AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAYAL ON THE CHANGING DIMENSIONS OF FOOD CONSUMPTION AMONG THE BIRHORS IN A RURAL SETTING OF WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT
The present study tries to understand the changing dimensions of food consumption among the Birhors of Bhupatipalli, Puruliya, West Bengal. The principle concern of the research is to represent how the choices of food stuffs and food practices among the Birhors became altered due to rehabilitation to the place now they live. The study is principally grounded on ethnographic approach and methods. The data has been collected by using semi-structured, focus group and depth interviews and analysed through narrative data analysis method. The findings of a one year long research suggests that the alteration of food practices impacts a lot to the cultural values and living of the Birhors of Bhupatipalli. The present effort as an output is looking forward to contribute knowledge for better policies and action for the Birhors and/or any rehabilitated target group for development.

KEYWORDS: Food, Rehabilitation, Culture, Values, Ethnography

INTRODUCTION
Food is one of the most important basic needs of human beings without which it could not continue to live in its present form (Jana, 2006). Contrastingly, Culture shapes and defines what people eat, how they eat, when they eat, the meaning of food and eating and acceptable and unacceptable food (Miller, 2011). Consumption of food is dependent mainly on availability of food (Singh and Palta, 2006). As food item is considered to be the most important aspect of livelihood, some of the favoured food items, which are generally consumed for survival, are offered to the deities (god/goddess). Different kinds of produced food are offered to the deities and different rituals are followed in doing so (Jana, 2006). Food continues to play an important role in the religious life of man through which man relates himself with the supernatural entities for production, prosperity and happiness. Religion has developed numerous symbolic ways and forms of using foods. All these have deeper meaning to the people concerned. People in rural areas maintain their livelihood depending on the natural environment through a significant process of regular interaction.
(Jana, 2006). Food habits of the tribal are said to be unique and their poverty is reflected in their food intake pattern.

The Birhors and the Settlement under Study: A Brief Overview

The Birhors are one of the three Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of West Bengal, other two are Lodha and Toto. Earlier they were categorised as Primitive Tribal Group (PTG). They have exceptionally ‘poor’ socioeconomic and literacy status. Birhors are identified as a nomadic hunting gathering group. But the Birhors are no more a semi-nomadic tribe in West Bengal, though they are still dependent upon forests. They now lead a settled life (Chowdhury, 2008). The Birhor belongs to the Proto-Australoid stock, linguistically; they originated from the Austro-Asiatic (Mundari) group (Sinha and Banerjee, 2004)

Birhors live in six villages spread across the three Blocks, namely Baghmundi, Balarampur and Jhalda-I of Purulia district of W.B. At present Birhors are found living in Bhopatipalli Baredi and Bareriya village (Baghmundi block), Chhotobakad and Ichatu village (Jhalda –I block) and Bersa village (Balarampur block). Our studied village Bhopatipalli is the first rehabilitated village in Purulia and a high concentration of Birhor families are found. They were previously habituated to live in the forests and hill areas of Purulia district. They preferred to live in leaf huts (Kumba). But at present they are living in houses build by Backward Classes Welfare Department of West Bengal. Birhors were relocated to mud built houses and later in the concrete huts by government agencies. The settlement situation in Bhopatipalli rehabilitation colony is somewhat different. Here permanent mud-built dwellings with rectangular ground plan and tile-thatched roof are common.

According to the villagers till the beginning of the year 1959, the Birhors were not covered by any development programmes of the Government of W.B. The need for uplifting their economic conditions of was nevertheless felt. As an initial measure, the scheme of establishing rehabilitation colony for the Birhor families was taken up. Total twenty Birhor families were provided with homesteads and dwelling houses under centrally sponsored Sub-Block scheme at Matiyala village, now known as Bhopatipalli. Then Backward Classes Welfare Department minister of West Bengal, Mr. Bhupati ranjan Majumder takes an important role to the implementation of the scheme for them. This rehabilitation colony renamed as Bhopatipalli, according to his name.

They originally migrated from Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Dhanbad districts of Jharkhand state more than 150 years ago. According to 2001 census of India the total
The population of Birhor in Purulia district W.B. is 279, out of them 148 are male and 131 are female.

The present study was conducted in the village named Bhupatipalli. It is located 22 km from Barabhum railway station. This rehabilitated village is near to the Bus route. Except one Bhumij family all families belongs to Birhor community. Total number of Birhor family in this village is 41. Total Birhor population of this village is 175. The village is surrounded by the few agricultural land, undulated land and forest. The village have One primary school, one junior high school and one community hall. Recently electricity is supplied in the village. They are often known as Shikari since hunting is their main occupation and till now they prefer to eat the flesh of monkeys. Their traditional and primary occupation was rope making. They collect the Chiharlata (Bauhinia scandens) bark, of which they make rope for various purposes. However, this occupation has been abandoned by most of them due to the relocation in a new place. Since raw material i.e. Chiharlata bark are not available, they had to change their occupation. Now, they are working as daily labourer in agricultural field or construction work. Although some of them are still engaged in rope making. But now a day they use plastic shake for rope making instead of Chiharlata bark.

Research Questions
The current research purposively sets three major research questions-

1. What are the ways of collecting, preparing, and consuming foods among the Birhors?
2. How they attach meaning of food stuffs with their everyday cultural and festive living?
3. What are the major changes in food consumption among the Birhors due to rehabilitation?

Methodology
The present study has been conducted in a Birhor village (Bhupatipalli) under Baghmundi block of the district of Purulia, West Bengal. In depth study was conducted on 41 families of the village Bhupatipalli to observe the food consumption pattern of the Birhors. It also tries to find out their various ways of obtaining food, their associated habits, notions and beliefs associated with food. The present effort is grounded by the ethnographic approach and methods, which became the principal pathway for collecting, sorting and interpreting the data with an intense dependency on case studies, semi structured interviews, depth and focus...
group interviews. The data has been transcribed verbatim to include insider’s point of view. The transcribed data have been analysed by using narrative data analysis method.

The Findings

The findings have classified under five broad themes that are as follows-

Collection of food materials

In the case of technologically less developed group, food habits are very closely linked with the environment in which they live in. The forest formed an integral part of their culture and tradition. Previously different forest resources are actually the primary resources base of the Birhors inhabiting this village. They depend exclusively on the forest for food and livelihood. They do the collection of food materials available in the form of root, flowers, seeds etc in the forest. As Birhors live in forest ecosystem their diet comprises of different unconventional foods. Their foods include edible forms of flowers, fruits, tubers and other flesh food available from the forest. For Birhor, once forest is the main means of food, but after relocation in this village this dependency decreasing.

They also engaged in collection of minor forest produce (MFP). They collect honey. They sell honey in the market and use the wax for the purpose of eating. Although every item is not available throughout the year, so their collection varies with the season depending upon the demand and availability of the resources.

The Birhors are a non-vegetarian community. The Birhor tribe only hunts for food and no other purposes. They do the trapping of khera (Rabbits, Lepus nigricoloris), titir (Bronze winged jacana, Metopidius indicus), banar (monkey, Maccaca rhesus) rats, deer etc in forest. They hunt from local forests like Matha, Bagh mundi and Balarampur range. Different wild animals are also consumed according to availability. Generally two or three Birhor males go together to the local forests with hunting implements. Sometime they take some dry foods with them. They eat hunted animals meats by roasting in the fire and sometime cooking these meats. The Birhors may have all kinds of meat, except beef and pork. As they belief that they belongs to Hindu religion, they do not eat it.

They hunt a unique animal, called Surjomukhi or Bonrui (Pangolin, Manis crassicaudata). It has a body covered with scales and came out only in night. The Surjomukhi lives in between large stone, under the soil. They killed it by detaching head from body. When the animal has died, they uncovered its skin and sold it at the market. They eat its
meat. In the rainy season, when there is a shortage of game, they have to depend solely on plant food.

**Meal pattern**

It was found that they were consuming four meals a day. Their food intake was dependent mainly on availability of food. Rice is their staple food. They eat rice with potato, tomato (*bilati*) and sometime with fish or meat. Sometimes, they also have eggs and chicken only occasionally. Fish provides a major item of food of animal origin particularly during the later part of rainy season and the period following it. Recently some of the villagers rare fish on the village pond. Occasionally they caught fishes from the pond, it supplement their food as well as economy some extent.

They usually eat rice four times at a day i.e. breakfast, lunch (*seta kalwa joma*), evening time and in dinner (*ayub pandam*). In the morning they go out in the work taking rice soaked in water. They eat stale rice (the remnants of the previous nights cooked rice soaked in water) with vegetables in the breakfast, locally called ‘*mar bhat*’. At lunch they eat steamed rice (*ai-marrizam*) or *tata bhaat* and vegetable curry. After returning from work, the female folk cook for the other members of the house. In the evening they consume dry rice (*sukha bhat*) with vegetable curry At dinner they eat steamed rice (*Nida-marrizam*) with boiled vegetables. At present some of them are habituated to taking roti (hand made bread) at night instead of rice.

**Table 1: Meal pattern of Birhor tribe**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meals</th>
<th>Food items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>rice (<em>mar bhat</em>) with salt, black-pepper and vegetable curry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>steamed rice with vegetable curry, fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening meal</td>
<td>Dry rice with vegetable curry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>steamed rice with boiled vegetables, roti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With rice they prefer to eat boiled vegetables, salt and chilli. They grow chillies on homestead land. Use of spices, garlic, and turmeric are made to limited extent. Among them use of edible oil is very limited. Foods are mainly boiled and baked. But for few families mustard oil is the medium of cooking. They use a very small quantity of mustard oil or rapeseed oil and spices. Their usual pulses are *moong* and *masur*.

They eat mostly sak-pata i.e. green leafy vegetables. They eat cabbage and cauliflower in winter season, besides tomatoes and brinjals. Birhors take *shim* (*malhan*), cockshim, lauwa, mula, kouda, *birti* (look like small Brinjal), kochu leaf (*alti ara*), palan leaf (*palan ara*),
kurnun leaf, sajina leaf (munga ara) and flower. The leafy vegetables were known as ‘ara’. This was consumed as per availability.

They eat roots, which they call locally baoula gethi and kundri. They usually have fruits such as kend, pial, bhela and plum. They used to eat wild fruits and vegetables. They take fruits occasionally, particularly during any socio-religious performance in the family. They eat one type of leaf called karanja. At first they dried the leaves in sun light and then powdered it. Then cook it with tomatoes.

Some unique cooking practices were found among them. They also eat some pickle or chutney made of amra fruit or red ant (kurkut). The kurkut chutney is made by some steps- at first they collected this big size of red ant from the local jungle. These ants lived in the leaves, make nest on the leaves in Berry trees (jamun) and kusum tree. Then they smashed it and cooked with ginger pepper, chilli and salt. It is very delicious to them. The egg of red ant along with morich, ginger and garlic are grinded and are used to cure cough and cold. Children’s breakfast is specially made with ant-egg. The eggs are boiled with salt and served to the children.

Consumption of Liquors
Most of the Birhor desire just two square meals a day, one or two clothes to wear and a little drink. Consuming haria on a regular basis is an integral part of their culture and tradition. Haria plays a significant role in the social and religious life of Birhor tribe. They often buy mahua liquor from the market and occasionally drink haria, prepared at home. They drink haria in community meet. Haria generally taken by old man and young man. Females are usually does not drink haria but females drink occasionally only at home or at homes of relatives. Old aged females sometime eat haria. Children or junior boys and girls are the exceptions; the habit of drinking does not form in them. Haria contains about 4.40% of alcohol by volume. Haria is made by some steps- it is prepared from rice by fermentation. At first they cook some rice. They put a plastic and dry the boiled rice under sunlight. The dried rice is mixed with ranu (a type of drug, white in colour, small round shaped). They collect this ranu tablets from local Baghmundi haat. Within one kg rice, two tablets of ranu is given. Then this mixture is touched at forehead with respect and put it into hari. The hari is covered with Sal leafs and put a plate over it. Then that is kept in such a place which is out of reach, so that no one can touch it. After four days, the women who cooked it bring out the hari and take out the haria. Now the haria is ready to serve. Haria is also abundantly used in many tribal rituals. They sometimes drink alcohol which they do not prepare at home. But i noticed
a change in their present alcoholic consumption. Now-a-days they do not take Haria on regular basis. They take it only occasionally.

Drinking tea however, has become very popular now. They smoke bidis and cigarettes. They chew pan with betel and khaini (tobacco with lime). Some smoke the hookah (indigenous pipe), too.

**Food and Rituals**

Superstitions and beliefs invariably influence the attitudes towards food. Food habits and beliefs differ among the different tribes and even among the communities within the tribes. In a community certain foods may be tabooed for all and in some cases, the food may be restricted to people by age, sex and physiological status and seasonal availability. They maintain a number of restriction as regards item of food which are not to be eaten on certain tithi (auspicious day) and in certain seasons. Birhors prepare special foods on various occasions like births, marriages, deaths and festivals.

They consider pregnancy as a normal phenomenon. Hence, no special measures or food and nutrient supplementation are thought of in relation to the pregnant women and nursing mothers. Rather, food restrictions and prescriptions during pregnancy and the early phase of lactation deprive the mothers and breast-fed babies from getting food and nutrients in adequate amount (Bagchi, 2006). Various taboos and restriction on food and movement are imposed on pregnant women. At the time of pregnancy, they eat kurthir dal with rice. Kurthir dal is a special kind of pulse available here. There are some temporary food taboos, during this period. Some vegetables are not allowed to eat specially tomatoes, pumpkins, brinjal etc. They believe that if mother eat this kind of food, it harms her baby. Eating the head of an animal or a fowl sacrificed to the spirits is taboo to a pregnant woman and her husband. During pregnancy the women does not drink ‘Haria’. If any woman gets pregnant during month of Ashar she does not eat fish. Because they believed that, if pregnant woman eat fish in the month of Ashar, the baby will came upward of the body. After birth of the baby, mother takes only one meal in the morning of each day, for the period of one month. After the purification ceremony of new born child completed, an elaborate feast celebrates or arranged. At that time they usually eat rice, meat of hen, haria etc.

There is no prohibition of eating food after fixation of marriage. But on marriage day after sun rise, the bride and groom eat gur bhat (jiggery and rice) on their own houses. Their
parents eat veg food on that day. After marriage rituals completed, feast is given to the invitees, with rice, dal, saag-sabji, meat of kukhru etc. A reception ceremony is performed after one day of marriage at the groom’s house. Then a feast given to the invitees with rice and meat.

After a person dies, Birhors mourn for ten days. During this period they do not have either spiced vegetable curry, fish, meat etc. They do not use any spices like oil, turmeric etc in their meal. For ten days all the relatives show their grief by not shaving. They eat only rice (mar bhat) and boiled potatoes. On the eleventh day they shave and have a feast. On the last day they eat meat, fish, rice and haria with the villagers and other invited relatives.

A death ritual took place in the than of their own house on 11th day of mourning period. A sindur tika was given on the forehead of kukri (hen) and rice was given to eat. Then the kukri was cut with respect to the head with the help of a bothi. The blood of the kukri is kept at the middle of the than along with the kukri. After 2-3 minutes, they bring the kukri in the house and then clean it and cut it into pieces. This flesh is cooked and only family members consume it. This puja is done for the peace of the soul.

Small chicks were reared so that they can be used as sacrificial animals during family rituals. Total six hens are sacrificed during the life span of a Birhor person. They sacrifice one pair after birth of a child, one pair after marriage and one pair after death of a person. The Naya or sacred specialist (Tem Shikari, Male, 90 years old) and Gorat or messenger (Kandaru Shikari, Male, 55 years old) of this village present at that place during scarification. After that it consums by all the family members and villagers. It is taboo for a village Naya to break the rule of fasting before performing sacrificial ritual.

When any ritual practice is held they keep fast for the whole day. During any rituals, they sacrificed goat and hen in the name of gods and goddesses. They break their fast by consuming flesh of these sacrificed animals. During Poush parban they eat pitha (a type of sweet). They make prasad with shinni, different fruits, sweets, stuffed rice (chira), juggery (gur), batasha and milk. Birhors celebrate Maghi puja in the month of Magh (January-February) at village garam than. On that day they at first give haria to the God. Then they serve haria with vegetables curry to the village people. Communal feasting is the routine activity of the religious life of the tribe under study. It is associated with drinking of rice-beer or haria. After taking rice beer, the males and females start rhythmic dancing.
Table 2: Food for various occasions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. no</th>
<th>Occasions</th>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Food items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>During the time of pregnancy</td>
<td>kurthir dal with rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After birth of the baby (next one month)</td>
<td>mother take only one meal in the morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>On marriage day</td>
<td>gur bhat (jiggery and rice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>On reception ceremony</td>
<td>rice, dal, saag, sabji, meat of hen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Death</td>
<td>During mourning period (10 days)</td>
<td>only rice (mar bhat) and boiled potatoes. Donot take spiced vegetable curry, fish, meat etc. They do not use any spices like oil, turmeric in their meal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>After mourning period (from 11th day)</td>
<td>meat, fish, rice, haria and sacrificed hen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Festival</td>
<td>On that auspicious days</td>
<td>Fruits, haria with vegetables curry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Food and Taboo**

The clans are exogamous and totemic in nature. The clan members show respect to their totems and never kill or injure these. Birhors are divided into a number of clans. During my study total 8 clans are found in this village such as Indur, Murmu, Hembrom, Soren, Latha, Nag, Saunria, Darua. Members of each clan think that they are originated from some plants or animals. For instance, members of Indur clan are originated form rat and members of Nag clan are originated from kobra nag or snake. Those who have the totem like Saunria do not cut the grass as they originated from it. So certain kinds of food are banned for members of certain clans. Through this they protect natural resources and forest from destruction. They express their concern for conservation. Their love for nature had influenced them to protect it.

**Conclusion**

This village has one ICDS centre (Anganwari). It is the education cum other development centre for children’s within the age group of 6 years. They not only get free education, but also get food with education. But it is only for day meal that means once meal in a day. ICDS centre also gives meals to the pregnant women. It gives supplementary nutrition to them. Some of them believe it never fulfil the nutritional status of their children.

Birhors have now modified their habits and manners according to the customs of the neighbourhood they live in. Now they have to buy food from local market or Baghmundi haat, which held on Wednesday and Saturday of every week. The soaring of the prices of rice and grains for the last years have affected their capacity to procure food from the market, thus threatening their food security.
Due to their poor economic condition following changes are noticed in food habits among the Birhors-

(1) Increase in use of leafy vegetables with its increasing production
(2) Fruit consumption has decreased with its decreasing production.
(3) Use of rapeseed oil as cooking medium.
(4) Use of pulses has decreased.
(5) Taking roti (handmade bread) instead of rice.

Due to relocation, they lose their source of food i.e. forest products, which is the main source of food for them. For some extent it leads to food insecurity among them. Some of them grew some leafy vegetables either in their own homestead or in the field. Agricultural development around them has given them vegetables to which they have adjusted their food habits. Now a day’s some persons from neighbouring villages came to this village and bring seasonal vegetables for sell. They also buy some vegetables from them. Recently a community food storage system developed in this village. It is a common grannery, where they deposited a certain amount of their harvested crop. It provides them some store paddy during their needs.

Relocation, communication with neighbouring communities and their shifting of subsistence strategy from Gatherer- Hunter to agriculture are root causes for the changing of food consumption pattern among them. Under the circumstances, most of the Birhors are very much serious in following their traditional food habits, norms, but they also accept change and in the process, they adjust with the present environmental conditions to which they belong.

References: