

AN OVERVIEW OF CHANGING FOOD HABITS OF TRIBAL PEOPLE IN JALPAIGURI DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Tribal people may be considered as the special group of people whose socio-economic structure is different in comparison with the non-tribal or advanced group of people. Tribal people generally use simple technology which they think fits well with the nature and inside the ecological surroundings. They run their life in an eco-friendly way and gathered traditional knowledge from the nature and crystallized in the laboratories of life over million years. As they are very close to environment, they know the use of nature very well and their dietaries are both simple and complex. They acquired immense knowledge about appropriate use of wild flora and fauna that are found naturally. Their social status, religions conciseness and regional practice have got the priority on the selection of food. The objectives of the study are to know the food habits and dietary system of the indigenous people and how these ethnic people mislay their traditional customs and accultured by the influence of other societies. Both the primary and secondary information collected from field survey and other sources have been considered for analyse the food habits and dietaries prevailing among the tribes in the district of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The study reveals that the eating pattern of the tribal people mostly depend on the culture, customs, traditional knowledge, social connotations and other economic factors but the dominance of Bengali and Nepali culture has changes their food habits enormously. The forces of modernization and development induced their standard of living and they are coupled to be absorbed into the regional mainstream.

Key words: accultured, dietaries, food habit, standard of living, tribal people.

1. Introduction:

A diversified ecological, cultural and linguistic zone has given shelter to plentiful tribal communities in all over India. Tribal population consists of 8.6 percent of total population in the different States of India. As per Census, 2011, the estimated Scheduled Tribes population of India is 104 million. Article 366 (25) of the Constitution of India, defines Scheduled Tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled tribes for the purposes of this constitution". These populations constitutes India's most susceptible group and are found in all parts of the country. The tribes of India belong to different racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups and have been living a simple life based on the natural environment. They mostly

occupy the isolated areas of hills and forests. They created distinct cultural and social environment inside their society. The discrimination and exclusion from the modern world makes tribal people unique in respects of lifestyle, food habits, tradition and cultural beliefs etc. Food habit of the tribal people defers from community to community and varies from season to season. The tribal people collect majority of their daily food from the forest. The main courses of their food are pulses, vegetables, fruits, edible flesh and fish depending upon the local availability. Living close to nature the tribal communities acquired immense knowledge about the use of wild flora. They apply their traditional knowledge for maintaining their traditional lifestyle but sometimes it may be restrained by the influence of modern society. The dominant tribal communities of Jalpaiguri district like Oraon, Munda, Santal, Rabha and Mech have distinct food habit and dietary system which is influenced by the nature. The food habits of these tribal people have been taken into consideration for this study.

2. Objectives of the study:

The study is all about changing food habits and socio-economic conditions of five tribal communities of Jalpaiguri district and how they are different from the people of modern society. In view of this, the objectives have been structured as-

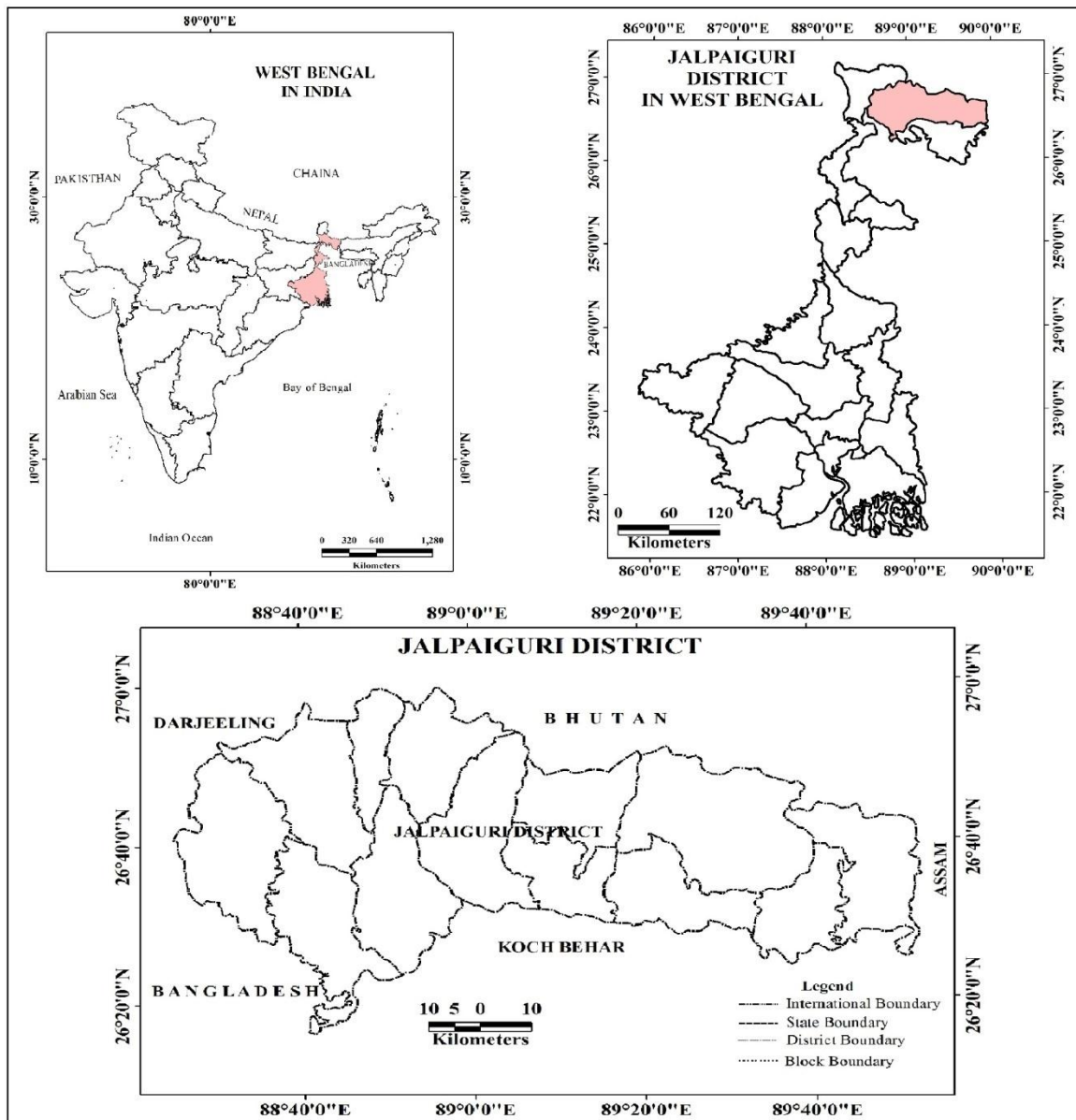
- to know about unique food habits of selected indigenous people of Jalpaiguri district;
- to assess how socio-economic parameters influence their food habits;
- to evaluate the influence of modern society behind changing food habits and dietary system of tribal communities.

3. Methodology:

Five dominant tribal communities namely, *Mech and Rabha* from Indo- Mongoloid group and *Oraon, Munda, and Santals* from Proto- austroloids have been selected to analyse the changing food habits of these tribal communities. Both primary and secondary data have been collected to assess the changes in food habits of tribal people. Secondary data have been collected from various documents, Government reports and other available literatures. Primary data have been collected with the help of a structured questionnaire by means of interview and personal interaction. The questionnaire had been administered considering two age grouped villagers; old age group having more than 50 years of age and younger generation having less than 30 years of age. 200 households have been surveyed by simple random sampling methods. With the help of cartographic techniques primary and secondary data has been represented and analysed the changing food habits of tribal communities.

The present study is confined within the districts of undivided Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The geographical area of the district is 6227 sq km. which spreaded between 26° 16' to 27° 0' N and 88° 8' to 89° 53' E. The tribal folk have been selected on the basis of their ethnicity and distinctive food habits. Santals from Uttar Hanskhali and Nipuchhapur Tea Garden of Mal C.D. block, Oraons from Batabari Tea Garden, Chhaophali of Matiali C.D. block and also from Gayerkata Tea Garden of Dhupguri C.D. block, Mundas from Nagrakata and Grassmore Tea Garden of Nagrakata C.D. Block and Hantupara Tea garden from Madarihat C.D. block as well as Raydok forest village of Kumargram C.D. block, Mech from Mendabari Forest village, Dakshin Mendabari of Kalchini C.D. block, Rabha from Dakshin Mendabari and Bhatkhawa Tea Garden of the same C.D. block have been chosen as target population. Eleven villages from seven C.D. Blocks have been randomly selected based on tribal dominance considering five groups of tribal communities.

Figure 1. Location of the Study Area



Source: DPMS, NATMO, Kolkata

4. Results/Findings:

4.1. Unique food habits of selected tribal communities of Jalpaiguri district:

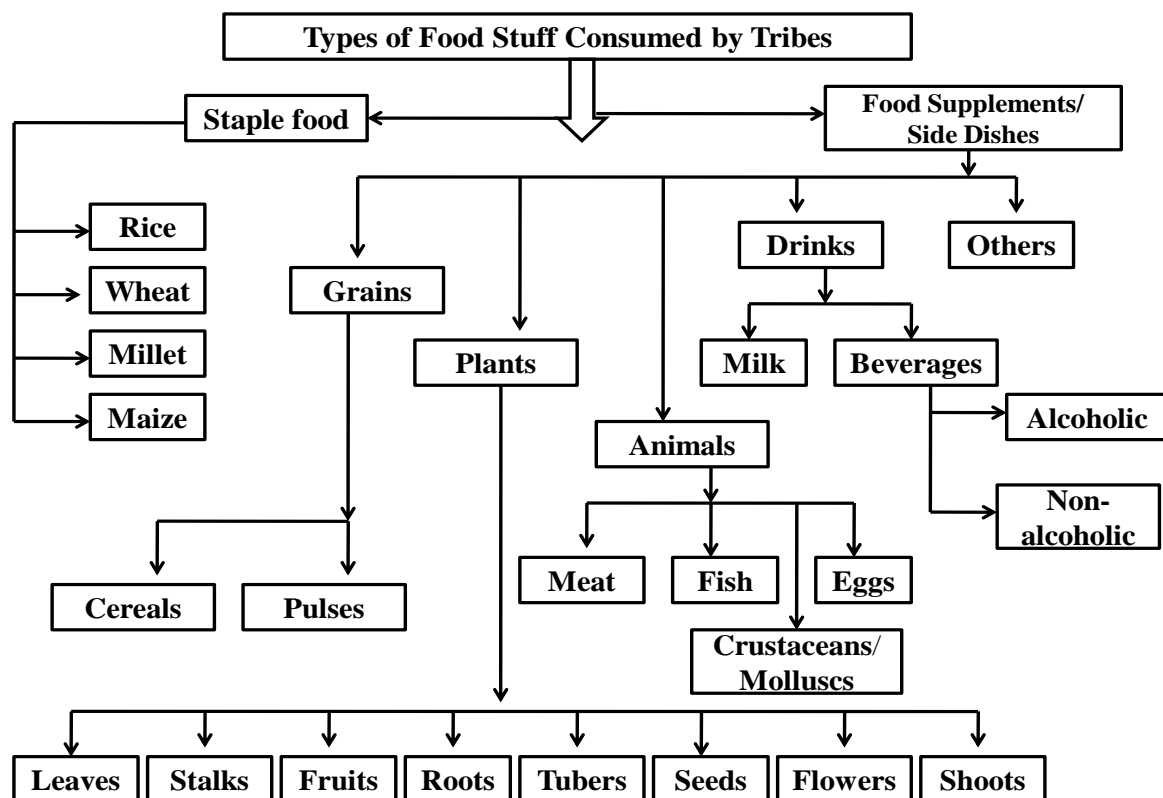
Indigenous people of northern part of West Bengal are mainly migrated from other geographic regions like Chotanagpur Plateau region, Assam hills and Indo- Malaya region. So they carry various cultural pursuits along with them which make the northern part of Bengal culturally vibrant in respect of lifestyle, languages, dresses, artifacts and others. Versatility is also found in their foods. Various types of food stuff which are consumed by the tribes especially the tribes of Jalpaiguri district have been

represented in schematic form (Sanyal, 1979). From diagram no. 2 it is clear that the tribal people used to take food which grows naturally and are very simple. Not only on nature but they also depend upon their traditional knowledge and wisdom which are the main ingredients behind their uncomplicated food habit. Their food stuffs are categorised into two groups; one is staple food and another is supplementary foods or side dishes.

4.1.1 Staple food:

Staple foods are considered as the main food. Tribal people prefer to consume rice as their daily diets. Two types of rice are generally consumed by them based on the method of preparation: *Seddho* or boiled rice and *Atap* or sundried rice. Various customs can be seen among various tribal communities regarding the preparation of rice. Rice grains are generally washed once by Rabhas and Mundas before preparation but Oraons and Meches washed it twice. "Atap" (sun dried) rice is not washed before cooking in general and is used for making rice balls/ cakes (*pitha*), parched rice (*Muri*), flattened rice (*chida*), roasted rice (*chalbhaja*) and porridge (*payash*) etc. Rice is taken along with cooked vegetables, pulses, fish/ meat etc.

Figure 2. Types of Food Stuff Consumed by Tribal Communities



Source: Sanyal, 1979 with modifications

Rice is very significant in Santal delicacy like other Proto- Austroloids as stated by Sanyal (1979). It is replaced by maize and pulses during scarcity. Besides these millets and *shyama* or *kodo* grass seeds are also used by the Santals. Among this community, economically well-to-do families prefer to take meals thrice but poorer section cannot afford it even twice a day. Vegetables and pulses are taken along with

staple food rice by Oraons also Das (1959 and 1960). Their morning dish includes stale rice, onion and chilly. Like all other Proto- Austroloids, Mundas are also prefer to take rice as a staple food and bound to take millets, pulses in scarcity. At the time of good harvesting season they take meals thrice a day and lots of leafy vegetables and pot herbs. They take meal twice a day at noon and in the evening. Rabhas also prefer rice as other tribes. In the morning they take either rice or different rice products like *chida, muri* etc. with tea (Sanyal, 1979). Rice is the staple food of the Meches. In scarcity, rice may be replaced by wheat or inferior cereals like millets. In Mech family, meal is taken thrice a day, in the morning, at the noon and in the evening. The amount of consumption of food grains and others depends on the economic status of the household as well as the availability of the food stuff. In scarcity, rice is replaced by wheat or other inferior cereals and even by boiled arum, leafy vegetables also by the households.

4.1.2 Side dishes or food supplements:

Mixed type of food habits are seen among all the tribes. Along with staple food they complement it various vegetarian and non- vegetarian items as side dishes. Cereals like *shama, kodu* grasses and various types of pulses are used by all the tribes apart from the staple food. From various literatures it is evident that in association with the staple foods, the uses of various vegetables and pot herbs are intended to be eaten as curry or fry or boil or baked. Various types of leaves like tender jute leaves, lettuce, tender cucumber leaves, cabbages etc., along with stalks, raw berries, mango, jackfruit, banana, guava, tomato, radish etc. are consumed either raw or cooked by them.

Table 1. Crop Calendar followed by the Tribal Communities

| Tribes | Food Stuff | Month of harvesting |
|--------|---|--|
| Santal | Paddy, Maize, Ragi, Millets, Vegetables | Sept./ October, October/ November, August, throughout the year, Oct./ Nov./Dec.-Feb. |
| Mundas | Pulses, Paddy, Maize, Ragi, Millets, Vegetables | July/Aug., Aug./Sept., July/Aug., Oct./Nov., Aug., throughout the year |
| Oraon | Paddy, Maize, Ragi, Millets, Vegetables | Sept./ October, October/ November, August, throughout the year, Oct./ Nov./Dec.-Feb. |
| Rabha | Paddy, Maize, Ragi, Millets, Vegetables | Sept./ October, October/ November, August, throughout the year, Oct./ Nov./Dec.-Feb. |
| Mech | Paddy, Maize, Ragi, Millets, Vegetables | Sept./ October, October/ November, August, throughout the year, Oct./ Nov./Dec.-Feb. |

Source: Sanyal, 1979 with modifications

Table no. 1 shows the crop calendar prepared by various tribal communities in details. It gives a clear picture of harvesting system of various tribal communities of Jalpaiguri district is explained. According to Sanyal (1979), tribes of Jalpaiguri used to produce their food grains on their own. Among proto-austroloids, Santal, Oraon and Munda who have small piece of cultivable land; they used to cultivate paddy, maize, ragi, pulses and various types of vegetables in the month of July to November apart from tea leaves plucking in the tea garden. Rabha and Mech are mainly known as good cultivators. It is clear that they possess good amount of land where they practices sedentary cultivation and produced paddy, maize, millets, ragi and vegetables throughout the year for their own consumption.

Proto- Australoids prefers to take ripe fruits of *Ficus in- fectoria*, *Sal (shorearobusta)*, *Beal (Eagle marmelosCorrea)*, Palm or Tal (*BorassusflabelliformisMurr*). Different types of roots are also eaten either raw or boiled and they preparecurry out of these. Non- poisonous or edible roots like wild potato, water lily (*Nymphaea sp.*), radish, carrot, etc. and poisonous e.g. *Ol* (different types of arum – roots), *arums*, *SimulKunda (Manihotutilissimaphol)* etc. are eaten by Santal, OraonandMunda communities. Red sweet potato, sweet potato (white), Hibiscus cancellantus etc. and young shoots of different plants are used as food. Young and tender shoots of bamboo are collected by the Santals, Oraons and Mundas from bamboo groves on regular basis. Different types of flowers are seen to be collected by the children's from the Proto- Australoids. Among different types of flowers, particularly *Sajina* and *Mahua* have taken the important place. Tea flowers are also collected by the Oraons from tea gardens and eaten as fry regularly. Seeds are not so much important but lotus seeds and bamboo seeds are also collected by the tribes occasionally.

Table 2. Collection of Various Food Staff

| Tribes | Types of food stuff collected | Other observations |
|--------|--|--|
| Santal | Wild flowers, wild fruits and wild shoots. | Wild foods are collected by women assisted by the young boys. |
| Munda | Edible flowers, wild tubers, roots. | Women take part in collection. |
| Oraon | Edible flowers, leaves, berries, roots and tubers. | Women folks gather all food stuff which forms significant role in their dietary. |
| Rabha | Wild potatoes, arum and vegetables | Women and girls are engaged in collection. |
| Mech | Wild and modified tubers and roots. | Women collect from the forest or from barren lands which is rocky in nature. |

Source: Sanyal, 1979 with modifications

Tribal people were used to practicing hunting for collection of meat from the forest and adjacent areas but now a day they are not involved in this activity as hunting is prohibited by various forest acts and laws. They used different hunting instruments like bows and arrows, sling, nets, stones etc for hunting jungle mouse, field rates, squirrels and wild birds etc. Rapid urbanization and implementation of forest protection acts is the main barrier for their traditional practice.

Various types of animal meat particularly pig, goat, ram, hare, birds, fishes, crustacean/ molluses and eggs are preferred by both proto-austroloids and mongoloids. Meats are intended to be eaten as curry by the tribes fresh or dried fishes (*Shutka*) are also consumed by Rabha and Mech. Taking of *Shedal*, *Bharta* are found among the Rabhas(Sanyal, 1979). Rabha and Mech is very good fish trapper so their daily dishes are served with good amount of fish regularly. The consumption of fish and meat of other tribal groups depend upon the economic strength of a family.

Table no. 2 shows the gathering of food staff of different tribal communities. Tender folks and women of Santal, Munda and Oraon collect different edible flowers, wild tubers, leaves, barriers and roots, wild fruits from forest and from barren lands.

Alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages are also consumed by tribes. They are very fond of alcohols as they prepare various types of drinks out of very simple ingredients. Tea is widely used by the tribes now a day. Most of the tribal people are very fond of fermented and spirituous liquors. They prepare the

alcoholic beverages from cereals like rice grains, Indian corn or maize and *marua* or *ragi*. Among Santal, Munda and Oraon, the chief ingredient for preparation of beer is rice. *Handia* is prepared by the Santal by rice; *Poura* is prepared by them from *Mahua* flowers also. *Jou*, made out of fermented rice is used by the Mech. Like other tribes Rabha communities prepare *Chakat* liquor from fermented rice.

4.2. Influences of socio-economic parameters on food habits of the tribal people:

Food habits of a community are regulated by the interaction of multiple factors. Dietary practices differ not only from country to country but also from region to region and from community to community. Broadly speaking food habits and a dietary system of any community is depending upon economic and non-economic or socio-cultural factors. An economic factor includes income of the individual or household as well as price level of different food articles and availability of foods. The non-economic or socio-cultural factors include size of household, occupation, education, standard of living etc.

4.2.1 Dependence on biotic resources for food:

Figure 3. Production of Staple Food

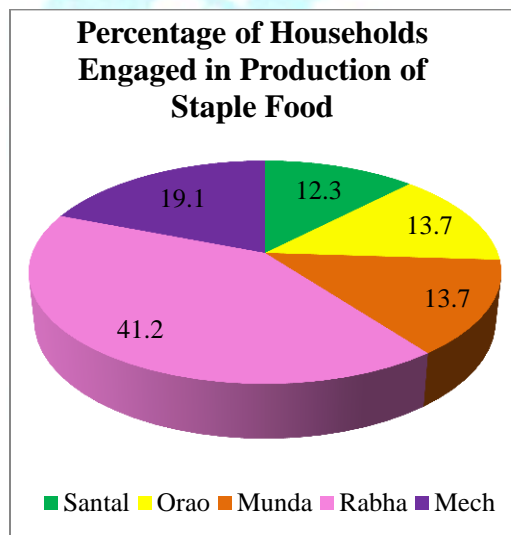
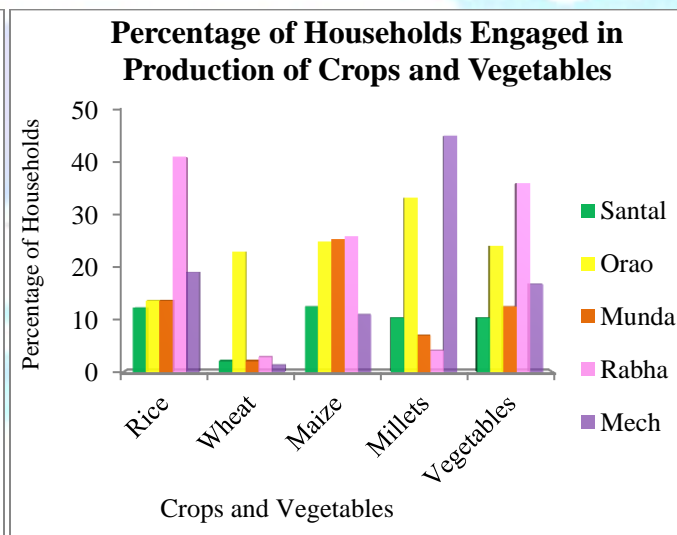


Figure 4. Production of Crops and Vegetables



Source: Primary data, 2016

Tribal people normally depend on the nature for food. They use to collect food from forest nearby. But now a day, most of them are practicing sedentary cultivation rather than food gathering or hunting. The tribal people used organic manure for producing crops and vegetables. They consume seasonal fruits, vegetables, food grains and leafy vegetables which are grown in nature in their locality. They collect fish from rivers by their handmade fishing net. A larger section of tribal people eats pork which is domesticated easily. According to Sanyal (1979), tribal people are the son of the soil so their lifestyle, food habits, dietary system is governed by nature. The quantity of food consumed by them is also governed by season. Summer season offers minimum quantity of food stuff to them due to scarcity of water. Fruits and vegetables are not easily available. In rainy season when the fields are full of water, the tribes do not get different types of food stuff such as fruits, roots, tubers even cereals easily. In autumn season the quantity and variety of food stuff are increased. Fishes as well as cereals are getting

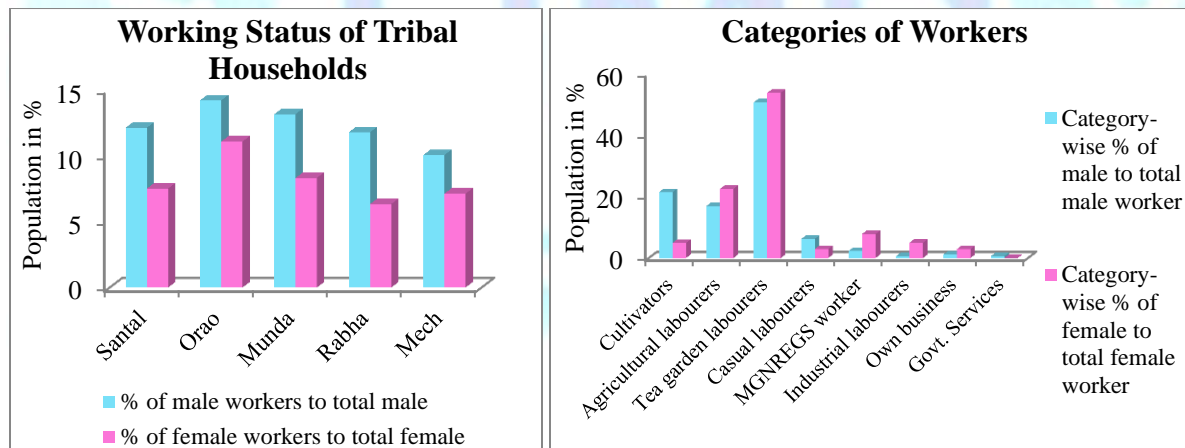
in abundance in nature at that time. In the earlier part of the winter season, a better supply of food stuff is observed than that of the autumn season.

From fig. no. 3, it is clear that most of the Rabha (41.2%) and Mech (19.1%) households have possessed agricultural land where they produced rice in rainy season and other supplementary foods in other seasons. On the other hand Oraon (13.7%), Munda (13.7%) and Santal (12.3%) households has very small amount of land provided by the tea garden on rented basis where they produces rice, wheat maize, millets and other vegetables throughout the year. In fig. no. 4, the production of various staple foods and food supplements cultivated by selected tribal communities is projected.

4.2.2 Influence of occupation and family income on the selection of food:

Food habit of a tribal family depends upon the family income which is adjudicated by occupational pattern of that household. S.C. Dube (1957) describes that standard of living is very often judged by the quality and quantity of food. The kind of rice eaten by tribal people and frequency of taking meal is solely depending upon the economic strength of the household. Comparatively poorer sections are not getting food twice a day but economically sound tribal families are very often taking food thrice in a day but now a day.

Figure 5. Working Status of Tribal Household Figure 6. Categories of Workers



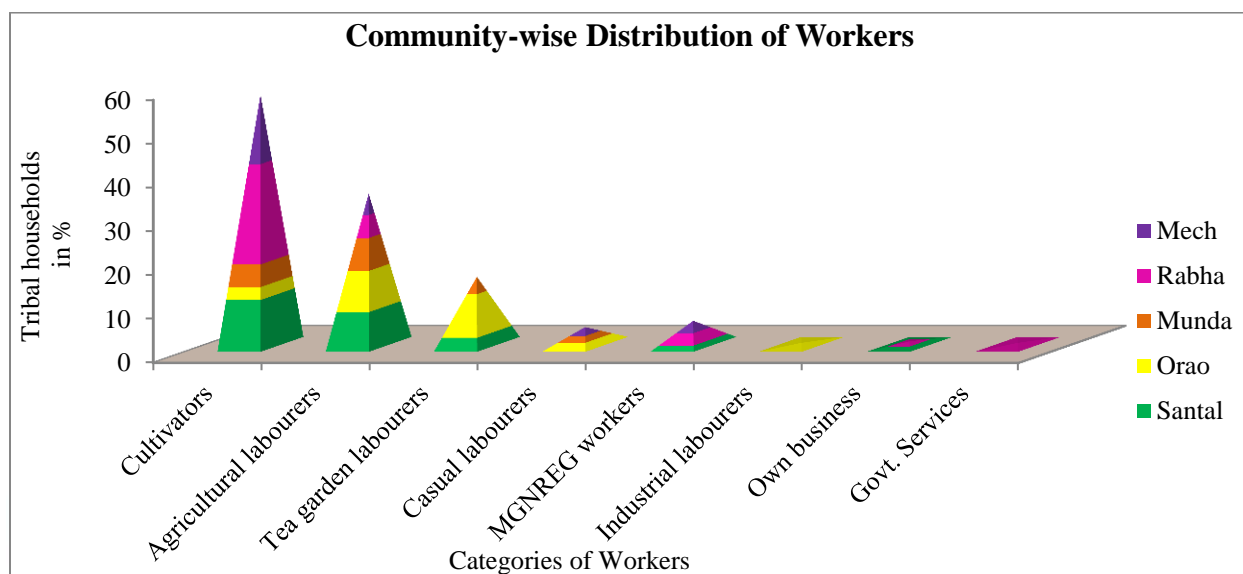
Source: Primary data, 2016

Study shows (Fig. no. 5) that male are actively participating in economic activities. On the other hand 11.06 percent, 8.30 percent and 7.50 percent of Oraon, Munda and Santal households are categorized as working population. 7.11 percent and 6.32 percent of Mech and Rabha female are also involved in various economic activities. Among these working population 50.82 percent and 53.92 percent male and female population are as tea garden labourer and only 0.57 percent male population are working in government sector. 21.46 percent and 4.9 percent male and female population works as cultivator whereas 16.95 percent and 22.54 percent male and female are actively participated in other agricultural activities (Fig. no. 6). So from the survey it is clear that the occupational pattern of the study area is depicting a humble economic condition of selected tribal households.

In figure no. 7, community-wise engagement of working population has been shown. 22.22 percent Rabha households are sedentary cultivators followed by 15.41 percent Mech, 11.46 percent Santal

households. 8.96 percent Oraon families are employed as agricultural labourers whereas only 5.01 and 4.65 percent Rabha and Mech families are considered as agricultural labourers respectively.

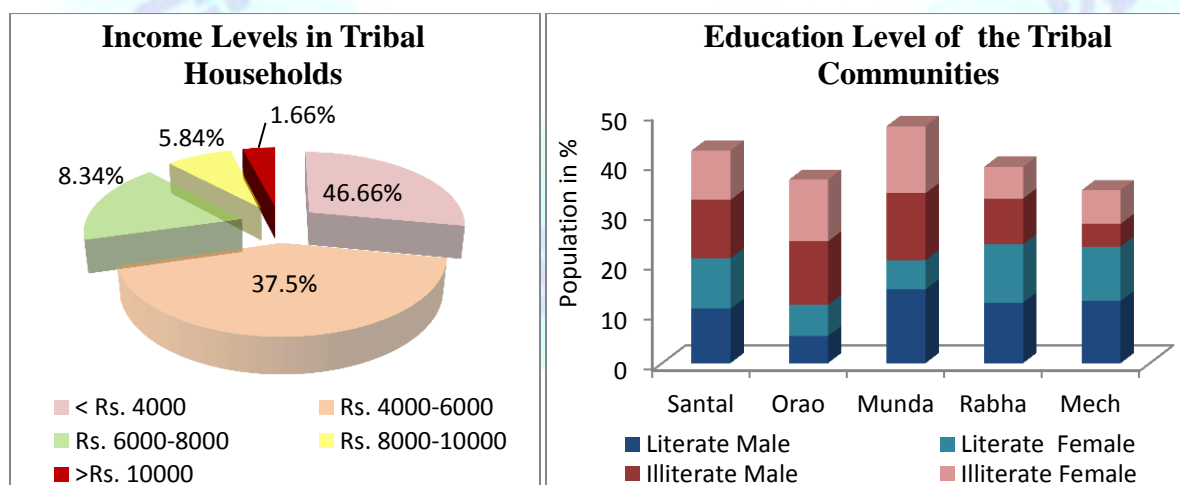
Figure 7. Distribution of Workers



Source: Primary data, 2016

On the other hand some Rabha (0.35%) and Santal (0.35%) households has generates their income from business; only 0.35 percent Rabha households are employed in government sectors. 2.15 percent Rabha and Mech households are engaged in MGNREGS activities. Basically Santals (2.86%), Mundas (3.58%) and Oraons (8.96%) are employed in a tea garden and their monthly income is less than Rs. 4000. It is observed that most of the open tea garden has public distribution system but the closed tea garden does not provide ration to its workers.

Figure 8. Income Level of Households Figure 9. Status of Education



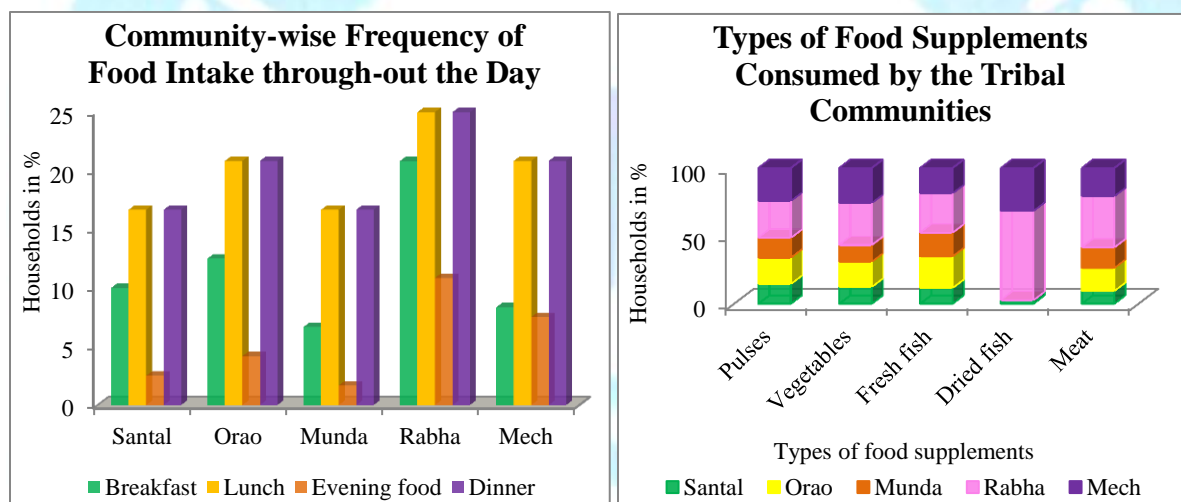
Source: Primary data, 2016

Income of the household influences both the dietary practices and purchasing power of a family. Study shows (Fig. no.8) that the regular farmers holds very small amount of land whether most of the share croppers has large sized lands and are economically rich. Among the land less communities, the consumption of food staff is very poor in quality and quantity. In general, a literate tribal household consumes various types of food staffs than an illiterate one (Fig. no.9).

4.2.3 Daily consumption of food stuff:

Frequency of taking meal and quality of food consumption based on the availability of food stuff depend on economic condition of a family (Prakash, 2014). Economically well-to-do family is able to consume various types of food twice or thrice daily. Frequency of food intake through-out the day has been shown in fig. no. 10. Rabhahouseholds are very particular about taking breakfast (20.83 %) and evening tiffin (10.84 %) regularlywhereas only 6.67 percent Munda and 12.5 percent Oraon households take breakfast.

Figure 10.Frequency of Food IntakeFigure 11. Types of Food Supplements



Source: Primary data, 2016

Consumption of supplementary foods along with staple food of different tribal communities is shown in figure no. 11.29.06 percent Rabha, 23.38 percent Oraon and 18.60 percent Mech households consume fresh fish whereas 65.8 percent Rabha and 31.57 percent Mech households are very fond of dried fish. Only 9.43 percent Santal, 15.11 percent Munda households consumed meat but this percentage is high in Rabha (37.73%) and Mech (20.75%) households.

4.2.4 Frequency of Intake of Different Food Items:

Frequency of taking different kinds of food items depend upon economic condition of a tribal household. Figure no. 12 shows that most of the families are unable to procure enough food stuff because of their poor economic status. Rabha (20.83%) and Oraon (12.5%) households prefer rice as breakfast. Rice is also consumed at the time of lunch and dinners by all the communities. Figure no. 13 illustrates that 42 percent population belonging to above 50 years of age prefers to take staled rice in breakfast but 15 percent people from the age group of below 30 years of age prefers it in breakfast. 39 percent young generation prefers tea and biscuits as their breakfast whereas 12 percent of older people

prefer it. 31 percent younger generation prefers puffed rice or *chida* as their breakfast rather than staled rice which indicates that the food habit of younger generation has been changing gradually.

Study discloses that the food habits of younger generation of selected tribal communities are slowly influenced by other non tribal communities. From figure no. 14 it is clear that 28 and 30 percent younger age group consumes fast foods like chowmin and other snaky items respectively whereas 41 percent of them goes for puffed rice or *chida* as evening tiffin but 62 percent aged people prefers puffed rice or *chida* as their evening tiffin.

Figure 12. Frequency of Rice Intake

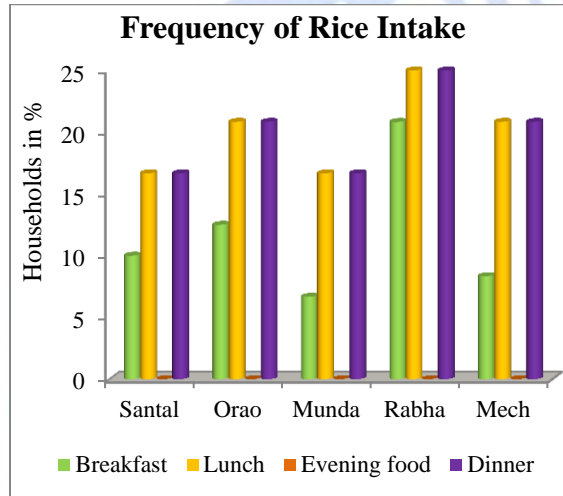
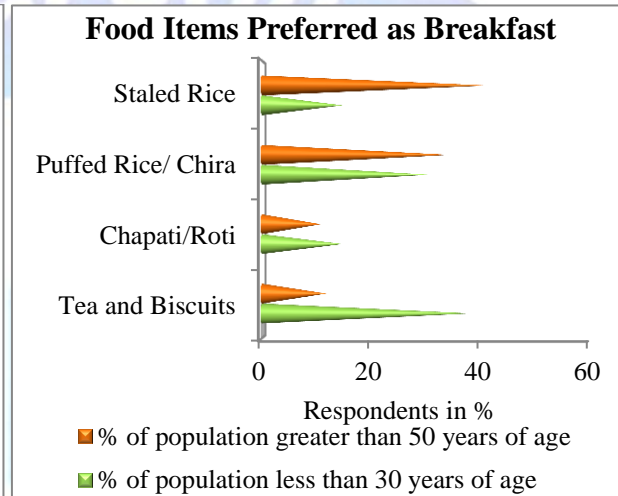


Figure 13. Preferred Breakfast Food Items

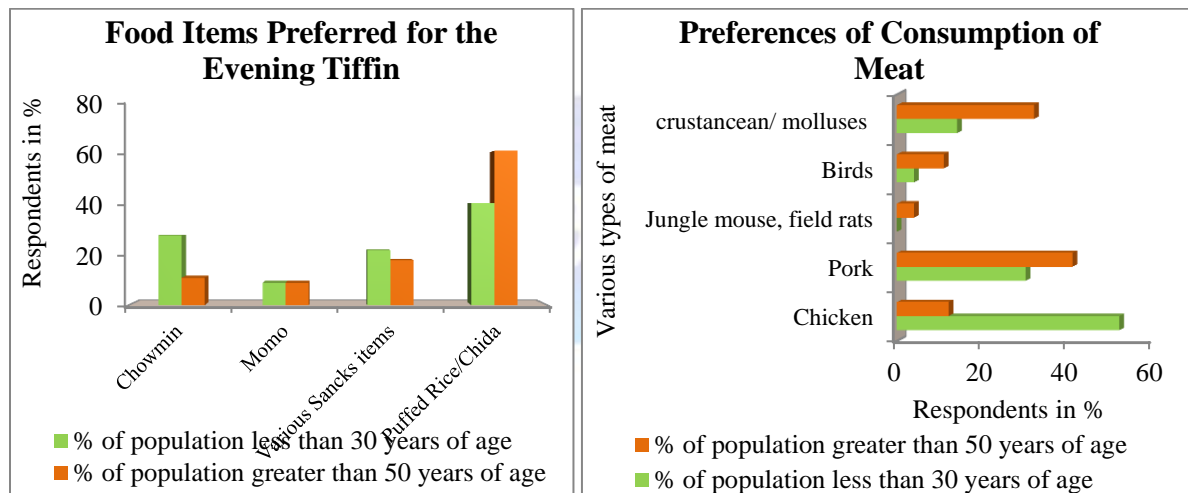


Source: Primary data, 2016

Figure no. 15 depicts that younger people of various tribal communities changed their preferences of meat consumption from traditional items like crustacean/molluses and wild birds to pork and chicken but 4 percent seniors among these tribal communities are still love to take jungle mouse, field rats along with pork and chicken. It implies that the changing socio-cultural environment and force full implementation of forest acts and laws compel them to change their food habits. They cannot enter into forest frequently as hunting is totally banned so they have to confine themselves within paddy fields, small bushes and rolling rivers.

Figure 14. Preferred Food Items for Tiffin Figure 15. Consumption of Various

Types of Meat

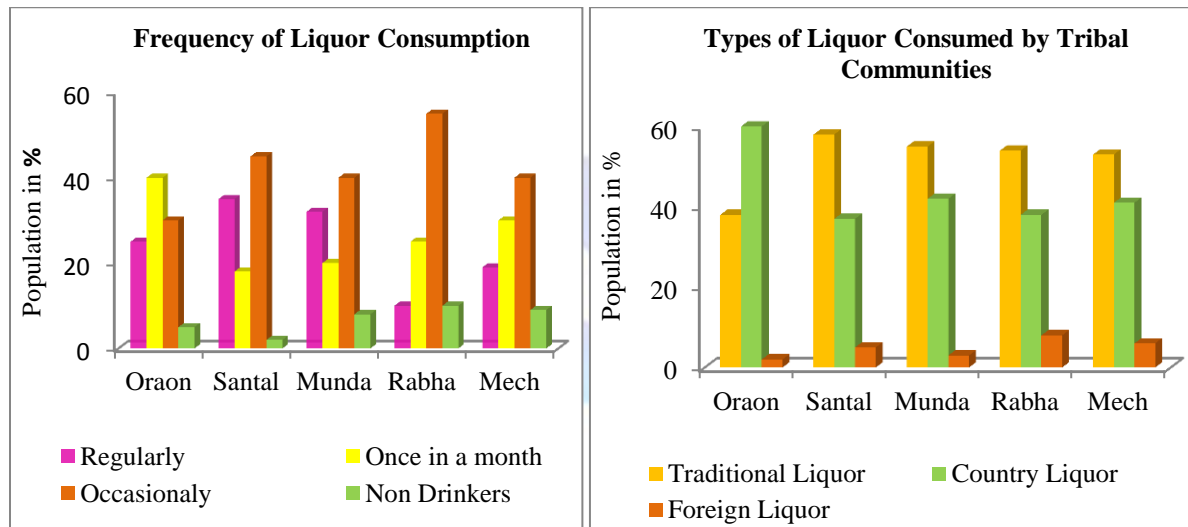


Source: Primary data, 2016

25 percent Oraon, 35 percent Santal, 32 percent Munda consume traditional liquor on regular basis but 55 percent Rabha and 40 percent Mech prefers to drink traditional liquor in social occasions only. 8 percent of Rabha, 6 percent of Mech are fond of foreign liquor. 60 percent Oraon prefers to consume country liquor along with traditional liquor. Now a day people of tribal societies restrict themselves from consuming liquor on regular basis. 10 percent of Rabha, 9 percent of Mech, 8 percent of Munda and even 5 and 2 percent of Oraon and Santals are counted as non drinkers respectively. Liquor consumption among the tribal communities is decreasing day by day due to extensive contact with the dominant Hindu castes. The influence and pressure of non tribal communities influences the tribal people to give up their habit to a great extent. Now-a-days, instead of country liquor, distilled spirituous alcohols are also consumed by the affluent tribes who lives closer to the urban facilities. Both cigarettes and homemade cigarette or *bidi* are commonly used by the tribal men and women. Besides this Mech and Rabha take tobacco leaf with a pinch of *chuna* (Calcium Carbonate) regularly as tobacco leaves are produced in their kitchen-garden or adjacent fields. It is the impact of the local neighbors such as the Rajbanshi, Nepali and Hindus. Recently tribal people are addicted to *Gutkha* also which are easily available in local markets.

Figure 16. Frequency of Liquor Consumption

Figure 17. Types of Liquor Consumed



Source: Primary data, 2016

4.3. Persuasion of modern society responsible for changing food habit and dietary system of the tribal communities:

Contacts with non-tribal and impact of urbanization are the main reason behind cultural conversion in food habits, procedure of cooking of tribal households but their economic upliftment has not yet arrived. The basic requirement to break an economic constraint is the supply of quantity of food daily. Little impact of cash and market economy, constant interferences from outside world and semi-isolated condition of habitation, the cultural homogeneity of tribes has been acculturated. The forest dwellers have still preserved their traditional culture to a considerable extent but now a day they also lose their tradition and cultural heredity undoubtedly in lower and slower pace. The tribal groups who have been settled down in villages and come into contact with non-tribal people become susceptible for acculturations. Unprecedented heavy influx of the Hindu refugees from the then East Bengal into their native area have initiated the path of changes. Regular and intimate interactions with various Hindu castes people particularly the Rajbanshi, Bengalese and other scheduled caste population put together for their gradual transformation. The rapid progress in socio-economic parameters, influences of market economy, various developmental initiatives taken for the sake of tribal advancement are also show the way of their cultural diffusion. Above all most of the tribal people opted Christianity only for getting certain benefits, mainly economic forced them to forget their own year old traditions. Standard of living, life style, food habits and dietary intake of tribal people are gradually changing due to the wave of urbanization.

5 Conclusion:

A change in the level of food staff consumption among different sections of tribal people is observed from household survey. The poorest in both racial stocks, experienced a fall in their consumption. However, the fall is more significant among the Proto-austroloids mainly among landless tea garden labourers. For the average income group, there is a significant improvement in the levels of

consumption of food staffs. Tribal people are not very conscious about the nutritional value of various foods but the nature teaches them how to select good food and survive in extreme situation. In view of low standard of living of these tribes, it can be stated that there is a need to achieve nutritional security along with food security in the district.

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