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Food as a Way of Life: Visual Ethnographic Narratives of Gadaba Food Practices in Koraput, Odisha

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"Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are." (Brillat-Savarin, 1825/1970)

ABSTRACT

Indian food encompasses a wide variety of regional and traditional cuisines native to India. Owing to diversity in soil type, climate, culture, ethnic groups, and occupations, these cuisines vary significantly and rely heavily on locally available spices, herbs, vegetables, and fruits. Tribal groups of Odisha, similar to their culture and traditions, have continued to maintain the uniqueness of their food habits, cooking practices, and even food production methods, despite the era of McDonaldization and Coca-Cola culture. Although wide-ranging ethnographic studies exist on the cultural relevance of food in India, they have so far largely ignored the tribal context in general and the Gadaba tribe in particular, as the food and nutrition of these societies are often perceived within development-oriented research as substandard. This paper highlights the significance of the food and eating habits of the Gadaba tribe and emphasizes their importance for a healthy life lived in harmony with culture and nature.

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Keywords: Gadaba Tribe; Tribal Food Culture; Indigenous Food Practices; Nutrition and Health; Odisha

Introduction

In Indian cultural traditions, food occupies a multifaceted and socially embedded position shaped by variations in ecology, climate, modes of subsistence, ethnic composition, and occupational structures. Within Hindu ritual practice, food offerings (naivedya) constitute a key medium through which relationships between humans and the divine are enacted and sustained. In Odisha, the Jagannath Temple at Puri exemplifies this ritual centrality through the long-standing tradition of offering sixty varieties of food (Sathiaa Pouty), a practice that draws devotees as well as scholars interested in ritual economies and sacred foodscapes. Across the life cycle from birth rites to death rituals food functions as both a material necessity and a symbolic resource through which social relations are structured and meanings are produced.

Despite the vast heterogeneity of food practices, India is often analytically divided into broad dietary zones, notably the rice-consuming regions of South India and the wheat-consuming regions of North India. Ethnographic scholarship has further demonstrated that food practices in India are historically intertwined with caste-based hierarchies, purity–pollution ideologies, and moral evaluations of diet. For example, while Brahmin communities in North India are largely vegetarian, coastal regions present more fluid dietary boundaries, where even higher-caste groups consume fish without stigma. Classical Hindu texts, including the Vedas, hierarchically classify food into Rajasik and Tamasik categories, embedding diet within moral and cosmological frameworks.

For Hindu communities, therefore, food is not merely sustenance but a ritualized and culturally regulated practice. In contrast, tribal food systems have frequently been positioned at the lower end of cultural and nutritional hierarchies, largely due to development-oriented and non-ethnographic perspectives that overlook indigenous knowledge systems. Such assessments obscure the ecological rationality, cultural coherence, and health implications of tribal food practices, underscoring the need for ethnographic engagement that situates food within its lived cultural, environmental, and symbolic contexts.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology to understand the food culture of the studied population. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it helps in exploring everyday food practices,

cultural meanings, and lived experiences of the community in their natural setting. An ethnographic research design was used, focusing on participatory observation method with the community. The study area was selected purposively due to the continued practice of traditional food habits. Respondents were chosen through purposive sampling, including men and women involved in cooking, farming, and food-related activities.

Data were collected through primary research, pictorial narratives were employed by taking photographs of food items, cooking processes, utensils, and eating spaces. These visuals were later discussed with participants to gain deeper insights. Informal discussions and field notes supplemented the primary data. Ethical considerations were strictly followed by obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality. The collected data were analysed thematically to identify key patterns related to food practices and cultural values.

Over View of Gadaba Tribals of Odisha

Geographically, Koraput forms part of the Eastern Ghats mountain range and is recognized for its rich ecological and cultural diversity. The Gadaba tribe is primarily concentrated in the Lamtaput block, located to the south of Jeypore in Koraput district, Odisha. The Gadaba identify themselves as "*Desia*", meaning "people of the land," and refer to their traditional cuisine as *Desia food* (*Kadi*), reflecting a strong sense of indigenous identity and territorial belonging. They speak the Gadaba language, which further reinforces their cultural distinctiveness.

The Gadaba community predominantly depends on subsistence agriculture and cultivates a variety of crops, including ragi, rice, moong, tamarind, and different types of beans, along with vegetables such as pumpkin, yam, potato, onion, radish, and carrot. Cash crops and spices such as coffee and pepper are also produced on a limited scale. Cultural life among the Gadaba is marked by collective celebrations, during which they perform *Dhemsa*, a traditional dance accompanied by rhythmic music and songs that commemorate joyful occasions. Despite economic marginalization, the Gadaba maintain strong traditions of hospitality, gift exchange, and communal sharing, particularly in their interactions with visitors, underscoring the social ethics embedded in their cultural practices.

Traditional Food Habits of Gadaba

Drawing from ethnographic observations, Gadaba food practices reveal that food is understood not merely as sustenance but as a meaningful cultural process. As Lévi-Strauss (1991) suggests, tribal communities choose "natural

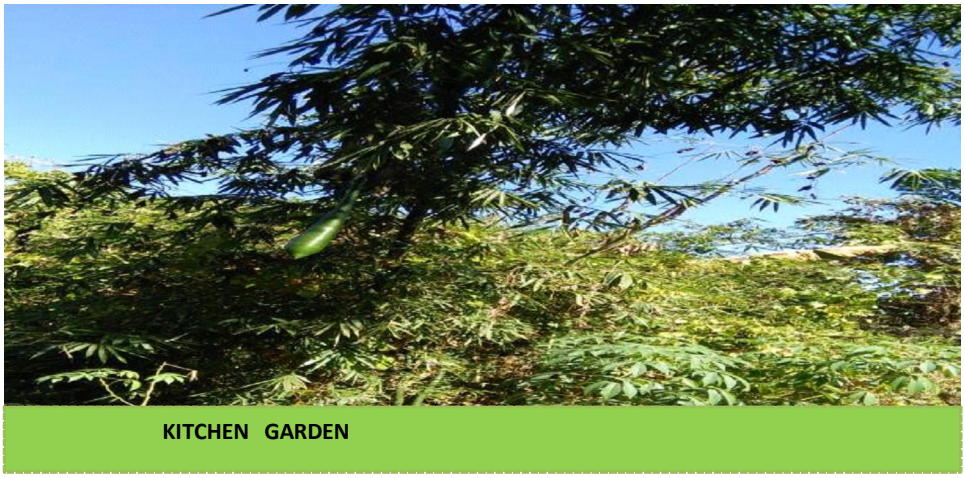

Image 1: Kitchen Garden

Source: Field Study by the Researcher

spices" not simply because they are "good to eat" but because they are "good to think." Among the Gadaba, the consumption of food and spices is believed to have a profound impact not only on physical health but also on the mind and the soul. Food is thus embedded within a moral and symbolic framework rather than being evaluated solely through nutritional parameters. For the Gadaba, food (*kadi*) is not viewed as the outcome of individual labor or household production alone. Rather, it is perceived as a collective achievement emerging from successful social relationships and reciprocal exchanges within the community, echoing Berger's (2010) assertion that food production is deeply social in nature. The growth of grains and staple crops is associated with the circulation and continuity of life (*jibon*), linking agricultural practices to broader cosmological beliefs.

Rice and millet constitute the most important staple foods in Gadaba households. Food preparation is characterized by simplicity and minimal intervention. The primary meal consists of two courses. The first course includes cooked rice (*bat, lai*) accompanied by vegetables sourced from the household kitchen garden. These vegetables are typically cooked without oil and seasoned only with chilli (*morij*), turmeric (*oldi*), and salt (*lun, bitig*). The second course comprises a thick gruel (*pej, idea*) prepared from ground and boiled finger millet (*mandia, khangu*). The first major meal of the day is taken between nine and ten in the morning, following the completion of early domestic and agricultural tasks such as cleaning the cowshed and caring for livestock. In the afternoon, during what is locally referred to as *pejbela* (gruel

time), a lighter meal is consumed, usually consisting of millet gruel supplemented with vegetable broth. The final meal of the day is taken after nightfall, around seven o'clock, and is largely similar in composition to the morning meal.

Meat (*manso*) is prepared occasionally and is cooked in a simple manner using only chilli, turmeric, and salt. Rice and millet thus remain the central components of daily consumption. In addition to cultivated foods, a variety of birds, ants, and snails are consumed, each prepared in specific ways informed by their perceived medicinal properties (Padhi, 2011). Locally brewed liquors such as *pendum*, *tadim*, *mahula*, and *salap* are consumed on a regular basis and form an integral part of everyday dietary and social life.These observations underline that Gadaba food practices are embedded within ecological knowledge, social relations, and symbolic meanings, challenging dominant narratives that frame tribal diets as nutritionally deficient or culturally marginal.

Medicinal Value of Gadaba Food Items

Gadaba food practices are closely aligned with indigenous knowledge systems that emphasize health, balance, and harmonious coexistence with nature. The food items consumed by the Gadaba community carry significant

Image 2: Manual Method of Milling Rice

Image 3: SOLAP (Palm tree Liquor)
Source: Field Study by the Researcher

medicinal value and contribute to physical well-being as well as overall vitality. Millets, which form a staple component of the Gadaba diet, are nutritionally rich and contain high levels of complex carbohydrates, B-complex vitamins, and essential minerals such as calcium, iron, potassium, zinc, and magnesium. These nutrients support sustained energy, bone health, and metabolic functioning.

Turmeric, a key ingredient used regularly in food preparation, is widely recognized for its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties and plays an important role in strengthening immunity and preventing common ailments. Similarly, the variety of leafy vegetables consumed on a daily basis serve as rich sources of iron, vitamin C, and potassium, contributing to improved blood health and resistance to disease.

Equally significant is the method of food preparation. Gadaba cooking practices involve minimal processing, limited use of oil, and simple seasoning, which help preserve the natural nutritional properties of ingredients. This culinary simplicity reflects an ecological ethos where food is valued not only for taste but also for its healing potential, reinforcing the role of diet as a foundational element of a healthy life lived in tranquillity with nature.

Food as a Process Among Gadaba

Food among the Gadaba is lived before it is eaten. My time in Gadaba villages revealed that cooking cannot be separated from cultivation, nor consumption from labor. Food begins in the soil, shaped by the rhythms of seasons and human effort, and moves slowly, carefully, from land to plate. What is considered "healthy" is not defined by recipes alone but by the entire process through which food is grown, handled, and shared.

In the fields, Gadaba men and women work together using methods inherited from their ancestors. Grains and vegetables are cultivated without chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Instead, compost is prepared from the dung of domestic animals' cows, buffaloes, and goats returned to the land. Neem leaves and ash are used to protect crops from insects, practices that reflect an intimate knowledge of local ecology. These methods are spoken of not as innovations but as common sense, as "the way it has always been done". "Harvested grains are not rushed through machines. They are cleaned, pounded, and processed by hand, often accompanied by conversation, songs, or quiet concentration. Production is primarily for household consumption rather than sale. There is little emphasis on profit or surplus; food is valued for its ability to sustain life rather than generate income. Labor is not hired in or out, and monetary calculations rarely enter discussions of everyday meals.

Cooking itself mirrors this simplicity. Gadaba kitchens favor blanched and boiled foods over fried or roasted dishes. Meals are prepared slowly over firewood, a practice that fills the air with smoke and the food with a taste

Image 4: Manual Cultivation

(Source: field Survey of Researcher)

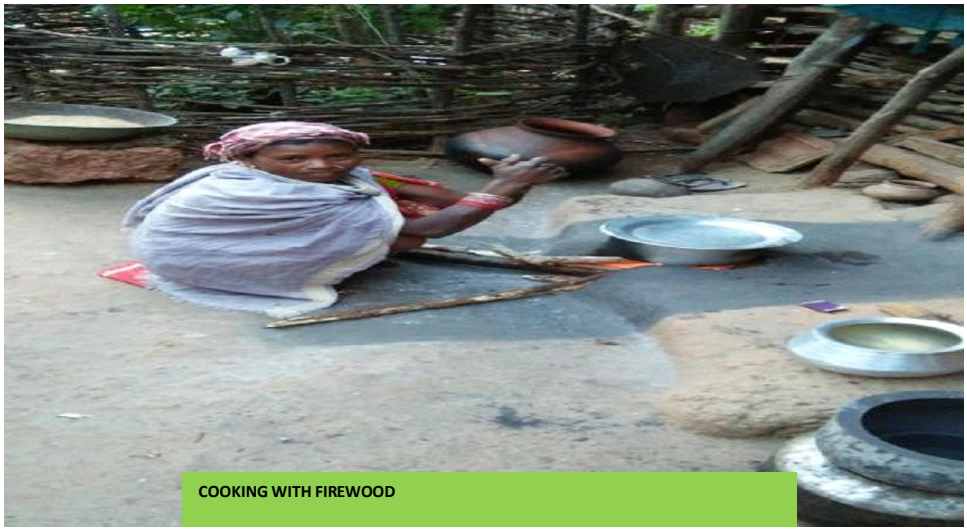

Image- 5 Method of Cooking
(Source: field Survey of Researcher)

many describe as impossible to achieve otherwise. Though the health risks of firewood cooking are known, the sensory and cultural value attached to it remains strong. Daily life is marked by physical labor working the land, tending animals, collecting firewood and food responds to this exertion. Heavy work is balanced by nourishing, minimally processed meals drawn directly from nature. Strength, endurance, and well-being are understood as outcomes of this close relationship between body, labor, and food.

These food habits are not taught through instruction but through participation. Children learn by watching, helping, tasting. In this way, food traditions are passed quietly from one generation to the next, sustained through everyday practice rather than formal transmission. Among the Gadaba, food is not merely consumed; it is cared for, respected, and lived an ongoing process that binds people to land, labor, and tradition.

Tradition And Food in Tranquility with Nature

Mary Douglas (1977) recognised that "gastronomy flourishes best where food carries the lightest load of spiritual meanings". Gadaba society stands in opposition to this very idea of gastronomy in connection with the nature around. Gadaba tribes are mainly naturalist or animist, so they have associated their food, culture in a very ascetic sense with the nature food production is equivalent to worship for them, that's why they worship the land even do sacrifices for better production. Their most ritual meal is known as "tsoru and

Image -6 Ritual of Sowing in Chait Parbo
(Source: field Survey of Researcher)

prepared in the context of a sacrifice" (Berger, 2010). After offering to God, next it offered to the eldest member of the house as a matter of respect and principle and exchanged with relatives. However, the"gastro-politics" do not dominate the sacrificial use of food among gadaba (Berger, 2010). In chait porbo, the ritual sowing of the seeds was performed by the villagers, a sacrificial meal has been provided among brothers and close relatives. So as a matter of discussion cooked food are the agents of sacrifice, social relations as well as offering to nature. In short food is of the nature, by the nature and for the nature.

Conclusion

Food among the Gadaba tribe is not merely a matter of sustenance; it is a profound expression of tradition, ecology, and indigenous knowledge systems. The Gadaba food culture reflects a close relationship with nature, where food is consumed in its simplest and least processed form, maintaining a seamless connection from field to plate. Each stage of production, processing, and consumption is carried out with due respect to cultural norms, ritual practices, and environmental ethics, reinforcing the community's collective identity and worldview (Roy, 1935; Elwin, 1955).

The processing and preparation of Gadaba food demonstrate remarkable creativity and preserve a treasure of authentic culinary practices rooted in ancestral wisdom. These practices are not static traditions but are outcomes of incremental learning acquired through long-term observation, experimentation, and adaptation to the local ecosystem. Such food practices

contribute significantly to sustaining both human life and the surrounding environment, reflecting what may be described as an indigenous model of sustainable living (Gadgil, Berkes & Folke, 1993).

Particularly noteworthy is the Gadaba community's sophisticated use of plant materials in fermentation and food processing. Though developed outside formal scientific frameworks, these techniques are subjectively scientific in nature, ensuring food safety, enhanced nutrition, and improved health outcomes. The empirical knowledge underlying these fermentation practices highlights the tribe's deep understanding of biodiversity, microbial processes, and seasonal cycles, thereby contributing to food security and well-being (Berkes, 2012; Katz, 2012).In essence, the food culture of the Gadaba tribe represents a holistic integration of tradition, ecology, and indigenous science. It stands as a valuable repository of knowledge that offers important insights into sustainable food systems, cultural resilience, and the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature.

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