

Food Habits as a medium of Socialization among the Dongria Kondh: A Sociological Study of Traditional and Changing Food Habits

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ABSTRACT:

The food practices of tribes in India more dependent upon forest and agriculture. All these food practices are based on agriculture along with nature based products. Study documents the food knowledge among Dongria Kondh and examines food practices as a process of socialization. Qualitative approach has been used, to analyse food habits connected with Niyamgiri Hill. 19 number of traditionally prepared dishes by the Dongria Kondh has been documented through unstructured interviews, focused group discussion and participant observation. The findings denote that the Dongria Kondh food habits is based on a varieties of millets, rice, maize, pulses, vegetables, fruits, roots, tubers, mushrooms, fish, meat, minor forest produce and traditional drinks. Food is also central to ritual and social life, as cereals, meat, liquor and forest products are offered to deities and ancestral spirits and shared during festivities and Ceremonial feasts. The Dongria food system therefore combines cultural continuity with growing nutritional, economic and ecological sensitivity. However, subsidized rice, market integration, commercial horticulture, changing preferences, restricted forest access and declining culturally significant crops are transforming food habits. Therefore, the study highlights that this transformation may weaken Pathways of food-based socialization and Indigenous ecological knowledge. It highlights the need to recognize and strengthen traditional food systems as vital resources for cultural continuity, social cohesion, livelihood security and sustainable community development.

Keywords: Traditional food knowledge, Cultural continuity, Indigenous community, Transforming Food habits, Sustainable development, socialization

Introduction

Socialization is a process through which individuals learn and adopt their societies' norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral patterns (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Food, as an integral part of everyday life, through which culture and social relations are learned, practiced, and reproduced across generations. George Herbert Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionist perspective

the self develops through interaction and shared meanings. Similarly, food practices learned from early childhood, including what to eat, what not to eat, how food should be prepared and consumed, with whom it should be shared, and which foods are appropriate on particular social or ritual occasions. Cooley similarly emphasizes the importance of primary groups, particularly family and close relationships, in the

development of the self and social behavior. Family interaction therefore plays a important role in understanding food preferences, eating practices, manners, and culturally norms.

Durkheim's concept of collective representations and social solidarity explain how food transcends individual act of consumption and becomes a collective practice through rituals, festivals, ceremonies, hospitality, sharing, and communal eating. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus refers to socially acquired dispositions developed through repeated experiences and practices. Food preferences and ways of eating can therefore be understood as embodied dispositions that individuals acquire through their social environment. Consequently, Fischler (1980), argues that food practices are situated within the relationship between nature and culture and are influenced by processes of social change. Ochs and Shohet (2006) demonstrate that mealtimes are significant cultural sites where children learn culturally appropriate patterns of interaction, communication, and eating behaviour. Similarly, Ayadi and Bree (2010) show that food learning within families takes place through everyday interactions between parents and children. Quintero-Angel et al. (2019) demonstrate that food habits and culinary practices can function as mechanisms of cultural transmission and contribute to the construction of cultural identity and social cohesion. Gallois et al. (2012), in their study of the Jenu Kuruba of India, highlights the role of parents, relatives, and other community members in transmitting traditional ecological knowledge to younger generations, demonstrating that traditional knowledge is embedded in social relationships and everyday practices. Fonte (2008) further establishes the connection between food, knowledge, and socialization by arguing that local knowledge is produced and transmitted through everyday social practices, norms, and habits. In this sense, traditional food knowledge represents an intersection between practical knowledge, cultural knowledge, and social knowledge. Burnette et al. (2020) demonstrate that family acts as an important conduit for Indigenous enculturation, cultural continuity, and wellness,

with traditional food practices forming part of broader processes of intergenerational learning and family bonding. Similarly, Dockery (2020) emphasizes the significance of intergenerational transmission of Indigenous culture and traditional knowledge for children's cultural development and wellbeing.

This theoretical understanding provides an important basis for examining the food habits of the Dongria Kondh. Bulliyya (2002), in his work on the health, nutritional, and dietary conditions of Kondh communities in Odisha, documents the importance of locally available food resources. Ethnoarchaeobotanical research on the highlands of Odisha demonstrates the importance of crop diversity, particularly millets, in understanding the cultural and ritual dimensions of food among communities including the Dongria Kondh (Berger & Cappers, 2022–2025). Food crops therefore participate in relationships between people, land, ancestors, deities, and community life, operating as a medium of cultural memory, ritual participation, and social identity.

However, Mohanty and Rajan (2023), in their study of Kondh communities of Rayagada, Odisha, demonstrate that neoliberal economic processes, commercialization, changing agricultural practices, and market-oriented production have influenced the traditional food system. Such changes may affect not only what people produce and consume but also the knowledge, values, and social relationships associated with traditional food practices.

Accordingly, the present study approaches food habits as a significant medium through which the Dongria Kondh reproduce, negotiate, and transform their social and cultural world. The comparison between traditional and changing food habits provides an opportunity to examine not only changes in dietary practices but also changes in family relationships, intergenerational knowledge transmission, cultural identity, ritual participation, and community life. In this sense, studying food habits among the Dongria Kondh provides a sociological lens for understanding the relationship between culture and socialization,

tradition and modernity, ecological knowledge and changing livelihoods, and cultural continuity and social change.

Significance

Most of the government sponsored schemes and programmes related to food, do not produce desired results due to lack of knowledge about food practices from natives perspectives. This study shows that food is not merely a biological need but a social practice through which the local people transmit cultural values, gender roles, ecological knowledge, family traditions, and community identity. By understanding both traditional and changing food habits, the study helps explain how socialization occurs within households and communities, while also revealing the effects of markets, migration, education, and changing livelihoods on indigenous cultural continuity and social relations.

Objectives of the study

For the present paper, keeping in view of the diversified food habits of Dongria Kondhs the major objective of the study was To discuss various food practices and its associated issues in relations to social aspects.

Study Area

Dongria Kondh predominantly inhabits in Niyamgiri hill range of south Odisha. The Niyamgiri hill range is distributed under two districts of Odisha namely Rayagada and Kalahandi. This forest range is bounded by Karlapat wildlife sanctuary on the North-West and Kotgarh wildlife sanctuary on the North-East end, which is very rich in biodiversity and natural resources.

Methodology and Materials of the Study

Study Locale and Population:

The study was conducted among the Dongria Kondh, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) inhabiting the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha, India. The study area primarily comprised the Niyamgiri region of Rayagada district, covering the blocks of Bissamcuttack and

Muniguda. The region is characterized by hilly and forested terrain and remote tribal settlements. The Dongria Kondh traditionally depend on horticulture, shifting cultivation and forest resources for their livelihood and are particularly known for the cultivation of turmeric, banana and pineapple. The population of the Dongria Kondh is approximately 9,000–10,000, distributed across nearly 100 villages in the Niyamgiri region.

Study Design :

An exploratory research design has been adopted to explore the traditional food environment, indigenous food practices, dietary diversity and factors influencing the consumption of indigenous foods among the Dongria Kondh tribal community of Odisha. The study will employ qualitative methods to obtain comprehensive information on the food practices and its relation to socialization among the community. The qualitative component will explore the traditional food systems, indigenous foods consumed, methods of collection and cultivation, seasonal availability of foods, food preparation and preservation practices, cultural preferences, food taboos and factors influencing the consumption of indigenous foods. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and key-informant interviews will be conducted among selected members of the Dongria Kondh community.

Sampling :

Purposive sampling method was applied to pick the sample from the universe of study. The study was conducted in two blocks of Rayagada district of Odisha namely Muniguda and Bisam Cuttack. Altogether ten villages were selected by taking five villages from each block randomly. In the later 155 respondents (men and women and adolescent) have been taken as sample size for the current research study.

Discussion and major Findings

Table 1 Characteristics of Study participants in villages of Bissamcuttack and Muniguda, Odisha

Block	Study Village	Group Size	Gender and Age Group of Respondents
Bissamcuttack	Khambesi	25	20 adult(10 women and 10 men),5 adolescent
	Kurli	15	15 adult (10 women and 5 men)
	Khajuri	13	5 elderly(women),5 elder (women),3 adolescent
	Kudabalipadar	7	1 elderly (men),6 adult (men)
	Sagadi	11	2 elderly men,7 adult men,2 adolescent
Muniguda	Denguni	25	5 elderly (2 men and 3 women),10 adult(10 men and 9 women), 5 adolescent
	Merkabondi	12	5 elderly(women),5 elder (men),2 adolescent
	Dhamanapanga	15	10 adult (10 women and 1 men)
	Khambesi II	20	5 elderly (2 men and 3 women),10 adult(10 men and 9 women)
	Serkapadi	12	5 elderly(women),5 elder (men),2 adolescent

(Source:Field work 2025)

Data Analysis

All focus-group discussions (FGDs) and interviews were recorded, transcribed from Kui into Odia, and subsequently translated into English. The transcripts were used to prepare a comprehensive list of foods known and consumed by the Dongria Kondh community. This method helped identify the foods most

frequently consumed, preferred, or historically important to Dongria Kondh households. The initial coding categories were developed from the objectives of the study and included: traditional food knowledge and intergenerational socialization. The coded data were further analyzed thematically to identify relationships between food-habit change and changes in socialization. Where appropriate, the responses

of elders and parents responds have been recorded. Elder participants were treated as important sources of information on earlier food traditions, indigenous crops, forest foods, food taboos, and customary environmental practices,

Results

while adolescents provided insight into contemporary food preferences, school meals, packaged foods, and changing attitudes toward ragi, forests, hills, and traditional culture.

Table 1

Sl.No	Food/Cereals	Local Name	Main Form of Consumption
1	Finger millet	<i>Dare / Mandia</i>	Gruel, pitha, porridge, or cooked meal
2	Little Millet	<i>Hiko/ kbir a</i>	Cooked grain, porridge, or gruel
3	Foxtail millet	<i>Kosla/ kang u</i>	Soft-cooked grain, porridge, or gruel
4	Barnyard Millet	<i>Suan</i>	Cooked grain, porridge, gruel, or khichdi
5	Pearl millet	<i>Arka/ bajr a</i>	Porridge, gruel, flour preparation, or cooked meal
6	Sorghum	<i>Knye/ juara</i>	Porridge, gruel, flour preparation, or cooked grain
7	Maize or Corn	<i>Makka</i>	Roasted or boiled cob, flour preparation, or cooked grain
8	Rice/Paddy	<i>Kuli</i>	Cooked rice, rice gruel, fermented rice, or festival food
9	Kodo millet	<i>Kodra or kodo</i>	Cooked grain, porridge, gruel, or khichdi
10	Sago palm pith	<i>Sago</i>	Cooked preparation, gruel, or mixed with other ingredients

(Source:Field Work 2025)

The table indicate that Dongria Kondh relies on diverse range of staple food and cereals, especially millets, rice, maize, and sago-palm pith, reflecting a traditional food system. Hence, food diversity contribute to nutrition, food security as

well as transmission of knowledge across generations. Hence, food functions as an important medium of socialization.

Major Staple Cereals

Table 2 Dishes prepared by local people

Sl.No	Dishes	Main Ingridients	Significance
1	<i>Mandia jau</i>	Finger millet/ragi, water/rice and pulses's water	Physical strength

2	Millet-rice gruel	Ragi, rice, pulses such as pigeon pea, salt	showing mixed-food traditions
3	Ragi cakes or patties	Ragi flour, rice, jaggery	prepared during festivals and special gatherings
4	Millet pancakes	Finger millet/ little millet/foxtail millet/sorghum/ pearl millet or kodo millet; water or jaggery	Reflects cereal diversity
5	Boiled little millet	Little millet/ <i>biko</i> or <i>kosla</i> , water, salt	food security
6	Wild leafy-vegetable curry	Edible leaves such as <i>patinkuchba</i> , <i>gandri kucha</i> and <i>vhardakuchba</i> , salt, chilli	Demonstrates knowledge of edible plants
7	Wild mushroom curry	Forest mushrooms, bamboo mushrooms, salt, chilli and vegetables	reflects knowledge of forest ecology and safe preparation
8	Bamboo-shoot curry	Bamboo shoots, salt, chilli and vegetables	use of forest and horticultural resources
9	Boiled or roasted yam	Wild yam, (<i>bilkuna</i>)	Provides carbohydrates during lean period
10	<i>Rani kanda</i> / <i>Langala kanda</i> preparation	<i>Rani kanda</i> / <i>Langala kanda</i>	Supports food security
11	Tamarind-seed gruel or powder preparation	Tamarind seeds, water and sometimes millet or rice	Used as a seasonal or emergency food
13	Mango-kernel gruel	Processed mango kernels, water, salt; sometimes rice or millet	Supports food security
14	Salap-pith gruel	Powder from the pith or dried stem of the sago palm, water, salt; occasionally ragi or rice	Use in Severe scarcity or lean period.
15	roasted Fish/Meat	Fish or Chicken, goat, pork, buffalo or other locally consumed meat	Provides animal protein
16	Mahua beverage	Mahua flowers, water	ritual offering, medicine and medium of hospitality
17	Salap or <i>mada kalu</i>	Fresh sago-palm sap	beverage culture and ritual practice
18	Banana liquor or <i>kadali kalu</i>	Banana and water	Demonstrates the conversion of horticultural produce
19	Molasses liquor or <i>guda kalu</i>	Molasses and water	locally available sweeteners in beverage production.

(Source:Field Work 2025)

The above table shows that Dongria Kondh dishes are not only the sources of nutrition but

also important cultural practices through which food knowledge, ecological awareness, and social

values are transmitted across generations. Thus, food functions as a living form of socialization through which the Dongria Kondh learn cultural identity, cooperation, ecological values, survival strategies, and continuity between generations.

Focus group Discussion 1 : Ragi Gives Us Real Strength

A Dongria Kondh farmer from (Parsali) village , stated, “Rice just fills our stomachs, but ragi (finger millet) gives us real strength.” This statement reflects the respondent’s lived understanding of the nutritional and cultural importance of ragi within the Dongria Kondh food system. According to the respondent, rice provides a feeling of fullness, whereas ragi is believed to provide lasting energy for agricultural

work, walking through the hills, collecting forest products and performing household activities. Ragi is commonly ground into flour and prepared as *mandia jan*, a semi-liquid gruel consumed as part of the household diet and during periods of intensive agricultural labour.

The respondent’s comparison of rice and ragi reflects cultural distinctions, with rice associated with market purchase and government food-distribution programmes, while ragi is linked with local cultivation, traditional seeds, local knowledge and the ecological conditions of the Niyamgiri hills. Thus, ragi is valued as symbol of physical strength, self-reliance as well as cultural identity and continuity with food practices.

Table 3 Overview of Dietary Patterns and Meak Structure

Meal Time	Common Food(Traditional)	Common Food (Changes)
Morning	<i>Mandia jan</i> or ragi gruel; leftover millet-rice preparation; boiled millet; <i>chuda</i> with <i>gur</i> ; banana or other seasonal fruit.	Tea with sugar, biscuits, packaged snacks, bread, noodles, and purchased fruits
Midday Meal	Simple rice or millet; pulses such as <i>kandul</i> ; leafy vegetables; boiled or roasted tubers; seasonal fruits; occasionally fish or meat.	Mainly rice from the Public Distribution System, purchased dal, market vegetables, potatoes, eggs, packaged spices, and occasionally fish or chicken
Evening	Rice, ragi or other millet; pulses; leafy vegetables; yam, <i>Rani Kanda</i> or <i>Langala Kanda</i> ; fish, chicken, pork, goat or other meat when available; seasonal forest foods.	Rice with purchased vegetables, dal, eggs, chicken, market fish, instant noodles, fried snacks, and other commercially available foods

(Source:Field Work 2025)

The table reflects a transition from locally produced, seasonal, and forest-based foods to market- and Public Distribution System-based foods among the Dongria Kondh. Thus, meal patterns reveal both dietary change and changing forms of socialization, family interaction, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and cultural identity.

Food as Socialization Process:

Children learn food knowledge by joining their elders to millet fields and forests, where they

identify edible plants and explain safe consumption. At home, women teach children through cooking—for example, preparing *mandia pej* (finger-millet gruel) as a staple food and serving mushrooms and tubers only after elders confirm their safety and proper preparation. During daily gathering children learn to identify edible plants, tubers, mushrooms, greens, and fruits. This learning reflects the cultural and environmental relationship of the community with Niyamgiri hills . The whole family often works and eats together in the fields

and all capable adults and children above 8 years contribute to the food security. Eating together shows household unity and mutual responsibility. Dongria Kondh show generosity and reciprocity through food and drink sharing. Children learn solidarity through such practices. However, in the youth dormitories they learn collective identity, relation and hierarchy between seniors and juniors often while sharing meals, snacks, and liquor. This process shows that food knowledge is transmitted through socialization and connects with ecological knowledge, cultural identity, and community survival.

Changes Related to Food Habit

Government rice schemes (PDS) have made cheap white rice widely available, leading many Dongria households to substitute rice for traditional millets and mixed cereals. Rice is increasingly seen as a “high-status” staple and preferred for feasts, displacing millets in everyday and ritual consumption. State and NGO schemes promoting horticulture (pineapple, turmeric, ginger) have reduced area under millets, shifting land use away from diverse subsistence crops toward market-oriented monocultures. Greater contact with valley markets and towns has introduced packaged snacks, refined flour, sugar, and processed items, especially among youth and school-going children. School feeding programs typically serve rice-based meals, reinforcing rice as the “proper” food and reducing children’s exposure to millet- and forest-based diets.

Changes in Socialization due to changes in Food Habit

The availability of free rice limiting children’s learning about edible forest food. This directly creates a limit on species identification, seasonal cycles, and sustainable harvesting. Less reliance

on forest foods limits occasions to teach children about edible plants, processing of bitter tubers, restricted sacred plants and this weakens the learning of environmental ethics. This study describes a shift from **millets** (tied to shifting cultivation, clan identity, and local belonging) to **rice** (linked to the state, markets, and outsiders). Rice is used as a symbol of high-status for guests (affine, officials) and increasingly dominating daily meals. Children are learning that rice is a “proper” food and millets as old-fashioned. Traditionally, new crops and fruits were offered to deities/ancestors before consumption, embedding gratitude and restraint. With rice dominating both daily and ritual consumption, the symbolic link between clan fields, specific millets, and ancestral reciprocity is reduced.

Conclusion Remarks

The changing food environment of the Dongria Kondh reflects the growing influence of roads, markets, state programmes, and external food commodities on traditional food systems. However, community seed banks, diverse millets, forest foods, household storage, women’s knowledge, and collective food practices remain vital for food security, ecological resilience, and cultural continuity. Food is learned through cooking, sharing, rituals, and seasonal collection; therefore, protecting traditional food practices also protects intergenerational socialization, indigenous knowledge, community dignity, and the living cultural relationship between the Dongria Kondh and Niyamgiri Hill. Sustainable policies should strengthen community control over seeds, forests, storage, processing, and marketing while ensuring that development supports—not replaces—their traditional food institutions.

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