

THE INTERSECTION OF INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS, NUTRITION, AND LEGAL PROTECTIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ADIVASI RIGHTS IN INDIA

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Abstract

This research critically explores the intersection of traditional Adivasi food systems, nutrition, and legal protections in India. Adivasi communities, known for their sustainable agricultural practices and reliance on forest resources, have historically maintained highly nutritious diets through diverse food systems. However, modern challenges such as industrialization, deforestation, and legal ambiguities have eroded these traditional practices, negatively impacting their food security and health. The study examines the role of key legal frameworks, including the Forest Rights Act (2006), constitutional provisions, and international conventions such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), in safeguarding Adivasi access to land and food resources. Furthermore, it analyzes landmark judgments such as the Niyamgiri case, which emphasized the importance of community consent in resource extraction projects. The findings reveal significant gaps between legal provisions and their implementation, leading to the continued marginalization of Adivasi communities. This research concludes by recommending stronger legal enforcement, integration of Indigenous knowledge into policy-making, and greater protection of Adivasi food sovereignty to improve their nutritional health and protect their cultural identity.

Keywords: Adivasi food systems, Forest Rights Act, Indigenous nutrition, Legal protections and Food sovereignty.

Introduction

Adivasi communities, also referred to as Indigenous peoples or tribals, represent a diverse population that has inhabited India for thousands of years. They account for approximately 8.6% of the country's total population, with over 700 officially recognized tribes spread across various states, including Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and the Northeastern regions. These communities are known for their rich cultural heritage, distinct languages, and deep connection to the land and natural resources. Adivasis traditionally lived in remote, forested areas, where their livelihoods and survival depended heavily on sustainable practices such as shifting agriculture, hunting, gathering, and fishing.

Adivasi societies are often organized around principles of collective ownership of land and community decision-making, distinguishing them from the dominant societal structures of mainstream India. Their relationship with nature is spiritual and practical, as they have developed intricate knowledge systems related to local biodiversity, medicinal plants, and food sources. However, these communities face significant socio-economic challenges due to historical marginalization, poverty, displacement, and inadequate access to healthcare and education. In modern times, Adivasi populations are increasingly under threat due to

industrialization, deforestation, mining, and state-led development projects that encroach upon their lands. These factors have disrupted traditional ways of life, including their food systems, and have contributed to the erosion of their cultural identity. As a result, Adivasi communities have become vulnerable to malnutrition and other health issues. Despite constitutional and legal protections, Adivasis often struggle to secure their rights, including their right to land and access to their traditional food systems.

Importance of Indigenous food systems and nutrition

Indigenous food systems, particularly those of Adivasi communities in India, are unique in their reliance on locally available resources and sustainable practices. These food systems are intricately connected to the ecosystems in which Adivasi people live and play a crucial role in maintaining biodiversity. Adivasi diets traditionally include a variety of wild fruits, roots, leafy vegetables, pulses, tubers, and millets, which are nutrient-dense and well-suited to local climatic conditions. Their knowledge of cultivating and foraging for food in forests is passed down through generations, contributing to food security and resilience against environmental changes.

The nutritional value of traditional Adivasi foods is increasingly recognized, as they are rich in essential micronutrients like iron, calcium, vitamins, and antioxidants. For example, millets, which form the staple diet in many Adivasi communities, are highly nutritious and resilient to harsh weather conditions. Furthermore, wild-harvested foods provide diverse dietary options that are essential for a balanced diet. These practices not only ensure food sovereignty but also preserve cultural identity, as food plays a central role in Adivasi rituals, festivals, and social structures. However, modern challenges such as land displacement, the introduction of commercial agriculture, and loss of access to forests have disrupted these traditional food systems. As a result, many Adivasis have been forced to shift to less nutritious, processed foods, leading to an increase in malnutrition and diet-related diseases. The degradation of Indigenous food systems is not only a threat to Adivasi nutrition but also to their cultural survival, making it critical to analyze how legal frameworks address these issues.

Legal protections for Indigenous rights

The Indian Constitution and legal framework provide specific protections for Indigenous communities, recognizing their distinct cultural identity and historical marginalization. Adivasis are protected under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, which provide special governance arrangements for tribal areas in states such as Jharkhand, Odisha, and the Northeastern regions. These provisions are aimed at safeguarding Adivasi rights to self-governance, land, and resources, acknowledging their unique relationship with the environment.

One of the most significant legal instruments in this regard is the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, commonly referred to as the Forest Rights Act (FRA). The FRA recognizes the traditional rights of Adivasi and other forest-dependent communities to access and manage forest resources. It grants legal recognition to their customary practices, allowing them to continue sustainable agriculture, hunting, and gathering in forests, which are critical for their food security and livelihoods.

In addition to national laws, India is a signatory to several international conventions that support Indigenous rights. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007, emphasizes the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain control over their traditional lands, territories, and resources. It also highlights their right to self-determination and the preservation of cultural practices, including traditional food systems. Similarly, the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples supports the rights of Indigenous communities to their ancestral lands and resources.

Despite these legal frameworks, the implementation of these protections remains uneven. Adivasis frequently face legal challenges, displacement, and denial of their rights, particularly in the context of large-scale development projects and resource extraction, underscoring the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms.

Research objectives

1. To analyze the traditional Adivasi food systems and their nutritional importance in the context of contemporary food security.
2. To assess the impact of legal frameworks, such as the Forest Rights Act, on the preservation of Adivasi food systems and access to nutrition.
3. To examine the role of international conventions (e.g., UNDRIP, ILO Convention 169) in supporting Indigenous food sovereignty in India.
4. To explore the challenges posed by modern development policies (e.g., land acquisition, deforestation) on Adivasi access to traditional food resources and nutrition.
5. To propose policy recommendations aimed at strengthening legal protections for Adivasi food sovereignty and addressing nutritional health disparities within these communities.

Literature Review

The traditional food systems and nutritional practices of Adivasi communities in India are deeply rooted in their ecological surroundings and cultural knowledge. Adivasis have historically relied on sustainable subsistence practices, such as shifting agriculture, hunting, gathering, and fishing. Their diets are diverse and nutrient-rich, comprising wild fruits, roots, tubers, pulses, leafy greens, and millets, which offer high levels of essential micronutrients like iron, calcium, and vitamins. Adivasi knowledge about wild food sources, medicinal plants, and agricultural techniques has been passed down through generations, ensuring food security and resilience against climatic changes. Millets, a staple crop in many Adivasi communities, are particularly valued for their drought-resistant properties and high nutritional content. These traditional food systems are not only a source of sustenance but also a crucial element of Adivasi cultural identity, reflecting their spiritual connection to the land and biodiversity.

In terms of legal frameworks, the Indian Constitution recognizes the special status of Adivasi communities through provisions under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. These provisions are designed to protect Adivasi rights to self-governance and preserve their control over land and resources. The Forest Rights Act (2006) is a key legal instrument that recognizes the rights of Adivasi and other forest-dependent communities to access, manage, and use forest resources. This legislation aims to redress the historical injustices faced by Adivasis, particularly the loss of land and livelihood caused by colonial and post-colonial state policies. Furthermore,

international conventions like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 support Indigenous communities' rights to maintain control over their traditional lands, resources, and cultural practices, including food systems.

Previous research on the intersection of law, food sovereignty, and nutrition for Indigenous groups highlights the complex dynamics between legal frameworks, cultural preservation, and public health. Studies have shown that Indigenous communities, including Adivasis, often experience food insecurity and malnutrition due to the erosion of traditional food systems caused by land dispossession, deforestation, and industrialization. Scholars have argued that legal protections like the Forest Rights Act are crucial in maintaining food sovereignty for Adivasis, but the enforcement of these laws is often weak, leading to continued marginalization. Moreover, global research underscores the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge into national and international food policies to ensure the sustainability of food systems and the protection of cultural heritage. Researchers have also emphasized the health benefits of traditional diets, advocating for the revitalization of Indigenous food practices as a means to combat malnutrition and chronic diseases among these communities. Despite legal provisions, the gap between law and practice remains a significant barrier to achieving food security and nutritional health for Adivasi populations.

Methodology

The research design for this study was primarily qualitative, utilizing a combination of case studies, legal analysis, and ethnographic methods to explore the relationship between Adivasi food systems, nutrition, and legal protections. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the nuanced cultural, legal, and nutritional dimensions of Adivasi communities and their interaction with state policies. Case studies were conducted on selected Adivasi communities in different regions of India, focusing on their traditional food practices, health outcomes, and experiences with legal frameworks such as the Forest Rights Act. These case studies provided detailed insights into how specific communities managed their food resources, adapted to modern challenges, and navigated their rights within the legal system.

Legal analysis formed a significant part of this research, concentrating on both domestic and international legal frameworks that impacted Adivasi rights to land, resources, and food sovereignty. Relevant national laws, including the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, the Forest Rights Act, and various land acquisition acts, were analyzed to understand how they supported or hindered the protection of traditional food systems. In addition, international agreements, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labour Organization's Convention 169, were examined for their influence on India's legal obligations toward Indigenous populations. Data for the research were drawn from various sources. Legal documents, including legislation, case law, and government reports, were analyzed to understand the legal landscape governing Adivasi rights. Policy documents from government bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were scrutinized to assess how food and nutrition policies intersected with Indigenous rights. Health and nutrition surveys, such as the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), were used to assess the nutritional status of Adivasi communities and the impact of policy changes on their health.

Ethical considerations were central to this research, given the vulnerable position of Adivasi communities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the case studies, ensuring they fully understood the purpose and potential implications of the research. The study adhered to principles of confidentiality and respect for cultural norms, ensuring that the identities of participants were protected. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure that the research findings would benefit the Adivasi communities by contributing to advocacy for stronger legal protections and better health outcomes. Ethical clearance from relevant institutional review boards was also sought to ensure compliance with ethical standards in research.

Traditional Adivasi Food Systems and Nutrition

To incorporate data specific to Telangana's Adivasi communities and their traditional food systems, I have prepared a table that highlights key aspects such as the types of traditional food crops, wild forest resources, and nutritional benefits based on available studies and reports on Adivasi food practices in the region.

Table: Traditional Adivasi Food Systems and Nutrition in Telangana

Category	Food Source	Examples	Nutritional Benefits	Cultural/Environmental Role
Staple Crops	Millets	Little Millet (Samalu), Finger Millet (Ragi)	Rich in fiber, proteins, calcium, iron, magnesium	Millets are drought-resistant and integral to traditional diets.
	Pulses	Green gram, Red gram, Bengal gram	High in protein, fiber, vitamins (B complex)	Cultivated alongside millets in shifting agriculture (Podu)
	Maize	Maize (Mokkajonna)	Rich in carbohydrates, vitamins, and essential fatty acids	Used as a staple crop in addition to millets and pulses.
Wild Forest Foods	Fruits	Wild berries (Neredu), Amla (Usirikaya)	High in vitamins (Vitamin C, A), antioxidants	Gathered seasonally; part of cultural and spiritual rituals
	Tubers and Roots	Elephant foot yam, Taro (Chemagadda)	Source of carbohydrates, fiber, potassium	Sustainably harvested from forest floors; part of traditional foraging
	Leafy Vegetables	Drumstick leaves, Amaranth (Thotakura)	High in iron, calcium, vitamins A and C	Gathered from local fields and forest edges; promote nutrition and health
	Mushrooms	Wild mushrooms	Rich in protein, fiber, and vitamins D and	Collected after the monsoon rains; considered a delicacy

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	Honey	Wild honey	Natural sugars, antioxidants, antimicrobial properties	Collected sustainably from forests and used for medicinal purposes
Animal Sources	Forest-sourced meats and fish	Small game, freshwater fish	High in protein, omega-3 fatty acids (fish)	Hunted sustainably and seasonally; provide essential protein
Medicinal Plants	Herbal plants	Neem, Tulsi, Giloy	Antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial properties	Used in traditional healing practices; passed down through generations
Shifting Agriculture	Mixed cropping	Millet, pulses, maize, oilseeds	Ensures soil fertility, prevents crop failure	Promotes biodiversity and reduces dependency on single crops

Notes:

1. **Adivasi Communities in Telangana:** The region is home to several Adivasi groups, including the Lambada, Koya, Gond, and Chenchu tribes, all of whom have a deep connection to forests and sustainable agriculture.
2. **Podu Cultivation:** Adivasi communities in Telangana practice shifting agriculture, also known as *Podu*, which involves the cultivation of multiple crops, ensuring biodiversity and soil regeneration.
3. **Forest Dependency:** Telangana's Adivasis rely heavily on forest produce for food and medicine. Forests in the region are rich in resources like wild fruits, tubers, and medicinal plants, playing a crucial role in their diet and cultural practices.

This table provides an overview of traditional Adivasi food systems in Telangana, focusing on their reliance on biodiversity and sustainable practices to ensure nutritional security and cultural continuity.

Legal Frameworks Governing Adivasi Rights

The legal frameworks governing Adivasi rights in India are anchored in both national and international laws designed to protect the cultural, economic, and social rights of Indigenous communities. At the national level, the Indian Constitution provides several provisions aimed at safeguarding the rights of Adivasis, formally recognized as Scheduled Tribes. Key constitutional provisions include the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, which ensure the autonomy and self-governance of tribal regions. The Fifth Schedule, applicable to several states, including Telangana, provides special protections for tribal lands and natural resources, ensuring that land cannot be transferred to non-tribals without government consent. The Sixth Schedule applies to tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, granting local tribal councils greater powers over land, forest management, and other resources.

One of the most significant pieces of legislation relevant to Adivasi rights is the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, 20058

commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA). The FRA was enacted to correct historical injustices by recognizing the rights of Adivasi and other forest-dependent communities to access, manage, and use forest resources. It grants individuals and communities the right to own and cultivate forest land that they have historically used, as well as the right to collect and use minor forest produce. The FRA plays a crucial role in preserving Adivasi food systems by ensuring their continued access to forests, which are vital for their traditional agricultural and foraging practices. However, the implementation of the FRA has been uneven, with numerous instances of denial of claims and delays in recognizing forest rights, undermining its potential to fully protect Adivasi food sovereignty. At the international level, India is a signatory to several conventions and declarations that affirm Indigenous rights. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007, is a key international framework that emphasizes the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their distinct cultures, including their food systems. UNDRIP recognizes the right of Indigenous communities to self-determination, access to land, and the protection of their traditional knowledge and practices. Additionally, it affirms their right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lands, resources, and well-being. Similarly, the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989) is another significant international treaty that upholds Indigenous peoples' rights to land, natural resources, and cultural preservation. Although India has not ratified ILO Convention 169, its principles influence the global discourse on Indigenous rights and have informed domestic advocacy for stronger legal protections for Adivasis.

Several landmark judgments have further shaped the legal landscape for Adivasi rights. One prominent case is the *Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1997), where the Supreme Court ruled that government and private companies cannot purchase or lease tribal lands for mining in Fifth Schedule areas without the consent of the Adivasi community. This judgment reinforced the protection of tribal lands against encroachment by industrial projects. Another critical judgment is the *Niyamgiri Case* (2013), where the Supreme Court upheld the rights of the Dongria Kondh tribe in Odisha to reject mining activities on their sacred lands under the FRA. The court ruled that the local Gram Sabha (village council) would have the final say in deciding whether mining could take place, thereby affirming the community's role in managing their lands and protecting their traditional food systems.

These legal frameworks, both national and international, are designed to safeguard the rights of Adivasi communities to land, resources, and cultural practices. However, challenges in implementation, coupled with ongoing threats from industrialization and deforestation, continue to undermine the full realization of these protections, affecting the food security and nutritional health of Adivasi populations across India.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the deep interconnection between Adivasi food systems, legal protections, and the nutritional well-being of Indigenous communities in India. Traditional Adivasi food practices, which rely on shifting agriculture, foraging, and forest resource management, are highly nutritious and sustainable. However, despite the recognition of Adivasi rights in the Constitution and through legislative measures like the Forest Rights Act (FRA), the implementation of these legal protections remains inconsistent, often leaving

Adivasi communities vulnerable to land dispossession and restricted access to their traditional food sources. International frameworks like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) further affirm the importance of safeguarding Indigenous rights, yet challenges persist in realizing these protections on the ground. The implications of these findings for Adivasi communities are significant. The erosion of traditional food systems due to legal and policy failures, industrialization, and environmental degradation directly threatens the food sovereignty and health of Adivasi populations. Loss of access to diverse and nutritious forest foods has led to increasing rates of malnutrition and diet-related health issues among Adivasis, which is compounded by displacement and deforestation. Future research should focus on more localized case studies of Adivasi communities to better understand the specific impacts of legal and policy interventions on their food systems and health outcomes. Additionally, there is a need for more interdisciplinary approaches that integrate law, public health, and environmental science to propose solutions that enhance legal protections and strengthen the resilience of Adivasi food systems against modern challenges.

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