

Development, Dilemmas and (In) Digestion: What eating ‘Cheeti ki Chatni’ does!

-Gautam Bisht

For the last six months, I have been associated with [CHIRAG](#), a project that focuses on sustainable food systems. The project looks at food as a key node in the network of politics, knowledge systems, nutrition, agriculture, health and wellbeing. This node is worked upon through three strategies: (i) non-cultivated food; (ii) cultivated food and (iii) State’s social safety net. This blog is about a dilemma that emerged while working on the uncultivable ‘wild’ food aspect of the project. It is here that the hierarchy of food and the social relations reflected in what is ‘civil’ and what is considered ‘wild’ becomes most acute.

In the first week of February, we organized a 5-day residential theatre workshop in Chakai. The participants were from the village organizations and Lahanti, a youth club, all from Chakai. We usually conduct residential workshops in the training hall of a hotel, 45 kms away from Chakai in Deoghar. Hotel based trainings release the facilitators from many micro-management issues and the participants too love such venues. Underlying this is a dominant pedagogic theory which says that participants once removed from their real life settings, which is considered to be distraction, can fully focus on the training/instruction. As per this notion, learning fosters within a controlled environment. However, an alternative approach to learning and pedagogy is to engage with the chaos of everyday, and is based on the political ethic that the real environment of participants (villages) is fundamental to their learning.

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Under the influence of the latter pedagogical framework, the workshop was hosted by Piprasol, a forest village in Bamdah Panchayat of Chakai. Since the project is on food, we designed the act of eating to be a potent learning experience. To achieve this, we prepared at least one locally

resourced non-cultivable food item per meal. This created a vibrant environment and engagement within the group. An interesting trivia to the story is that our theatre resource person, Jeetrai Hansda's Facebook post asserting his community's right to eat beef had landed him in jail last year.

On the third day of the workshop, Jeetrai Hansda suggested that he will prepare *Lal Cheeti ki Chatni* (Red ant sauce), also called *chapda/chopda* in some places. The chutney was a mix of red ants, salt, green chili, garlic and ginger. A lot of us were about to have this chutney for the first time, and it was no surprise that a lot of young Santhalis were in this lot. I liked the chutney way more than I had anticipated, perhaps due to its piquant flavor. Food as it is served in the village makes every item optional, but peer pressure insidiously operates within all groups. At that moment it was irrelevant who ate it and who didn't, but as I later came to know, at least one person took all of this in a very bad taste. Alka (*name changed*), an SHG member from village Bermasiya, left the workshop on the third day complaining of indigestion. A few days later I met her and got to know that she hadn't eaten the 'chutney', but it had nevertheless become the source of her displeasure and pain. She commented:



"pata nai vaha pe kya kya bata rahe the! Phir kya kya khilane lage! Purane jamane ki baat kar rahe the? Toh phir pehle ka aadmi toh jaanver ka maas pehen ke ghumta tha, vo pehen le ab?"

(Whatever was being discussed was beyond me! And then they started serving strange things like insects...! They were talking about old times and forest food. Earlier people wore animal skin, should we now wear that?)

This reminded me of other incidents from my prior experience of working at the intersection of education, local knowledge and culture. Alka reminded me of Malkan (*name changed*), a former member of Lahanti youth club, who expressed

disagreement over a scene in a theatre performance. The scene showed two village women discussing the value of Sal leaf plates and how their community has had an intimate relationship with nature. He commented:

“Inhi sab vajah se hi toh hum log abhi tak develop nai kar paye.. Ye pedo ko puja aur ye sab sochna. Ped ek istamaal ki cheez hai, usme bhagwan nai hai. Badi mushkil se in sab se nikle hai...ab phir isi meh nai ja sakte.”

(Worshipping trees and such beliefs....it is for these reasons that we are underdeveloped! Tree is something with utility, not some god. With great difficulty I have come out of this...and don't want to go back)

However on the other hand, there were equally strong opinions in favor of what happened. Many people in the theatre workshop were elated by their experience and vocally expressed that on the last day of the workshop. For instance, Sukhdi (*name changed*), another SHG woman from Pojha, said:

“Dada, aapka bahut dhanyawad ke aap ye trainng rakhe, Jeetrai dada ko yaha bulaye, ye sab humne seekha. Aisa lag raha hai ki ki kuch vapas mil gaya, khud se jud gaye”

(I am extremely thankful that you arranged this training and brought Jeetrai Hansda here. Here we relearned important things and feel for connected to oneself)

In occasions like these, developmental work hits a blind spot, evoking such difficult to digest dilemmas. As a facilitator, the dilemma lies in navigating the two distinct worldviews and ways of looking at development (in our case eating). Being able to eat certain things and being able to not eat certain things items is a maker of your development. For instance, rodents are another source of food here, but many people are grossed out by that. But as someone suggested, instead of trying to think what development is we should focus of what it *does*, moving from essence to functionality.

In that sense, what is it that eating *cheeti ka chatni* does? Scientifically, due to its anti-bacterial properties, it aids digestion. Culturally, it's considered to be therapeutic by many indigenous communities, and thus it endorses a marginalized worldview. For a global project like ours it is

exoticness exemplified. For people like Alka it's a regression but for people like Sukhdi it marks a reunion.



In picture: Workshop participants and facilitators eating the local dishes prepared by the community, in Piprasol village, Chakai.

Post Script

I wrote this blog during the Covid lockdown and food is one of the central elements of the discourse on the current crisis. Some argue that the virus emerged out of the eating habits of a group and some believe that drinking cow urine can cure it. Many are worried about the food sufficiency of migrant laborers and rural people amid the crisis. Many State schemes are in place to provide food, and farming activities are exempted from the lockdown. In rain-fed agricultural zones like Chakai, the wider non-cultivable food basket is a sustainable community asset like never before. And if sustainability is not a neutral humanist idea but a political struggle meshed with dilemmas, then perhaps its taste is- a little red *antish*!



Gautam Bisht is working as a Research Associate in the CHIRAG project and he is based out of Chakai. He is leading the Programming activities in the CHIRAG project which aims at creating a democratic platform for the community to receive relevant information on sustainable food systems and share their experiences and grievances. He is also the co-founder of Sinchan, an Education and Rural Entrepreneurship Foundation. Before joining PRADAN, Gautam was pursuing his Masters in Development Practice from Ambedkar University, Delhi