

## 12 Identity and individuality

### Revisiting Indian tribal cuisine

*Shraddha Chatterjee and Seemita Mohanty*

The old aphorism “India is a land of diversity” remains true when we talk about tribes in India. The term “diversity” opens up a door to define identity since it is through identity that we set a benchmark for recognising the wide array of heterogeneous people in a country like India. It is thus pertinent to define identity and individuality. Different disciplines of study especially psychology, sociology and anthropology have come up with varied notions of identity. However, these notions do not give us an independent and unparalleled definition of identity. Identity and individuality must be understood in relation to various other parameters. Thus, it sets forth the fact that there are several definitions of identity and individuality as there are factors governing it. Identity and individuality can be discerned through personal, sociological, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, racial, familial and even gender-related factors. According to the formal definition:

a person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future

(Weinreich, 1986, pp. 299–320).

This takes us forward towards a more specific definition of identity based on ethnicity with respect to tribes: “one's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity” (Weinreich, 1986). In other words, identity seeks to answer three basic questions: who am I? What am I? and How am I?

A clear idea of identity is set when one takes up the “Twenty Statements Test” by two eminent sociologists. This test provides 20 blanks on a page with the same question before each blank “Who am I?” The person has to provide 20 different answers to the same question. It is an objective approach and an initiative to understand oneself in a better way and to establish one's individuality in a society. It was acclaimed as a considerable

success and became popular among various cultures and countries. There were 20 different answers exemplifying their names, appearances, characteristics, gender, occupation, feeling, desires, and ethnic background and so on. All these facets help one see their own selves in varied ways as each facet is completely distinguished from the other. It builds up a belief that I am somebody and this somebody is different (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954). Deciphering the purpose of this test further, we infer that it is through our day-to-day lifestyle that we start constructing our identity. It may be our personal identity or social identity. This can be explained with a simple example—when babies are born, they are given names. They identify themselves with this name as their family members call them repeatedly. This is where their respective personal identities are developed. Gradually they become familiar with every member. They establish their relationships with their family, know them and then slowly get to know the outer world. This is how they adapt to their surroundings, accept it and then construct their social identities. While the children grow up in a variegated society, they further observe that they are distinct from the other and that each person has his or her own individuality. Thus, the test acknowledges this distinctiveness and helps people recognise them in a better way.

People across the globe have their own idea of their respective identities. Collective consciousness, which often plays a vital role in unifying a society, helps in compartmentalising people into certain groups, clans, tribes, creeds and so on. Tribes, however, have not seen the light of modernisation as much as the mainstream societies have. That is the reason why the ideas of identity and individuality of tribes need to be exposed to the outer world in order to serve the very purpose of these concepts, even when one's argument that these constructs work mostly the same for the tribes may seem justifiable.

### **Post-colonial India: tribal identity re-defined**

Indian tribes are some of the most widely spread communities of the country. They are a heterogeneous mass embedded within the diversification of the country. The social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and geographical differences establish a wide-ranging variation within the Indian society. This variation is significant in tribes too. There are as many miscellaneous tribal groups as there are states and languages, population size and ethnographic conditions. It thus generates a loop within a loop wherein the intricate diversity in tribes is rooted within the multifarious differences of the country. Hence, tribes are to be identified than be defined. Their individuality is to be established than be discounted. This identification comes in several ways. Be it the way they dress, the life they lead, the livelihood they choose and most importantly the cuisine they prepare; tribes or the *Adivasis* are the first citizens that existed in India since time immemorial. It is needless to mention that the colonial rule paved a way for an origination of tribes. Post-colonial

India witnessed a multifaceted cluster of different tribal groups as it started emerging. The need for acknowledging and embracing their identity had become imperative since there had always been a barricade between the conventional Indian society and the unnoticed world of these aboriginals. Since then numerous schemes and programmes have been in place for the betterment of these communities. It is a continuous process—myriads of changes have already taken place and many others are yet to happen.

The government and other perceptive Indian minds have initiated measures to safeguard such fading and forgotten cultures. Tribal fests with cultural programs, handlooms, instruments, games, and competitions have come up in various cities. Nevertheless, tribal cuisine is under constant threat as it is being replaced by readily available food products in the market. The reasons are many. Firstly, tribes constitute the lesser known section of the society. They are marginalised groups who remain subverted mostly due to the inattentiveness of the already established communities. Secondly, if we focus specifically on their day-to-day food habits, tribes are largely dependent on wild food plants, forest products like honey, wild berries, dried seeds of fruits, lotus stems and wild leaves. They are very efficient in storing products as they live close to nature. Gradually their direct access to the forest and Minor Forest Products (MFP) are declining due to frequent deforestation and lesser availability of local forest products. They find it easier to get hold of the mainstream markets for their immediate needs (Phadnis). Saili Palande Datar, an environmentalist explains this one-directional shift of the tribes towards the urbanised cuisine culture. She emphasised that tribes do have a desire to swerve towards fanciful, eye-catching and unfamiliar food items just the way we have an urge to try out new foreign cuisines. This practice of linking one's position to the food one eats is in the trend. For them, simple cooking and primitive food items favoured their body and lifestyle very well but their temptation towards commercial and packaged things has increased lately. With a mission to organise a competition among tribal ladies, Datar expects them to cook without using any previously bought spices and resorting to their traditional methods and ingredients while abiding by the norms of the competition (Phadnis, 2015).

Thirdly, tribes in India have mingled into the change and tumult of urban life and they choose to be identified with them rather than their own identity. This is chiefly because their identity never received widespread acclamation.

### **Indian tribal cuisine: an overview**

Indian tribal cuisine is one such parameter which broadly establishes the tribal identity and individuality that otherwise remain undiscovered. Tribal food, in general, consists mostly of the age-old traditional cooking patterns and customs. Despite tremendous change in Indian lifestyle and eating habits, tribal cuisine still continues to be an indigenous practice. The need of the hour is to provide recognition to those cuisines that keep tribal originality

intact. It helps us analyse the ways in which the tribal cuisine remains distinctive amidst the already existing varieties of food in the Indian society. Non-vegetarian cuisine usually consists of boiled, smoked, or roasted meat comprising pork, rat, wild rabbit, bat, pigeon, snail, frogs, jungle birds, red ant pickle, dried fish or meat and similar others. The forest also is a huge source of pre-requisites for cooking like wood, straw and beverages (mahua flowers).

In contrast to the strong flavours of the spices in Indian cooking, tribal cuisine is subtle, peculiar, bland but aromatic and healthy. For example, people of Kandha tribe of Odisha eat burnt fish and meat. They smoke the meat in order to preserve it. The oil they use is extracted from the Sal and Mahua seeds. Unlike other developed parts of the world where cooking includes varieties of spices and even chemicals, preservatives and colours, tribal cuisine is prepared by simpler means and very few of those dishes include Indian spices like turmeric, cumin, coriander and chilli. Being excellent fruit farmers, they produce different items out of fruits such as pickles and *aampapad/ amba sadha* (mango slices made from dried mango, pulp and sugar) which are famous all over the state. The process for pickle-making, however, is quite simple but takes time. They just chop the fruits, add some oil and some spices and leave it under the sun. Within one or two weeks the pickles are ready. Their food preparations speak a lot about their traits.

Tribal community is a peace-loving section with only a few things to take care of before going to bed at night. They neither prefer complicated and confusing doctrines nor eat gorgeous food. Added to this, tribes are dependent predominantly on nature say, each weather or climatic change decides how they carry forward their cuisine culture. The tribes of Kerala, like Adian, Irular, Aranadan, Cholanaikan, Hill Pulaya and Kanikkaral always remain prepared for the rainy days. As drumstick, coconut, and tamarind are crucial ingredients and de rigueur to their cuisine, these tribes preferably prepare a stew out of these components to savour the taste in the rainy season. “The Kuruma or Mullu Kuruma tribe of Wayanad are mostly vegetarian lovers and uses a lot of greens and leaves in their preparations. Boiled wild tubers in honey, fried mushrooms, ‘muddha ada’, ‘muddha vada’, coconut rice, ‘kallu puttu’, ‘Pollayappam’ are a few of their special foods” (“Tribal Food - Taste the Unknown”, 2017). Dried fish or *sukhua* and *sutki* named by the tribes of Odisha and Bengal, respectively, can be naturally parched during summers. We may say that seasons do affect their culinary art. Earthen pans or pots and locally available ingredients are the only pre-requisites for a highly nutritious and healthy tribal cooking. The Garo tribe of Meghalaya is one of the oldest living tribes in India. One of their primitive cuisines is *Do’oBrenge*, chicken cooked in bamboo stem with minimum use of ingredients. The pieces of chicken are first marinated with onions, ginger paste, garlic paste, green chillies and salt. Then they are inserted into the bamboo stem. Few banana leaves are plugged into the mouth of the bamboo

and then it is kept into the charcoal fire for about half an hour. Other such cuisines of this tribe are *Wak Arobak* (pork cooked with Arobak leaves), *Watepa* (fish wrapped in banana leaves and cooked), *Sakin* (typical Garo rice) and the list continues. If we talk about some of the Bodo cuisines, their staple food mainly consists of rice accompanied mostly by meat. *Daau Jwng Aloo Jwng Wngkhree* (chicken and potato curry), *Oma Eonai* (fried pork) and *Naa Jwng Jinka Wngkhree* (fish curry with ridge ground) are some authentic Bodo recipes. Each tribe has a variety of cuisines that are different from each other. Considering the limited number of ingredients for cooking, tribes use almost the same ingredients but different ways of cooking as well as naming the cuisines. So, these dishes are representative hallmarks for each tribe. The tribes in Nagaland—Angami, Khiamniungan, Ao, Rengma, Konyak, Lotha, Chakhesang, Phom, Chang and Pochury—have their own age-old cooking methods like shredded meat pickle, *Awushi Kulho* (chicken with potatoes), *Axone* (soybean), dried pork, and pork cooked in bamboo stems.

### **Tribal cuisine: distinct and individual**

Bringing forth the idea of tribal cuisine is not just to establish its distinctiveness but to revive the recipes that remained caged inside the four walls of the tribal households for a long time. The food choices help one delve deeper into the lives of the tribes—it narrates a tale of their origin, settlement and migration. It further gives an insight into their personality, passion, and livelihood. It also constructs the relationship between the ways in which the society comprehends their dietary habits and the ways they execute their food consumption. Thus, the tribes do not consume food; food consumes them. It further reminds us of the famous quote: “there is no love sincerer than the love of food” (Shaw, 2008). When we say food, it is the ethnic cuisine that matters and not just mere food. With the multitudes of tribes in the country with their varied languages, folk dances, customs, traditions, music, festivals and culture, tribal cuisine is another unique aspect that can be added to this list.

When we talk specifically about identity and individuality with regard to food, it does not only reflect one’s oneness in the society but also the various facets through which these eating behaviours are psychologically, socially and economically linked to one’s everyday life. It is a common human tendency to get adapted to the frequent changes taking place in the society. That is how humans unwittingly become compatible to the society. For instance, the negligence towards tribal culture and incessant attention to the enthralling modernised world of the non-tribes (i.e. the mainstream society) beguiles the tribes to renounce their own uniqueness. The well-known adage: “you are what you eat” is appropriate to explain this statement. One’s cuisine places oneself apart from the others. It helps one discover oneself through the culinary art. Culinary skill is a part of

the tribal culture along with the other cultural and sociological aspects of their life. The only difference lies in the fact that while the costumes, jewellery, dance and music are the voluntary representations of the tribal culture, tribal cuisine does not get as much attention as other tribal art and aesthetics do. Nonetheless, it is a matter of great pleasure and contentment that today many social media platforms have come up that talk about tribal cuisine. The worlds of internet and social media have hugely benefitted these indigenous people in uplifting their cuisine and carrying forward the significance of their culinary art and culture. Along with these virtual platforms and blogs there are various YouTube channels that expand the widespread varieties of cuisine through minimal ingredients and basic instructions. Furthermore, young minds are coming up with the idea of restaurants that provide tribal delicacies in their menu. We can cite the example of Aruna Tirkey, rural development professional, a food specialist, a homemaker and an expert of indigenous cuisine. A down-to-earth lady, Tirkey's humbled gestures and knack for success chronicle the countless hurdles that she underwent to reach the summit.

The common race has a preconceived notion about the tribal lifestyle and dietary preferences which in many ways hamper the growth and expansion of tribal skills. Tribal people are often confused with savages eating raw or undercooked meat and vegetables which is actually not true. Their cuisine comprises of well-cooked veg and non-veg dishes which the world needs to taste and talk about. One of the famous dishes of my eatery is *phutkal* and *kudrum* chutney.

(A. Tirkey, personal communication, March 12, 2020)

Tirkey also shares her daily hindrances while fetching the ingredients for her eatery which she manages all by herself. She says: "I use pure traditional methods by buying ingredients from tribal women, who fetch it directly from forests, drying them under the sun for few days and then preparing the required cuisine out of those" (A. Tirkey, personal communication, March 12, 2020).

*Ajam Emba* which otherwise means great taste is a successful eatery and training centre in Ranchi, Jharkhand, with an aim to make tribal cuisine available from the farmlands of Jharkhand. The most interesting fact about this initiative is that it has given job opportunities to poor tribal women who are the actual chefs of this eatery. The participation of the tribal women ensures a pure preparation of the recipes. This helps them revive the lost flavours of the tribal gustatory. To cater to the authenticity of the food, the availability of products, and ingredients decides the menu of the day. With a dream to expand this mission, Tirkey envisages to include more and more tribal women in this noble work in order to help them regain their individuality and simultaneously popularise the forgotten flavours of Indian tribal cuisine.

It is generally observed that people have a preconceived notion about tribal lifestyle and dietary preferences which in many ways hampers the growth and expansion of their skills. They are often confused with savages eating raw or undercooked meat and vegetables which is certainly not true. They eat deliciously well-cooked vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes which the world needs to taste and talk about. Another important subject to be addressed is the issue of recognition. Getting due recognition for their authenticity has been a real issue. Even though the younger generation of mainstream society has started to take the matter in their own hands by advocating the tribal kitchen, the results are not satisfactory so far. They still suffer from discriminatory rejections, unsettling remarks and prejudices.

Slow cooking is the most important technique that is usually adopted during the preparation of tribal cuisines. *Desi* mutton, *desi* chicken, *desi* prawn and *desi gettu* are some of the few cuisines prepared using long-established procedures of tribal cooking. *Phutkal chutney* and *Kudrum chutney* are two such dessert variants that speak a lot about the Odisha and Jharkhand tribal cuisine. *Phutkal* is a wild leaf that is made into chutney using required condiments from the kitchen of tribal households after drying and grinding. *Kudrum* is a wildflower “which most likely resembles Hibiscus” as informed by Tirkey. One morsel of the *chutney* is enough to create a blast of flavours, i.e. tangy, spicy, sweet, salty and sour—all at the same time.

Though respective state governments are sincerely working towards the betterment of their tribal subjects, their culinary sphere gets less attention due to other overshadowing needs like health, housing, education and employment. One way to bring out the best of tribal kitchen in front of the commoners is to organise festivals and competitions while keeping an eye on the sponsorships and financial rewards to encourage them for voluntary advancements.

One of the many YouTube channels that chronicles tribal recipes and makes them reach out to the dwellers of mainland is *Eat Your Kappa*. A Garo woman from Shillong, Meghalaya, is taking the North Eastern tribal cuisine to yet another level. Nambie Marak, the woman behind this channel wants to bring back her childhood while recreating those recipes in the lap of nature. In her videos, Marak is seen cooking the indigenous North Eastern recipes preferably outdoors and on the lap of nature. She endeavours to highlight some lesser-known ingredients, cooking techniques and recipes that do not reach the mainstream society. “A Kappa, the source of the name of her vlog, is the name of the cooking technique in the Garo tribe—in which meat and vegetables are cooked with liquid alkaline” (Deepak, 2017).

### Through an existential ideology

Tribal cuisine can be comprehended through the ideology of existentialism. Existentialism as a philosophy as well as a literary movement

gained its popularity during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Existentialism as opposed to nihilism argues that life is meaningful and one must establish one's own existence before life comes to an end. Existentialism breaks all sadistic finitudes by stating that we have possibilities for opportunities and a prosperous life although death is an inevitable end. In other words, there must be room for one's own identity and recognition amidst the absurdities of life. This takes us to the famous quote by Jean Paul Sartre (2007): "existence precedes essence." Essence is a philosophical idea that asserts that every being has a set of characteristics which turn out to be its essence. Essence becomes the fundamental identity of one's life. Sartre opposes this notion as he believes that no human being is bounded by some set of predefined characteristics that certify his purpose in the society.

According to existentialist theory, human beings should govern their own life and create meaning out of it. There are no preconceived rules that set their identity. This identity is to be generated than to be acquired by living a life and setting one's own distinct individuality. There are many examples to substantiate this. Animal world, for instance, has been divided into three categories in terms of the food they consume. They are "herbivores," "carnivores" and "omnivores." The former two classes exhibit significant differences in their traits. Carnivores being predators often are violent creatures whereas herbivores are usually calm. The intention behind this example is to understand the basic traits of humans from all around the globe. The mainstream societies have so many varieties of cuisines to confuse themselves like the ones representing different countries i.e. Chinese, Italian, American, Indian, Mexican, Spanish and French. For instance, harmony is an integral part of Chinese culture (Wu, 2021). It is directly reflected in their food preparations where almost all the flavours like spicy, sweet, sour, and salty are deployed in a very balanced manner. The food is also very appealing to the eyes just like the Chinese dresses and structures. Similarly, the cuisines of United States are heavily impacted by the country's history. The diversity seen in the US food industry is because of the colonisation and immigration that once upon a time had brought this country down to its knees (B Le, 2017).

In India, where in every 100 kilometres, the language changes and so does the lifestyle, food habits differ from state to state. It is generally influenced by the cultural, religious and geographical aspects of our country. The reason behind the above citation is to understand the connection of tribes with their cuisines. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that tribal people are born and nourished in the lap of nature which also helps them shape their own identity. So, their lifestyle is way simpler than that of the outside world. Tribes in India do have a variation but one important factor connects them together. Every Indian tribe is bounded by a coherence of simplicity. Sadly, their interactions with the other world i.e. the developed societies have affected their culinary habits. We often classify a person with the food they have. The choices of cuisine speak a lot about a person. A

person's choice of a restaurant narrates his social status too. Bread, to illustrate, symbolises poverty whereas cake implies wealth. Evidently enough, the tribal cuisines fall prey to the discriminatory notions of the mainstream society. Humans are the most adaptive beings. We always have an inclination towards the ongoing trends. We want to keep pace with the ongoing changes in the society. We have an obsession to fit in, irrespective of whether it is in our comfort zone or not. Similarly, eating practices change with the upcoming shifts of time. In this case, holding on to the primitive practices of dietary habits poses a challenge for the Indian tribes. This is due to a dearth of knowledge and lack of initiatives by mainstream people to acknowledge the importance of tribal cuisine.

Imagine if we had a food system that actually produced wholesome food. Imagine if it produced that food in a way that restored the land. Imagine if we could eat every meal knowing these few simple things: what it is we're eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what it really cost. If that was the reality, then every meal would have the potential to be a perfect meal. We would not need to go hunting for our connection to our food and the web of life that produces it. We would no longer need any reminding that we eat by the grace of nature, not industry, and that what we're eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world.

(Pollan, 2006)

Pollan, an American author, journalist and activist, asserts that food is an integral part of our day-to-day life. It is so much amalgamated into our everyday lives that it has become commonplace. We are generally not perturbed by the availability of food at every nook and corner of the world. But we certainly cannot accept the inaccessibility of food. Unlike the mainstream society, tribes do have a sense of reverence for Mother Nature and express a deep gratitude for the things that are bestowed upon them. However, migration has affected the tribal cuisine culture to a great extent. The government strategies in the name of wildlife conservation and Forests Rights Act have prohibited the entry of many indigenous people into the forest premises. As a result, the inaccessibility of various herbs, edible flowers, plants, and other products hinders the essence of their cooking (Pandey, 2016). Added to this, it further obstructs the way they maintain their culture of cuisine preparation. Thus, it will not be wrong to say that their cuisine tasted way better a decade ago than today. Nowadays, they have to take the aid of certain spices to bring out the taste in their food. To sum it up, the involvement of foreign ingredients into tribal cuisine interferes with their individuality that otherwise becomes a benchmark for their identity. Nevertheless, the acceptance and inclusion of the tribal cuisine in the outside world has opened up a portal towards an era where tribes are no longer treated as negligible or inferior beings. The inclusion of tribal cuisines may not be solely responsible

for this achievement, but it has played a vital role in establishing their significance in a society with plenty of rooms for betterment of tribal cuisine.

### **From existentialism to individualism**

As we discuss individualism as a philosophy, we come to note that existentialism gives rise to individualism. Individualism prioritises the individual over every other being providing “the right of the individual to freedom and self-realization” (Wood, 1972). Individuality should not be confused with selfishness for selfishness is only concerned with the self and does not incorporate the participation of others. Individuality, in contrast to selfishness, takes into account the presence of others. It is through the presence of other beings when one has the potential to individualise oneself and construct his singularity in the world of differences. Cuisines follow the same regime. Tribal cuisines set a standard for their own uniqueness and that brings all sects of tribes together in one line. They are the first citizens to exist since ages.

Structuralism is an influential movement of the twentieth century.

Saussure proposes a relational theory of language where

- (i) “words” existed in relation to other words.
- (ii) The meaning of each word was dependent upon the meaning of other words.

Thus, meaning was the result of being able to recognise the *difference* between words—“cat” is “cat” because it is *not* “bat” or “hat.” It is different in terms of the sound produced and the way in which it is written. Meaning thus emerges in the difference or opposition between words. We work with binary or paired oppositions to make sense of words and sounds in speech. “Cat,” “bat” and “hat” are all words in the system of language. They are related to each other because they belong to the system and because they make sense only in being different from each other. We would not be able to recognise “cat” as a unique word if we did not have other words from which it is different (Nayar, 2010).

Ferdinand de Saussure’s proposed theory cited above is to a greater extent relatable to the idea of identity and individuality of tribal cuisines. To make it easily understandable, the difference between dishes of same category belonging to the respective kitchens of tribal huts and urban apartments can be scrutinised. The Khasi Tribes of Meghalaya are famous for their traditional food *Jadob*, which is a classic example of food being an identity. When served, *Jadob* may look similar to Biryani but there is a huge difference in terms of ingredients, preparation as well as nomenclature. In Khasi the meanings of *Ja* and *Dob* are rice and meat, respectively. So, it is clear that the dish is named simply after the major ingredients used in it. The dish is prepared in the blood of whichever animal is easily available and

sometimes in pork fat (Bhatnagar, 2015). It uses less oil and the spices are not usually the same as used in Biryani. However, the origin of the word Biryani is debatable as one theory suggests the root word to be *Birinj*, the Persian word for rice, whereas another theory says it to have come from *Biryani* or *Beriyani* meaning to roast or to fry. Not only *Jadoh*, but most of the tribal cuisines ever recorded have their own stories of origin and preparations which is different from the mainstream dishes. That is the reason why their individuality remains intact as long as the concerned tribesmen are not affected by the glitters of the outer world. Just the way a cat and a leopard are different even though belonging to same family, dishes like *Jadoh* and *Biryani* are different despite their seemingly similar thumbnails.

Another sort of individuality can be observed from the tribes belonging to different other states. For example, all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have rice as their staple food and so do the tribes of Assam. But the varieties of dishes made of rice individualise both the states. Inhabitants of Arunachal Pradesh produce *Dung Po* (steam rice), using two brass utensils which is inspired by a myth that brass utensils provide better taste. This substantiates the mythological influences on tribal kitchens. Another dish is *Kholam* where rice is cooked in a unique method. Instead of utensils, only a bamboo filled with rice and water in a certain proportion is left with enough heat. In Assam, rice is soaked, roasted or boiled. The soaked rice is called *Kumal Saul* which is best served with milk and is eaten as breakfast. It is observed from the above citations that tribes inhabiting different states, under different climatic conditions, cook different meals but they use almost the same ingredients and methods. Even the sub-tribes of a certain tribe differ in terms of cuisines made of same major ingredients. For instance, the Pnar, which is a sub-tribe of Khasi residing in East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, eat a delicious *Doh Kblieh* which is basically a pig brain salad. Among other pork dishes found in the rest of the sub-tribes is *Dohneiong*, which is cooked using pork and black sesame and has gravy. So, individuality is observed not only between tribes and mainstream societies but also among tribes of different states, different tribes of the same state, same tribe inhabiting different states, and even sub-tribes of one particular tribe; the influential factors being geography, availability of wild creatures, agriculture, cultural and religious beliefs.

Odisha tribes also have their unique dietary habits and cuisine culture, which is quintessentially reflected in one of their energy drinks, *Mandia pej*, in addition to the other ubiquitously available and more widely known health drink *handia*, made from fermented rice, with the fermenter prepared from a mixture of dried plant roots, stems, leaves and barks. *Mandia pej* is usually taken to cool down the body amidst the scorching summers. It is prepared by adding the mixture of powdered rice and powdered *Mandia* (finger millet) into boiling water. Once the heat subsides, the drink is distributed among the family members and can be preserved for three days. Another beverage that is a naturally procured intoxicant is *Salpa* which is

consumed by many tribes of Odisha. *Salpa* is procured from an extension of a tree of the same name. The fully-grown extension known as *Philo* is cut off from the tree and its liquid is consumed raw.

Here we can cite the cuisine culture of the Munda tribe, which is one of the biggest tribes of Odisha, who like other tribes, also worship some local deities and celebrate their traditional festivals which incorporate a vast array of traditional dishes. They worship Lord *Bhairava* in a local festival called *Landi Jatra* which takes place towards the end of summer and the beginning of rain. A carnival is organised and people from neighbouring villages are welcomed. Some traditional rituals are also performed like animal sacrifice and prohibition of meat for women. The sacrificed sheep is marinated with tamarind sauce, turmeric, chilli and salt before being cooked with very little oil. Once cooked, the flesh is first offered to Lord *Bhairava* and then distributed among the men. Women do not eat this meat with a fear of being infested by evil spirits. Another festival is *Bolani Jatra* in which the chariot procession resembles that of the great "Rath Yatra" of Lord Jagannath. It follows the similar traditions of sacrifices and ceremonies as *Landi Jatra* except for the venue, which is outside the village. They celebrate marriages with a wide range of non-vegetarian delicacies as lunch and dinner among guests and family. They cook country chicken, ducks, dried fish, smoked fish, grilled fish, quail, sparrow and mutton. After fishing, they tie the fishes with bamboo sticks and put them over the flames for some time. After the smoking of those fishes is done, they are left to be dried in the sun. It takes days for the fishes to be perfectly dried. They last for years without any preservatives.

Like the rest of the world, Mundas too strictly follow some rituals after the demise of their loved ones. Immediately after the death of a dear one, their family abandons the kitchen for three days. Since they do not cook their own food, their neighbours take the task to fill the poor family's stomach. They are given only vegetarian food cooked without oil and spices. On the fourth day, all their relatives are invited to mourn for the dead one. The gloom and bitterness in the acceptance of an absence in the family are reflected by the food that is cooked that day. Neem leaves, bitter gourds and chilli are cooked together; and a bitter-tasting curry is produced. Every member of that gathering eats it. On the tenth day of the demise, they assemble again to pray for the salvation of the departed soul and celebrate by dancing to local folk songs and drinking *mahuli* which is another common intoxicant, brewed from *mahua* flowers. Dried fish rolled in Sal leaves and pinned to a bamboo stick is soaked in castor oil and given to the members of the family to smell. With that, the ritual of living with uncombed hair ends and the members are allowed to apply oil in their hair. The guests are offered dishes made of the aforementioned non-vegetarian ingredients along with *Ghugni* which comprises of jackfruit and radish. As per the family's convenience, another gathering is arranged anytime between six months and a year to reminiscence and celebrate the deceased

for one last time, and the food offered that day is almost the same as the tenth day, but the bitter-tasting dish of the previous congregation is left out of the menu. This represents their complete acceptance of someone's departure from the family for the heavenly abode, and the need to move on with life.

## Conclusion

The Government of India has been introducing and exercising various measures to help society acknowledge and appreciate tribal life and living, while taking necessary countermeasures to safeguard the tribe's identity and individuality, time and again. The constitution of India has been caring and thoughtful enough towards the tribes. However, additional changes are required to bring out the best of the tribal community and since food is the lane seldom walked through, tribal cuisines need more recognition. Some non-governmental organisations as well as concerned individuals have taken a step forward to fulfil the gap. Different wings of media have joined forces to make tribal worlds better. Food festivals like "Bhoomi Utsav" which is held on 2 October every year, "The Seed Festival," held in Delhi in the month of March and in other big cities as well throughout the year, "The Living Farms Adivasi Food Festival" in different states and "The Mei Ramew" also known as "The Mother Earth" festival in northeast India are being organised successfully in which tribal communities are the biggest beneficiaries. Television shows like HOMP (*Highway on My Plate*) by NDTV. Good Times and several others have also shown great interest in highlighting tribal cuisines. Food bloggers and print media have become the indispensable tools to magnify these delicacies to their readers. All these efforts may not be enough to serve the purpose as of now, but definitely a revolution can be seen brewing in. As long as the tribes of India do not let the outer world invade their kitchen and corrupt the culinary principles, food will keep on representing their identity and individuality in front of the world.

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Edited by  
Seemita Mohanty



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