

# What we can Learn from the Tribals about Forests as a Source of Food Security

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New research shows the resilience and strength of tribal food systems.



**The importance of forest-based foods is likely to increase further due to climate change. Credit: Twitter**

Recent findings from a research conducted with the close involvement of tribal communities disprove the view that the tribal food system is inherently backward. Several of these forest-based foods have been found to be rich in nutrition. The importance of forest-based food increases during adverse weather such as frequent drought conditions. Hence, its role in fighting hunger and malnutrition is likely to increase due to climate change. However, the danger is that with the increasing depletion of natural forests and their replacement with man-made commercial tree plantations, the availability of diverse foods from forests can diminish rapidly, as has already been seen in several villages.

These and other important findings of the research were presented at a recent seminar on the relationship of the forest with wild food diversity and quantity. The seminar, held in Bhubaneswar, was organised by Living Farms, an organisation that works with tribal communities in Odisha, and the German political foundation Rosa-Luxemburg Stiftung. Researchers who have worked with tribal communities on their food systems, as well as representatives of tribal communities participated in the seminar.

Several tribal communities procure nutritious food from nearby forest areas. The availability of food is tied to the survival and health of natural forests and their rich biodiversity, as well as the protection of tribal rights to collect minor forest produce. Unfortunately, both of these factors have been adversely affected in several places. This may be one factor why, despite the introduction of nutrition schemes, the overall nutrition situation has not improved among several tribal communities.

The importance of forest-based foods is likely to increase further due to climate change. Hence, the need for protecting the remaining natural sources is more than ever. We also need to recognise and respect the importance of the knowledge that tribal communities possess when it comes to accessing and using these diverse forest-based foods.

Debjeet Sarangi of Living Farms said that the food system of the Kondh community is mostly considered as non-economic and non-viable but their research shows that it has multi-dimensional benefits in terms of the rich nutritional content of several forest foods collected in a sustainable manner by tribals and socio-cultural services. Nutrition analysis of leafy vegetables, tubers etc. collected from forests shows their high nutrition value. *Gandhiri sag* is very rich in beta carotene. *Mundi kanda* and *Langala kanda* are known to be rich in iron and zinc. *Bounsho chhatu* and *Gandhiri sag* contain high levels of soluble proteins. The ongoing research shows that if forests are managed mainly with a commercial perspective, they start diminishing. This has an adverse impact on the nutrition of tribal communities.

Dr. Vijay Rukmani Rao, co-author of a report on forest food in Odisha, said that the study done in 2014-15 in 24 villages of Rayagada and Sundargarh had shown the availability of 121 types of food from forests whose importance increased in times of scarcity of agriculture-based food. We need to include tribals in the conversation and learn from them. Some plants in forests can also be poisonous which is why the knowledge system of tribal communities becomes important to understand and utilise the food and nutrition base of forests.

Tribal communities have a broader view of mutually protective relationships. As Jagannath Majhi, a Kondh tribal, said, "We are what we are because of forests. They are the root of our existence. We don't look at forests as a commercial entity or a profit-making venture. Forests and its species are a part of us. We care for forests as they provide us with food. Forests teach us the way of life, and do not discriminate. We understand forests and the traditional practices which have kept it alive. The collection process helps in regeneration of forests. The food consumed is as per the season. We do not want anything from the government."

Dr. Debal Deb, who has made an important contribution to these research efforts, said, "There is a tendency to look down on the food system of the tribal communities and in the process, several strengths of the food system have been ignored. But we need to appreciate these strengths of self-reliance to protect them and to build further on them. Similarly, the tremendous contribution of tribal communities in protecting and nurturing forests need better appreciation and recognition."

In fact, it is due to the absence of such recognition and appreciation that harmful policies such as replacing natural forests with man-made plantations of commercial species are allowed to spread rapidly, even though these alienate local communities and deprive them of several nutritious foods. One can only hope that recognition of natural forests as an important source of food security and sovereignty will lead to more careful and community-friendly food-security enhancing policies.

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Contact *the author*