

AGRICULTURE WORLD

VOLUME 7 ISSUE 01 JANUARY 2021 ₹ 100

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RE-CONNECTING WITH OUR ROOTS

How Crises Reiterated Food Sovereignty in Chakai



The announcement of country-wide lockdown induced by COVID-19 pandemic hit the informal sector the hardest. The return of migrant workers to their places of origin, disruption of agricultural supply chains, closing of markets and local hatias, restricted movements and a ban on transportation had a damaging effect on local food systems. Food security was threatened for the poor and vulnerable population across the country. The impediment in the income and livelihoods of these people and their local food systems raised questions on the existing social policies and market practices.

While various studies were conducted on migrant crises and on the disruption of lives and livelihoods of people due to the current pandemic, there is a lack of rigorous academic studies that examine the impacts of COVID-19 on food insecurity. This article adopts a sustainable food systems lens to present experiences of the authors working in CHIRAG-a research translation project in the Chakai block of Bihar. The article also explores the potential of the recent pandemic situation in undoing the erosion of food sovereignty of the local Santhals in these regions.

Food sovereignty

Food security was re-defined by FAO in 2001 providing emphasis on consumption and the issues of entitlements and access by vulnerable people to food after the study by Amartya Sen. The new definition of food security, however, avoided discussing the social control of the food system. Food sovereignty is about the right of people to determine their own policies relative to food and agriculture—rather than having their food supply subject to market forces.

The term food sovereignty was coined in the early 1990s by a global peasant and farmer movement called La Via Campesina to introduce the idea of ‘food sovereignty’ at the World Food Summit in 1996. They defined

food sovereignty as “the right of a community to define its own diet and shape their own food systems.”

This concept goes beyond ensuring food availability and sufficiency and to enable people to assert their power in food systems by rebuilding their relationships with their land, forests and environment. In this article, we reflect on the Santhal food sovereignty by exploring village economy in Chakai, factors responsible for the shifts in the village economy and the local food systems, and the way forward.

Chakai block is inhabited seventeen percent tribals, mostly Santhals and shares its borders with the Santhal Paraganas region of Jharkhand. Dependant on rain-fed agriculture, forest produce collection, agricultural labour and migration, the vulnerability and disadvantageous position of Santhals in these regions is aggravated by the presence of left-wing extremism.

Though the lockdown and the restrictions that followed prevented Santhals in these regions from accessing, producing or selling food, it pushed them towards their traditional practices and questioning their existing food and market practices.

Re-conceptualising village economy

Village economy is more than the mere selling of goods and labour in the market and includes a whole range of activities in which the rural people participate. The ‘eco’ in economy comes from the Greek root ‘oikos’, meaning ‘home’ or ‘habitat’ and ‘nomy’ comes from ‘nomos’, meaning ‘management’. This interpretation of economy highlights the enduring management and negotiation between the human and non-human ecological components for sustenance in rural and forest areas.

With maximum forest cover (40%) in Jamui district, ecology becomes an integral part of

economy in Chakai. This conceptualisation of economy greatly differs from the globally accepted concept of economy measuring economic well-being with indicators such as Gross Domestic Product, Gross National Product and ease of doing business index. Studies have shown that the globally accepted meaning of economy has greatly affected tribal economy. In Chakai, the concept of economy has shifted from self-sufficiency to production and exportation for markets and catering to global consumption. Rather than production for their own nutrition and well-being, Santhals are now producing for distant markets and their production choices and consumption patterns are being heavily determined by markets.

Munna Hansda from Barmasia village now does not want to do traditional cultivation and grow indigenous and local foods. He says, “We are not able to take such products that we produce in the village to the market. We don’t have the proper channel to sell those products or knowledge of that. So, nowadays, we do not focus on farming activities. Working outside the village is a better option for us.” Notions of production are being limited to only those products that can be sold in market bypassing various locally grown and available traditional tribal crops such as different types of millets, fresh vegetables from the kitchen garden, foraged food products and non-timber forest products.

Shift in work patterns in the village

Migration to urban areas for work is a widely practiced phenomenon in Chakai in men from households with small or no landholdings. The youth of the region aspires to migrate to cities for exposure and better prospects of life whereas older men with children migrate to earn enough to fulfil their food sufficiency, cash requirements other household needs. In various conversations and interviews, the authors learnt that the migrating men perceived that they had nothing to do in the village. One of the men shared, “I don’t do anything because there is nothing to do in the village”.

Women in the villages also shared similar thoughts on staying home and “doing nothing.” During a discussion with self-help group members, participants said, “Factories should be set

up in the farmlands and people will work and earn money here; anyway, there is no earning in agriculture.” ‘Work’ is now limited to the selling of labour in the market, and labour that 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 labour into such as animal care, housework, cooking, working on one’s own farm and kitchen garden, foraging, and collecting non-timber forest products.

Are these activities not responsible for ‘managing the home and habitat’? If the answer to this question is yes, why is it then not considered work? What a market-focussed/market-oriented food systems does is they impose a food system that is alien and unfamiliar to the historical and traditional practices of Santhals. The concept of food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of local peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production and define their own food systems (Peoples Food Sovereignty Network, 2002).

Local food systems in Chakai

Food consumption habits in Chakai have changed to a great extent as reported by the villagers. Tribal people do not want to consume their own traditional local food and continuously devalue their own rich, diverse food system, which includes various varieties of rice, millets, pulses and uncultivable food products such as different kinds of yam, mushrooms, green leafy vegetables and local fruits, which grow in the forest. Villagers want to give up these food practices and adopt urban practices.

At a meeting held by PRADAN, when the facilitator asked the villagers about the different seasonal food they consumed, villagers avoided talking about their traditional food. When one of them spoke about ‘guddu’ (a species of rat), the other villagers murmured to each other, “We should not speak about these things; he (the facilitator) will feel awkward.” A village elder said, “When I was in school, my family was so poor, I never ate wheat chapati. We used to eat finger millets and maize. My children, however, never faced that situation.” Wheat and



white polished rice, brought from thousands of miles away, is considered the standard food whereas locally obtained food is now being regarded as inferior. The market has become the leading principle for guiding individual and collective action.

How COVID-19 crises laid the foundation for food sovereignty

After the imposition of restrictions owing to national lockdown, we continued our interactions with some of the villagers through phone calls and discussions on online platforms. We found out that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the non-resilience of the market-driven food economy.

It brought about an unexpected realization among the villagers of the value of their traditional food items and practices, which are resilient, sustainable and can be relied upon to help them live through any crisis- delay in aid, disruption of supply chains, mass return of migrant workers and restrictions in mobility. The villagers informed us that because the markets were shut down, they chose to fall back on their traditional and foraged foods. They engaged their labour in traditional practices

such as hunting and collecting uncultivable food items from the forest and in kitchen gardens. During the lockdown, we also conducted an online photography contest with the members of a Santhali youth club called Lahanti club. In this online contest, the photographs of 19 different non-cultivable foraged food products were submitted by the villagers. Afterwards, people shared their thoughts on the whole process.

Kavita Marandi, one of the youth from Lahanti, said, “Local hatia (markets) are closed but we do not lack vegetables because there are many things in and around the village and forest that we can eat.” Motilal said, “We don’t need food from the market; we have everything we need here.”

Food is inherently linked to the ecology and, therefore, an integral part of people’s relationship to their environment. The crisis gave a way for the villagers to take control of their food systems and become more food sovereign as food sovereignty is linked to forests and to the resources those forests provide.

Building knowledge and skills locally to sustain the knowledge



Food sovereignty is based on the assumption that the local people, especially the elders are knowledge banks who have generations of wisdom on building sustainable food systems. We felt that the local and traditional practices needed be to be identified, documented and developed by enabling the youth in the village to become change agents in their own food systems.

CHIRAG project is working with and supporting Lahanti Club, a collective of young people from the Santhali tribe in Bihar, in making films about traditional foods foraged from the forests. Lahanti club's Youtube channel is gradually becoming a repository of a variety of foraged foods, capturing the whole process beginning from collection of the food, preparation, cooking, eating and highlighting the nutritional benefits.

The project team is also mapping the consumption patterns with various seasons and the benefits associated with it. When the national lockdown was lifted, we organized a food mela, or festival, in Pachuadih village in Chakai where the community displayed 12 different local Santhali food items in the mela. The 12 food items in the image above are 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 said, "Other than salt and masala, we didn't buy anything from the market for this event."

They acknowledged that they survived because of the local foods and that, during the lockdown, the consumption of the local and forest food has increased.

Food sovereignty-the way forward?

Food sovereignty enhances the independence of local and tribal farmers by providing them an opportunity to participate in decision making at all stages of the food system and grow culturally appropriate, locally determined food. For food sovereignty initiatives to have real empowerment on tribal people, infrastructures such as local supply chains, space for traditional food items in local hatia and knowledge flow into the community should be strengthened.

Additionally, accessing and documenting the local knowledge on what to harvest, where to harvest, when to harvest and various usages of different types of food is essential not only to

