
FOOD AS SOURCE OF ETHNO-HISTORY: A STUDY OF THARU TRIBES OF CHAMPARAN DISTRICT OF NORTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Food culture is an essential element of a region's history and diversity, as it exhibits the social, economic, geographical, agricultural, demographic, and cultural characteristics that have shaped that particular area over time. It also showcases a region's distinctive customs, flavors, and culinary practices. Several variables contribute to the significant differences in food culture between different regions and countries. These elements include historical, geographical, climatic, cultural, and economic influences. Therefore, this article sheds light on the ways that the culinary culture of a Tharu tribe reflects the history and diversity of that region and also how their food practices help to create a sense of their ethnic culture and identity. The primary objective of this study is to document the ethnic history of food belonging to the Tharu tribal community. While so doing, attention has been devoted to the fact of how the eco-system in which Tharus lives affects their food choices and culture. In a way, this paper explores Tharu food's history from the perspective of cultural environmental history. This attempt is useful in capturing the interplay of nature, culture, and ecology, with particular reference to the Tharu tribal community. In short, this paper documents the environmental history of Tharu food culture. The empirical method has been used to document the food history of the Tharu tribe.

KEYWORDS: *tharu, food culture, tribes.*

INTRODUCTION

Food has been one of the important indicators of not only cultural heritage but also history. This paper proposes that food can be a fabulous source for constructing ethnic history. The proposed paper testifies to this proposition by focusing on the Tharu tribal community of Champaran district, which is located in Bihar. The central argument advanced by this paper is that looking at food as one of the important sources for writing a history of indigenous tribal communities could be a profitable exercise. As India houses several hundreds of ethnic tribal communities that do not preserve their history in the form of written records, food can be used to trace the evolutionary trajectory of history and the impact of the eco-system on food. In a way, this paper attempts to trace the environmental history of food of the Tharu tribal community from the perspective of ethnic history.

However, the studies done on the history of Tharu tribes by British ethnographers like Hamilton, Carnegy, Crooke, Elliot, Nesfield, Risley, Turner, Knowles (missionary), etc., give a general ideas and exhaustive picture of Tharus mainly illustrated by Gazetteer's or the Tribes and Castes series. The impact of colonial ethnography was further carried by Indian anthropologists like Majumdar, S. K Srivastava, A. Hasan, etc., who emphasized monographic approach mainly dealt with numerous Tharu subgroups (esp. Rana Tharu) and topics related to ideological preoccupations like race, caste, tribe, origin and owe their general interest in the question related to tribal welfare, tribal contacts with non-tribals and government, socio-economic conditions, house composition and material culture. Nevertheless, their general description of Tharus from a historical perspective is mostly rooted in the ideological framework of colonial administration. The contemporary writers like Nadeem Hasnain, Sameera Maiti, B. S Bist, S. C. Verma, etc., attempted to capture life world of Tharu tribal community like, art forms, socio-economic conditions and cultural aspects. Such historical, sociological and anthropological studies didn't give importance to food as a source for writing history. So, this article attempts to use dietary practices as a source for understanding the cultural history of Tharu tribes.

JAL JUNGLE JAMEEN AS A SOURCE OF THARU FOOD DIVERSITY

The Tharus, the largest indigenous community in Bihar, reside amidst abundant agroforestry resources in the West Champaran region of the state. Champaran who got its name from Champaka Aranya, a name which dates back to the time when the vicinity was a tract of lush forest of Champa (Mongolia) treesⁱ. The geography of West Champaran is categorized into distinct tracts. The northern region lies in the hilly tract of the Sumeswar and Dun range at the foothills of the Himalayas, observing the potential for abundant crop growth. Adjacent to the hilly area lies the Terai region, an extensive forested area predominantly inhabited by the Tharu Tribe of the district.

Even today, Tharu livelihood relies entirely on the interconnected support of forest, land, and water. Indeed, the Terai region of Champaran is abundant in all these sources of livelihood. These sources have been generously bestowed upon the Tharus by nature. The fertile soil in the terai of the foothills of these forested hills is ideal for paddy cultivation. Several small rivers meander through these terais all year round. The Tharu community uses water for irrigation, drinking, bathing, and other purposes. Various animals, such as fish, snails, turtles, etc., are food sources for the Tharus. The forests generously meet the diverse needs of the Tharus. Obtaining wood, grass for construction, various animals and birds for hunting, various fruits, flowers, vegetables for sustenance, and herbs for medicinal purposes all come directly from the forest. The forests also offer fodder and pasture for the Tharus' cattle. Tharu gather cereal from the land, aquatic organisms from the water, and various resources, including wood, fruits, and meat from the forest, through their diligent efforts as needed.

This Tharu community resides in areas rich with natural resources and has maintained its traditional ecological knowledge of collecting and preparing food from natural sources using conventional methods. Due to their specific habitat and dietary preferences, they constitute a

separate population when compared to other groups. These individuals engage in subsistence farming and are also recognized for utilizing local wild plants, fruits, and tubers to augment their food and nutrition. Tharu's way of life involves a combination of hunting, fishing, gathering forest produce, raising livestock, and farming.ⁱⁱ The region under consideration has a highly affluent and multifaceted culinary tradition. The culinary traditions of this region exhibit a diversity of aromas and tastes ranging from local natural products to non-Tharu ingredients (pepper, cardamom, cloves, etc.) percolating into their cuisine. Their dietary consumption is subject to the unpredictable fluctuations of natural phenomena, marked by significant seasonal changes contingent upon the accessibility of agricultural and forest resources. The majority of Tharu communities are located close to rivers and forests. Hence, aquatic organisms such as fishes, crabs, snails, clams, mussels, and other similar species play a significant role in the dietary practices of the Tharu community. Furthermore, Tharu cuisine encompasses diverse meat options, including pig, wild boar, chicken, wild rabbit, and pigeon meat. Varieties of legumes, wild mushrooms, and other wild vegetables and greens of nutritive value are commonly consumed.

Tharu agricultural practices have a direct relation with their socio-cultural traditions. It starts with the celebration of *Khichdi (Makar Sankranti)* in Tharus of Champaran, also known as *Maghee parva (kind of harvest festival) in Nepal*, followed by the festival of *Sakauni (completion of paddy plantation)* and ends in *Soharai (Diwali)*. Among several agricultural crops, rice cultivation plays a significant role as it is a vital component of Tharu cuisine. To comprehend Tharu cuisine, it is imperative to grasp the importance of rice in preparing Tharu recipes. Still, they plant old varieties of paddy (*Basmati, Dudhkotiya, Aandi, Dudhraj, Sathi, etc.*), which are commonly utilized in rice consumption though the cultivation of paddy using High Yield Variety (HYV) seeds (*Mansuri, Sona Mansuri, Saryu-52, etc.*) has commenced today. The unique variety of paddy is the product of the region's favourable climate and Tharus traditional agricultural experience and realization. The celebration of Chhath holds great significance for Sathi Paddy for rice (for making kheer) and its straw. Specially for the Chhath festival, a certain amount of cultivation of Sathi paddy takes place. Whereas *Anandi rice* is well known for *Bhuja* (roasted rice). This particular variety of rice is renowned for its delicate flavour profile and inherent sweetness. Mostly distinguished by its intrinsic stickiness when subjected to the process of cooking or steaming.

Not all types of rice are prepared utilizing every culinary technique. Therefore, different types of rice are used for various culinary purposes. The Tharu people consume rice that has been prepared using three distinct methods. The first method involves cooking the rice called *Bhaat (most popular among Tharu)*, followed by the second method entails roasting the rice and transforming it into *Bhuja*. Lastly, it involves steaming the rice. The consumption of steam-cooked sticky rice is limited to specific ceremonial or festive events. Some individuals consume them in their natural state, while others include them in various culinary preparations mostly made with rice flour or utilize them in the production of '*Chhabka*' and '*Jaad*', a type of alcoholic beverage. '*Chhabka*' and '*Jaad*' are highly regarded as preferred culinary delicacies and beverages among the Tharu community. Additionally, the dish is prepared through the process of boiling

fragmented rice (Khuddi) and combining it with a unique indigenous herb (Jaadi) and spices. The food item known as 'Chhabka' is widely regarded for its delectable taste, whilst 'Jaad' is a beverage that bears resemblance to Taadi (Palm wine). Chhabka does not possess intoxicating properties, however Jaad exhibits intoxication effects similar to those of alcoholic beverages. Moreover, rice offers a diverse variety of culinary products in Tharu culture that are skillfully made. Rice is closely linked to its geo-socio-cultural aspects. It creates the identity of Tharu cuisine. It is not only a staple food of the Tharu community but also a primary constituent among the several sources of culinary inspiration for Tharu cuisine. Hence, the Terai region, home to the Tharu community, is famous for its diverse cuisine choices and extensive spectrum of flavours. The Culinary Culture of the Tharu mirrors the region's rich history and diverse heritage.

TRADITIONAL THARU FOOD CUISINE

It is important to note that the dishes discussed below have the component of rice as the main ingredient for delectable Tharu delicacies crafted from rice flour in particular and served as a main course meal with side dish delicacies in general.

The traditional food 'Pittha' is one of the unique dishes in the Tharu community. This dish is made up of rice flour, mostly of Aandi Chawal. While making Pittha, rice is grinded in a traditional grinder called Dhenki, (traditional lever for de-husking and grinding rice), Kudhni (hand grinder) or Chakkiya or Jaata (conventional tool used for grinding grains, spices, pulses etc.) which is a tradition. When the rice is grinded in a conventional grinder rather than in a rice mill, the locals believe the rice tastes comparatively rich in taste and nutrition which is outdated now. In the Tharu community, pitha is one of the essential dishes prepared for the Navratri and Sohrai festivals. The locals of this place design Pittha according to the main tribe deity they worship.

Traditionally it is prepared on fire, pot structured vessel is half filled with water, which is placed on the fire (Chullah) to be boiled. Now, *Paeen* (hand woven basket with an opening at the bottom) is placed on the top of the vessel and a variety of designed Pittha are then put on the sticks placed on the open bottom as the first layer is attached to the *Paeen*. After placing one round of Pittha, cover it with *Dhakiya or Panjhopi* (hand woven basket lid) and steamed it for some time. After that, a second layer of Pittha is added on top of the first layer and kept covered for some time. The process (putting layer after layer) is repeated till the vessel is full or the dough is over. Subsequently, banana leaves are employed as an internal layer before being enveloped with *Dhakiya*, facilitating optimal air pressure and promoting uniform and expedited boiling of the Pittha. Now, it is kept on steaming till it is cooked. It is often served with various pickles and curry. Generally, it is the most essential dish among Tharus, mainly served to the guests and neighbours during festivals.

Even among Tharus, who share similar cultural backgrounds and exhibit identical dietary habits, variations in food traditions exist. This Tharu delicacies are known as *Dhikri* and *Bagiya* in Nepal. *Dhikri* is usually prepared during significant festivals like *Maghe Sankranti (new year)*, *Dashain (ancestor worship)* and *Tihar (Diwali or diwari)*. It is known as *Dhissa* in Uttarakhand

and prepared during *Charai* and *Teez*, while it is known as *Ghuchiya* in Uttar Pradesh and made after the harvest of new crops.

The traditional cuisine 'Chechi' is derived only from Aandi rice, fluffy steamed rice cake either in a fragmented state or as intact grains that have been cooked by the process of steaming and consumed with Chutney, milk and curry of cooked meat and fish. Chechi, also called Chichar, is the most typical dish in Tharu. It is actually *Bhaat* (cooked rice), but the way of making it is different and traditional. Chechi or Chichar is made on special occasions like weddings, welcoming guests and festivals. First, Anandi rice is soaked in water for 4-6 hours to make this. Due to this, the rice becomes soft, and Chechi becomes more delicious. But, if in a hurry, just soaking the rice properly in water also works.

After that, a proper wood fire is lit in the *Chullah* (stove), and water is kept in an earthen pot or other metal vessel. Then Anandi's soaked or puffed rice is kept in a *Paeen* made of a kind of Moonj straw. A layer of Raddi sticks (locally grown straw) is placed in the open bottom of *Paeen*. Rice does not fall because of these sticks scattering. After keeping the rice, it is appropriately closed with a lid (Panjhopi). Again, this paeen is placed properly over the pot or vessel containing boiling water. It is put in such a way that it sits properly on the mouth of the water vessel. The steam of boiling water quickly penetrates up. Chechi gets cooked with this steam. It takes about 2-3 hours to make it, and a lot of wood is also burnt. This is the reason why it is made only on a special occasion.

'Bhakka' is another traditional food of Tharu tribes, commonly steam-cooked broken rice of any variety. In colloquial speak-up, the fragmented rice grains are widely referred to as 'Khuddi'. When the quantity of the broken rice ingredient (khuddi) is plenty, it undergoes the similar traditional process of steaming (discussed above for chechi); this steamed rice is known as 'Bhakka', consumed with chutney, milk and curry of cooked meat and fish. However, when the quantity of 'Khuddi' is limited, it is utilized for in-house poultry purposes.

Indeed, the Tharu community exhibits a predilection for consuming various forms of aquatic fauna, encompassing a wide range of species such as fish, freshwater prawns, as well as more unconventional options like diminutive crabs and clams but Ghonghi (edible snail found in freshwater) is a common delicacy in Tharu cuisine, similar to how chicken and mutton are offered. It is one of the unique food varieties that find a place not only on the table of Tharus but also consumed by many tribes residing in the North Eastern tribal region of India.

A handful of Conch-shaped shell (ghonghi) is collected from the ponds, lakes and rivers of close proximity. The ghonghi are left to steep overnight in order to extract all the viscous substances contained within them. Their inedible caudal extremity is severed to facilitate flesh extraction from the shell. The ingredients are boiled and subsequently prepared as a curry, incorporating spices such as coriander, chillies, garlic, and onions. The rice paste-water mixture is applied to thicken the curry when a snail is about to be cooked. It is eaten with the main rice meal, which exhibits a smooth consistency and a flavour reminiscent of creamy mushrooms.

The Tharu community exhibits a strong preference for consuming taro leaves, also known as *kachh*, and has developed a distinct culinary technique for its preparation. A dish made with taro

leaves is called '*Rikkoch*'. Taro cultivation is among the most ancient in the world and has a rich and extensive history.ⁱⁱⁱ Fresh taro leaves are selected and are cleansed thoroughly. The plucked leaves are exposed to direct sunlight for some time as it facilitates its softening. Paste of rice flour or lentil is prepared with turmeric powder and a desired amount of salt. Leaves are spread on the posterior region of a *Suppa* (sifter) or any alternative flat surface. The thin coating of prepared rice flour paste is applied onto the designated surface. An additional layer of taro leaves is used, and the paste is reapplied. It is possible to opt for two or three layers. The prepared leaves that are spread out are folded into a cylindrical shape. The paste is again applied to keep the leaves together while you fold to get the desired shape. As previously mentioned above, the conventional method of steaming is employed similarly. Now cut it into pieces and fry both sides in oil. Prepare curry by frying chopped onions, chillies, and spices together in mustard oil and adding the rice paste-water mixture. Simmer the mixture for some time, and once reaching the boiling point, incorporate the fried leaf cakes and ensure that the cakes are thoroughly cooked. Sometimes, it is eaten fried with chutney. The unopened leaves and petioles of this plant are prepared like spinach and are commonly consumed as a vegetable. The Tharu people prepare long-petioles as a dietary component for their domesticated pigs, recognizing them as a valuable source of nutrition. Additionally, the tubers of this plant can be cooked by steaming or boiling and are often regarded as a delicacy.

'Gundruk' is another delicacy of Tharu obtained by fermenting leafy vegetables and plants. When the mustard, radish, and cauliflower leaves are harvested in October and November, many leaves collect, exceeding what can be consumed fresh. The leaves are permitted to undergo wilting for a duration of one to two days, after which they are grinded in a traditional Kudhni grinder. The shredded leaves are densely compressed into an earthenware vessel or tightly packed in banana leaves. This packed stuff is kept in warm places. Especially kept in a small pit dug in the ground. Often, these pits are dug at the location where a fire is ignited to safeguard livestock and provide them with warmth. After five to seven days, a slightly acidic taste signifies the end of fermentation, or this can be identified from how it smells, and the gundruk is taken off and dried in the sun. After fermentation, gundruk turns dark brown or black, which is very different from the leafy green colour it had before.

Gundruk is commonly cooked and served because of its lightweight nature after festivals and celebrations, where spicy cuisine and abundant meat are typically consumed. It is usually made by soaking in water for some time, then boiled (depending on the varying degree of sourness a person likes) and later cooked like curry, adding spices like mustard, chillies, garlic, onions, and sometimes potatoes. The rice paste-water mixture is applied to thicken the curry when it is about to be cooked. This dish is served with rice and is characterized as a low-calorie meal that improves digestion. It has a robust and fermented aroma and a varying degree of sourness. Yet, it is considered a delicacy consumed by the inhabitants of the Terai region, particularly Tharus and other indigenous communities. It allows families to store abundant amounts of leafy greens for future use when they are not readily accessible.

Also, fishes caught through traditional equipment in abundance are dried to make *Sukthi* (small tender fishes like deduhi, sidhari, pothiya, etc., dried in sun rays), *Pakali* (little bit bigger fishes like garai, singhi, gotina, etc., mixed with husk then dried in fire through traditional dryer tool (*Jhajha*), *Sidhara* (small cakes of dried fishes, together with the colocasia stem and turmeric powder), etc. The dried fish and veggies are kept for times when it's not possible to get fresh ones.

THARU FOOD VALUES AND THEIR BELIEF SYSTEM

Tharu cuisine is characterized by a diverse range of dishes that exhibit pronounced and captivating flavors. They possess aromatic properties, exhibit distinct characteristics, and offer a unique taste. The nutritional products consumed by the community are sourced from natural resources and locally available sources. Tharu cuisine is generally widely recognized for its emphasis on healthfulness, mainly attributed to the incorporation of fresh leafy greens that are often boiled rather than fried and the minimal utilization of oil.

Many look askance at dishes made of snails, but among Tharus, ghonghi is a delicacy. Despite exhibiting variations in customs and costumes across sub-groups, the indigenous Tharu community collectively demonstrates a fondness for snails. Tharu affinity for snails is seen in their practice of maintaining snails within the ponds of their residence. When Tharu visits the homes of their relatives, they demonstrate their cultural relevance and endearment by bringing along these snails. It is believed that it strengthens relationships with relatives. Snails are purported to possess a high protein content, which is supposed to expedite the healing process of wounds and fractures. It is popular among the tribes, but many non-tribal individuals have begun ingesting them due to their delectable taste and nutritional benefits. These snails are also sold in markets nowadays. Chechi and Bhakka are sticky and heavy, resulting in protracted digestion. Generally, Tharu women who fast prepare Chechi and consume it before commencing their fast. Consuming this food helps satiate hunger in women, preventing rapid hunger onset and making fasting periods more manageable. Dried vegetables and dried fish serve as valuable greens and dietary fiber sources, particularly in regions where access is limited during the winter season. Dried fish is an exceptionally high-protein food with a protein content.

Turmeric usage as a coloring agent in meals enhances the flavor and possesses medicinal characteristics. The additional ingredients - green chillies, onion, and garlic - increase the flavor, mitigate the odor, and are beneficial for health. They also consume fresh fish as part of their celebrations. Taro exhibits a superior nutritional profile to most other root and tuber crops. Both corms and leaves have high-quality protein content and serve as valuable sources of essential nutrients such as phosphorus, potassium, calcium, and easily accessible iron. The corms possess a finely textured starch that is readily digested. Taro adapts to various challenging environmental circumstances, including drought, salinity, and flooding constraints; that's why it is an essential, enriching cuisine for the Tharu community. On the occasion of the Jiutiya, Gaur Pabani (karvachauth), Khichdi (Makar Sankranti), and in Pidwadi (ancestor worship), fish and pittha are presented as offerings to the household deity, and after that, consumed by all family members as

'Sirmi' (prasad). It is believed that the offering pleases the deity and fulfils one's wishes. Since most of their cuisines are prepared by steaming, it is good for health and is tasty as well. It is much healthier and more nutritious as it doesn't contain added spices. Tharu cuisine is recognized for its simple ingredients and reliance on traditional culinary methods. This carries a historical significance in the Tharu community, so conservation of their cuisine is necessary.

CONCLUSION

Similar to other aspects of Tharu society, such as tradition and culture, the culinary practices of the Tharu community are intricately linked to the natural surroundings and environment in which they reside. The Tharu community has resided harmoniously in natural environments for numerous ages, fostering a symbiotic relationship that has influenced the development and adaptation of their dietary practices. They demonstrate the perfect equilibrium of reaping natural resources and nurturing them religiously, reflecting their tribal culture and rural cuisine. Their cooking methods demonstrate inventiveness, the rich history of their food heritage, and their gradual learning to support life and the environment. The indigenous inhabitants have extensive information regarding the various methods of utilizing their resources for specific or regular consumption, preserving the sacred identity of food and strategies for storing them for use during periods of scarcity, rendering food a living tradition of history.

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