The need to give more importance to development of tribal communities has been emphasised time and again, but any unbiased review would reveal that the actual achievements have been far from satisfactory. One of the main reasons for this has been that while preparing tribal development plans, existing strengths and assets of tribal community life have not been understood and recognised. Even some of the best-intentioned planning for tribal areas has started with the pre-conceived notion that tribal agricultural systems (and related livelihoods) are inherently backward and have to be changed in favour of outside intervention. This assumption, which is not at all based on scientific research, results in neglect of many positive aspects of tribal systems and their many-sided achievements which are the result of the wisdom and experiences of several generations in evolving farming systems in keeping with local conditions and constraints. This neglect leads to imposition of alien systems which, even if well-intentioned, are not suited to local conditions. A strength of traditional systems has been mixed low-cost farming. On the one hand heavy expenses are avoided; on the other many diverse crops are grown together in keeping with needs of a balanced and nutritious diet. If weather conditions are adverse, at least some crops will survive even if others perish. This is a risk-minimising strategy. Hardy species which can survive in adverse weather conditions are emphasised. Bio-diversity is valued and encouraged. In addition nutritious food is obtained (other important needs are also met) in many diverse forms from forests. This uncultivated food comes in the form of several fruits, flowers, leaves, herbs, roots and tubers. Vast knowledge of value has been passed from generation to generation regarding what to select and what to avoid. This knowledge enables tribals to carefully obtain a wide range of safe and nourishing foods which, of course, are entirely free from any adverse impact of agri-chemicals and additives. Some of these can be consumed raw while several others are used to prepare a wide variety of dishes which are both tasty and nutritious. If, despite such inherent strength tribals today suffer from high rates of malnutrition, the reason is that their traditional wisdom and the food and farming system based on these are under assault from many sides. On the one hand tribals are being displaced on a massive scale, pushed to slum-like conditions where their traditional skills and wisdom have no place to flower. Secondly, there is massive ignorance and neglect of their traditional strengths and hence there is hardly any official effort to protect these great assets. It is just not recognised by the 'developers' that if due humility is exercised, they could actually learn from tribal communities. Debjeet Sarangi, a social activist who works with tribal farmers in Odisha says: “We found that several tribal farmers were routinely growing 55 to 60 crops on two acre farms, and the mixed farming system was rooted in sound agronomic and nutrition logic. In addition these tribals had excellent knowledge about very diverse uncultivated food they could obtain from forests. We contacted senior researchers who told us that as long as these traditional systems were well preserved tribal communities did not need outside help or employment works during bad drought years. Unfortunately the spread of monoculture crops and plantations under the grab of 'development' as well as other destructive projects implemented thoughtlessly without understanding the value of tribal farming harmed the self-reliance of tribal communities. While tribals looked upon their land as mother, outsiders looked only at the minerals they could extract as quickly as possible. There is a very basic difference in the two approaches." Debjeet adds, “Experiences of our organisation 'Living Farms' show that any food security system proposed by the government should take into consideration the ability of traditional farming tribal systems to provide a very diverse and balanced mix of nutrients in the form of several millets, legumes, cereals, fruits, vegetables and herbs. The food security proposed by the state should support this strength and self-reliance of traditional food systems instead of harming them.”

A study titled 'Forests as Food Producing Habitats' conducted in Rayagada and Sundargarh districts of Odisha by Debal Deb and others recently recorded 121 different kinds of uncultivated foods being harvested by villagers, mainly tribals. Ninety-eight different kinds of uncultivated foods were used to prepare cooked foods. The study found that forest foods could be playing a vital role in terms of micro-nutrients. Particularly in times of stress, uncultivated foods form a critical source of nutrition. If the forest is well maintained there is year-long supply of such foods. This food is completely free and hence accessible to the poorest. This study has also drawn attention to the enormous wealth of biological knowledge associated with these foods available with members of the community including children. This knowledge relates to where a particular specie grows, seasonality, identification, nutritive and medicinal properties, processing, cooking, storing or other aspects.

Clearly such invaluable knowledge of bio-diversity should be respected and valued, and intervention of government programmes should be based on understanding and appreciation of such existing strengths of tribal communities.

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