

# Food Practices among the Santals of Odisha: An Anthropological Enquiry

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## ABSTRACT

Food is the one of the most vital necessities of life. It is also a prerequisite of nutrition which nourishes the body. The function of the food is to supply nutrients to meet the physiological needs. Food is also integral to our social existence and serves an important function in our daily life. In addition to satisfy social and physical needs, food also satisfies our emotional needs. Santal, one of the tribes with a wider distinction has its own food habits they constitute both domestic and wild food stuff though the latter is at receding trend. They eat both vegetarian as well as non vegetarian. In this paper it is intended to discuss their food habits which have cultural heaving on their choice. The food choice is also delimited by their economic condition and the environmental productivity, thus influencing the nutrition base. The present empirical study is an attempt to highlight the food habits among the Santal society. This study was conducted in the Santal village of Bantali Rakhasahi in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha.

**Key word:** *Food habit, Santal, tribe, Cultural perception, Religion*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the 2011 census, India has more than 84 million tribals who constitute 8.2 percent of country numbering 84,326,240. There are 62 tribal groups found in Odisha accounting for 22.21 percent of the total population of the State. Total tribal population of the Odisha is 95,90,756 of which males and females are 47,27,732 and 48,63,024 respectively (Census, 2011) and cover approximately 15 percent of the country's area. Mayurbhanj is one of the tribal dominated districts of Odisha, which has been declared as the fully scheduled district of the State. In the present study the authors have attempted to analyse the food habit of Santal tribe in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, India.

Food in any society is basically an indispensable means of survival (Marak, 2007) and it is integral parts of our social existence and serves an important function in our daily life. However, viewed from anthropological perspective, it becomes evident that, food not only satisfies hunger but is also located in the cultural complex of the society (Panigrahi, 2015). Food habits of a community are influenced by geographical as well as social surroundings (Dhar, 2010). Food habits of tribals in different region are quite different from the other

parts of the country as food habits of many tribal groups are mostly monotonous and local based (Varadarajan, 2010). Food procurement and its preservation are conditioned by the climate, varying seasons, community size, economic condition, infrastructure and technological knowledge. Traditional norms, religious belief and societal values also influence consumption pattern. At an advanced stage of social development, taste becomes an important indicator of food-habit (Saikia, 2013). In the simpler society like tribals their food is also related to the cultural context. It includes regular food, seasonal food, health foods and food offered to deities. Occasions related to life cycle like birth, marriage and death etc. also found to bring in variation in their food consumption pattern. Ecology too has important bearing upon the availability of the food. In recent times, ecological degradation and influence of other communities has resulted in a lot of changes in food pattern of the Santal people.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of the study are

- a. To analyse the food habits among the Santal tribe of the study area.
- b. To study the daily food consumption pattern of the Santal.

c. To evaluate the changes that is taking place in the traditional food pattern of the tribe.

### III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A number of scholars have made significant contribution towards study of food habits of communities. Rajalaxmi (1999) has suggested that food habit is different from people to people, region to region and county to country. Food processing practices, in general, seem to differ depending on various factors like tradition, culture and individual preferences. Processing, in addition to improving the taste of the food products, add variety and diversity in food habits, and also improves nutrition. She is also opined that understanding the qualitative aspects of the tribal food processing could help in proper planning, motivating and evaluation of nutrition education programmes intended for the community. Yotopoulos (1985) emphasised the concept of grain can be consumed in two forms- first direct grain consumption as rice, roti, bread etc and second indirect grain consumption as animal products embodying definite quantity of feed-grain (meat, eggs, fish and dairy products). Another component of indirect grain demand is processed food, alcohol and fuel. Marak has emphasized that concept of food consumption is influenced by

many factors such as socio-economic status, culture, religion, education, ignorance, food beliefs and habits. Girijamma (2001) has claimed that food habits and food beliefs are among the oldest and most entrenched aspects of their culture. According to Hembrom (1996) the food of Santal is as much simple as their life. Unlike main stream community, they do not include much spices and oil into their diet as they live closer to nature and adoption of food available in their surroundings. Saikia (2013) has examined that food habits of a community and hold the view that it is influenced by geographical as well as social surroundings and its procurement, while its preservation are conditioned by the climate, varying seasons, community size, economic condition, infrastructure and technological knowledge.

### IV. PROFILE OF THE STUDY AREA

According to the census 2011, India has 8.10 percent of tribal population. The land of Odisha is one of the largest abodes of tribal concentration in India. It is one of the states in eastern India which is famous for harbouring 62 tribal communities occupying second place in the country for holding 22.08 percent of tribal population from among the total population of the state. Almost 44.21

percent of the total state geographical area has been constitutionally declared as scheduled area. These tribal communities mostly reside in the scheduled Area (overwhelmingly rural as 95 percent of them reside in the villages) which account for 44.21 percent (Census, 2011) of the total land of the state. They also vary from one another in terms of their number, languages, social structure, and territorial affiliation.

Mayurbhanj district is extremely important from anthropological point of view. It is inhabited by almost all the scheduled tribes found in the eastern regions of India and it is educationally most backward district of Odisha, which covers 4022 sq miles with a total population (census, 2011).

The present research work was undertaken among the Santals of Bantali Rakhasahi village lying on East Longitude of 85°40' and North Latitude of 21°16' and 22°34' in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha ([www.mayurbhanjdistrict.nic.in](http://www.mayurbhanjdistrict.nic.in)). The village is about 80 km from the district headquarter town of Baripada and about 8 km from Rairangpur town. Though the village is multiethnic, it has the largest concentration of the Santal population. Santals are the largest adivasi community in India who believe in Hindu religion

(Guha & Ismail, 2015) and are also one of the advanced and numerically dominant tribal communities of Odisha. (Murmu and Kanhar, 2014). They call themselves *Hapan*, meaning child or children of human beings. Locally they are known as *Majhi*. Numerically they are the third largest tribe of India and second largest in Odisha. According to 2011 census, they constitutes 56.67% of the total population of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha and their literacy rate is 60.7 percent in the district. They can be found mainly in the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. They speak among themselves in their own language called *al-chiki* at the same time they got used to speaking in Odia as well with the outsiders when they come to visit their village. In general these people are peace-loving & friendly with the outside visitors (Parida, 2016).

The entire village of Bantali Rakhasahi consists of 175 households. The total population of the study area 904 individuals consisting of 475 (52.54%) males and 429 (47.45%) are females. The village consists of four caste and three tribes. The most dominating among them is Santal. Of the total households, 131 (75.99%) consists of Santal families; among them 54.29% are male, 45.70% are female. The second place is occupied by

Kamila caste (Goldsmith) which has 24 households constituting 13% of the total population. The remaining are of Blacksmith with 9 households consisting of 41 individuals (4.53%). Munda tribe consists of 5 households with 25 individuals of which 11 are males and 14 females. The fifth is Kolho tribes represented by 3 households with 3 families in this village which consists of 15 (1.65%) individuals. There are two scheduled caste households consists of 13 (1.43%) individuals with 8 males and 5 females. There is only 1 Gouda caste household with 5 persons of 2 males and 3 females (Parida, 2015). The major proportions of males were found in the age groups 40-49 years i.e. 23.9 percent and 30-39 years 23.6 percent while in females the highest percentage is reported from age groups 20-29 years ( 28.3 percent) and 30-39 years (22.9 percent).

## V. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

For the present empirical study various anthropological methods have been used for a depth understanding of food habits among the Santals. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data, but more emphasis is given on primary data which are collected by authors through field based work. Only qualitative data has been collected through

using observation method (both participant and non-participant), interview method, and structured questionnaire.

## VI. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### FOOD HABITS AMONG THE SANTAL

Food among the Santal is very simple as it mostly relies upon the food available within their surroundings. Cultivation of rice is the primary source of food in their diet but the way of cooking and eating rice is different. After the rice is cooked they don't pour out the water from rice instead, they take it whole and it is called, *da maadi* in Santali, where *da* means water and *maadi* means food. With *da maadi*, they mainly take green leafy vegetables which is either grown around their house or picked from nearby jungle. They have classified their food into two main categories, i.e. *jom* and *nu*; *jom* means solid, chewable food and *nu* i.e. drinkable and smoky items. Apart from cultivated crops, Santals procure their food from their nearest forest. They cover not only corns of grasses but also various types of large quadruped animals.

The Santal are taking meals thrice a day. They take it around 8 o'clock in the morning and in afternoon around 1 to 2 o'clock.

clock and 7-8 o'clock in the evening. There is no special time for the intake of tea or coffee. Their staple food is rice and is taken with a side dish dal with some vegetables or meat, fish or egg (*billi*) as non-vegetarian (*jill*) items. Due to deforestation, the quality and variety of their diet has changed a lot. Now, most of the items of their traditional diets mainly non-vegetables food (name them) are not available in the forest. Their present diet consists of rice, vegetables, pulses, meat and packed foods like bread, biscuit etc. This qualitative change of diet affects the intake of nutrient which is not adequate for health. The Santal people are mostly habituated to take homemade liquor called *handi* (rice-bear). However its consumption is very high which also causes health problems.

#### A. VEGETABLE FOOD

Santal cultivate vegetables in their agricultural land and get different wild vegetable from the forest. These include, potato (*allu*), tomato (*bilati*), drum stick leaf (*munga alla*), chili (*marich*), cauliflower (*baha kubi*), cabbage (*patam kubi*), turnip (*oll kubi*), bitter gourd (*karulla*), coriander leaf (*dhunia sakam*), gram (*chhola*), ladies finger (*bhuundi*), radish (*muli*), arum (*saru*), mangoes (*ull*),

papaya (*jada*), jamu (*kud*) and plum (*didhadhi*).

#### B. NON- VEGETABLE FOOD

The non-vegetarian food of Santal includes domestic as well as the wild varieties in regular basis. These are fish (*haku*), frog (*rate*), crabs (*katkaam*), ants (*kurkuti*), rabbit (*kulei*), squirrels (*tul*) and birds which are hunted by them. They also go to hunt animal from the forest which is called "**Disum Sendra**". Animal food are also taken at specific occasions with due observance of certain rituals.

They used to eat domestic animal meats like **Beef** (*degri jill*); during Diwali festival. First they sacrifice black cow in the cowshed; they cook beef at the cowshed by boiling and mixing it with the little salt. They then share it among all the family members and relatives. **Pork** (*sukri jill*) is taken in the month of February. They sacrifice pig at the *Jahira than* a sacred place. The head portion is give to the **Naike**, whereas body portion is shared among the community member who attains the function. They cook the food with salt but no oil is added to it. They do not give that pork to the females. They also buy pork from the market. **Mutton** (*Merrom Jill*): Mutton is eaten in different festival, they sacrifice the he goat at the *Jahira than*, (sacred place) they give Head

portion to the Head man, and body portion is shared among the participant member. First they boil that meat and mixed with the til (sesame) oil and salt. They also buy meat from nearby market. Wild animals like, rat (*gudu*), rabbit (*buru kulei*) frog (rate), crabs (*katkaam*), ants (*kurkuti*), rabbit (*kulei*), squirrels (*tul*) are hunted from the forest. **Fish** (*Haku Jill*): Sometimes, they catch fish from their agricultural field or nearby river; they roast fish mixed with mustard oil or till oil. In every festival they sacrifice he-goat, cock, pig, cow at the sacred place (*Jahira*), after which their actual festival begins. The Prasad is only given to male person. They do not give it to women for they are considered impure because of their menstruation cycles. They believe that **“God will be angry if they give that Prasad to the women”**.

### C. FOOD FOR CHILD

Santals people give soft food to children like boiled rice, boiled vegetable preferably potato, Arum (*saru*). In the morning time they are given biscuits, Water rice, to the children, during lunch time boiled rice is given with boiled potato. They fry drum stick leafs (*munga alla*) with mustard oil to feed the children and some time they give boiled eggs to the children. Children are given fried rice

(*khegedi*) in the evening whereas at night the food consists of boiled rice and fried potato with mustard oil.

### D. FOOD FOR ADULT

Santal people take food twice and thrice in a day. In the morning time they eat cooked rice soaked in water the previous night, with mustered oil (*sunum*) or till oil (*til sunum*) roasted drum stick greens (*munga alla*) and also use chotni like burnt resin with little bit salt, then they go to field with their lunch box (*patam*). They believe that without rice they cannot work properly. Because it gives much energy, they return from field at afternoon, after bath they eat boiled rice with different vegetable food like cauliflower (*bahakubi*) with chili (*marich*). Sometimes they catch fish from their agricultural field or nearby river, they roast fish mixes with little bit of mustard oil or *til* oil and salt. Food during night does not vary much; they take rice, curry (*utto*) like potato curry, cauliflower (*bahakubi*) or any other vegetable curry.

### E. FOOD FOR OLD AGE

Usually aged person takes food thrice a day. In the morning time they take **black tea** with sugar with fried rice (*khejedi*), biscuits, some person take watered rice with greens leaf of Drum

stick leaf (*Munga alla*). For the lunch they take boiled rice with boiled potato arum, they do not want to eat fried or spicy curry because they believe that curry is not good for digestion. In the evening time they take black tea with fried rice (*khejedi*), whereas dinner consist of boiled rice and burnt potato, or resin burnt *chatni*.

#### **F. FOOD FOR THE GUEST**

The guest is provided with best of the food that are offered. Basically chicken cooked with spices and oil along with liquor is the main delicacies. In the morning time they are served black tea with biscuits. Lunch consists of spicy chicken which is made from resin paste, Ginger (*ada*) paste; chilli (*marich*) paste fried with till oil and boiled rice. The guest is honoured with country liquor, or the foreign liquor. Boiled rice with vegetable curry accompanied with liquor is served in dinner.

#### **G. LEAN PERIOD**

The rainy season is called as lean period among the Santal. June to August is a difficult period for the Santal people as they cannot do any work in the forest or go for daily wage labour because of continuous rain during these months. During this period work opportunities from agricultural sector are negligible. As

the Santal do not have habit of saving for the futures, they are in real trouble when confronted with times of scarcity.

#### **H. SPECIAL FOOD**

The Santal provide some special food for women during confinement after delivery. This food is generally continued for a few weeks after the birth of the child. This food includes medicinal herbs, vegetables and green leaf vegetable. The special food is provided to the women to regain the health and vitality, and also to produce more milk for the child. However, they don't give any special food for women when pregnant. They were not taking milk as a food but presently they also take milk as their food menu.

#### **I. RITUAL FOOD**

Santal people observe different ritual. They eat different food in the different rituals both vegetarian and non-vegetarians food. These foods are called sacred foods. They used to drink liquor in different occasion, they eat banana in different festival, this is regarded as sacred food also, eat coconut in different festival, first they worship that food then they eat. On the 21<sup>st</sup> day of child birth (*ekoisia*), they observe purification ceremony for which maternal uncle, aunt, relatives and friends are invited. They cook boiled rice, dal, chicken (*sim jill*), mutton and other masala



curry subjected to their economic status. They first worship country rum (*handi*) and liquor (*parwa*) being regarded as *prasad* given to all guest and after that food is served. Now-a-days they also have non-traditional liquor like Beer, Signature, Bagpiper, King Fisher, Royal stag, old monk, Whisky, black dog etc. which depends on their economic status.

Food of Santal people is also very much influenced by seasonality. They divide their food into three different seasons such as ...

**(a) Spring Season** (June-September):-

During this time Santal people catch fish from their agricultural field or near river or Ponds. They roast that fish and eat. If the catch is huge they sell that fish in the market. There is no restriction between male and female. In this season they frequently consume fishes (*hakku*) which a good source of protein. **(b) Winter season** (October-February):-In the winter season Santal people get different vegetables from their farms and also from the market like, potato (*allu*), tomato (*bilati*), drum stick leaf (*munga alla*), chili (*marich*), cauliflower (*baha kubi*), cabbage (*patam kubi*), turnip (*oll kubi*), bitter gourd (*karalla*), coriander leaf (*dhunia sakam*), gram (*chhola*), ladies finger (*vundi*), radish (*muli*), arum (*saru*). **(c) Summer Season**

(March- June): In summer they go to forest for hunting birds and animals which is called, "*Sindra*". They hunt different animal like, Rabbit (*buru kulei*), boar (*buru sukri*), rat (*guddu*), jackal (*khikli*), deer, goat (*marom*), After hunt they come to home, and organize village feast. Due to scarcity of vegetable in their farm and forest during this season, they buy vegetable from nearby the market. Some Santal could not buy vegetable due to their poverty. They eat boiled rice (*baskey daka*), with potato burnt in the hearth.

**J. LIQUOR**

When our mouth is full of liquor say the Baiga, we talk like King. But when it is empty, we remember the money we had to borrow to pay for it (Elwin, 1939). Santals are used to drink as their culture and liquor is a part and parcel of the people of the study area. The rice beer (*parwa*) and country rum (*handi*) is used in various socio-cultural, religious and economic contexts. It seems to be an easily available source of entrainment for the Santal people in the study area. They have strong inclination towards liquor and beverage. The statement holds good for the Santal of Odisha also. In different ritual and festival they prepare liquor by themselves as it is offered to the deity. They buy country liquor Rs.30/ per litre. Both male and

female drink liquor. Though it is not given to the children but young children are often given small quantity.. When a Santal child is born, an offering of country liquor as a part of rituals is made. He continues to drink as part of his daily routine till the end of his life. It is their conceptions that liquor gives them energy to cope with the hard and arduous life. They prefer beverage for their socio-religious activities.

Liquor is consumed on following pretext

(I) They drink *mahuli* (rive beer) and *handi* (country rum) when they feel tired, (ii) many among them take it as their habits, (iii) Some drink for sound sleep, (iv) Some take it as medicine (stomach pain). (v) Also as part of their religious attribute.

## K. SMOKING

Smoking is also very common among Santal community. It is mostly prepared by themselves. For smoking purpose and chewing as intoxicant, they use *Dua* which is prepared from tobacco. *Nasa*, is also prepared from tobacco. Tobacco leaves are rolled in *Saili* or *sala* leaves and is smoked as *pika*. Along with these *Bidi* is also bought from the shop.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Food habits/practices among the Santals are fully dependent on their availability in their surroundings. Forest is one of the most important resources from where they procure their food. Most of the people are engaged in agriculture but are also working as daily wage labourer, hunter, gather, collecting of foods, woods and various types of animals from nearby forest where they live. Their staple diet is rice (*daka*) and they don't take any wheat based preparations. But the cooking preparation of rice and eating rice is different as compared to other tribals and non-tribals. Most of the people take meals thrice a day, consumption of pulses is restricted mostly to three or two days a week, with a negligible percentage of them consuming it daily basis. The vegetable content of their diet is very limited and is mostly seasonal subject to the availability of their farm produce. Owing to their poverty they cannot purchase vegetables all through the year and hence most of their meals go without vegetables. Most of their food stuffs are cooked with water and the use of oil in curries is very limited. Some of the vegetable, such as potato and brinjal (*Bengaal*), are directly roasted in the hot coals and consumed without oil. Their low economic position and gradually depleting resources from environment

leave them with inadequate food and poor

nutrition which affect their health status.



Respondent waiting for drink *Handi*



Red Ant (*Kurkuti*)



Rice bowl (*baati*)



Stale rice, (*da maadi*)

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