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Research Paper

Traditional foods of tribal households of Southern Odisha

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■ **ABSTRACT :** *A* study was conducted to know the traditional foods of tribal families, present dietary pattern and major food combinations of tribal diet in Koraput and Rayagada district of Odisha. A total of 240 households were interviewed to know the daily, weekly, monthly and occasional diet pattern of tribal families. Cereal/millet was the main source of energy and also protein in their diet because consumption of pulses or non-vegetarian food was very less. Tamarind had a great role in their diet as daily they were preparing charu. Average consumption of tamarind in each family was about 1-2 quintals per year which they collect from forest. Seasonal foods were very important for tribals and were taken only during special season. It is prominently observed that tribal households have some traditional foods and food habits which are very much detrimental to the nutritional security for example- eating mango seed kernel powder, tamarind seed powder, poisonous mushroom, and rotten meat etc. may create health related problems and sometimes fatal situations. Massive awareness programmes and provision of subsidized food especially during the period of food scarcity would be more appropriate.

■ **KEY WORDS :** Tribal, Traditional foods, Diet, Mandia pez, Charu

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Odisha is inhabited by 62 tribes with a total strength of approximately six million (5,915,067) constituting 22.43 per cent of the total State population. Tribal population is ethnic in composition, smaller in size having subsistence economy based on forest, wages and shifting cultivation. Shifting agriculture on unproductive and uneconomic holdings under un-irrigated condition in the undulating terrains with traditional skill and primitive implements raise only one crop during the monsoon, and therefore, they have to supplement their economy by other types of subsidiary economic activities. They have simple technology, simple division of labour, small-scale units of production and no investment of capital. The production, distribution and consumption are limited to the family. The ability of a household to command sufficient resources for food and basic needs is largely dependent upon social, material and economic conditions. In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the traditional foods and various food combinations of the tribes of Rayagada and Koraput districts of Odisha.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

The study was carried out in two hilly and tribal dominated districts namely; Koraput and Rayagada of Odisha during 2008-09. Two blocks namely Badunga and Laxmipur in Koraput and Rayagada and Kashipur in Rayagada district were selected for investigation. Two villages in each of the

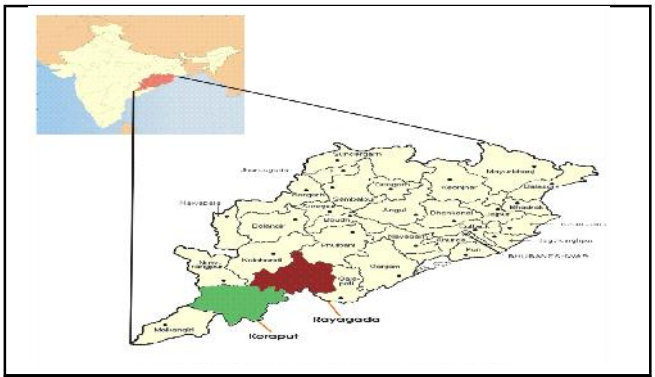

Fig. A : Location map of the study area

selected blocks and 240 households consisting of 480 respondents (male head and female head) were personally interviewed. Data was collected through structured and pre-tested interview schedule by the investigator with the help of interpreters. Collected data was analyzed and interpreted. Emphasis was laid on traditional foods and various food combinations of the tribes of Rayagada and Koraput districts of Odisha.

■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Traditionally ragi (finger millet) locally known as mandia was the main food of tribal households but after introduction of PDS rice they were also consuming rice in various forms. Ragi (*mandia*) and rice were the main staple food of tribals at present in study area. *Ragi* is a rich source of calcium, phosphorus and minerals, which keeps the pregnant and lactating women and young children healthy. Overall, data presented in Table-1 revealed that 82.50 per cent families took rice daily whereas, 100 per cent families took r*agi* daily. This indicates that they are continuing their traditional food practices. PDS facilitated consumption of rice in tribal households. Tribals did not take pulses daily; they were taking it on weekly (70.42 %), monthly (17.08) or occasionally (12.50 %). Oil, sugar and Jaggery consumption was very low in tribals and they were using mainly niger and *mahua* oil. It was found during the pilot survey that certain category of food namely roots and tubers, fruits, eggs, meat and fish were only taken by tribals occasionally, for which no response category was incorporated in the study. Vegetable consumption (green leafy, other vegetables, root and tubers) was studied and found that cent per cent households consumed these seasonally. Some families grew vegetables in their kitchen garden and some got it in exchange. Further, 62.08 per cent households consumed seasonal fruits (mango, jack fruit, *jamun*, guava etc) available in the forest. This type of food pattern has also been reported by Panda and Padhy (2007) and Sinha and Valeria (2005).

Though they eat various types of wild fruits, they could not provide information about the fruit consumption. Further questioning revealed that they did not spend money to purchase fruit, but consume what is locally available on the trees. It was not possible to quantify this because it varied with seasonal availability. Milk and milk products were almost missing in the diet of all age groups. Therefore, deficits in the intake of protective foods such as milk, vegetables including green leafy vegetables, and fruit were found.

Most of the tribals were non-vegetarians. They consumed pork, rat meat, chicken, sheep, egg, meat, and fish, goat and various birds (72.08 per cent households). However, the use of non-vegetarian items was limited to two or three times a month, usually on the days when they were paid for their work or on social functions, festivals, and special occasions. Mango kernel and tamarind seeds were seasonal foods eaten during rainy season in the form of *charu* (gruel). These seeds were not taken only due to food scarcity but also due to their tradition. *Handia/Mahua* drink was very important for tribals and 61.66 per cent men took it daily whereas, 49.16 per cent women occasionally during festivals,

Table 1 : Frequency of food item intake among the tribal households (%)

Food items	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Occasional/seasonal
Cereals (Rice)	82.50	17.5.	0.00	0.00
Millet	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Pulses	0.00	72.50	14.88	12.91
Nuts and Oil seeds	90.83	9.16	0.00	0.00
Green leafy vegetables	3.33	69.58	11.67	15.41
Other vegetables	0.00	3.33	19.17	25.41/50.41
Roots and Tubers	0.00	0.00	0.00	97.08
Fruits	0.00	0.00	0.00	78.75
Egg, meat, fish etc.	0.00	0.00	0.00	84.16
Sugar and jaggary	0.00	0.00	0.00	60.83
Mango kernel, tamarind seeds etc.	0.00	0.00	0.00	80.83
Handia, Mahua drink etc.	58.33	0.00	0.00	55.83

Table 2 : Food materials and their combination used by tribal households

Frequency	Food items	Combination of food items
Daily	*Mandia* cake, *Mandia* / rice gruel, *Mandia* gruel, Tamarind *charu*, *Kandul dal*, Rice, *Handia*, *Mahua* drink, niger oil, Mahua oil	*Mandia*/rice cake with tamarind *charu*. *Mandia* / rice gruel. *Boiled mandia* / rice with *Kandul* dal. *Sawan*/rice gruel with tamarind *Charu*.
Occasional	Boiled rice, rice-jaggery *kheer*, *Kandul* Dal, *Mahua kheer*, maize/ rice, *Handia*, *mahua* drink, egg, meat, vegetables	Rice+Dal, *Mandia* cake + *Charu*, *Mandia* cake+ Dal, *Mahua kheer*
Seasonal	Forest fruits, mango, *Jamun*, jackfruit, mango kernel gruel, tamarind kernel gruel, honey, root and tubers, vegetables, bamboo stem, mushroom	Not specified combination

marriages and social occasions.

The food items and their combinations are presented in Table 2. It was recorded that Mandia cake, *Mandia* / rice gruel, *Mandia* gruel, tamarind *charu*, *Kandul dal*, rice, *Handia*, *Mahua* drink were taken daily. For preparing any type of vegetable/ *Charu*, they used niger oil or *Mahua* oil. On special occasion, they took boiled rice, rice-jaggery *kheer*, *Kandul dal*, *Mahua kheer*, maize/ rice, *Handia*, *mahua* drink, egg, meat and vegetables.

Cereal/millet was the main source of energy and also protein in their diet because consumption of pulses or non-vegetarian food was very less. Tamarind had a great role in their diet as daily they were preparing *charu*. Average consumption of tamarind in each family was about 1-2 quintals per year which they collect from forest. Seasonal foods were very important for tribals and were taken only during special season.

At the time of food scarcity, dried *mahua* flowers are boiled either with tamarind seeds (*Tamarindus indica*) or *Sal* seeds (*Shorea robusta*) which formed an important part of tribal diet. To meet the daily requirement of food during scarcity season, tribals used tapioca, sweet potato, mango kernel, jackfruit seed and *mahua* etc. Cassava roots was soaked and boiled for 15 to 20 minutes and peeled and eaten with salt or sugar. Both the roots and tubers possess a large quantity of starch, least amount of protein, fat and sparing amount of Vitamin-C and minerals. These could be considered as a poor quality of food. Jackfruit seeds were another group of emergency food. After eating the juicy pulps of jack fruit they collected the seeds, washed and dried under sunlight by indigenous method and stored it for future use. During scarcity season, they boiled it in hot water, chopped and mashed. Then they salted it to taste and consumed it as their staple food.

Reduction of food consumption and change of food consumption pattern was another way of passing the food shortage. Many households consumed broken rice instead of rice; some of them reduced their dependency on market for purchasing food items. They managed hunger with low cost foods. Some households avoided breakfast and many people changed breakfast to low-cost foods like broken rice, puffed rice and tea. As lunch, many people used to take watery rice locally called *pakhal* with or without a curry made of vegetables. During lean season, they did not get green vegetables, so they managed with powders of leaves and long lasting food preparations. These included tamarind, dry *mahua (Madhuca indica)* flowers, *bari* (a cake made of pulses), jelly cake made from *mahua* flowers etc. Sometimes, they consumed these food items including dry *kendu* fruits, *mahua* flowers, sal *(Shora robusta)* seeds, etc. instead of rice. Sometimes, they took infectious food items like wild mushroom, meat, cahru made from infected mango kernel and tamarind seed powder which caused diarrhea and dysentery and some times, fatal situation in them. This affected their nutritional security. A study on food consumption patterns depending upon availability of food conducted in four districts of Orissa provides basis for our findings (orissagov.nic.in/p&c/human development /summary /chap03.pdf). The literature on livelihood and coping during food deficit situations among tribals also highlights such micro-level household strategies (Gordon *et al.*, 2001).

Conclusion:

It is prominently observed that tribal households have some traditional foods and food habits which are very much detrimental to the nutritional security for example- eating mango seed kernel powder, tamarind seed powder, wild mushroom, and rotten meat etc. may create health related problems and sometimes fatal situations. Massive awareness programmes, nutrition education and provision of subsidized food especially during the period of food scarcity would be more appropriate.

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