

Within the world of food collection

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Hindus in the desert vow never to eat fish.

– Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*

SEVERAL years ago an argument broke out at a shrine in the village where I lived and where we had brought the bear that had been killed on the hunt. Someone wanted a claw of the dead animal and had voiced the desire; almost everybody, including the priest, opposed it, saying that we should not disfigure any offering brought to the shrine after a ceremonial hunt. The general opinion prevailed and the bear was left intact. According to custom, the women and children later filed passed the animal

(‘to have a good look’) and the bear was roasted over a fire, the fur scraped off, the meat cut up and divided.

This year, in the same shrine and after a similar hunt, it was a barking deer that had been brought as an offering. After the ceremonies were over, and after a small discussion between the priests and some of the elders, small circular slits were made just above and below the hind thigh of the deer, and the bit of tube-shaped skin slipped off its leg. This was then fitted on to the ceremonial horn (that is blown during such an occasion and throughout the hunting season) as an adornment. Nobody objected to this, and the animal was duly roasted and later divided up.

Both the ceremonial hunts mentioned above were the first hunts of the season, known in Durwa as the *welka kedh*. The success of the hunt is believed to foretell the fate of the coming agricultural season and every able-bodied male in the community is expected to participate. While on the hunt – with such a large number of people – it becomes more than obvious that these occasions are not for procuring meat and that the purpose is the assertion of territorial rights which is inextricably linked to visits and offerings at various sacred spots all along the route of the hunt.

The route may be said to be a boundary marker and led through all sorts of legal titles of land, such as protected areas, reserved forests, national parks and wildlife sanctuaries; the composite of all the routes of the ceremonial hunts of a community or clan is the total territory claimed by them. There are instances when a clan may have migrated away from a place but periodically still return to lead the hunt in their area – the area may be occupied and settled by others – to continue to assert their ownership.

Hunts such as these, all of them taking place in the months preceding the monsoon and involving only men, made me first realize that ‘hunting’ is not synonymous with ‘meat’ or ‘food’, and that there were other connotations attached to the activity. They inevitably involved rituals and, often, first fruit ceremonies that commenced the harvest or use of certain plants, and they sometimes heralded specific social and economic actions such as horn-blowing, sowing, or the consumption of *mahua* distilled from fresh flowers.

To emphasize, not all hunting is geared solely towards meat. The hunts that are pursued for food are usually the more casual ones that people go for in small groups throughout the year.

The meat sought is essentially that of small game – monitor lizards, civets and giant squirrels, rat snakes, monkeys – and quite unlike that sought during the ceremonial hunts. It is these smaller casual hunts, often indulged in to break the monotony of agricultural work, that actually bring in the bulk of the protein consumed by forest dwelling peoples in central India. Yet, as most people who go out to hunt know, one often returns empty-handed after a long day in the forest: in fact, that is the usual rule!

Compared to hunting, fishing is more pointedly about food. Though individuals do go out to fish with a net or a rod, the ‘idea of fishing’ conjures up a group – a family with children, a bunch of women and girls, a couple, or two or more families – and an expedition. It could be far from home where they may need to camp overnight, or close enough to return home before dark. Such ventures may involve dykeing and bailing small streams, the use of plant poisons, and searching under rocks for crab. One important difference between fishing and hunting, as far as food is concerned, is that one almost never returned without at least a minimal catch: in this it was akin to plant food collection rather than hunting. Also, a fishing expedition always involved women – sometimes only women – and often children, the latter learning about the use of plants and plant parts used in stupefying fish. And because of the children involved the mood was one of a family outing or picnic, with noise and splashing and pranks.

The gathering of plant foods is an entirely different domain, in the sense of it being an ‘all year round’ activity and almost entirely a women’s affair. Every village has its own ‘super-woman’, a plant collector par excellence, in whose house one inevitably finds unusual foods. It is with much

pride that one is treated to rare forest foods. In my experience it was in the house of Jenka Murtal, a woman in Bastar, that I tasted the smoked fruit of *kalla* (*Dillenia aurea*; the more commonly known and consumed *Dillenia* is *D. pentagyna*, known as ‘musiri’ in Durwa) and the sun-dried fruit of *gorra* (*Bridelia retusa* which is common in the forest but hardly ever dried and stored by the people because of the labour involved in gathering the small fruit) among other delicacies. Some people seem to consider it a duty to collect and taste (and have others taste) the various foods that appear through the year.

As most of the foods, in the form of leaves, flowers, shoots, fruit, seeds and nuts, make only a fleeting appearance in the forest, it is necessary to be particularly attentive to be successful in procuring them. It is common for people to remember a year or a season when they either missed or managed to taste a particular food. A person may recall a year when she had gathered and eaten much termite mushrooms, or a year may be remembered due to the scant amount of wild mangos in the forest and the distance they had to travel to find the few that were available. The flowering of bamboo and the bamboo rice that becomes abundant once in many years is a case in point. Risking generalization, one may classify years when some foods were tasted and years when some were not and, of course, the stories and incidents these food gathering ventures threw up.

What makes plant collection important is the fact that it contributes to a large proportion of the *adivasi* diet. They are usually available throughout the year (tubers in late winter and spring, seed kernels in summer, greens and shoots during the onset of monsoon and the wet period) and provide a range

of nutrients required for a healthy diet. More than fishing, plant-food gathering allows for much freedom: one may make individual forays into the forest or go with a companion, and one may combine it with other chores such as leaf plucking or fuelwood collection. It is an activity that caters to individual moods and situations that may vary each day, demanding solitude one day and preferring company on the next.

More often than not, it is plant food that is traded in local *haats* in central India (unlike in Northeast India and in Southeast Asia where many animals/animal products are openly traded in street markets), the demand for them coming from people in nearby towns who know the taste of many wild foods and, more recently, those who see health benefits in consuming them.

A quick survey of edible plant foods in some villages in Bastar yielded a list of more than 300 species. However, those that were regularly eaten were far fewer, many species having slipped out of traditional diets as ‘there was not enough time’ (a common answer to the question, ‘Why don’t you eat this tuber or that fruit anymore?’) It usually pertained to plants that were cumbersome to harvest or process), or because they were difficult to identify for the younger generation, or simply due to a change in taste. Even then, about 200 species were regularly gathered and consumed by a large section of the adivasi populations of central India. This inevitably meant that at least 200 plants and plant parts were recognized and known in an intimate manner, which included their habits, status and ecology, and allowed them to understand any change in their behaviour over the years.

Going out looking for these plants give people an understanding of the forest that is seldom acquired in

any other manner (though searching for plant medicine by specialists is another way of understanding the forest but that, as mentioned, is a specialized activity) and it is this practical knowledge that is the unintended but most prized fruit of a food gathering lifestyle.

In this context I would like to mention a small incident while looking for various yams in the forest. I was accompanied by a young Durwa boy who had been to school and who surprised me with his ability to discern several species of the said genus *Dioscorea*. He would confidently remark that a particular kind would have prickles at the base of the stem, that another would not, that one would form its tubers deep in the ground, that another would have hairy leaves, and so on. And, of course, he was always right. When I asked him how he had learned all this – this being an especially difficult genus even for botanists – he said that he had watched his mother as a young child, as she would carry him along on yam trips. She usually sat him down on a nearby rock and went about digging; later, as he grew up, but was still not old enough to be sent to school, he began to help. Much of what he knew about yams, and indeed about the forest itself, he learned by watching, and not because he had been consciously taught.

Hunting is almost totally banned in India, strictly enforced by policing in protected areas. The Forest Rights Act (2006) explicitly states, while conferring other rights to the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers, that it excludes ‘the traditional right of hunting or trapping or extracting a part of the body of any species of wild animal’ (ch 2, 3(1)). In most protected areas fishing too faces similar restrictions though the decade old act may bring some relief to this

aspect of adivasi life. Yet, within the adivasi tradition, though there are ceremonial hunts – which as earlier mentioned refer more to territory and spirit appeasement – there are very few customary rules that guide hunting *per se*, in the sense that they are ‘traditional management principles.’ In effect, though there are rules about not stringing a bow in the vicinity of the village, there is no rule that says that one may not kill a very young or female deer. Most of the prudence exercised in hunting, and to a large extent in fishing, tends to be individual or groups decisions, rather than a general customary rule.

In stark contrast to this ‘freedom’ in hunting, plant collection is full of rules that guide harvest (time of year and, on occasion, also place), and the method and times of cooking and storing various forest foods. So clear are these rules that they may be said to guide the overall adivasi behaviour in the forest for a large part of the year. The dates of first fruit ceremonies for both cultivated as well as wild foods may vary between villages. Those who have already celebrated the ceremony are free to travel (and eat) outside their homes and villages; those yet to celebrate it are restricted in their movements outside their village as they may not partake of food in homes that have been through the festivities. Restrictions on travel and commensality are very limiting in forest areas where villages are far from one another and people rely on each other for shelter and food. Yet, plant food gathering hardly faces any legal restriction and is carried out in most forests all over the country.

Just as hunting is also about territory, the actions of food gathering links Durwa culture to language and metaphor to perceptions in ecology, and gives it a unique vantage from which to view a forest based lifestyle.

(In sharp contrast we have contemporary societies that have discovered the value of forest foods and are willing to pay for it. Their understanding or interest in such foods seldom goes beyond a food's nutritive value and the perceived benefits it may have in case of specific illnesses. More worrying is their singular lack of concern about the adivasi and forest communities that harvest such foods traditionally, process it if necessary, and make it available to consumers in distant places. When a particular food becomes unavailable, due to a failed monsoon for instance, this disregard about the broader circumstances that had converged to bring such rare foods to their table is striking! Food, in such societies, is disconnected from most of the other aspects of life and is considered in isolation.)

The Durwa people use nine verbs to describe the various kinds of 'hunting', six verbs to discuss the kind of fishing concerned, and nine verbs to denote specific kinds of gathering.¹ These verbs range from (for hunting) *chasing*, that pertains to going after monkeys, civets and flying squirrels and other arboreal mammals, or *searching*, that usually refers to rat snakes and monitor lizards that are sought out in the slush along stream banks; for fishing techniques we have *bailing*, of small streams that are dyked and bailed for fish, or *stupefying* (fish) in such streams by using one of the many available plant poisons, or *feeling* (under rocks) for crab or solitary fish; gathering invokes images of *searching* (among leaf litter) for mushrooms, or *digging* for yams and other rhi-

1. M. Ramnath, 'The Role of Wild Food in Tribal Culture in India: as Taste, Identity, Metaphor', in A. Baviskar (ed.), *Nature Today: New Studies in Ecology and Environment*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, (forthcoming).

zomes used as condiments, or simply *plucking* leaves that are used as pot herbs.

These and the other 16 verbs all have their rules, in terms of time and place, which ensure a prudence in the manner of food collection. The verbs encompass a section of the actions that the human being makes in his attempt to procure food, many of these verbs also being a part of everyday vocabulary, hinting at the full potential of possibilities of an active and healthy person.

In a related manner, natural phenomena are described using observations that are understood by many adivasi people who are tuned into such a way of life, most emphasized by the manner in which they procure their food. A casual remark, in response to my inquiry about the monsoon, was *sufficient rain but not strong enough to wash the leaf litter away from the trails*. Further discussion held much more information: that if the litter is not washed away down the slopes and eventually to the streams – where they plaster the rocks and form a refuge for the crabs – the crabs will have fewer nurseries in which to raise their young and which will have an implication on the following years diet.

Likewise, a comment that (edible) red ants have made their nests in the lower parts of trees implies that there will be heavy winds. In daily life these observations are shared among people when they meet; the interpretation and inferences are left to the listeners who may extract the precise meaning after discussing the specifics of location, terrain, etc. Compared to this, contemporary modern society relates to food in a manner similar to the way it relates to other utilities that it buys and consumes. In particular, modern society has no rules or restrictions that guide its food related behaviour.

It is understandable that little reliable information is available about wild food collection, especially of meat, as most adivasi communities that are involved in it are aware that it is illegal and that they are looked down upon by 'outsiders' due to some of the meats that they consume. Though some of the animals whose meats are consumed may be threatened or endangered, the bulk of fish and plant foods are harvested in most places in central India according to customary rules that assure their long-term survival. In a few places where these rules have broken down they may be traced to unrealistic prohibitions (like a complete ban on fishing in national parks) that have resulted in the use of chemicals (instead of plant poisons); but these can be set right if there are free discussions between the people and the authorities.

Most forest dwellers venture into the forest mainly in search of food; other reasons, such as medicine, fibre or material for construction, etc., are secondary. Food collection, apart from allowing people to break the monotonous rhythm and mood of cultivation, gives them their particular identity, simultaneously making them the foremost observers of natural phenomena. Despite the advances in the various natural sciences there is no substitute for such daily engagement that the adivasi has with the forest and which rewards him with a knowledge unattainable in any other manner. Regardless of what one believes about the harvest and consumption of wild forest foods, it would be unwise to overlook this reality in much of India; instead, it would be fruitful to see how such practices can help better our knowledge about lesser known aspects of the natural world, aspects that are missed by a science that is guided by a wholly different set of aspirations.