The Return of INDIA'S INDIGENOUS FOODS

by Vandana K

Pictured: A shopkeeper weighs finger millet.
Photo supplied by the Centre for Science and Environment, New Deli.

REBIRTH OF FOOD

Three years ago, Navnath Dhindale started growing Sahyadri Black rice on his four-acre farm in a remote mountain village in the Kalsubai Harishchandragad Wildlife Sanctuary in India's western state of Maharashtra. His grandfather used to grow an indigenous variety, which is only found in the Sahyadri mountains but has gradually become rare in the region.

Twenty-one-year-old Navnath belongs to the Mahadev Koli community, one of the several indigenous communities — referred to as tribes and Adivasi — in India that have faced centuries of marginalisation. A few years ago, Navnath went to Mumbai to earn a living, but the difficult conditions forced him to return. Today he works with Out of 0 (OOO) Farms, a Mumbai-based startup that promotes indigenous seed varieties and connects farmers to urban markets.

One of the biggest threats to indigenous people in rural India is rapid deforestation. During the last decade, the government introduced a high-yielding hybrid rice variety in Navnath's village that led to large swathes of forest being cleared.

According to Amrutha Jose Pampackal, a third year PhD student at Cornell University, 'Forests are an important source of nutrition for rural and Adivasi communities, especially when they face seasonal food insecurity. They rely on forest produce such as mushrooms, leafy greens and tubers that enhance their dietary diversity. However, the quality and biodiversity of forests has gone down.' Pampackal has been studying access to food among the marginalised communities in Kalahandi district in India's eastern state of Odisha.

Though in Navnath's case, all was not lost. After a few years of growing hybrid rice, Navnath switched to Sahyadri Black after he got free seeds from OOO Farms. Today his income has tripled. Thirty other farmers from the area joined in and no tree has been felled in the last three years.

When OOO Farms first tried to sell the rice in a farmers' market in Mumbai, consumers' responses ranged from concerns about its edibility to disappointment about its high price. The company was able to sell only ten kilos of rice in the first few months of its launch. 'We didn't feel bad because our focus was the farmer and not the consumer,' said Shailesh Awate, one of the co-founders of the startup. Their efforts paid off when last year they sold twenty-five tonnes of indigenous produce.

One of OOO's primary aims is to build seed sovereignty at a village level.

> *I have also created an indigenous seed bank with OOO Farms with more than sixty varieties of rice and vegetable seeds. We give these to other farmers for free. They return the same amount of seeds to the bank after their harvest,* said Navnath.

Navnath's story signals the slow but steady resurgence of native food, also known as 'desi' in Hindi. These foods are part of India's rich biodiversity and diverse cuisines. While there is now a growing demand for desi varieties of grains, millets, fruit and vegetables, issues such as the gendered aspects of labour, lack of access for some groups and the role of caste in undermining them, remain largely unexamined.

While the Mahadev Koli of the Sahyadri mountains almost lost their indigenous rice, in other communities across India desi foods have maintained their place in local cuisine. Indira Kabadwal's village Udhiyari lies in the Gagas river basin in the Almora district of Uttarakhand, a Himalayan state in north India.

On less than an acre of land, Indira cultivates *madua* (finger millet), *jhingora* (barnyard millet), *kala bhat* (black soybean), *gahat* (horse gram), *ramdana* (amaranth) and *bhangjeera* (seeds of perilla *frutescens*).

> *We kept eating our desi foods even if we stopped growing them, we bought them from other farmers. On rainy days in the winter, my mother used to make a halwa [dessert] from madua with oil and gur [jaggery]. I make it for my kids who also enjoy it,* said Indira.

Indira started growing desi crops twenty years ago when lack of rainfall began to affect her red rice crop. Desi crops do not need intensive labour, chemical inputs or much water. Indira has been selling her produce to the Umang Mahila Producers Company for eleven years — a local female-run company that encourages financial independence among women through microfinance groups and livelihood opportunities through the traditional farming system. Up to six hundred female farmers within Uttarakhand sell their produce to Umang's brands, Himkhadya and Kumaoni, which retail millets, legumes, seeds and fruit preserves. Umang's highest-selling product is amaranth (*Amaranthus hybridus*) — the company produced 5,660 kilos of the seed in 2018–19.

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Pictured: Phalsa sherbat.
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Umang's example also shows how women have played an indispensable role in preserving indigenous foods. Rural women are the ones who perform the majority of labour on the farms as well as processing, storing and cooking the produce. Similarly, the job of foraging mostly falls on women in Adivasi communities.

Because of this, it is so important that women are acknowledged as keepers of indigenous foods and compensated for their labour.

'Back in the day, we used to take our *ramdana* to the grocer's shop and barter it for salt. We also used to sell it for as low as 8–10 rupees a kilo,' said Indira. Now, Umang offers farmers a higher market rate of between twenty and twenty-two percent and all the women who sell to the company are shareholders and can receive a bonus at the end of the year depending on the produce they contribute.

out traditional family recipes in order to 'eat better'. Food bloggers are also experimenting with the desi way of eating. Chefs are sourcing indigenous millets and wild foods to create seasonal menus to set their restaurants apart. The Indian bistro chain Fab Café, which is found in fifteen cities, is one such venue. The menu features ingredients such as *makhana* (foxnut), *kuttu* (common buckwheat), *jowar* (sorghum), lotus stem, jackfruit flour, water-chestnut flour, *ragi* (finger millet), Himalayan red rice, *kokum (garcinia indica)* and palm jaggery. These foods can also be found in organic grocery stores, farmers' markets, health festivals, exhibitions and online stores, and a range of small businesses have emerged in the last decade marketing new forms such as flours, baked goods, snacks, sauces, condiments, beverages, etc. But access is limited to those who can afford the expensive price tag that comes with desi eating in the city.

Chef Joel Basumatari lives in Dimapur, a small city in Nagaland, a hilly state in the northeast of India. His father is from the Kachari tribe and his mother is from the Sema and Angami tribes. He studied hospitality management in the UK and worked as a chef in luxury hotels in London until he decided to return home in 2012. Presently, he freelances as a chef and also runs Saucy Joe's, a food-processing unit that makes local sauces. He is also involved with the North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS), a grassroots non-profit that promotes agrobiodiversity by focusing on 'slow food' among indigenous communities across the region.

A cake made with *chak hao* (black rice) and passion fruit, rosella compote, fiddlehead ferns cooked with chicken, *mirka* (cauvery white carp) cooked with morning glory leaves and chutney made out of king chilli are some of his creations made from local produce. 'I feel it is my duty as a chef to make local food accessible and interesting when we have gotten so used to fast food,' said Joel.

Joel travels with NESFAS to local villages to exchange culinary knowledge, and cooks new dishes with whatever is growing locally. He also learns from the community's traditional recipes and the folklore behind each ingredient. Before the pandemic, he visited five remote villages in Meghalaya, another northeastern state, and created forty new recipes for the locals. 'It is very important that we don't forget our roots and where we come from. That is why we have to safeguard these ingredients for our community,' he said.

Aruna Tirkey belongs to the Oraon Adivasi community of the central Indian state of Jharkhand. She is on a mission to restore pride in Jharkhand's Adivasi cuisine and create livelihoods for her people. She owns Ajam Emba, a restaurant in her hometown Ranchi that serves local delicacies such as *pitha*, a rice cake steamed in sal leaves; *chilka*, a thin crepe-like roti made from rice and madua; curry made from a local freshwater *getu* fish; *gondli* (little millet) halwa; and fusion foods such as *madua momos* (steamed dumplings). The restaurant employs Adivasi women and has gained popularity among locals and tourists alike.

Aruna believes Ajam Emba's attempt to renew indigenous food has already begun to show results on the ground. 'A woman from our community insisted I come to her farm and see something she was excited about. When I reached there, I saw she had planted *gondli* for the first time. It made me very happy,' she said.

Despite the earnest attempts to celebrate India's native foods, it is hard to ignore the complexities of race, caste and class that are all intricately connected to its food system. Class mobility has led many people to shun their indigenous food and adopt a staple diet of wheat and rice, which were once largely eaten by the upper-caste people and indicated prosperity. These grains have also been popularised by the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India, a welfare program run by the state that provides cheaply priced grains to all citizens including the poorest. On one hand it has ensured availability of affordable food for the poorest but on the other it has failed to promote indigenous foods.

Aruna was documenting indigenous recipes when she found out that there was a feeling of shame and social stigma attached to eating one's own food among the Adivasi communities in Jharkhand. 'People told me that no one would socialise with them if they would eat such coarse food,' she said.

The inherent racism in the caste system has also been used by the *savarnas* (upper castes) to negate and devalue the indigenous foods of the Adivasis.

'When my uncle was studying in an engineering college, his upper-caste classmates found out that he used to eat *madua*. They told him his skin was so dark because he ate such dark food,' said Aruna.

Our contemporary ecological crisis is another major challenge to the continuation of indigenous foods. 'Climate change, environmental degradation and concretisation are impacting the availability of indigenous foods and, therefore, impacting communities,' said Vibha Varshney, co-author of *First Food*, a series of three recipe books published by the Centre for Science and Environment, which aims to protect local biodiversity by showcasing indigenous foods.

Considering India is one of the most vulnerable countries to the climate crisis, it is imperative that indigenous foods are protected. 'Last year, the monsoon in Maharashtra was delayed and it led to drought. Without water, the hybrid rice distributed by the government dies within a week. When our desi crops wilted, we thought they were dead. The rains arrived much later and within a few days of the first shower, the paddy crop came back to life,' said Shailesh.

The revival of indigenous foods has not come easily. Individuals and organisations promoting these foods are having to overcome multiple barriers of discrimination based on class, caste, race and gender. In the ongoing pandemic and ecological crises, indigenous foods could be a means to protect ecosystems, improve nutrition and ensure equality and justice. Indeed, they deserve the long overdue respect that they are beginning to receive, and a place at our table.