culture," emphasized Machua Ho, a dedicated documenter of the indigenous food system in the Similipal Biosphere Reserve area for over a decade. Native foods are not just sustenance; they serve as living connections to our ancestors, preserving our identity and heritage.

Erosion of Indigenous Food Knowledge:

There's a pressing concern regarding the erosion of indigenous food knowledge. Despite the wealth of knowledge within the tribal community about traditional foods and ecological practices, there's a lack of awareness among the youth. This knowledge gap stems from a breakdown in the transmission of knowledge between the community's elders and the younger generation, particularly regarding the rich diversity of indigenous foods. The encroachment of urban food culture and the prevalence of mono-cropping have accelerated the decline of indigenous food diversity among the youth. This distressing trend has led to a reduction in the variety of indigenous diets, resulting in inadequate nutritional intake and adversely affecting the health and well-being of the community.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the vibrant tapestry of Adivasi food in Sundargarh encapsulates the essence of tradition, flavor, and adaptability, offering a tantalizing journey into the culinary heritage of diverse communities. Across the region, the rich array of tribal cuisines reflects centuries of ancestral wisdom and cultural diversity, showcasing a deep-rooted connection to the land and its resources. In Sundargarh, the exploration of Adivasi food practices reveals a profound harmony between tradition, sustainability, and cultural resilience. These practices, deeply rooted in ancestral wisdom, reflect a holistic approach to sustenance that prioritizes harmony with nature and respect for biodiversity. From seasonal delights like *Demta* Chutney and *Kendu* fruit to staples like bamboo shoots and colocasia roots, each dish embodies a deep understanding of local ecosystems and traditional knowledge. Moreover, Adivasi cuisine serves as a powerful expression of identity, culture, and community, fostering connections across generations. However, contemporary challenges threaten the preservation of these traditions, necessitating efforts to revive and celebrate indigenous food systems. Initiatives like the Millet Mission offer hope for the future, emphasizing the importance of reclaiming and revitalizing traditional practices. By empowering communities to cultivate and celebrate their culinary heritage, we not only safeguard cultural identity but also promote sustainability, health, and social equity. Ultimately, the preservation and revitalization of Adivasi food practices in Sundargarh are vital for building a brighter, more sustainable future for generations to come.

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