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UNVEILING OBSCURE FOOD CULTURE OF INDIGENOUS TRIBES: A STUDY OF SELECT
ODIA TRANSLATED FICTION OF GOPINATH MOHANTY AND PRATIBHA RAY

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Abstract

Food serves as an inextricable part of any culture as it helps them to stay affixed with their authentic culture. It is often used as a means of retaining their cultural identity. Food Culture according to American Ethnologist Lucy Long, refers to “the practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution and consumption of food” (Long, 2015).

Undoubtedly, the culture of the tribes is totally in contrast with the culture of the mainstream. They not only eat, but also live, sing, dance, drink and express their emotions discretely which is beautifully sketched in the narratives of eminent Odia writers like Gopinath Mohanty and Pratibha Ray. Mohanty’s tribal series (*The Ancestor, Paraja* and *The Dynasty of the Immortals*) shed light on inscrutable way of living of various tribes of Odisha like Kondh and *Paraja* unveiling their secret ways of devouring. Pratibha Ray’s classic text (*The Primal Land*) based on Bonda tribes is no less significant in this regard as it deciphers the quirky food history of the tribes. The tribe thriving in Malkangiri district of Odisha, have a special kinship with *Salap* tree whose extract (*sapung*) is not only nutritious but also intoxicating. They indulge in extravagant feasts during festivals and ceremonies with variety of sumptuous dishes. The *Parajas* hailing from Koraput district of Odisha are pictorialized differently as being solely dependent on agriculture. It can be truly said that their food comes right from the field and is as fresh as morning dew. They basically feed upon what they get profusely like roots, leaves, grains etc, cooked in a distinctive way. Another densely populated tribe is Dongria Kondh who occupy a major portion of Niyamgiri hills of Southern Odisha. They can be contemplated as the true sons of nature as they spend their life blood sporting, tilling and cultivating. They are often seen drinking wine and relishing.

The main objective of this paper is to unveil the obscure eating habits of the indigenous tribes especially *Paraja*, Bonda and Kondh by illustrating various translated texts of Gopinath Mohanty and Pratibha Ray. These eccentric eating habits impart an unique identity to the tribes which is deeply rooted in their credos. This study will further explore the food culture of the aboriginals.

Keywords: *Paraja*, Kondh, Food, Culture, Peculiar, Indigenous tribes

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Food is just a small word with four alphabets but it is a great linker that connects us all to various cultures. It is directly linked with heart, mind, soul and belief system of the individuals. Gradually, it evolved with the evolution of human beings and made way to our traditions and communities thus making history to be followed by generations. It has now become an identity and sentiment for us that not only connects us with our culture but also mark us with a unique authenticity. For that reason food is served in all the occasions' right from the birth of a child to the death of a person.

In India (formerly known as Hindustan), people believe for true service of God, purity of food is mandatory to bring mind to the state of equilibrium, which ultimately paves way to enlightenment. As researcher Dina Simoes Guha has noted in the article *Food in the Vedic Tradition*, food is considered as a sacred substance, it is cosmic, spiritual and facilitates the very flow of life or *prana*.

Food has also been referred to in the Upanishads as a divine substance termed as: *anna* which is both blest and social. It is both the maker and the immolator, thus it is venerated as God. The food we eat greatly impacts our nature and frame of mind. It has the faculty to switch our mind and thoughts. The mind and body impact each other through food. So, it is key to have quality food for mental and physical well-being:

“aharashuddau sattva shuddhih”(7.76.2)(By eating pure food, mind becomes pure)

India is one of the most ancient and divergent nations in the world with most varied religious communities and cultures. One of the most shocking revelations is apart from people of the main stream, there are 705 ethnic groups (Scheduled tribes) residing in it, which are commonly referred to as *Adivasis* or indigenous people. They comprise 8.6% of the total population of the country. Most commonly found tribes are Gonds, Bhils, Santhal, Munda, Khasi, Garo, etc. These people have different areas of operation and modes of living and are often claimed to be the original inhabitants of India. These tribes are often considered out of the fourfold *varna* system in the social hierarchy because of their bizarre and mysterious life style.

Tribes are people living in a specific geographical area sharing same culture, language and history. Their world is fully guarded by nature, stringent rules, regulations and superstitions. Many anthropologists and ethnographers have toiled hard to unveil their secret ways of living by conducting several researches and studies. But still the gap prevails between the people of the mainstream and aboriginals. The more one studies, the more is revealed like the layers of an onion still the interest revives among the mainstream to reach the unreachable and explore the unexplored.

Many distinguished writers from all over the world have tried their best to pictorialise their strange and peculiar life style in their writing. For instance Varrier Elwin's *Bonda Highlanders* sheds light on the bizarre customs of the Bondas which was concealed in the deep forests surrounded by mountains of the same name. There are other writers who excel in tribal literature especially because of their fascination and curiosity to explore more about the unknown and reduce the gap between the people of the mainstream and original inhabitants called tribes.

Discussion

Food culture of Odisha is quite distinct with opulent history according to sundry occasions. Though, the staple food is rice, which is found abundantly as a result of harvesting. The major influence on Odisha cuisine is highly religious in nature. As all know, the major part of Odisha is honoured with the elegance and saintliness of temples which undoubtedly form the epicenter of socio-cultural activities. Food offered to Lord Jagannath in Puri is popularly known as '*Mahaprasad*' which contains varieties of conventional dishes cooked in earthen pots using charcoal and wood. It encompasses more than sixty dishes made of cereal and vegetables indigenously grown. Odisha can rightly be termed as a food hub as both its worshipped and worshippers are foodholic. As stated in the Newsletter, *Saathi*, Ministry of Tourism, there is a belief in Hindu mythology that Lord Vishnu often meditates in Badrinath, gets his attire done at Dwarka, use to

have his lunch at Puri and rests for the night at Rameswaram”.

The cuisine of Odisha is quite plain and less piquant though heavenly. It is easy to digest and contains different kinds of *pitha* which is prepared from cereal in the form of a cake by steaming. For instance, *chakulipitha*, *podapitha*, *Sijha Manda*, *Enduripitha*, *kakarapitha*, etc., prepared on multiple occasions and festivals. There are varieties of sweets like *Rasagulla*, *Chennapoda*, *ChennaJhilli*, *Khorakhai*, *Rasabali* available in different parts of Odisha. All the *pitha* and sweets are offered to Lord Jagannath during the time of rituals. It is often said that Lord Jagannath was first discovered by the indigenous tribe in a cave amidst hills.

In Odia Literature, many renowned writers have bewitchingly highlighted the tribal culture in their works like Gopal Ballav Das, Gopinath Mohanty and Pratibha Ray in order to throw light on their mysterious modes of living. These tribes have created huge boundaries around them due to which it becomes difficult for government policies and schemes to reach as noted in the article of the researcher Dr Minati Sahoo. Their world is totally different from the world of the mainstream and so their beliefs, rituals and superstitions. These writers have done a commendable work of bringing the culture of the aboriginals to the lime light.

Gopinath Mohanty has contributed to great masterpieces like *Paraja*, *Dadi Budha* and *Amrutara Santana* which has been translated into English targeting multiple readers. To start with his classic novel *Paraja*, the novel can be rightly termed as ‘revenge tragedy’ detailing the strange practices of the tribe. Mohanty himself has taken all the painstaking effort to observe their peculiar eating habits and food culture during his posting at Koraput. Though *Paraja* is one of the most common tribes of Odisha, it is not a unified community. This particular tribe take in people from various communities, speaking a diverse language and following strange customs. In the words of the researcher Savitha Kumari, Mohanty chronicles the social history of the *Paraja* tribe through its protagonist Sukru Jani who lives with two sons and daughters in the Sarsupadar district of Koraput.

Mostly in the tribe, men use to toil in the fields and women have to look after the household chores including cooking, washing clothes and dishes, etc. The women of the tribe often use leaves and seeds in their cooking as mentioned in the first chapter of the book where Sukru Jani’s home is described;

“In a corner of this room there is a heap of mango seeds, to be crushed into powder boiled and eaten..” (Mohanty 3)

The tribes use mango seed flour or powdered *mandia* (ragi) usually cooked with a few eatable leaves and water in an earthen pot. They like flour in the form of gruel which kept them enthusiastic throughout the day. Their granaries were filled with ten measures of *mandia*: some stored up in leaf containers and others scattered all over the floor. *Mandia*(ragi) was abundantly grown in the green patches and the people of the tribe loved having it. Apart from that *olsi* and *kandula* was also harvested which belongs to different species of millet. These form the staple food of the tribe. Mohanty keeps on describing the primary occupation of the tribe; agriculture through vivid description of their green land planted with maize, chillies, tobacco and millet. Not only their style of living is unique but also their eating habits. As one of the instances in the novel, we find Jili the daughter of Sukru Jani washing some wild *gurdi* leaves for cooking when enquired by the forest guard. These people basically fed themselves with whatever was easily and plentifully available in the hilly areas like leaves, seeds, millet, vegetables, poultry, fish, crab etc.

The people of the tribe were solely dependent on agriculture for their living. They use ancient *Paraja* ballads for communication, entertainment and fun in which one could get trace of their food habit. They basically use *mandia* or rice flour in their cooking which they prefer in the form of gruel. For instance, in chapter fourteen, we come across a group of reapers working in the field and singing song on harvesting:

“Daily we labour in this field of *mandia*

And pour our sweat on this land. And the crops grow and ripen and are harvested, Are

loaded in carts and taken away and stored".(Mohanty 58-59)

In these songs there is reference to home brewed beer, maize gardens and *mandia* fields which not only foregrounds their eating habits but also shows their fascination for liquor. The *Parajas* are fond of alcoholic drinks and beverages. Use of liquor is a habitual practice in all the religious rituals as noted by the researchers Reetika Srivastava and Abhishek kumar Jaiswal in their article.

All these bizarre but healthy eatables make *Parajas* indestructible and ready to face any challenges. Their food directly comes from field which keeps them healthful and disease free. The daily eating routine of *Parajas* is revealed by the novelist through eating schedule of Jani: "His needs are simple; a bowl of *mandia* gruel every morning and again in the evening" (Mohanty 2). This serves as the secret behind his strong muscular figure that keeps sickness and disease at bay.

According to the researcher Rualzakhumi Ralte, the people of the tribe observe multiple festivals according to seasons and months. They often observe the festival of Spring in March through feasting, revelry and hunting. Mohanty vividly describes the way they welcome festivals and totally indulge themselves, casting off all worries and work.

In the month of December, there comes the Harvest festival, where fifteen days after the celebration of the festival there is a ritual of eating the new grain. The writer explains the significance of harvest in the line:

"Each harvest came as the climax of an unending cycle, and bound them harmoniously to the land. The life in the soil lay dormant until they watered it with their sweat and warmed it with their breath; then it awakened, borne up on tender stalks."(Mohanty 199)

Home brewed liquor, whether *mahua* wine prepared from *mahula* flowers or rice-beer exclusively made from rice or date palm beer extracted from date palm trees – always had a remarkable place reserved in tribal culture. It is not only a part of their diet, but also added enthusiasm

to their frequent festivals and dances further enriching their authentic culture. Not only that some myths and superstitions also form a component of it.

Mohanty's masterpiece "*The Ancestor*" is also based on *Paraja* tribe, their custom, tradition and disintegration. The ancestor here is the disfigured date palm tree worshipped by the aboriginals for good harvest. Here the *Parajas* are shown living in harmony with nature. The setting is the Lulla village amidst hills and mountains. The major characters including the village headman Ram Muduli, Hari Jani, Thenga Jani, Saria Dan, and the Christians Eleo and others always seen rejoicing in a festive mood even while working in the field, rearing cattle, fishing, etc as evident in the words of the researcher Narayan Jena.

These people lead a pure life away from pollution of the urban city life. Like their needs, their diet is simple yet wholesome. They are blessed with the purest water of the river Muran which not only nourishes but also refreshes. Mohanty sketches a delightful picture of the cultivated lands in the form of undulating "yellow *alasi* fields", "bluish green *ragi* fields" and maize fields stretching along the dense forest hinting at their profession of agriculture and their dependence on it.

The *Parajas* are described as extremely conscientious since they labour from dawn till dusk just for a handful of *mandia*. They celebrate the harvesting season of spring and wait optimistically for the next season. The fresh food from the field, crystal clear river water, home brewed *mahula* wine are the first priority of the tribe apart from that they are fond of rice water, *ragi* or rice gruel that acts as a cure for them. These foods are plain and light in diet and easy to digest that not only supports good health but also keeps them lively even after a whole day labour.

In his next novel *The Dynasty of the Immortals*, Mohanty accentuates Kondh tribe which are largely populated in the Southern Odisha. The narrative revolves around various themes like correspondence between man and nature, domestication of the tribe, rituals and superstitions, subjugation of the aboriginals etc. Horticulture is the main profession of Dongria Kondh which are

acknowledged as 'Sons of Nature'. All that they need to thrive is nature, food, song and dance. They are the prehistoric tribe of India. The major character of this narrative is Sarabu Saonta who has grown old just like the very existence of his tribe. He is happy and content with the quality of life he led. The Kondhs have a different philosophy regarding life and death.

In the words of the researcher J. Infenta Virgil and Dr K. Malarmathi, whole community of Kondh is described through the protagonist Sarabu who is quite content living a normal life. He has no worries as he is the son of Mother Nature. He commemorates the very act of living and takes pride of his own culture and credos. The writer takes all the effort to observe their culture and pens down his experience through Sarabu;

"Sarabu Saonta was ruminating. All of it was futility, all darkness-ahead and behind. His life had been happy. No anxiety, no worrying-only hunting, farming, wine and enjoyment"(Mohanty 7)

A Kondh never finds life glum. He finds ways to live life to the fullest. Their philosophy is authentic and different from other tribes they believe in three things; man's ultimate kinship with nature, man's correlation with the community he lives, and lastly man's connection with God. All the three has to be maintained for the lap of luxury.

The above details the food patterns of the tribe. Despite of being an agrarian community, these people have sundry taste so far as food is concerned. Their staple food is rice and boiled, smashed potato along with onion, chilli and salt. In normal days, the potato is replaced with some green leaves. But during festivals and special occasions, they devour goat meat. They hinge upon hunting, farming and wine for their existence. Their food is completely organic and nutritious. They kill animals for flesh which provides them with protein. Agriculture facilitates product ability of various crops to keep hunger at bay and wine adds freshness to their diet keeping them enthusiastic and spirited.

When ruminating about tribal culture, Pratibha Ray is a significant writer who has spent a

considerable amount of time with the Bondas as her post-doctorial research. There she had a close observation of the Bondas living in the hilly areas of Malkangiri district and has recorded her experiences in her fictional narrative *The Primal Land*, which is based on the history of Bonda tribe.

The term Bonda means naked or savage. The Bonduni (female Bonda) has to remain half –naked in order to toil in the fields while a Bonda man would use all his time to drink *sapung* and enjoy. Their world is surrounded by weird rituals and superstitions. Their customs impart an unique identity to them making them distinct from other tribes.

The food culture of Bondas is quite discrete as compared to the other tribes. When a baby boy is born in the tribe, a young *salap* sapling is planted in his name. These tribes have special correspondence with *salap* tree. There is a belief that an extract from *salap* tree called *sapung* is quite nutritious and intoxicating which energizes the Bonda man throughout life. According to the researcher Rualzakhumi Ralte, the Bonda man may sell off his land and even his family in the crucial time but can never imagine of selling his *salap* tree:

"The *salap* has been the cause of murder, rioting, incarceration and hanging. Still, the Bonda's relationship to the *salap* is that of the flower to the stalk. An eternal link. The Earth Mother, he believes, has given him the *salap* to nurture him. (Ray 11)

The narrative doesn't have a single protagonist but a number of voices detailing the history of the Bondas. According to the novelist, the oldest surviving member of the tribe is Soma Muduli. As he narrates his own life story, the secrets of the Bonda way of living is revealed with the progression of the plot.

Popularly known as the men of the hills, Bondas feed on whatever they get. In a strange custom of Bonda marriage, a Bonda man, who use to be much younger than Bonduni, has to win a Bonduni's heart bestowing her with rich gifts. Similarly, a Bonda man is welcomed with a variety of mouth-watering dishes like roasted rats, dried fish,

puffed rice, etc. The Bonda man is no less skilled when it comes to gifting. He wants his bonduni right in his arms and for that, he would go to any extent. So, he visits with brass rings, *jalebis*, rice fried and spiced and *mahula* liquor to win his future wife's heart.

Food plays an important role in Bonda culture which is depicted in the songs of the tribe where a Bonda man tries purposefully to convince his Bonduni by describing her that he has enough food, cattle and grains for consumption. They have enough cultivated lands for harvesting so that they won't run out of crops, they have swans in large numbers to provide them with eggs and meat and multiple trees in their orchard loaded with fruits and vegetables. All these details are beautifully inculcated in the song:

"We too have our ricefields, our mango and jackfruit trees, Our flowers, our birds, our saal and neem trees. Why then do you keep saying No? Come to me if you wish, or do not come But have no fear of another"(Ray 29)

Each Bonda household use to possess a kitchen garden for availability of fresh leaves, seasonings and spices. They follow the dietary pattern of mountain people which consists of various types of meat from the domesticated animals like swans, goat, sheep, duck, rat, fish, pork and beef too. In their culture women play an important role, serve as workers and providers of food. Their staple food is rice. The rice is cooked in multiple ways like fried and roasted with added spice and sometimes puffed rice is consumed. The ricefields hints largely at rice cultivation and consumption. The elucidation of multiple trees suggests Bondas taste for fruits, vegetables and leaves. They are even fond of dry fish. These foods shape Bondas to be ill-tempered and brute as compared to other tribes.

Findings

From the above discussion, it is quite clear that food not only help us to survive but also provide us with an unique identity and culture thus marking us different from others. The food history of tribes is quite distinct from us. It has become a part of their identity and culture and thus inseparable. The tribes

are those indigenous people who live in groups, sharing a common language, culture and heritage. They have their own food culture different from others and follow a multiple of diets according to the occasion. Tribal culture and traditions are well described in the narratives of eminent Odia writers Gopinath Mohanty and Pratibha Ray who have conducted ethnographic study on various tribes. Mohanty's *The Ancestor* and *Paraja* foregrounds the culture of the so called *Paraja* tribe. The word *Paraja* means common suggesting the simple life style of the commoners residing in the hilly areas of Koraput. These people follow plain diet of *mandia* or rice gruel twice a day cooked with leaves which is both easy to digest and nutritious. Their food habits change according to ceremony.

In *The Dynasty of the Immortals*, we come across Kondh tribe, who are also dependent on agriculture. They are naïve and calm just like their food. They are fond of rice, smashed potato with chilli, onion and salt and sometimes the potato is replaced with leaves. They often indulge themselves in hunting, farming and drinking.

In Ray's *The Primal Land*, there is description of Bonda tribe and their history. Bondas are considered to be savage and naked. They feed upon whatever is available in the hills amidst forests like fruits, vegetable, fried and spiced rice, *jalebis*, dry fish, etc.

The most common thing among the tribes is the beverage they prefer. It is home brewed liquor made up of *mahula* flower. The very nutritious and intoxicating extract from the *salap* tree is often relished by the tribes especially Bondas.

The tribal food culture is quite discrete and obscure consisting of various millets, grains, vegetables and even leaves. But it is highly nutritious and life giving. Some prefer roasted rats and some wild swans. Some prefer plain rice and potato and some go for sumptuous like *jalebis*. But it helps in imparting a unique identity to them by being an inseparable part of their culture.

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