



“THIS IS OUR NUTRITION”

*FOOD MEMORY,
TRADITIONAL DIETS,
FORGOTTEN FLAVOURS*



By The Hunger Project India
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What is nutrition? Why does it matter? How has it been defined in the past and how is it defined now? What are the ruptures and continuums between old and new ways of understanding nutrition?

Part five of the "Enhancing Nutrition Outcomes" series tells the stories of food memory, traditional diets, forgotten food practices and flavours across villages in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan. Read all parts I, II, III and IV.

It is just before noon when we reach Jasodha Talia's little clay hut in Odisha. It stands in a quiet tribal hamlet surrounded by dense forest. Fifty-year-old Jasodha, who belongs to Odisha's Bhumiya tribe, is preparing for lunch. A clay pot has been placed on a mud stove. Vegetables are being chopped.

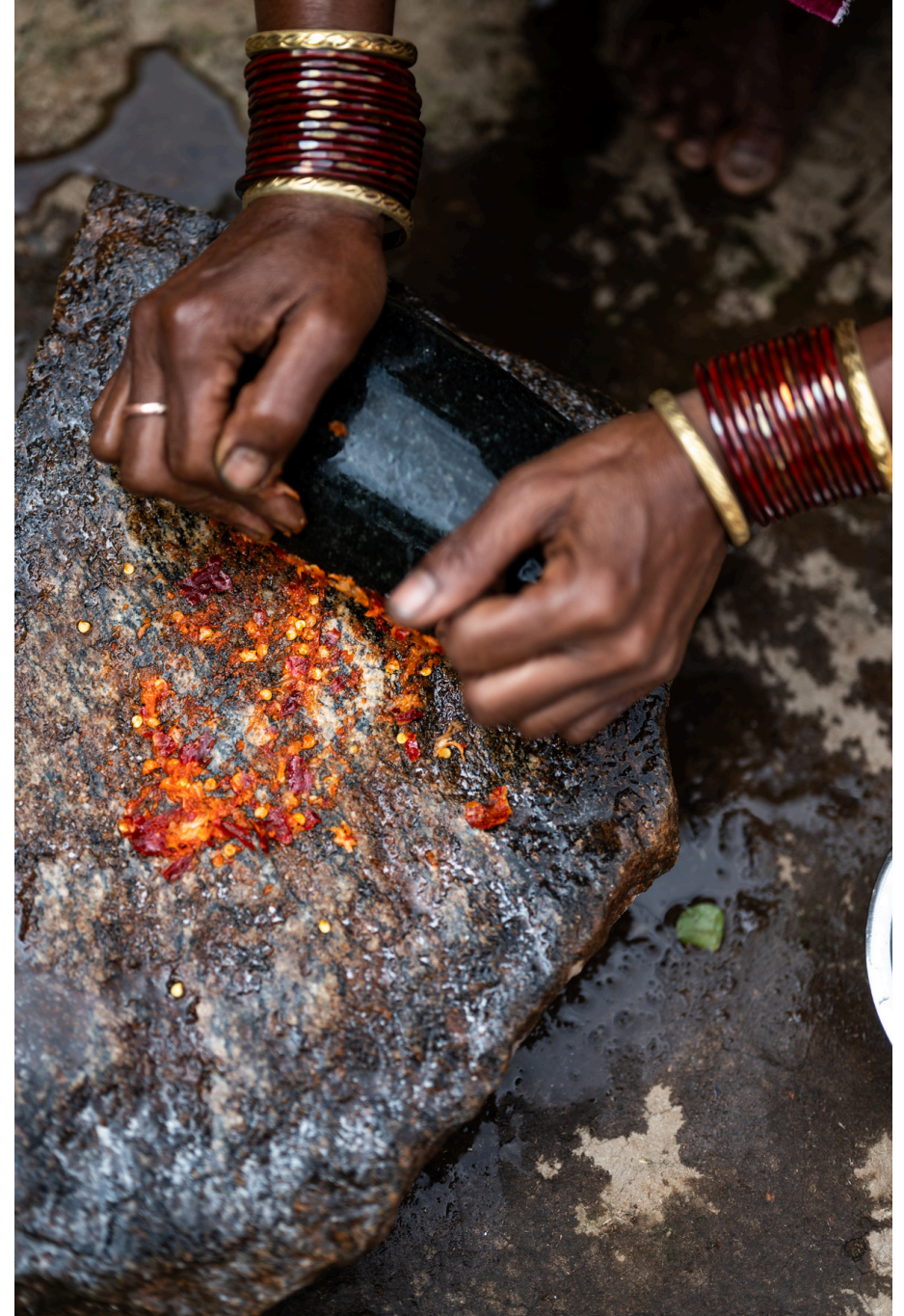
Jasodha is thinking about how food habits have changed. "For generations, we lived on native millets and foraged forest food like gundri (quail), genda (squid), turunga macha (small fish), rabbits and wild edible plants like nangal k anta (wild yam root), sunsunia saag (sushni leaves) and jhotta (black beans)," she says.

Over time, new foods have entered their diet. "We now grow okra, pumpkin, bottle gourd and brinjal," continues Jasodha. "Some food is slowly disappearing; the environment is changing. Some food we hold on to. This is our nutrition." Her smile, at the memory of lost food, holds sadness mixed with determination. She begins to chop garlic, onions, and chillies to make a paste, pausing only to wash the greens.



Jasodha prepares to cook sansuniya (water clover) saag and jhotta (black beans) curry.





Far too often, the traditional food of Dalit and Adivasi communities is excluded from modern understandings of nutrition. Many of the ingredients are now disappearing because of climate change and a preference for processed food. Traditional forms of knowledge, ways of life, memories of how resource-poor communities drew nutrition from their surroundings are disappearing with them.

It only felt urgent and germane to the theme that we asked such communities to define nutrition for themselves. This allowed us to capture and record certain food practices before they are lost for good. Traditional food goes beyond the notion of a “balanced diet”; it holds deeper cultural significance. We sat in kitchens and asked village elders about the food they ate from the fields and forests of their youth. Their stories weave a rich tapestry of ingredients, practices and social ties that once constituted the cooking and eating of food.

In Rajasthan, 102-year-old Gajri Bai and 80-year-old Surma Ram, both from the Garasiya community, recall the forgotten kura, a type of wild millet they grew up eating. It is now cultivated only in small quantities because of the introduction of wheat and rice. As she prepares a sweet kura porridge, Gajri Bai speaks of the millet’s nutritional properties. “What was our sustenance is now a luxury,” she says. “[Kura] is one of the reasons I have lived this long and can still work in my field.” Surma Ram agrees: “We never needed the hospital because of kura. It was food and medicine.” Not only did it give you energy through the day, it also treated diarrhoea.





But grinding kura is strenuous and younger generations have moved away from kura. “Food habits have changed with changes in culture, air and water,” observes Surma.

His son, standing next to him, points out they also eat less meat than before: “Meat, mostly mutton, was part of our regular diet. But we can sell the goat’s milk now, why eat it?”

There may be another reason for turning away from meat. Surma quietly adds that his parents faced caste discrimination because of their diet. “Upper caste neighbours would not come to our house because of the meat smell,” he murmurs.

He quickly moves on to the topic of fang kadhi, a curry made from a wild creeper that is a staple in Garasiya households. Fang leaves are used to prepare herbal tea for coughs and colds. They also go into a hearty curry. Surma makes a fragrant pot of fang kadhi. His wife, Pavna Bai, makes baati, or roti, with a mix of bajra and kura, topped with homemade white butter, to go with it.





FANG KADHI

Clean and wash the fang leaves.

Mix buttermilk with gram or millet flour in a large pan to prepare a smooth batter. Heat the mixture on a high flame.

Flavour with garlic, onion, green chilli, cumin and fenugreek seeds, red chilli and turmeric. Simmer the curry on low heat until it starts to boil.

The longer it is cooked, the tastier it becomes.



Across villages, it is the same story – the rural poor losing diverse food plates because the birds, animals, roots and wild edible plants that once went into the dishes have been edged out by acute environmental changes and changing food habits.

“Our local foods are more nutritious,” declares Sumintrini Chaudhary, a 70-year-old Dalit woman in Madhya Pradesh. “Look at this spread,” she says, gesturing to the vegetables laid out before her. “This is kodai, this little millet. It is not easy to find. Your modern foods cannot match the nutrition it provides.”

At a THP community meeting in Madhya Pradesh, another elderly Dalit woman remembers it has been 20 years since kodai was last sown. “Through these meetings, we recognise the need to revive this traditional food, which is rich in fibre and iron, and controls blood sugar,” she says. The grain, which is difficult to process, has been replaced by rice, more easily available through the PDS. In markets, a kilogramme of kodai now costs Rs 100. “How can I afford it?” the elderly woman asks.

Kusma Devi, a 70-year-old Dalit woman in Madhya Pradesh regrets that younger generations do not know the value of millets and seasonal edible wild plants. “Everything we need to sustain life surrounds us if we are willing to see it,” she says. One of her favourites is kanakaua saag, a weed also called kena grass, rich in iron. According to Kusma, it boosts energy, strengthens bones and eyesight, besides being good for your gut. She sits on a small wooden stool, cutting the greens with a hasiyan, a sickle-shaped knife with an iron blade and a wooden handle. Once it is cooked, she serves the saag with roti and a fried green chilli pickle. The saag’s bitterness has mellowed after cooking, making it earthy and mildly sweet.



KANAKAUA SAAG

Kanakaua: 250 g
Green chilli: two
Ginger: one small piece
Garlic: three cloves
A pinch of cumin
A pinch of hing (asafoetida)
Salt: to taste
Turmeric: one tsp

Wash the leaves well and finely chop them. Now, heat some oil in a wok. Add cumin and asafoetida, and let them crackle. Add chopped chilli, garlic and ginger. Fry them lightly for a minute. Add the kanakaua, mix well for five minutes. Add turmeric and salt. Cook on low heat for five to seven minutes. The hot kanakaua is ready. You can serve it with bajra roti or hot parathas.



In Karnataka, elders like Kenchamma, Sushilamma, Gowriamma and Jayamma insist traditional millets and herbs have kept them healthy to this day. “Today’s food gives us bone aches,” laments 70-year-old Kenchamma as she thinks of the chemical-laden food she often has to eat now.

Kenchamma and Gowriamma are crushing jowar (sorghum), urad dal (black gram) and fenugreek seeds on a stone grinder for jolada kadabu, a soft millet-based flat cake. In the past, pounding grains was a community affair. The two elderly women travel back in time, singing folk songs as they crush the pulse and millets. “We are trying to preserve old ways of cooking, but it is hard work,” sighs Gowriamma. They serve the flat cakes with lentils, jaggery syrup, cow ghee and red chilli chutney.

Sushilamma also tells us about siridhanya laddu, a nutrient-dense treat of 22 millets, herbs and spices, once considered crucial for managing conditions like diabetes and thyroid disorders.





JOLADA KADABU

Jolada: 500 g
Urad dal: 250 g
Hyacinth beans: 250 g
Methi seeds: 100 g
Kodai: 100 g
Salt: to taste

Wash all the ingredients and soak them in water for five to six hours. Dry them in the sun for a short while. Grind the jolada into a flour. Grind the soaked urad dal, hyacinth and fenugreek seeds as well as the kodai into a smooth paste. Combine the ground flour with the paste and mix well. Let the mixture rest for seven to eight hours. Add salt and mix again. Use a steaming vessel, similar to the utensils used to make idli (steamed rice cakes). Place it on the stove and add a cup of water to the bottom of the vessel. Once the water starts to boil, ladle the flour mixture into a plate and set it in the vessel. Steam for about 15 minutes, or until the mixture is cooked.

It may be served with the following sides: hyacinth bean sauce (thokku); liquid jaggery; red chilli chutney.



It is not just what is cooked that has changed but how it is cooked. Most Adivasi tribes cooked food in water, says Jasodha Talia, the Bhumiya woman from Odisha. “My grandfather used to cook in water, and so do we,” she continues. “In the last ten to fifteen years, oil consumption has increased but we try to avoid it. There is no nutritional value.”

Jasodha looks amused at the thought of ignorant oil consumers as she starts making curries, one with sunsunia saag (sushni leaves) and another with jata manji (simba beans). Sushni is an aquatic plant. Jasodha says they used it to treat insomnia, diarrhoea and skin diseases.





SUNSUNIA SAAG

Sunsunia saag: 500 g
Garlic: 10 cloves
Onion: two, large sized
Red chilli: two
Tomato (optional): one
Salt: to taste

Wash the saag well. Make a paste of the onion, garlic and red chilli.

In a pot, boil about one glass of water. Add the saag and cook for three to four minutes.

Add the chilli-garlic-onion paste and mix well. Cook for 10 minutes, till the water dries.

(Some like a bit of gravy as they eat it with rice, and some like it dry.)

Serve it hot.



In Odisha, members of the Gauda tribe, a cattle-herding community, remember kolotho papaya, a horse gram curry. Sisters-in-law Mathai and Rajmani Gauda say it is good for bone health and preventing kidney stones, while being easy to cultivate.

They cook it with papaya picked from a tall tree with the help of a bamboo pole. Papaya helps boost blood circulation, they point out. “It is iron-rich, which makes it good for mothers who are breastfeeding and adolescent girls.” She adds, with some scorn, “These days, young people are so exposed to ‘modern food’ that their digestive systems have become sensitive. PDS foods like rice, lentils and oil have taken over.”

As Mathai stirs the curry, Rajmani talks about the old practice of using kolotho peel as livestock fodder or manure. “We don’t waste any food,” Rajmani says. “Growing up, we saw how each part of the plant could be used. It is all about using resources efficiently.” With that, they serve the faintly umami-flavoured kolotho, now cooked in a thick gravy, in a leaf bowl.





KOLOTHO PAPAYA

Kolotho: 500 g

Green papaya: one medium-sized

Salt: to taste

Mustard oil: one tbsp

Garlic: two to three cloves

Onion: two, small-sized

Dried red chillies: two

Wash the kolotho well. Peel and chop papaya, onion and garlic. Pour about two glasses of water into a pot and put the kolotho in to boil for at least 20 minutes.

Press the gram to check if it is semi-cooked. Add the chopped papaya and onions, along with salt to taste. Once thoroughly cooked, prepare a tempering of garlic and chillies.

For the tempering, pour a bit of mustard oil into a separate ladle and when it begins to sizzle, add garlic and chilli. When slightly brown, add it to the kolotho pot directly and stir well.





THP's nutrition-based programme is a conscientious and strategic effort to close the existing gaps in access to nutrition. Any small change in eating and cooking practices indicates a shift in old social norms that determined who ate first and whose health was prioritised.

Documenting food memory enabled an equally important exploration into traditional food practices and systems. These are personal histories filled with pleasure and nostalgia, with longing for a forgotten flavour. But they also hold something more – the ability of communities to adapt to social, cultural and economic realities, the joyful desire to thrive.

As Jasodha remarked, “Who doesn't want to eat well?”





Text by Surbhi Mahajan. Photos by Anurag Banerjee (Karnataka & Odisha),
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