

Why Odisha's Tribal Women Are Returning to Their Natural Roots for Guidance on Food

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India's tribals often possess traditional knowledge that gets lost because of the younger generation's lack of interest. An organisation is trying to prevent the same from happening in Odisha.

Even in 21st century India, there is a sizeable number of children for whom life is riddled with poverty, food insecurity, poor nutrition, and minimal access to safe water, sanitation, and health services. In Odisha, tribals are among the most deprived and backward of ethnic groups, and they constitute 23 % of the population in the state. Such has been the cycle of desperation that, for women like Chandrabati Kadraka, Mangi Kumuruka, Pratima Kumuruka, Latika Toiba, Lalita Mandai, and hundreds of others like them, impoverishment, exploitation, and ill-health have always been a part of life. But these days they are gradually equipping themselves to break free. With support from Living Farms, a non-profit working on food and nutrition security, these women are going back to their native wisdom to, at least, secure the health of their coming generations.

Ever since she participated in the 15-day nutrition camp that was held in her Nuagaon village in the Bissam Cuttack block of Odisha's Rayagada district, Chandrabati Kadraka, 22, has been a happy woman. For the first time since her daughter, Tiki, was born two years and four months ago, she now knows how to properly nurture her into a healthy child. Her baby girl is weak and, consequently, falls ill quite frequently, giving the young mother sleepless nights. "Fortunately, I have understood the importance of having a balanced meal put together from locally grown produce. We have a variety of foods, including various types of tubers and roots gathered from nearby forests, which are unique to our diet. Previously, we were hesitant to feed them to our kids. However, at the camp, I came to know how our tribal foods are highly nutritious, particularly for children," elaborates Chandrabati.

In Nuagaon, 12 mothers with children under three years of age attended the camp.

Chandrabati Kadraka, 22, with her little girl, Tiki. (Credit: Rakhi Ghosh/WFS)

According to Bichitra Biswal of Living Farms, "Kondh tribal farmers were growing different varieties of traditional foods in the upland and hill areas. But with time, most shifted to cash crop cultivation for money. Naturally, the highly nutritious foods have disappeared from their plates. Through the camps, we are trying to generate awareness around the good values of their indigenous fare."

Nutritionist Tapaswini Swain explains, "Tribal people are believed to be the closest to nature. They consume foods with very minimal processing, and the duration from the field to the plate is less, hence the bio-availability of nutrients is very high."

"Millets, for example, grow in abundance, and are a storehouse of nutrients as they contain protein, fibre as well as micro-nutrients such as beta carotene, iron and calcium."

Lalita Mandai, whose son is going to turn three, prepares a special kind of chattua (food powder) from millets and nuts which is "much better than any kind of readily available baby food in the market". (Credit: Rakhi Ghosh/WFS)

Every six months, Living Farms conducts an assessment of dietary diversity in 200 villages across Bissam Cuttack, Muniguda, and Chandrapur blocks. "In Rayagada, there is immense food diversity – from pulses, millets, and other grains to fruits, vegetables, tubers, and mushrooms. We are promoting their nutritive value aggressively in order to encourage the locals to consciously make them a part of their food regime so that their health parameters improve. During our assessments, we found a marked change among those consuming these items regularly," reveals Biswal.

Emphasizing on the need to have fresh, locally grown or gathered produce, Mangi Kumuruka, 65, enumerates the wide array of millets they have to choose from.

"There's
mandia
or
ragi
(finger millet),
juara
(great millet),
bajra
(spiked millet),
kangu
(Italian millet),
kodia
(
kodo
millet),
khira
(barnyard millet), and
suan
(little millet). Millets are full of iron and calcium, and it's important for pregnant women to have them. As it is, tribal women are largely dependent on deriving nutrition from forest foods, and it's even more critical to have these when they are expecting so that both mother and child remain healthy during those critical days," she explains.

Pratima Kumuruka, another Kondh tribal woman, adds, "There are no chemical fertilisers in our foods, so we do not see many pregnancy-related complications among tribal women. Rather, if we take millets and pulses regularly, our children are healthier."

Mangi Kumuruka, 65, emphasises on the need to have fresh, locally grown or gathered produce. (Credit: Rakhi Ghosh\WFS)

These days, Krushna Toiba and his wife, Latika, of Badeipadar village, too, are convinced that millets provide sufficient nutrition to children. That's why when the Accredited Social Health Assistant (ASHA) worker of their village asked them to start complementary feed for their seven-month-old child, the duo decided to give *mandia*. "Today, our daughter eats all types of millets, and she is healthy," shares Krushna with a smile.

After participating in the nutrition camp and interacting with Living Farms' activists, the tribals approach food differently. Notably, families like Toiba's have even started cultivating little kitchen gardens to ensure a steady supply, whatever the season. "Earlier they used to typically grow three or four types of vegetables, and that too during the monsoon season. Nowadays they sow 15-20 varieties and harvest throughout the year," says Biswal. Latika has grown nearly 27 varieties of vegetables and fruits for family consumption in the small patch in her backyard. "We do not buy from the local *haat* (market) as we produce enough for all of us," she declares proudly. Most women have taken to growing nutrition gardens in their backyard.

["We collected seeds from neighbouring villages by sharing seeds of traditional crops, and presently we have a variety of seeds. So much so that we do not have to buy them from the market; rather, we collect and preserve our own," says Majia Kumuruka.](#)

[Most women like Majia Kumuruka have taken to cultivating nutrition gardens in their backyard. \(Credit: Rakhi Ghosh\WFS\)](#)

Whereas good farming practices are one aspect of healthy eating, preparing meals is another. A few elderly tribal women have concerns about the indifference of the younger generation with regard to the traditional preparations. "Our food is our identity. Once our food is lost, we will be lost," remarks Rupa Kumuruka, 52, of Badeipadar village, rather ominously. However, since Living Farms has been organising recipe festivals, there's been a revival of interest. At these festivals, community elders rustle up some delicious dishes from millets and other forest foods. They tweak these versions to attract the youngsters, who prefer spicy street fare easily available in

haats

. Young daughters-in-law are trying their hand at making

ladoos

,

halwa

, and

pakoda

from finger millet, niger and foxtail millet. "In the recipe festival, the emphasis is on making wholesome dishes that children will relish," says Biswal.

Lalita Mandai, whose son is going to turn three, says, "I have learnt how to use ingredients for interesting meals. I now know how to prepare a special kind of **chattua** (food powder) from millets and nuts. It is better than any kind of ready baby food." Chandrabati also adds millets, pulses, and tubers to their diet.

"At home, I used to make *khechudi* with cooked rice, pulse, and vegetables. But I have begun adding different tubers to this mix. Another dish Tiki loves is my millet *kheer* that is high on iron and calcium," she says.

A tribal woman feeding her son nutritious ragi soup. (Credit: Rakhi Ghosh\WFS)

Through special nutrition camps, the tribal community is now rediscovering agriculture, natural resource management, and nutrition.

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