

## Local food: the future of village economy

-Atul Purty

This article is based on my two years of field immersion in a village in Chakai, Bihar. Chakai block is in Jamui District, the southern part of Bihar and is predominantly occupied by the tribal Santhali population. After almost two years of staying in Chakai, I feel that a new notion of economy has emerged in the area.

While talking about the village economy, I am not limiting it to only the selling of goods and labour in the market, but expanding it to the whole range of activities in which a community participates. The “eco” in economy comes from the Greek root oikos, meaning “home” or “habitat”. The “nomy” comes from nomos, meaning management. In this understanding, economy is not detached from ecology, but refers to the enduring management and negotiation of human and nonhuman ecological relations of sustenance. This concept of economy is something different from the concept of economy nowadays used in televisions and read in newspapers, which measure the economic well-being in terms of GDP, GNP, global business, etc. This current notion of economy became the globally accepted meaning of economy, which has affected the tribal economy a lot. In Chakai, the concept of economy is shifting from self-sufficiency to market production, labor exportation and global consumption. Rather than production for self-wellbeing, people want to produce their product for distant, global markets.

### How the Market has influenced economy

During my stay in Chakai, I saw many men out-migrating for work from the villages. The village youth are highly motivated to migrate from their villages and go to bigger cities to earn. A common narrative or reason behind this that I heard from them was that “*gawn me kam nahi hai*” (there is no work in the villages)

Another thing I noticed was that whenever I asked any person who didn't migrate outside the village for work about what they do, I mostly heard them saying:

*"Ghar par hi hain abhi to kuch nahi karte hain"* (I stay in home only I don't do anything).

Women in the village also shared similar thoughts on staying at home and 'doing nothing'. During a discussion with SHG members, participants said that *"khet wagira hata ke yahan factory hi khol dena chahiye, sab yahin kam karega, aise bhi kheti se kuch kamai nahi hai"* (factories should be established in farmlands of village, people will work here and earn money, anyway there is no earning in agriculture).

'Work' is being limited to the selling of labour to the market, and labour which can't be sold in the market holds no value in the community. The question that arises here, is what is the value of the vast range of other activities people put their labor into, like animal care, house care, cooking, working in own farm and kitchen garden, foraging, collecting non-timber forest products, etc.? Aren't these activities responsible for 'managing the home and habitat'? If the answer to this question is yes, then why it is not considered work?

This changing notion of economy has also impacted the food production and consumption. Munna Hasda from Barmasia village now doesn't want to do their traditional cultivation. He says *"the products which we are produce here, we are not able to take that to market, we don't have the proper channel and knowledge of that. So nowadays we are not focusing on the farming activities. Working outside from village is the better option for us"*. Notions of production are being limited to only those products which can be sold in market and surplus can be produced in the form of money, excluding locally grown and available items such as the different tribal traditional crops and various millets, fresh veggies from kitchen garden, foraged food products and non-timber forest products.

Food consumption habits have changed a lot as well. Tribal people don't want to consume their own traditional local food and continuously devalue their own rich diverse food system

which includes various variety of rice, millets, pulses and uncultivable food products from village. Villagers want to leave these food practices and adopt urban practices. During one meeting of PRADAN in village, I saw that when facilitator asked villagers about the food practices of different season, villagers were avoiding talking about their traditional food practices. When one person started sharing about 'Guddu' (a kind of Rat), people started whispered to each other in their local language saying that "we should not say about all those things he(facilitator) must be feel awkward". During an interaction with a village elder, he shared that "when I was in school that time my family was so poor, I never got chance to eat wheat chapati, we used to eat finger millets and maize, but my children never faced that situation". Food like wheat and white polished rice, which is coming through traveling thousands of miles is levelled as the standard food, while locally obtained food appears inferior. In this sense, Market became the leading principle for guiding individual and collective action.

### **Returning to the Old economy**

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the non-resilience of the new concept of economy and showed how traditional lifestyles are far more sustainable. During the national lockdown, migrant workers eventually returned to their villages and supply chains disrupted. Since traveling services were closed due to lockdown, I couldn't travel back to my field immersion site so I continued my interactions with some of the villagers through phone calls and discussions on online platforms. I came to know that with markets being shut due to the lockdown, villagers moved back to their alternative traditional foods. They engaged their labour in traditional practices, like hunting and collecting uncultivable food items from forest. They worked on their kitchen gardens and farms.

During the lockdown, we also conducted an online photography contest with the members of Lahanti Youth Club. In this online contest, the photographs of nineteen different non-cultivable food products were captured by the villagers. Afterwards people shared their

thoughts on the whole process through video conferencing. Kavita Marandi, one of the youth from Lahanti said “local Hatia (Market) are closed due to lockdown but we are not lacking in vegetables because there are lot of things to eat around the village and forest”. Pooja Hembrom said “even we were not aware of these food items before the lockdown, but we are realizing that these food items are tastier and safer also”. Motilal shared “we don’t need food from market, everything is here”.

During the national unlocking, Shuvajit and I organized a food mela with the people of Pachuadih village in Chakai. This event was a part of the GRTA-CHIRAG<sup>1</sup> project focused on sustainable food systems. The community, in the mela displayed the local Santhali food and there where around twelve different food recipes in the food mela.



**Picture 1: Women in the food mela presenting the various locally available greens**

<sup>1</sup> GRTA-Global research translation award; CHIRAG: Creative Hub for Innovation & Reciprocal Research & Action for Gender Equality”



These recipes were (on the left): Local Rice, Papaya Curry, Munga Ara, Kundri Ki Sabzi, Mix Local Mushroom, Ghangra beans, Kurthi Daal, Kanthe Ara, Kendu Ara, Rote Ara Chutney, Pudina Chutney and Gandhari Ara.

Participants shared that “other than the Salt and Masala we didn’t buy anything from market for this event”. They also shared that during the lockdown they survived because of these local foods and during the lockdown the consumption of the local and forest food has increased.

The Lockdown revealed to local communities that there are alternatives beyond the globalized and market driven food economy which are more resilient and sustainable. These need be to be identified and developed. The current crisis highlights the unsustainability of our current economic system and the need to deliberate different ways to organize our societies. An alternative political-economic system is required, one that is more resilient, just, and explicitly prioritizes human and non-human well-being over the market driven economy.



**Atul** is working as a Research Associate with CHIRAG project leading the programming activities in the project which aims at creating a democratic platform for the community to exchange relevant information on sustainable food systems. Before joining PRADAN, Atul was pursuing his Masters in Development Practice from Ambedkar University, Delhi. He is currently interested in social entrepreneurship models in the grassroots.