

Cultural dimension of tribal food and drink: A study among the Dongaria Kondhs of south Odisha

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Abstract

All types of food and drink of the tribal people are always intimate to nature. The present study intends to have a descriptive analysis of culture of tribal food and drink practices especially of the Dongaria Kondhs of Rayagada district of South Orissa, India. It is an empirical study conducted during 2011 to 2012 in four intermittent visits in two villages.

The methods adopted for collection of data were mostly through interview guide, individual and group interviews and observation, since the women are intimately concerned with the food and drink; the adult women have been selected as subjects of this study. Thus, the focus was made on activities of sixty adult womenfolk in natural set-up spread over four Dongaria villages.

Majority of respondents were found to have poor level of sanitary habits and least scientific knowledge regarding nutritive value of food they consume, however, on the basis of food value, they have their native taxonomy. The history of their tradition has given the skill and technology of procurement, preservation, processing and consumption of food and drink. The sharing and caring attitude for food and drink observed among Dongaria reveal a kind of generosity as well as reciprocal relationships. The group social solidarity within and between the members of small groups was a marked feature. The food and drink cannot be understood in isolation as they are inseparable from bio-cultural dimension of the community interaction. Therefore, the food and drink of tribal communities have to be seen holistically. Their ethnic solidarity and the narrations on their diversified food culture that include procurement, preservation, preparation and consumption express a sense of food security

With the decline in biodiversity of their habitat, there is deterioration in the rate of exchange of food and drink. The decline of range of required food items from their habitat resulted in health deterioration. The scarcity led them develop some kind of coping mechanism to struggle in the maintenance of order in social solidarity.

Keywords: dongaria kondh, food, drink, food security, PDS, and social solidarity

Introduction

Natural resources like land, forest, water and soil provide a major part of the required food and drink for tribal communities within their habitat. The diversity of food and drink items are mostly seasonal so also the cereals and pulses they procure from land as sources of food stuff through peasantry, protein, and calories from plants in forest through gathering, collection and hunting, protein and oil from fish and snail, crab and turtle from water sources, and other edible procurement of mushrooms, roots and tubers, insects, amphibians, lizards and rodents from soil etc. The bovines the tribal have like pigs, buffalo, cows, sheep and goat as food from animal sources and duck and chicken and Indian mountain quail (*titor*) as food from birds are the sources of food.

Since decades, as a part of food security, the free rice, wheat etc is being given through public distribution system (PDS) to the almost half the population of the State who remain below the poverty line. The welfare state is supposed to not allow anyone to remain hungry but in vain. It has been stated that India has continued to amass extraordinarily large stocks of food grains in the central government reserve, without finding good use for them (Sen 2005) [10]. Nevertheless, a majority of tribal communities continue to depend upon subsistence agriculture including shifting cultivation and horticulture. Their multi cropping production practice largely depends on

natural support. Often change of weather, untimely monsoon, and flood, drought and damage caused by wild animals, reduce their expected food procurement. Agricultural production fluctuates from year to year under the impact of natural calamities. The date palm and salap (*caryota urens*) are the plants from which they extract liquor. They also brew liquor through indigenous technology from mahua (*mahua latifolia*) flowers and fermented rice and ragi. Tribal people do not eat all edibles always. The food-taboos restrict them from consuming specific food during specific period of ritual observance as practiced by the concerned communities. By not consuming specific food during ritual, the persons do not get required nutrition. However, these deficiencies are partially met in different ways. Harris stated that food preferences illustrates how humans the world over have universal needs for protein, carbohydrate, minerals, and vitamins but obtain these nutrients in different ways depending upon the dietary preferences established within their culture (Harris 1991) [4].

To understand the difference between biological and cultural behavior of human we may simply observe the variety of ways in which different societies satisfy a basic biological drive such as hunger. Although the tribal communities are omnivorous with the ability to digest many types of plants and animals for nutrition there are many difference in eating behavior and food preferences throughout the world (Scupin

and de Corse (2005) [5]. Dugalus suggested that all societies have symbolic classification of certain objects or foods that are unclean, tabooed, polluted or dirty as well as that are clean pure and undefiled (1966).

Objectives

The objective of the study is to understand the cultural dimension of food and drink and their contribution in maintenance of social solidarity through food and drink transactions. It is an empirical study conducted during 2011 to 2012 in four intermittent visits in two villages numerically represented by the Dongarias. The tools used for collection of data were mostly through interview guide, informal individual and group interviews and observations. Since the women are intimately concerned with the food and drink, the married adult women have been selected as subjects of this study. Thus, the focus was made on activities of sixty adult womenfolk in natural set-up spread over four Dongaria villages. The observation was made through holistic approach.

The Dongaria Habitat

The settlement of Dongarias are either on hill top or on hill slopes surrounded by thick jungle with clad mountain slopes indicating their *podu* patches. The ravines are the usual routes for inter village interaction for marital alliance and exchange of goods and services. Irrespective of sex they are seen with decorative head dresses with hair pins fixed to size the combed long hair. Every one puts up an axe on shoulder and a small rope to help them carry fire wood. The axe is also a tool for their defense. The low roofed Dangaria houses are linearly arranged mostly in two rows with the intersecting *kacha* undulate snaky road. They grow many varieties of small millets, maize, oil seeds and grams. Some they exchange in weakly hat to meet other exigencies such as salt, liquor match box, dress materials and dried fish. The belief is that they live in their habitat by the mercy of their deity Niyam Giri Raja. Seasonwise the water they get the seeds they grow in hill slopes, the roots, shoots, tubers and leafy vegetables they get are by the blessing of their ancestral spirits and deities. The games they get in forest meet their ritual and food requirement. The older Dongarias tell that they had many varieties of edible roots tubers, fruits and animal in their habitat which declined since decades.

The villages are provided with infrastructure the solar panels and lights and most of them are non-functional. The zinc sheets have been given to a few households which are being used as roof of their single roomed house. Inside it has a septum separating their room to keep bovines. The walls are made up of mud plastered to the weed and bamboo frame not exceeding beyond eight to nine feet high.

Large number of Dongaria families in particular face severe food scarcity during lean season. Thus, they their dependency on forests for the livelihood and subsistence is unavoidable. They have varied and prolific wild fauna and flora in their habitat. It is a fact that "Deforestation to a large extent has aggravated the food problem in tribal areas where the forest served as a sustainable to famine being food sources" (Patel 2012) [5]. At the level of social composition, it was found that there was intermarriage between Kutia kondhs and Dongaria kondhs. However, the Dongarias bring Kutia women as their

wives and never allow their daughters marrying in Kutia family. As a result it is no more practice sub-tribe exogamy. A few Dongaria households brought Kutia women as their wives. Such a marriage breaks the sub-tribe endogamy principle. Most of such interclub-tribe marriages are love marriages and marriages held through elopement. Most of the households are in the process of resource alienation. Forests are subjected to the process of degradation in varying degrees on account of severe biotic pressure, intensive use, shifting cultivation, mining, diversion of funds for developmental projects and inadequate investment for their sustainable management of resources. Weak agro-climatic conditions, poor connectivity and infrastructure, relative physical isolation and low social capabilities among Dongarias characterize them as backwardness and vulnerable in many economic frontiers.

The respondents inhabit in the dense forest in the hilly terrine with houses being low roofed and arranged linear pattern. They collect food from the forest. The Dongarias being one of the major aboriginal inhabitants of this area can be divided into three broad categories: Some Dongaria families are still in primitive stage of living while a few are in transition. Those families remain by and large isolated from the non-tribal people maintain a language of their own and have manners, customs and practices, dresses and appearances distinctive of them. The boys and girls dress themselves equally with hair pins fixed on bun, ear rings and nose rings. They mostly have an unstable economy, such as shifting cultivation and largely dependent on the forest. They do not stay in one village for generations together but when the adjoining areas are no longer suitable to derive a living, they desert the place and settle in another place. Most of them speak Dravidian tongue till now. Those families come nearer urbanites and have adapted themselves to the outer social practices face different kind of food and drink. They readily adopt the economic system of the civilized society, but their social organizations are less responsive to change. They speak their own tribal language while talking among themselves but they talk either in Odia or Telugu with outsiders.

Biosocial dimension of Dongaria community interaction for food and drink

A few Dongaria families have got assimilated by the Hindu society and their status become comparable to one or the other established *Jatis* of the local area. They speak either Odia or Telugu even when they talk among themselves. They have adopted the dress and ornaments of Hindus and also practice the Hindu religion though in most cases they have their local gods (*penu*). Dharani *penu* is the supreme deity whose blessing makes them get food and drink from forest. She is represented by three erected stones in every residential area her consort *kotebali penu* represented by a vertical stone at the back of which there is a wooden pole known as *munda* at the back of the shrine to what they locally call as *kuddi*. The goddess *hira penu* is the domestic help of the goddess *thakurani penu* who inflicts pain in children if not properly respected and periodically fed with blood of the sacrifice. *Jatrakudi penu* loves eating blood of the cock and pig and she is considered as short tempered. This deity keeps watch eye of every villagers and punishes to the deviants. To get rid of such

punishment the food is being cooked and distributed among the villagers after the fistful of it is offered to the deity. There are other deities namely *lahi penu*, who keeps people safe in forest, *lada penu* whose abode is the banyan tree in forest. These two *penus* are worshipped on the eve of communal hunting ceremony. The other important female deities known as *Lai penu*, *Sita penu* and *Danda penu* remain inside the house and are treated as benevolent spirits. Both the *Chatar penu* and *Bhoiri penu* belong to male deities are being worshipped during the *Meria* ceremony. The shaman (Beju) or Shamanin (Bejuni) performs the ritual to ward off the malevolent spirits. To do so animal and bird sacrifice is a must and while the raw blood is consumed the flesh of the bird is cooked and eaten. The *Niyam raja penu* is represented by a sword who is worshipped during *durssera* and *jura parab*. This deity is the symbol of power and authority. Most of the festivals are based on communal spirit only two of the nine main annual festivities are being organized at home.

It is believed that He relishes the blood of buffalo (*kodra*) and loves to share food with His people. Therefore big animals are sacrificed for a community feast. They do sacrifice and consume bovines in all annual festivities like Cow (*kodi*), Goat (*Adda*), Sheep (endha), Pig (*pajii*) Fowl (*Koyu*) Pigeon (*parua*). They domesticate dogs who accompany them while they cross forest road and ravines. They do not eat dogs. The flesh of the big sacrificed animal are being shared among the villagers with a bigger share for the leader and ritual head. Only brewed liquor is offered to all deities and is being shared in a container, a processed dried bottle gourd, among the participants.

Food taboo has been observed by them during life cycle rituals such as pregnancy, child birth, name giving (*mila daru*), ear and nose piercing (*ki-ka-patpkamu*), puberty, marriage (*Haidi*) and death (*hateyash*) they have restricted food items. For seven days the girl who got puberty is given no non-veg and no liquor. The preferred food is the millet gruel and salt. On seventh day, she is fed with delicacies with bowl of liquor. Similarly, during death the family members imposed restriction of food for 21 days. This is being strictly observed by women. The Milk is taboo to them because they consider cows and buffalo milk is the right of their respective calf as baby has a right over her/ his mother's milk. The animal udder is compared with breast of the mother. The child is put on breast till the birth of subsequent child. The developers could realize how milk being tabooed by a section of Khadia tribe Odisha known as *Dud Khadias*. *The milchi cows, given by Govt. to a few Dud Khadia households, as an income generating development intervention was found to be a failure.*

Food of the Dongarias

Dongarias eat food mainly three times a day morning, mid day and evening. Seasonal cereals, pulses and vegetables viz, maize, millet, redgram (*kandul*), *baila* and cowpeas (*jhudanga*) etc. the roots like *rani kanda*, *langala kanda*, and many more. Green leafy vegetables are of different kinds are eaten depending upon the seasonal availability and so also is the mushrooms. They collect these from forest and consume. The cooked food is eaten by the members of the family in group. They relish non-vegetarian items prepared out of fish,

chicken, mutton, buffalo meat, beef and pork. They love to consume dried fish baked on fire with their evening meal.

Dongaria children are put on breast for a prolonged period from the day of birth. The breast feeding discontinues at the arrival of next child. Weaning is initiated early from the parent's plates. The gruel of little millets is introduced at the beginning, however, the child is weaned from the plate of the parents and the parents wean them after the food is made paste and then pushed them into the mouth of the baby. Gradually the child shares food from parents and siblings.

Drinks of the Dongaria

They are very fond of mahua liquor locally called as *irpi kalu* and sago palm juice locally known as *mada kalu*. They brew liquor from fermented banana rice and molasses/ jaggery. The liquor extracted from banana, rice and molasses are called *kadali kalu*, *pranga kalu* / pedom and *guda kalu* respectively. Consumption of liquor is a part of their culture. In all rituals and social function they consume the liquor brewed at home. Among the Dongarias there is no hierarchy for work distribution and food consumption and use of ornaments between men and women. Both used to smoke keeping the fire of the cigar inside the mouth.

Dongarias are skilled horticulturalist. Their habitat is climatically suitable to grow jack fruit, mango, citrus fruits like orange, lemon, banana, pineapple and turmeric. In their kitchen garden they grow vegetables like ribbed gourd, ash gourd, bottle gourd, bitter gourd, pumpkin, variety of beans, brinjal and chilly.

Occasional games of birds and animal provide Dongarias the required protein and calories. Similarly, maize and ragi they grow in hill slopes mainly provide them the carbohydrate. The oil they extract from mahua seeds are being used for cooking and other bodily uses. The mushrooms they consume seasonally have their protein food value. In addition fruits, nuts, tubers, roots and shoots collected by them from forest provide them different kinds of nutritional inputs. Their multi-cropping practices insure them some kind of food basket essential for their body growth. The leafy vegetables of numerous kind help them sustain. The liquor they brew for daily consumption and ritual necessities are stated to be good for health as they carry nutritive value in their food and drink. Felix strongly support this view and published an article in news daily wherein he categorically stated that traditional home prepared drinks are never harmful and restricting them to brew is likely to affect their health adversely.

Traditionally they are the food collectors and gathers from forest. This age old subsistence activity is indispensable part of their economic life. They collect honey from honey comb. They have festivals like *Kandul parab*, *Ghant parab*, *Nuakhai*, *Pidika*, *Punapadi*, *Danger puja*, *Meria puja* and *Biharn puja and Salangi*. The last two are concerned with individual while rest other is community based. The appeased fertility cult and in festivals like *Pikadi-* for better oil harvest, *Mandia rani parab* for millet production, *Punapadi* festival for bumper production of leafy vegetable and fruits, they sacrifice big animals which are being consumed with liquor with much pumps *Salangi* is worshipped for growth of bovine wealth. Food offered to the deities is being consumed by the people in group. The rituals and the food served to appease the deities/

spirits commensurate with the seasonal availability of food items. Thus, the food diversity and seasonal rituals express an insignia of traditional coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

The sharing of food and drink among the Dongarias is based on the practice of nature worship with the philosophy of share and care attitude for each other in the community. Any loss or gain is attributed to the wrath of spirits. Scarcity of water and food is attributed to the displeasure of the ancestral spirits and the deities whose abodes remain in forest, mountain, land and water. So long, the natural resources are possessed with greater biodiversity, there is food security. As regard the nutrition, they have their own concept of food procurement, preservation, processing and intake that provides strength. However, the food taboos and food preferences follow the seasonal routine. It is also constrained by socio-cultural rituals. They are maintaining the biodiversity by not killing the pregnant animal and birds as a part of their belief system. The eating habit in forest and at home is least hygienic and it is more so during the community feast. Sanitary habits and knowledge about nutritive value of food is very poor among the adult women Dongarias. Their native taxonomy of food like hot food and cold food is unique. The history of their tradition has given the skill and technology of procurement, preservation, processing and consumption of food and drink. The sharing and caring attitude for food and drink observed among Dongarias reveal a kind of generosity. The reciprocal relationships of food exchange often observed to contribute mending the misunderstanding if they have. The group social solidarity within and between the members of small groups was a marked feature. The food and drink cannot be understood in isolation as they are inseparable from bio-cultural dimension of the community interaction. Therefore, the food and drink of tribal communities have to be seen holistically. Their ethnic solidarity and the narrations on their diversified food culture that include procurement, preservation, preparation and consumption express a sense of food security. With the decline in biodiversity of their habitat, there is deterioration in the rate of exchange of food and drink. The decline of range of required food items from their habitat resulted in health deterioration. The scarcity led them develop some kind of coping mechanism to struggle in the maintenance of order of social solidarity. Therefore, the food and drink of tribal communities have to be seen holistically. Their ethnic solidarity and the narrations on their diversified food culture that include the total process express a sense of food security and coping mechanism. With the decline in biodiversity of their habitat, there is deterioration in the rate of exchange of food and drink, range of required food items and this contributes to the loss of strength in the maintenance of social solidarity and manifest in health deterioration.

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