Perspective

The Language of Wild Food Collection: Verbs and Their Implications to Forest Knowledge

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1. INTRODUCTION

This is a paper adapted from a talk given at the Equinox 2024: The 4th Annual International Conference[1]. Much of what I spoke about is from my own experience of living and working among the Durwa people in Central India, in the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh.

The key point here is 'wild forest food' and I use the term to mean foods that are not cultivated, but harvested from the wild. The 'wild' can therefore be the forest, open scrublands, fallows and field bunds, swamps and wetlands, rocky places, in high altitudes and even in deserts landscapes. The foods I refer to are harvested, processed, cooked or stored (for later use) directly from the wild.

In 2013, the Food and Agricultural Organisation organised a conference entitled 'Forests for Food Security and Nutrition[2] after which this focus of forests as a food source gained importance. Many groups and organisations working with indigenous peoples and forests began to take notice of the foods available within such wild spaces. Many of these wild foods became popular as they were known to have high nutritional values and antioxidants, trace elements, omega-3, etc., and were deemed as super-foods. This aspect has also endangered or led to the decline of many of these foods as they have inevitably led to their commercialization with no harvest protocols.

2. MODES OF UNDERSTANDING THE FOREST

For my research, I have used wild foods and their collection to explore a better understanding of the forest. In particular, the terms used in the Durwa language in the various kinds of food collection, will be the focus. The forest landscape has been traditionally understood through broad ecological studies with a thrust on classical taxonomy. This has relied on an objective process, taking into account the forest distribution in terms of their latitudes, altitudes, species composition, etc. For instance, we have high altitude tropical forests (as in the western ghats) or a forest on a hillslope facing north, which might encourage certain species to grow well due to favorable micro-climatic conditions, or a dryland forest. Each of these tracts is categorized differently. But my approach is to use the adivasi, the indigenous way of looking at forests, in particular through their methods of procurement of wild foods, and the terms they use in their collection.

[1] *https://journalvantage-maitreyi.com/pdf/8.%20Equinox%202024%20The%204th%20Annual%20International%20Conference.pdf*
[2] *https://www.fao.org/4/i3482e/i3482e.pdf*

Food collection is broadly classified within the activities of fishing, hunting and gathering. These three activities are quite generic and I would like to break them into their smaller components. These small components are the actual actions that are carried out when food is collected- there are at least 22 such verbs in the Durwa language[3]. These are the action words that describe how food is collected from the forest and, therefore, also the way in which the forest is known and understood and related to.

The words pertaining to gathering are usually about plant collection. Here the terms are:

koyurānā, to pluck (leaves), using only the hand; harvesting (rice, etc.) with a sickle; getting (cocoons, ant nests) with a hooked bamboo pole.

pethkurānā, to pick up (from the ground), as with mushrooms, seeds, fruit, flowers, seeds.

rundaitānā, to collect or bring together, as with grain or scattered seeds.

kantānā, to search (for cocoons) or something specific (like a medicinal plant).

kuthkurānā, to cut, as when harvesting (millets).

chekrānā, to scrape, as when getting resin (from the bark of a tree), or a beehive.

pintānā, to break (off) or snap, as with bamboo shoots, or the legs of a crab.

titkurānā, to shake vigorously (from side to side) as when handling an ant nest or with other insects.

The terms associated with hunting are:

chulurānā, to wander (alone) or in small groups, usually for small game; the route and purpose decided according to the circumstance.

kātānā, to wait, in small groups and at night, usually for porcupine to return to their burrows or to a regular grazing spot.

walitānā, to chase, usually for monkeys, langurs, giant squirrels, or wounded game.

kedh (patitānā), the 'taking out' or 'performing' of the ceremonial hunt, through an area of forest, annually. Obligatory for every able bodied person in the community, usually for all game, big and small, and shared according to tradition.

kotrānā, to dig, (for rats) in the field, also for other animals like shrews that may be in tree-hollows; occasionally snakes in anthills.

kantānā, to search, for game or tracks (of game); but used for looking for monitor-lizards or rat snakes that are difficult to spot.

aiekurānā, to shoot, (with bow and arrow), and used specifically for big game like deer and wild boar. Though other animals are shot too, there are 'complementary' actions that overshadow the final shooting; for instance, in walitana, it is the chase, that is given importance and not the final killing.

tudrānā, to burn, set on fire, usually to smoke something out (like rats, a wasp's nest, a beehive).

watte'l (tondurānā), to set traps (for hare, mongoose or rats), and occasionally for monitor lizards.

The terms associated with fishing are:

olshurānā, to bail, after dyking a small stream, for fish, involving team-work to divert and empty the water which is passed through a meshed basket.

oigurānā, to feel (in a dark place, or under a rock) for fish and crab.

kollurānā, to stupefy (fish) using plant poisons, (commonly with the dried and powdered fruit of Catnaregam spinosa, or the mashed leaves of Cansjhera rheedii.

jāri (tintānā), to cast a net (or tie it across a stream or river).

meenchub (ainkurānā), to play (for fish) with the fishing hook, using earthworms as bait, (or for crab, using lizards).

aikurānā, to shoot with a two or three-pronged arrow (at fish in clear and shallow pools).

All these terms mentioned above refer to specific actions, actions that pertain to the procurement of specific kinds of food that is sought. Each of these actions rely on very particular skills and certain tools (baskets, rods, baits, rope-ladders, smokers, bows and arrows, traps, spades, axes) and are usually complemented with fire and dogs.

My contention here is that the adivasi understanding and intimacy with the forest comes from such a way of relating to the forest while going about the business of wild food collection. The actions that the adivasi people perform while getting their food, of feeling under a rock (*oigurānā*), and wandering (*chulurānā*), and searching (*kantānā*), and chasing (*walitānā*), etc. are the means to get aquatinted and intimate with their forest surroundings. These actions through which the forest landscape become familiar and known are very different to those of a modern scientific method of classifying and grasping the essence of a forest landscape, a method far removed by its objectiveness imposed by taxonomy, the

[3] *It is most likely that people who live in similar terrain and have similar lifestyles have such terms in their languages too*

separation of different forest types, etc., without any direct and daily stake in the landscape.

Almost all the verbs used in food collection mentioned above are everyday words that are of common usage. When they are used in the context of food collection, they take on an added, specific, connotation. These additional nuances of the word, for instance with *oigurānā*, makes us picture the rocky stream or river-bed, along which the fish or crab is sought or the word *chulurānā*, to wander, when used by a person with a bow and arrows, and perhaps accompanied by a dog, suggests a journey for small game, the route unfolding while on the move; unlike proper ceremonial hunts, such wanderings have a certain casualness about them.

3. CONCLUDING NOTE

The knowledge gained about the forest through the actions performed when going about the business of collecting wild foods suggest a daily engagement, and a familiarity, with the landscape. It is inevitable that various aspects of the landscape – hills, directions, streams and swamps, rocky outcrops, sand beds, dryness and humidity, the varieties of vegetation and the life-forms within it – are all encountered and, over time, many of the terms used in common discourse with each other in such adivasi communities convey more than is understood by the outsider.

The physical intimacy with the forest environment that wild food collection demands entail an emotional component. There is joy and elation in having a successful fish catch or finding an unexpec-tedly large tuber in the pit; conversely, there is disappointment when a rat evades a trap. There could also be fear when a boar appears suddenly when searching for mushrooms. In essence, wild food collection is an extremely subjective and unique way of knowing the forest.

To conclude, I'd like to say that the way we perceive the forest environment determines how we will treat it. The objective method is definitely useful in quantifying data – species composition, forest types, areas, canopy density, etc. – but it leads to the false notion that one 'type' of forest can be replaced by another if the quantities and composition can be replicated. There is such a strong reliance on 'quantifiable' data that that which cannot be measured is deemed unimportant and left out of consideration. Thus, we observe that there is an enormous amount of information, almost all subjective and in the realm of the scientifically intangible – that the adivasi people have about forest landscapes. The terms used in wild food collection, and the areas of forest knowledge that they venture into, could be a beginning for a more holistic perception of the landscape.

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