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Shift in Tribal Food Habits: From Sustainable to Non-Sustainable

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Giving up on traditional food and blindly having 'development' agendas in agriculture thrust on them has resulted in the tribals losing their wise and time-tested habits and practices, leading to heavy loss in health and economic terms. Today, they are neither here nor there—neither modern, 'developed' and prosperous nor in touch with their own indigenous crop cultivation methods and wholesome food habits

"There is a great need for the introduction of new values in our society, where bigger is not necessarily better, where slower can be faster, and where less can be more." ~ Gaylord Nelson

Abstract

THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES ON THE factors leading to a drastic shift in the agricultural practices of the indigenous Pahariya and the Santhal tribes of Sundarpahari block, resulting in feeble dietary habits and serious health repercussions. The indigenous Pahariya and Santhal

tribes earlier engaged in traditional agrarian and food gathering processes, which placed healthy and diversified food items on their platter. Now, however, such variation and diversification in their food no longer exist. Whereas I do describe the traditional tribal food habits with their health and nutritional aspects and compare these with newly acquired habits, the major focus of this paper is to look at the possible factors that have led to 'the shift' in the qualitative degradation in food patterns and its impact on the overall health of the two tribes.

The Santhals are mainly agricultural tribes, with around 95 per cent of the population engaged in agrarian livelihoods. They clear the forests, till the land and produce food on it

This article takes into account the role that migration has played in this 'shift' and the issue of degradation of the very crucial, traditional tribal practice of *adgadha* (community cattle sheds and the mechanism of collection of fines for errant cattle during sowing time) and its repercussions, the heavy dependence on the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the role of newly-formed Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) in Jharkhand. Besides this, the study examines the role of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) in shaping the nutritional aspirations of the children and the implications of the adoption of new food habits.

Backdrop

The Sundarpahari block of Godda district comprises 221 villages, spread over 13 *panchayats*. The block is divided into two, both by its physical characteristics and community-wise. The hill is entirely inhabited by the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) whereas the plains below are where the Santhal tribes live. At around 16,198 people, the PVTG population is 24.74 per cent of the total population, which is the largest in any one block of Santhal

Parganas. People belonging to Scheduled Tribes (ST) comprise 76.58 per cent of the population, Scheduled Castes (SC) 2.13 per cent and the rest of the population belongs to Other Backward Castes (OBC).

As far as other resources are concerned, 60.4 per cent of the total available 32,678 ha of land is cultivable and 10.7 per cent of that is irrigated. The rest of the land is rain-fed. Forest coverage is 42.41 per cent, mainly in and around the tribal dominated villages. Usually, these lands are under cultivation with food crops such as paddy, wheat and maize. Pulses and oil-seeds are cultivated as second crops. Vegetable cultivation is not very popular and is often limited to a small corner of the land around the houses.

Data reveal that the Santhals and the Pahariyas are the two predominant tribes of Sundarpahari. The Pahariyas are the original inhabitants of the area and are settled in the regions of the Rajmahal Hills and the neighbouring region of Santhal Parganas. Racially, linguistically and culturally, they are close to the Birhor tribe. Both the Bihors and the Pahariyas belong to the Austro-Asiatic sub-family of the Austric family of

languages. They are of Dravidian origin like the Mundas, the Oraons and other tribes of the Austro-Asiatic sub-family. Their villages are small, with 20–30 households and a maximum of 50 houses. The housing pattern is very dense and the houses are close to each other and have just a small path in between them. They prefer living an isolated life and avoid interaction with other communities.

The Santhals are mainly agricultural tribes, with around 95 per cent of the population engaged in agrarian livelihoods. They clear the forests, till the land and produce food on it. They are also considered good hunters and, besides this, they own domesticated *goi* (cows), *merom* (goats), *sukri* (pig). The *pushy* (cat) is their favoured pet.

The Santhals live in the plains and their houses are constructed in rows and the villages are relatively spacious and large. Traditionally, the Santhals and the Pahariyas have not been living in peace with each other, partially because of historical differences and partially due to the current economic, educational and cultural dominance of the Santhals. Despite coming from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they have one

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thing in common, that is, their dependence on natural resources—from food to common itinerants to their religious practices; they borrow heavily from the forests, the mountains and the water bodies nearby. As per a survey, there are as many as 10 types of mushrooms, eight types of aquatic weeds, five types of honey, 20 types of birds, 24 green leafy vegetables, 15 types of fruits, six types of vegetables, six types of legumes, two types of millets, three types of flowers, four tubers and three types of seeds, available in the wild for consumption.

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Today, the traditional, ancestral knowledge and skills about the wild have diminished significantly. The Santhals and the Pahariyas have been forced by circumstances and by societal approval to adopt a newer monoculture system of cultivation that has changed their eating from a relatively healthy and fuller food pattern to an inadequate dietary habit. Today, typical Santhal and Pahariya food habits include large amounts of rice, which is either eaten with watery potato gravy, or with watery pulses with salt and chilly to enhance the taste. Gone are the days when they had a variety of green vegetables on their plate.

Forests and water bodies, as a resource, are known to be sustainable only when a balance is maintained between the demand

and supply, that is, what we take from the nature needs to be given back within a stipulated span of time; otherwise the balance begins to dwindle. Earlier, the forest produce offered a variety of items. This variety has now been reduced to a mere two or three items. The seniors remember eating hearty meals of *dakka* (rice), *dal* (pulses), *jundra dakka* (maize), *jundra pitthe* (maize bread), *kode pitthe* (millet bread), *kode dakka* (millet porridge), *uttu* (veggies) from the forests and fields and *hakku jheel* (fish) from nearby streams, all in one single day. Food yield from the forest would complement the cultivated crop foods. The irony is that now the same seniors have to make do with simple *dakka* and watery *dal uttu*, with barely visible forest veggies on their plate.

Here is a look at their pattern.

Table 1: Comparison of the old cropping patterns of Sundarpahari and current use of land

No.	Crop	Conventional Varieties	Current Usage
1	Millet	Finger millets (6–7 varieties)	Sparsely practised
		Kodo millet (4 varieties)	Sparsely practised
		Barnyard millet (3–4 varieties)	Extinct
		Foxtail millet (2 varieties)	Extinct
		Little millet (2 varieties)	Extinct
		Sorghum (1 variety)	Sparsely practised (only Pahariyas tribe)
2	Maize	6–7 varieties	All varieties sown
3	Rice	143 varieties	10 varieties in practice, all of the up-land varieties extinct

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No.	Crop	Conventional Varieties	Current Usage
4	Pulses	Pigeon-pea (3 varieties)	2 varieties in practice
		Chick-pea or Bengal gram	Sparsely practised
		Lentils	Sparsely practised
		Grass pea, or Khesari	Widely practised
		Green gram	Sparsely practised
		Horse gram	Sparsely practised
		Black gram	Sparsely practised
		Moth bean	Extinct
		Field-pea	Extinct
		Field bean	Sparsely practised (only by the Pahariya tribe)
		Cow-pea	Sparsely practised
		Yard-long bean	Sparsely practised (only by the Pahariya tribe)
		Cluster bean	Sparsely practised (only by the Pahariya tribe)
		Velvet bean	Extinct
Sword bean	Extinct		
5	Oil-seeds	Mustard	Widely practised
		Rape seeds	Status unknown
		Linseed	Sparsely practised
		Sesame	Sparsely practised
		Niger	Sparsely practised
		Rozalle	Status unknown
6	Fibre crops	Sunhemp	Status unknown
		Kenaf	Sparsely practised
		Cotton	Extinct
7	Tubers and roots	10–12 varieties	Sparsely practised
8	Vegetables	Wild leafy vegetables (48 varieties)	Status unknown
		Cultivable leafy vegetables	Sparsely practised
9	Mushrooms	25 wild varieties	Status unknown

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No.	Crop	Conventional Varieties	Current Usage
10	Fruits and berries	25 + varieties	Status unknown
11	Edible seeds and grains	10–12 varieties	Status unknown
12	Edible flowers	4–5 varieties	Status unknown
13	Edible resins and gums	5 varieties	Status unknown
14	Honey and honey larvae	4–5 varieties	Sparsely practised
15	Tree bark (for tea)	25 varieties	Sparsely practised
16	Rat	12 varieties	Sparsely practised
17	Bamboo shoot	2 varieties	Sparsely practised

The shift and the probable causes

Let's take a look at the circumstances and the factors that have led to this shift.

Despite so many treasures available in the wild and given the basic forest-dwelling nature of tribals, the change in lifestyle is not sudden like a snap of the fingers. The change has been gradual and has happened over the course of a decade. Several circumstances have led to the change.

- **Seasonal migration and its impact**

Migration for work is one of the new patterns of tribal people. The exodus to the cities after the paddy harvesting and sowing seasons has had a serious impact on the traditional cultivation

patterns of the area. Seasonal migration of youngsters from the area has led them away from year-round cropping and has made them believe that only a small amount of rice is needed for their survival; the rest can easily be obtained from the PDS. Their newly-acquired food habits have made them believe that only large quantities of rice with potato, chilly and salt are required for a healthy diet. The tribals are not careful about their food intake and ignore the traditional varieties, resulting in nutritional deficiencies as well as a decline of indigenous seed varieties. The villagers are unaware how imperative it is to grow these crops to conserve ancient seeds.

Migration has also led to another set of circumstances that has had a detrimental impact on the traditional agrarian system.

First, the practice of releasing their cattle to roam free after the paddy harvesting season is over. Also because rice (their staple food) is easily available from the PDS and they are able to migrate off-season, they do not worry about the rest of agriculture. Even for those who want to cultivate the traditional varieties of rice after having got the seeds from their relatives, cultivation becomes difficult because the entire village and the neighbouring villages have left their cattle loose to graze in the open.

An incident that took place will, perhaps, illustrate this issue better. Bara Sindhri village in Bara Sindhri *panchayat* of Sundarpahari has been known for its pigeon-pea, or *arhar*, and other legumes. The people here have been considered the champions

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of legumes cultivation; however, for the last three or four years, there has been a serious decline in the production because the people have no seeds to plant the legumes and the ones available at the local *hatiya* (market) are too expensive to purchase. On being asked about the cause for this, the villagers say that they missed one season of cropping due to low rainfall and they had to consume the seeds meant for sowing the next season.

They were not able to acquire fresh seeds when needed. Some of the villagers thought the hybrid seeds from the block was the culprit for the gap. Gradually, over time, seeds preservation of indigenous varieties took a backseat and, eventually, disappeared from the system. Now, such is the condition that the villagers have to either purchase very expensive pulses from the market or go without eating legumes. Biti Murmu, a resident, remembers the time when they had such high production that guests from outside would be gifted sacks-full of gram and pulses; now, they barely have enough for themselves. The preservation-conservation of indigenous varieties of seeds and their multiplication is dwindling.

The second major change is the diminishing value the young have for tribal law and order. Now that they have experienced a new set of city values, tribal laws seem less significant. One important tribal order prevents setting loose of cattle for grazing and fining the people if it happens. Customarily, an *agadha* is made and those setting their cattle loose on others' crops are penalized and their cattle confiscated for some time and kept within the *agadha*. The people were mindful of this practice and were careful not to set their cattle free. Now this traditional law is no longer abided by; therefore, people cannot grow any crop the harvesting time period of which goes beyond that of paddy, which includes pulses, wheat and some lentils.

Despite all the people having issues with cattle grazing indiscriminately, no action is being taken to prevent the animals from roaming free. Consequently, the villagers suffer from a qualitative decline in their food.

- **Agrarian consequences of PDS and ICDS**

PDS was supposedly meant for providing rationed foodgrains to the poor; however, it has had somewhat harmful effects as

well. On the one hand, PDS is beneficial for the impoverished people whereas, from another perspective, it has influenced the community's agrarian consciousness negatively.

Before the arrival of PDS, the focus of the farmers was on growing many indigenous varieties of grain and pulses for consumption and trade, and on the conservation of traditional seeds. Optimum utilization of land would take place and crops such as paddy, maize, pulses, wheat, sorghum, lentils, cow-pea, pigeon-pea, and chilly would be grown round the year. Also, the polished rice, consumed now, has severe nutritional deficiencies because the top layer of the rice is eroded by milling and polishing. The community, in addition, has become heavily dependent on PDS-based cereals and is neglecting the cultivation of traditional grains.

Similarly, ICDS, while being a boon for children, needs to be looked at from the agricultural lens. When seen from that perspective, it presents a different scenario. From childhood, the children are being conditioned into a particular dietary habit—a habit that is not in tune with their agri-social upbringing. Once the children acquire this new

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taste, they yearn for the same food and, eventually, it reflects in their future livelihoods as well.

• **Dwindling natural resources**

Food that used to be available from the forests is growing scarce due to rampant exploitation of the forests and the sharp rise in population. After hunting was banned, except for the relaxation during the *Sohrai porb* (the biggest Santhal festival) and the *Magha parb* (the biggest Pahariya festival), the people's means of getting nutritious food from animal products has ended. Traditional water-bodies have also become silted and due to lack of any external help in de-silting, the water retained is for a very short span of time. Hence, fishing, which once used to be in abundance, is limited to a short duration. The new water-bodies being constructed through MGNREGA are poorly made, mainly because of the deep-rooted corruption in the system, resulting in poor quality of work.

• **Influence of the elite and globalization**

The influence of the outsiders (non-tribals) has been visible in the lifestyle of the tribal population—be it the socio-economic, cultural or in the dietary habits. The influential

non-tribals, who themselves are influenced by the cities, have a great impact on the purchasing habits of tribal people. In the weekly *hatiyas*, whatever comes sells like hot cakes.

The habit of eating rice is actually an acquired one, copied from the outsiders. The original staple of the locals was the *jundraa dakka* and *daa mandi* (water rice), which the Pahariya and the Santhal relished. These healthy tribal dishes are now considered inferior and are often looked down upon by their non-tribal counterparts. Rice and pulses are the food of the elite, and has been integrated in the tribal food habits. The quality of rice preferred by the 'civilized' is the white shining polished one, which the indigenous people have now emulated, shunning their home-harvested, very nutritious, brown rice.

Around ten years ago, the *ada* (leafy vegetables) from the forests used to be high in demand and the villagers would get up early in the morning to gather them; if someone happened to be late, they would not find any *ada*. Ironically, the situation has changed now. In the words of Gangamuni Soren from Chandana village, "*Haan, dada, ab to saag*

sab bada ho jata hai, fir bhi koi jungle mein abb todne nahin jaata hai. Pehle to koi der se pahunchta tha to saag milta hi nahin tha. Ab kewal garib didi sab hi jungle saag lene jaati hain (Brother, nowadays leafy veggies grow big and the people do not go to the forests to pick them. Earlier, if someone was late in going to the area, they would not find any. Moreover, now only the poor women go to the forest to get leafy vegetables)."

While the *dikhu* (non-tribal) eat copious amount of rice, pulses and vegetables, the Santhals and the Pahariyas have adopted rice, a bit of pulses, potato curry and great amounts of salt into their lifestyle. The mainly carbohydrate and the extremely low vitamin diet has led to further degradation of their already deteriorating health due to brain malaria (*plasmodium falciparum*) and other seasonal diseases. Coming to the influence of globalization and modernization in the area, the modern High Yielding Variety (HYV) grain has been vigorously promoted (and still continues to be) for the last five to six years in the local seed markets. The high yield, being the initial USP of these varieties, attracted the community and they enthusiastically adopted

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the seeds; over the years, the continual practice has led to the discontinuation of local varieties and, in some cases, to their extinction. Although now, many people have shown a willingness to cultivate the conventional varieties, the extinction of some of the indigenous seeds has left the hapless peasants in the lurch.

- **State agriculture policy**

The state has its own developmental objectives to fulfill and the decisions are taken not from the grass-roots level up but flows from top to bottom. Whatever seems to be working in the outside world is seemingly good for this area is the state's policy. Over a decade, the state has been intensively pursuing its agenda of monocropping of paddy and maize varieties. The only seeds available for distribution are the input-intensive HYV paddy and maize (that too when the sowing season passes by). Even the other varieties, that they wish to push into the area, are procured from relatively rich states with different agro-climatic zones. In 2014, for example, they procured pulses and seeds from Punjab and wanted the farmers to cultivate them. However, due to corrupt agricultural practices, most of the seeds landed in the open

market and whatever was left was consumed by the community.

No effort has been made by the block to preserve traditional food crops or to probe the declining interest in traditional food-growing habits. No market has been created for the traditional Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP), especially edibles. Neither have any steps been taken to market the indigenous varieties of grains, which would probably have big markets outside.

The aftermath

The consequences of the degradation in the quality of the eating habits of Pahariya and Santhal households have been disastrous. The most-affected domain has been that of health. If one happens to visit a typical Pahariya and Santhal tribal village, all one sees are their shriveled and emaciated bodies, with yellowish eyes and stained teeth. The changes in their lifestyle has led to increasingly high fatigue rate and poor immunity levels. All this is due to the poor proportion of vitamins, minerals and proteins in their diet. Besides the seasonal one-time diet of *jondra dakka* all the

365 days (almost), a heavy meal of *dakka*, *bloom* (salt) and *dal* or potato curry is not sufficient to meet the nutritive requirements of the people. Eventually, immunity decreases and people have to go to the area doctors, usually quacks, inviting significant monetary loss also.

On an average, the biggest leakage in the annual income expenditure cycle of a tribal family is due to diseases, largely arising from the poor quality (and often quantity) of food. Sundarpahari has become a haven for quacks and other modern medicinal practitioners. There is rampant use of antibiotics and medical equipment, all at the cost of the poor and hapless tribals.

The women, as usual, are the most deprived. As the local varieties diminished and disappeared from the mother's platter, the nutrition levels of the food of the women declined; yet their infants continue to draw milk from them, during lactation. The babies get their supply of milk but the mother is severely deprived of essential nutrients. One might argue that 'ready-to-eat meals' are supplied in the *aanganwadis* however, the facts tell a different story. The irregular supply from *aanganwadis*, and

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the non-palatable taste of those meals eventually lead the mother to manage with whatever is available, the consequences of which we have discussed above.

Another noticeable effect amongst the tribals is their shifting agrarian habits from the rich and diverse multi-cropping to the intense mono-cropping. Many rich indigenous varieties of paddy, maize, millets and other traditional varieties have been lost in the process. Varieties, in tune with the topography, have gradually been abandoned. People, somehow, even if they want to cultivate them, will not be able to do so because the varieties are extinct now. A very popular and drought-resistant variety of up-land paddy (*tandi dhaan*), which some farmers are

keen to sow, is no longer sown in these areas.

Indigenous breeds have been replaced by the very popular high yielding and other seemingly 'white varieties' of paddy and the story is the same for other crops as well. The loss is to such an extent that the people have to look to others (market, state or development agencies in that area) for seeds. Many times, a particular crop has been skipped in an entire village because of the non-availability of the seeds in that area.

Moreover, because PDS is corrupt and inefficient, the quantity provided is inadequate; PDS, which was supposed to be a salvation agent and a boon, is actually fast becoming a bane.

Conclusion

Ever since the tribal people became connected to the outer world, they have been exposed to many steps in development that is proving to be negative. Whereas from an outsider's perspective, everything is good and development is in progress because of the visible changes in lifestyles of the tribal population, the repercussions that one sees from a different perspective are stark and disastrous. Maybe the relevant stakeholders need to switch lenses to see the real picture and, thus, intervene accordingly.

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References are available on request at newsreach@pradan.net