

# Assessment of food related habits and customs of *Bhil* tribe of Udaipur district, Rajasthan

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Rajasthan is a home to various tribes who have very interesting history of origin, customs and social practices. About 39 per cent of Rajasthan tribal consists of Bhils. The present study was planned with the objective to assess the food habits and customs of Bhil tribe of Jhadol and Girwa panchayat samiti in Udaipur district. Five villages were randomly selected from each panchayat samiti. Ten families from each village were interviewed, thus making a total sample size of hundred families for the study. Food habits of Bhils are greatly influenced by beliefs, traditions, customs and taboos of the society. All the respondents were non-vegetarian. They consider the importance of special foods during various physiological conditions *i.e.* pregnancy, lactation, illness and fasting. Due to their low socio-economic condition they cannot afford the foods that are important during such conditions. Meal and alcohol plays a very important role in every occasion. Specific type of meal is prepared in different occasions that to depend upon the customs, food habits, and availability of the food in the particular area. Food habits of the tribes need to be assessed because it differs from one tribe to another and from one region to another and it has a major effect on the nutritional status of the population. There is a rich habitat of natural foods in Indian tribal environments that need to be used to promote food security, nutrition and health.

**Key Words :** Bhil tribe, Food habit, Food custom, Physiological conditions, Special foods, Udaipur

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## INTRODUCTION

India is a land of numerous cultures and people. Many different ethnic groups found here outnumber many countries. The term tribe is derived from the Latin word 'tribes' meaning the 'poor of the masses'. With more than 84.4 million, India has the largest population

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of the tribal people in the world (Das and Bose, 2012). These tribal people also known as the *adivasi's* are the poorest in the countries, who are still dependent on hunting, agriculture and fishing. Most of them are small communities with relatively low growth rate compared to rest of the population (Rao and Laxmaiah, 2003). It is believed that they are the oldest inhabitants of Indian continent. The *Bhils* are largely concentrated in the area around Chittorgarh, Udaipur and Dungarpur in the south corner of the state constituting a formidable 39 per cent of the state's tribal population (Census, 2011). This is the third largest tribal group of Indian sub-continent . The term *Bhil* is said to have been derived from Tamil word 'Bhilawar' or a Bow man. The *Bhil* habitants are

of dispersed type detached huts amongst the hills, each hut standing on a small knoll in the midst of the patches of cultivated lands. The *Bhils* of India are a good example of indigenous people with diversity in their culture, tradition and environment *Bhils* religious practice differs from place to place. They are highly superstitious and are known for their truthfulness and simplicity (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2009). Food has always been much more than a source of body nourishment it has played a major part in social life, both religious and secular, of human groups. Social systems and culture are the major determinants of 'What we eat'. Food habits refers to why and how people eat, which food they eat, and with whom they eat, as well as the ways people obtain, store, use and discard food. The choice of food is deeply related to life style of an individual and above, in which he is living (Rao *et al.*, 2006). Food habits of the people vary from one part of the geographical location to another depending upon proximity of sea, land, hill and desert. Social factors and cultural practices in most countries have a very great influence on what people eat, on how they prepare food, on their feeding practices and on the foods they prefer. Apart from these socio-cultural barriers, the religion, education and economic factors do alter the food behaviours (habits). These factors are determinants of the food pattern of individuals in a given society but bound to vary from a society to other, one area to other. All people have their likes and dislikes and their beliefs about food, and many people are conservative in their food habits. What one society regards as normal or even highly desirable, however, another society may consider revolting or totally inedible. It is often stated that food habits seldom or never change and are difficult to change (Mishra *et al.*, 2002).

### Objective :

To study the food habits and food customs of the *Bhil* families residing in Udaipur district of Rajasthan.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Jhadol and Girwa panchayat samiti of Udaipur district. Five villages were randomly selected for the study from each panchayat samiti. The villages were densely populated with *Bhils*. Ten families from each village were selected making a total of 100 families for the study. For accomplishing the present study, interview technique was used to gather information from the respondents. Information pertaining to food habits included daily pattern of meal, general food habits, method of cooking food, food habits followed during various physiological conditions, alcoholic practices, while food customs included pattern of meal during pleasure and sad events, information about socially prestigious and restricted foods.

## OBSERVATIONS AND ASSESSMENT

The results obtained from the present investigation as well as relevant discussion have been summarized under following heads :

### Food habits and eating habits of *Bhil* tribe :

Food habits refers to why and how people eat, which food they eat, and with whom they eat, as well as the ways people obtain, store, use and discard food. Food habits are deeply related to life style of an individual and are influenced by many socio-cultural and economic factors. The general food habit of the *Bhil* tribe depicts that they follow two meal pattern in both panchayat samities as shown in Table 1. Qamra *et al.* (2006) in their study on *Bhil* tribe of Madhya Pradesh reported

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to their general food habit and meal pattern**

Sr. No.	Panchayat Samiti	Meal pattern f (%)		Food habits f (%)	
		2-Times	3- Times	Vegetarian	Non-vegetarian
1.	Jhadol (n=50)	50(100)	-	-	50(100)
2.	Girwa (n=50)	50(100)	-	-	50(100)

**Table 2 : Distribution of respondents according to method used for cooking food**

Sr. No.	Panchayat Samiti	Methods f (%)					
		Boiling	Sautéing	Roasting	Frying	Combination	Fermentation
1.	Jhadol (n=50)	46(92)	48(96)	-	11(22)	42(84)	26(52)
2.	Girwa (n=50)	23(46)	50(100)	-	16(32)	39(78)	18(36)

that *Bhils* take their meal twice a day, one around 11-12 a.m. and another in the evening before it gets dark. In non-vegetarian food items they eat mutton, chicken and fish, but mutton is mostly preferred by *Bhils* families and is a major part of their celebrations and various occasions. The study of Bhattacharjee *et al.* (2009) on *Bhils* supports our data which reports that goat, chicken and fish were mostly preferred by them. *Bhils* consume the food cooked on daily basis, if left then only they include it in their next meal. All the family members take their meals together in both the panchayat samities and there was no difference in the food pattern of males and females in the family. All the members eat same kind of food. There is no compulsion of eating food in the same plate. Each member eats food in separate plate.

#### Method of cooking and food preserved by *Bhil* tribe:

As shown in Table 2 majority of the *Bhil* families in Jhadol (96%) and Girwa (100%) panchayat samities use sautéing method for cooking food followed by boiling in Jhadol (92%) and combination method (84%) in Girwa as they were not able to afford cooking their food daily using oil. Indira (1993) in his study reported that boiling was the predominant cooking method followed by the Irula tribes. Fermentation method was used by 52 per cent families in Jhadol and 36 per cent in Girwa. Frying was least used method. Only 22 per cent families in Jhadol and 32 per cent families Girwa reported frying as cooking method, whereas none of the families reported roasting as a method of cooking food. Combination method of cooking includes mostly boiling+sautéing, fermentation+steaming, steaming+sautéing. Steaming method is used for making *mahua dhokla* while fermentation method is mostly used for preparing alcohol from *mahua*.

The simplest methods of preserving food is drying in the hot sun which have been used for thousands of years and is still used by indigenous peoples like *Bhils*. They feel secure throughout the year regarding availability of food by preserving foods as they are not able to afford costly food items on daily basis and at that time these preserved foods are consumed by *Bhil* families. It is evident from Table 3 that mostly vegetables were preserved by *Bhil* families in both the panchayat samities. Regarding fruits only aonla, raw mangoes and *mahua* were being preserved. Panda and Padhy (2006) reported that mango kernel and *mahua* flowers are dried under

**Table 3 : Type of foods preserved by *Bhil* families**

Sr. No.	Type of food preserved	Panchayat Samiti	
		Jhadol (n=44) f(%)	Girwa (n=23) f(%)
1.	Pumpkin	30(68)	4(17)
2.	Green Chillies	28(63)	21(81)
3.	Ladies Finger	25(57)	12(52)
4.	<i>Bathua</i>	23(52)	7(30)
5.	Bengal gram leaves	3(7)	-
6.	Fenugreek leaves	2(5)	-
7.	Cluster beans	10(23)	4(17)
8.	<i>Tinda</i>	-	1(4)
9.	<i>Mogri</i>	3(7)	-
10.	Raw Mangoes	9(20)	16(70)
11.	<i>Mahua</i>	5(11)	-
12.	Aonla	4(9)	-

the sun and are stored for further use as food by *Kandha* tribe of Orissa.

#### Food preferred during various physiological conditions :

Very few families of *Bhil* tribe consider the importance of especial foods during various physiological conditions and also due to their low socio-economic condition they cannot afford the foods that are important during these conditions. Mainly homemade and easily available foods were preferred that were used by their ancestors (Sharma, 2003).

During pregnancy boiled milk with ghee, Goat milk, Bengal gran dhal, kangni halwa, and ghee were given to the lady with the reasons depicted in Table 4 majority of the items depicted are considered nutritious, energy giving and easily digested by the pregnant lady. The major aim of giving these foods during pregnancy is to help deliver a healthy baby without seeking medical help as they are not able to afford medical charges. During lactation period foods which give strength to the mother body are mostly preferred like wheat chapatti, jaggery *raab*. One to two glasses of jaggery water were also given for first two to three days, the reason behind it provides strength and normalizes reproductive system and regulate blood loss. Telesara (2000) in her study on traditional dietary practices of tribals during pregnancy and lactation *Gond ladoo* (*Gond*+*ghee*+wheat flour+jaggery) were given, to the lady, it provides energy and strength. Some of the respondents reported that it helps to increase milk output and prevent excessive bleeding. Coconut *ladoo*

are preferred the reason behind coconut is easily available, it relieves back pain according to some respondents and few reported that it provides strength and provide immense energy which is required to do heavy work and it also helps to increase milk output. During illness Foods that were easily digested are given to most of the patient. Foods that are liked by the patient were mostly preferred. During fever wheat flour boiled in water is given to the patient as it provides energy and strength. They use *neem* flowers for treating fever which is considered very effective. Sinha (2004) in her study on traditional health care practice prevalent in tribal areas also reported that *neem* helps to develop resistance in the body to fight against fever. *Moong dhal* water and *khichri* are also given as they are easy to digest. *Thuli* is preferred by most of the families, the reason behind it is easy to digest and it has hot *taseer* which cures fever.

Starch taken out of rice helps to recover diahroea patients. Verma (2002) in her study on local health wisdom of rural women also reported consumption of buttermilk as beneficial for diahroea patient. Buttermilk with added salt and sugar is preferred as it helps to recover the water loss of the body. In Jaundice boiled food is given, the reason behind is that the oil preparations are harmful and the patient is not able to digest oily foods. *Thuli* was also given as it is easy to digest. Juice of sugarcane and reddish were mostly preferred as they are easily available and helps to recover jaundice patient. *Raab* is also given as it provides strength and is good for jaundice patient. During fast no especial preparations were reported. They usually take simple food and wheat chapatti was preferred rather than maize reason behind is maize is considered as hot food

**Table 4 : Food preferred by Bhil families during various physiological conditions (n=100)**

Condition	Type of food	Reason
Pregnancy	Boiled milk with ghee	Provide strength to face labor pains during third trimester
	Goat milk	Nutritive, easily digestible
		Easily available at home
	Green gram <i>dhal</i>	Easily digested and cures constipation
	<i>Kangani</i> (Italian millet) <i>ka halwa</i>	Nutritious and provides strength to the pregnant women
Lactation	Ghee	Acts as lubricant which helps in easy delivery
	Wheat chapatti	Provides strength
	Jaggery <i>raab</i>	Provides strength after delivery
	Jaggery water	Provide strength, normalizes reproductive system and regulates blood loss
	<i>Gondladoo</i> ( <i>gond</i> + <i>ghee</i> +wheat flour+jaggery)	Gives energy and strength
		Increases milk output
	Coconut Ladoo	Prevents excessive bleeding
Illness:	Sweet buttermilk	Relieves back pain
	Wheat flour boiled in water	Provides strength and increases milk secretion
		Good for health
Fever	<i>Neem</i> flowers vegetable with added sugar	Gives strength
	Green gram <i>dhal</i> water/soup	Reduces fever and other chances of infection
	<i>Khichari</i>	Easy to digest
	<i>Thuli</i> ( <i>dalia</i> + <i>moong dhal</i> )	Easy to digest
Diahhroea	<i>Chawal ka pani</i>	Easy to digest
	Buttermilk +Salt +Sugar	Helps control diahhroea
Jaundice	Boiled foods	Helps to recover lost water
	<i>Thuli</i> ( <i>dalia</i> + <i>moong dhal</i> )	As oil preparations are harmful and difficult to digest
		Easily digested
	Sugarcane and radish	Keeps body cool
Fasting	<i>Raab</i>	Good for jaundice patient
		Provides strength and helps in recovery
	No special preparations, simple meal is taken once in a day	-

### Foods avoided during various physiological conditions :

As depicted in Table 5, during pregnancy raw papaya, sour foods, maize is avoided as it is believed to cause miscarriage. The study of Patil *et al.* (2010) on pregnant women supports our data which reports that papaya is considered 'hot' during pregnancy which causes miscarriage. These foods are considered factors aggravating miscarriage, dry foods and not also easily digested by the expectant lady. Sharma (2003) in her study on pregnant women reported that intake of maize during pregnancy causes abortion. During lactation period also maize is avoided because it is heavy to digest and develops swelling in the body of the lady. They believe that it develops heat which is not good for both mother and child. High intake of salt is avoided for one week after delivery because it causes swelling in the body of mother. High intake of chillies, chutney, sour buttermilk and *Urad dhal* also avoided during lactation. As reported in Table 5, during fever sour foods like buttermilk and *chutney* are avoided with the reason that they are the factors that aggravates the fever. Meat is also not given to the patient suffering from fever because

it is heavy to digest. In diarrhoea spices are avoided by most of the *Bhil* families because it affects the stomach. In jaundice yellow food items are avoided because of their belief that yellow food items act as barrier in curing jaundice. Alcohol and non-vegetarian foods were not taken by all family members until the patient get fully recovered the reason behind this rely on their belief that jaundice occurred due to their sins. So leaving these foods is a way to feel guilty and say sorry to god and thus doing this can correct their faulty deeds. Jain (2000) in her study on indigenous health care practices also reported avoidance of yellow food items in jaundice. And during fast, green vegetables and maize are avoided because these are not considered pure by *Bhil* families. Alcohol and non-vegetarian are avoided by all families as these foods are considered as *tamsik bhojan*.

### Alcoholic practices:

Alcohol consumption was a common practice among *Bhils*. It forms a major part of their different celebrations. None of the occasion is complete without alcohol. Alcohol is self prepared from *Mahua* in majority of the families in both the panchayat samities. Drinking

**Table 5 : Foods avoided by *Bhil* families during various physiological conditions**

Condition	Type of food	Reason
Pregnancy	Raw papaya	Leads to miscarriage
	Sour foods	Causes prolonged cold and cough
	Maize	May cause miscarriage
	Rice	It is a dry food, difficult to digest and thus avoided during pregnancy
Lactation	Maize (for 1 month)	Causes swelling in the body
	High salt intake (for 1 week)	It is heavy to digest
	Chillies	Develops excess heat which is not good for both, mother and child
	<i>Chutney</i> and very sour buttermilk	Causes swelling in the body
	Black gram <i>dhal</i>	Harmful for mother as well for infant
Illness		Body sores out
		Heavy to digest and leads to acidity
Fever	Sour foods like buttermilk and <i>chutney</i>	Aggravates fever
	Meat	Heavy to digest
Diarrhoea	Spices	Affects the stomach, leads to acidity
	Whole grains	Are not easy to digest and increase diarrhoea
Jaundice	Fried foods	Difficult to digest
	Meat and alcohol by all the family members	Their belief is that disease occurred due to their sins so avoiding these foods is a way to feel guilty and say sorry to God and thus doing this can correct their faulty deeds
	Yellow food items	Yellow foods act as barrier to cure jaundice
Fasting	Meat, alcohol, green leafy vegetables, maize	Not considered pure
		Considered as hot and <i>Tamsik bhojan</i>

of indigenous liquor, mahua was a popular practice among *Bhils* (Bhattacharjee *et al.*, 2009). This locally available alcohol is consumed by maximum families. Both male and female member drink alcohol but this practice is mostly seen in male members. Alcohol is consumed during various occasions like Holi, Rakshabandhan, Marriages, Birth occasions, and when guest arrives. Samati and Begum (2007) in their study reported that *Kiad* is popular local liquor of Pnar tribe of Jantia hill district. It plays a important role in their socio cultural life and is a major part of their occasions.

**Food customs :**

*Pattern of meal during pleasure events :*

Meal plays a very important role on every occasion. Specific type of meal is prepared on different occasions that too depend upon the customs, food habits, and availability of the food in the particular area. Among *Bhils*, *Gavri* (*Gavri* is a semi musical and dramatically performed religious ritual exclusively demonstrated by *Bhil* tribe. It is a 40 days festival. *Bhils* focus their festival

on *Gavri* a form of the Hindu goddess *Parvati*. *Bhil* men participate in the festival and it begins with the rituals in the performers home village. For these forty days they must not drink liquor, eat meat or green leafy vegetables), Navratri, marriages and birth occasions, are celebrated as pleasure events, with special preparations of food as depicted in Table 6. In Jhadol rice is used mostly on all pleasure occasions while in Girwa wheat was mostly used.

*Pattern of meal during sad occasion (death) :*

When death occurs in any *Bhil* family, food is not cooked by that family for three days. Neighbours feed the family during these three days, after which the family of the deceased person can cook food. When death of a woman occurs the *Mrityu -Bhoj* is prepared after eleventh day of her death while when a man dies *Mrityu- Bhoj* is prepared on twelfth day of his death. During these days, family members neither consume alcohol nor non-vegetarian food.

For *Mrityu –Bhoj* villagers collect money/wheat/

**Table 6 : Food preparations during pleasure and sad events**

Sr. No.	Occasions	Panchayat Samiti	
		Jhadol	Girwa
1.	Gavri	Sweet rice <i>Churma</i> Rice +pulse Rice+ <i>kadi</i>	<i>Bati +churma+ urad dhal</i> <i>Kheer</i> <i>Poori+vegetable</i> <i>Poori+dhal</i> <i>Suji ka halwa</i>
2.	Navratri	Rice +mutton (on completion taken as prashad) Sweet rice given to <i>Bhopa</i> <i>Churma Ladoo</i>	<i>Poori+vegetable</i> Mutton <i>Malpue</i> <i>Churma Ladoo</i>
3.	Marriages	Mutton Alcohol <i>Poori+dhal+sabzi+rice</i>	Mutton Alcohol <i>Poori+dhal+sabzi+rice</i>
4.	Birth Occasions	Chicken/mutton +rice Alcohol	Alcohol mutton Wheat flour <i>halwa</i> Sweets
5.	Holi	Alcohol	Alcohol
6.	Rakshabandhan	Alcohol <i>Poori+dhal</i>	Alcohol
Death		<i>Lapsi</i> (wheat flour porridge) Sweet rice Rice +pulse <i>Bati+dhal</i>	Sweet <i>Boondi</i> Sweet rice <i>Poori+dhal</i> <i>Bati+dhal</i>

rice. Rice was gathered in villages of Jhadol for the death occasion, while in Girwa wheat was gathered in some villages (Koriyat, Undari and Barapal) while in other villages (Tidi, kaya) money is collected for contribution in *Mrityu-bhoj*. In Jhadol *lapsi* (wheat flour porridge), sweet rice, rice with pulse, *Bati* with *dhal* were mostly prepared while in Girwa, sweet *boondi*, sweet rice, *poori* with *dhal* and *bati* with *dhal* were prepared as indicated in Table 6. Only sweet items were offered to both God and dead person.

#### **Socially prestigious food:**

According to *Bhils* socially prestigious food were those which they usually prepare on special occasions, foods that are income elastic and foods that their community liked most. Some people also reported that whatever their ancestors considered prestigious they also do so. Mutton, maize and rice were considered prestigious by the *Bhil* families. Alcohol was also considered prestigious because no occasion was considered complete without it. Local liquor plays important role in socio cultural life and is a major part tribal occasions (Samati and Begum, 2007).

#### **Socially restricted foods:**

Some foods were restricted due to taboos followed by them and restriction in certain foods was also influenced by their custom. *Bhils* did not consume pearl millet and maize if purchased from outside their state. The reason behind, this was that if they consume these grains it will give poisoning effect. Beef was also avoided because cow is considered a sacred animal in Hindu religion.

#### **Conclusion :**

Food habits of *Bhils* are deeply related to their life style and are influenced by many socio-cultural and economic factors. All the families of *Bhils* are non vegetarians and follow two time meal pattern. But due to low socio-economic status the consumption of non vegetarian foods is confined only to some special occasions. Very few of the *Bhil* women consume any special diet during pregnancy and lactation. Rice, alcohol, mutton forms the major part of their ceremonies where as alcohol and non-vegetarian foods are restricted during sad occasions.

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