BurlangJyatra

A Unique Way of KutiaKondh's Revitalisation of Indigenous Food System in Odisha

by

Dr.Sili Rout
Assistant Professor
Department of Anthropology
Model Degree College Nabarangpur, Odisha

Abstract

Indigenous food system that is based on centuries of accumulated wisdom is crucial for both food security and food sovereignty, as well as for cultural identity, spiritual wellbeing, and responsible stewardship of the environment. Under changing social-economic-political conditions, small scale and indigenous food systems have been declining in developing countries primarily as a result of agricultural industrialisation, commercialisation of crops, and food globalisation. Various studies show that eroding indigenous food systems have resulted in greater poverty, food insecurity, poor health, and malnutrition among Indigenous communities. These include millet in general and finger millet in particular.

This paper is focused on *BurlangJyatra*, an Indigenous rural community seed festival traditionally and historically celebrated by the KutiaKondh Indigenous millet farmers in the district of Kandhamal in Odisha, which has declined, but has been revived in recent years through civil society intervention.This paper provides two key learnings.First, to recognize the deeper significance of such festivals in reconnection and sustainability of biodiverse farming at the individual and community levels, we must go beyond a simplistic celebratory and promotional discourse around rural, historical, socio-cultural traditions.As key to social-ecological resilience, it emphasizes relationships, adaptation, and reciprocity as values of Indigenous knowledge systems. Second, the paper provides new insights into the use of a social-ecological framework for revitalising Indigenous food systems for food and nutrition security, biodiversity conservation, and biocultural diversity at the community level.

Keywords: **Indigenous food system, Millet, KutiaKondh, Biodiversity, Seed festival.**

Introduction

Indigenous Peoples around the world are stewards of nature and holders of vast local knowledge and traditions, handed down from generation to generation, that guide them in living interdependently with the environment. Indigenous food systems represent a treasure trove of knowledge that contributes to well-being and health, benefiting communities, preserving a rich biodiversity, and providing nutritious food (IFAD, 2021). Indigenous food system that is based on centuries of accumulated wisdom is crucial for both food security and food sovereignty, as well as for cultural identity, spiritual wellbeing, and responsible stewardship of the environment. Under changing social-economic-political conditions, small scale and indigenous food systems have been declining in developing countries primarily as a result of agricultural industrialisation, commercialisation of crops, and food globalisation. Various studies show that eroding Indigenous food systems have resulted in greater poverty, food insecurity, poor health, and malnutrition among Indigenous communities (Whyte,2015; Turner, 2008; Bagelman, 2018; Lemke, 2017; Silvasti,2014; Gendron, 2017). Recent years, however, have seen a renewed emphasis on local small scale and indigenous food systems as a means of achieving food security, alleviating poverty, and supporting rural livelihoods as well as achieving wider goals such as biodiversity conservation, the restoration of ecosystem services, and climate adaptation (NIRMAN, 2017).

Traditionally, tribals in India, particularly in Odisha were cultivating millet (jowar, bajra, ragi, and small millets) for centuries, which was also their staple diet. Millet in general and finger millet (*Mandia*) in particular has been an important crop grown by the tribes of Odisha for generations on hilly and undulated terrains. This was also their staple diet in the form of *MandiaJau* that suited the local soil and climatic conditions as well as highly nutritious. In tribal communities, millet is not merely a grain to be consumed; rather it is the repository of generations of community's wisdom of collective sowing and harvesting. The tribal philosophy is also reflected in the presence of a common village fund either in the form of food grains or in the form of cash which can be used to meet the difficult situations.

In India, 60 years ago, millet was grown in 40% of all cereal cultivated area. This has dropped in the last 50 years and now millet occupies only 11% of India's cropped area. The major wave of undervaluation came from the 1960s onward with the Green Revolution (Jena, 2017). Millet came to be known as a coarse grain eaten by the poor and used as fodder. It has largely remained excluded from government's food grains research, policy, minimum support price

buyback, irrigation facilities and marketing campaigns. Agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan has called millet as one of the orphan crops.It is becoming increasingly difficult for tribal people of Odisha to consume millet due to changes in their diet, such as switching to rice and wheat. This signals an impending condition of starvation and death for the people.Amid a decline in millet cultivation in recent times, the Government of Odisha launched the Odisha Millets Mission in 2017 in order to resume millet cultivation in farms as well as on plates. A major objective of the Odisha Millets Mission is to increase household consumption, create decentralized processing units to reduce drudgery, increase productivity and integrate millets with ICDS, MDM and PDS.

The revival of millets in Odisha is primarily happening in those districts where millets were historically and traditionally grown and consumed as part of a diversified Indigenous farming system and where farmers continued to grow millets in spite of overall declines, though in smaller quantities. The central and state governments have been keen to launch and implement a number of initiatives in the third sector over the past few years with the participation of market actors and community organizations. The primary goal is to reclaim more land for millets cultivation, encourage farmers to grow millets, and increase the yield and consumption of millets in both rural and urban areas. As a result of this initiatives, India's National Food Security Act of 2013 included millets in the public distribution system (PDS) as a significant step.

With this backdrop, ancient practice of rural community seed festivals, which had declined over the decades in Odisha, has begun to re-emerge through collective local mobilisation of farmers backed by civil society action.The *BurlangJyatra* (Indigenous Seed Festival) is one of those festivals that have been revived in Kandhamal, a district where Indigenous communities have traditionally grown and consumed millets. In this annual festival, Indigenous farmers from different millet-growing villages in the district come together to share their experience, knowledge and farming practices and to exchange Indigenous heirloom seeds among themselves. In spite of the fact that such festivals are not widely known outside the rural farming communities, it is widely perceived and understood that they mark the heritage, identity, and livelihoods of the Indigenous communities in the region who practice millet farming.

This article aims to highlight the importance of rural Indigenous community seed festivals, which remain largely underexplored and underappreciated. The importance of such festivals in

the state and elsewhere in the country has been well reported in the media and civil society, but few sustained reflections have been made regarding the importance of such festivals. There has been little sustained reflection on the significance of millets seeds/grains as food and nutrition for their medicinal or religious/spiritual values, biodiversity, and climate resilience. These festivals have persisted over decades, even if they have taken on a marginalised form in recent years, and their recent revival suggest deeper and strong connection to their ancient food systems that are less recognised widely, so it deserve greater attention.

Research Design and Methodology

The study follows the logic of interpretive inquiry (Berger, 1967), secondary data collected (from documents, reports, blogs, websites, and audio-video material) and primary data co-generated (through interviews, focus group, and the reflective journal kept by me), which together formed the data set, were subjected to thematic analysis (Barun, 2006).

This is an on-going research project and the analysis presented here draws on a wider qualitative exploratory research study. Choosing to study *BurlangJyatra*is a by-product of my on-going research project on "Millet in KutiaKondh Culture and Livelihood". The study was conducted in the Kondhmal district of Odisha. I have learned through my interactions with the research participants that Indigenous seed festivals are being revived in millet-growing districts. There were also instances of this in other states across the country. Adopting a rapid review approach (WHO &AllianceHPSR, 2018 and Khangura, 2012) aimed at synthesising evidence from diverse secondary sources within a short timeframe on what is known about them, it was apparent that such festivals are generally considered part of an ancient heritage and as a marker of an Indigenous farming identity and religious-spiritual values culturally relevant to the farming communities. The diverse sources included published literature (peer-reviewed and grey), media reports, web-site content, blog posts, videos, and personal communication. It also became clear that there is a distinction between the rural Indigenous community seed festivals that are locally rooted and have been historically practiced and those that can be considered as 'non-Indigenous' in nature. The latter are planned and organised as a platform or as a networking event, usually by stakeholders in the public or the private sector, to bring together farmers as well as other key stakeholders for market promotion or showcasing of local/traditional seed varieties, food, and farming systems (e.g., Community Seed Fest supported by M S Swaminathan Research Foundation in Wayanad, Kerala) (Community Seed Fest in Wayanad, Kerala, accessed Oct, 2022). These are different from the rural type

embedded historically and socially within an Indigenous setting as *BurlangYatra*. Nonetheless, the literature review suggested a broad acknowledgement of the significance of community seed festivals voiced at different forums (local, national, and global), particularly by the civil society sector. However, there was a lack of in-depth systematic attention given to the 'meaning-making' of the festival by the Indigenous farmers themselves and the particular ways in which it was influencing the food system and the outcomes. Rural Indigenous community seed festivals, whether in Odisha's context or elsewhere in the country, turned out to be largely an unexplored research area.

Who are Kutias'

Out of thirteen Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of OdishaKutiaKondha is one of the PVTGs and are major sections of Kondha tribe who speak *kui,* a Dravidian language. The Kondha's who live in hill top and valleys are known as KutiaKondha. Whereas those who live in high land and near the streams are called DongriaKondha andJharniaKondh respectively;kondhas who are residing in plain area are known as Desiakondh.

Figure 1: An elderly KutiaKondhWoman with traditional attire and tattoo marks.

KutiaKondhs are a sub-group of Kondhs (also referred as Kondhas or Kandhas or *Kuiloku*) who comprise the largest Indigenous community in the state. Among the 62 tribes that inhabit Odisha, Kondhs comprise 17% of the total Indigenous population; nearly 1.6 million and nearly a third of Kondhs described themselves as 'cultivators', which is the highest proportion in relation to the other Indigenous communities in the state (Census 2011). Their agriculture is subsistence-oriented, and they are predominantly marginal and small farmers (Dayal, 2014). Also, many of them depend on forest products and practice slash-and-burn agriculture. A significant portion is also employed as wage workers.There are also micro forest-based enterprises like the production of *sal* leaf plates and baskets and brooms, which provide minor sources of livelihood.They have gradually transitioned from a barter system to a monetised economy, but the sharing economy remains widespread.

The KutiaKondh mostly inhabited the Southern part of Kandhamal district, however some of them also found in Kalahandi district. The word "*Kuti*" in *kui* language means "big hole". It is believed that the KutiaKandhas have been originated from the big hole of earth (Ojha, 2016). They are originally found in Belghar, Gumma, Lankagarh, Jhirpani Gram Panchayats of Tumudibondh block. They are also found in Subarnagiri and Kotagarh block of Phulbani. The KutiaKandhas continue their age old subsistence activity of food gathering from the forest. Seasonal food collection is still an indispensable part of their economic life. Their food is greatly supplemented by a seasonal variety of fruits, roots and tubers. The high dependence of KutiaKandha on the mountain and forest include several customary practices like, agriculture, grazing, ethno-medicine and the collection of Minor Forest Produces. Major cultivations of the KutiaKandha are cereals such as *Mandia* (Ragi, Finger Millet), *Kosala* (foxtail millet), pulses like *Kandlo* (tuvar, pigeon pea), *biri* (black gram), *Kolath* (horsegram) and oilseeds like castor and linseed. Mostly the foot hill regions are selected for the cultivation and indigenous technologies are adopted to protect the crops (kbk.nic). But Post-Green Revolution, the production of food crops such as indigenous rice varieties and millets declined. This led to the loss of indigenous food practices and food system.

KutiaKondhs, as with other Indigenous communities, have their own language, system of culture, traditions, religious practices, inheritance of property, marriage system, healthcare practices, and magico- religious practices (Garada, 2012). The celebration of festivals throughout the year constitutes a big part of their community life. These are often directed to address very specific purposes such as: "for good rains; good harvest; first eating or consumption of seasonal crops, fruit, root, flowers and leaves tubers; protection from… calamities, epidemics and attack of wild animals; safety, security and sound health of human and livestock; and the like, for which the blessings of supernatural beings and spirits of ancestors are invoked or sought" (Garada, 2012). Some are celebrated at family level, some at a village level, and some at the regional level on specific days of the year decided most often at the community level by the village head in consultation with the village priest. These festivals underscore the socio- cultural connection and the close links of the Kondhs with the ecology, thus making for a strong 'place- based' identity (Maida, 2007).

BurlangJatra

Locally known as '*BurlangYatra'*, the closest translation of '*Burlang'* in the local dialect *Kui* into English is 'related to seed', and '*Yatra'* means a local 'fair' or 'festival'. Thus, together,

BurlangYatra is commonly described and understood as a 'seed festival' or a 'biodiversity festival'. *BurlangYatra* is celebrated by the Indigenous community of KutiaKondhs in the district of Kandhamal in Odisha. The KutiaKondh community in Kandhamal celebrates *BurlangYatra* during the post-harvest season between February and March.This is one of three major festivals that the Kondh community celebrates, the other two being *Maria* and *Anka*, which are celebrated during times of climate crisis (NIRMAN, 2016).These festivals are considered as part of an ancient socio- cultural tradition for the community and have persisted over the decades, but the scale of their celebration had waned along with the decline of Indigenous food systems until their revival (Saxena, 2020).

Figure 2: Performing *BurlangJyatra*

Reclaiming the Festival and Role of the Formal Institutions

Institutional and non-governmental organisations strive to empower and enable the disadvantaged communities to exercise their rights in health, education, and livelihoods, whether they are adivasis, dalits, women, children, or other vulnerable groups.Likewise, NIRMAN, a local grassroots civil society organisation (CSO) in Odisha (NIRMAN, 2016)has been instrumental in the revival of *BurlangJyatra*. The motivation for the revival of *BurlangJyatra* in recent years in Kandhamal has come from within the community and outside of the market and the formal institutions (Saxena, 2020). *BurlangJyatra*has been facilitated by NIRMAN with the support of regional and national civil society alliances and networks (such as Millet Network of India (MINI), Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture (RRAN), Development of Humane Action (DHAN), Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), and Deccan Development Society (DDS)) engaged in supporting sustainable agriculture, food and nutrition security, conservation of biodiversity, and rural livelihoods in semi- arid regions (NIRMAN, 2016).

NIRMAN was founded in 1997, with its headquarters currently in the capital city of the state and field offices in six districts. It has a special focus on livelihood improvement of small and marginal farmers, Indigenous farmers, and forest dwellers in its 'project areas' which include Kandhamal.In 2011, NIRMAN conducted a study in Kandhamal and found that millets and other indigenous crops in the district were steadily declining, and out of 40–50 varieties of

crops that were grown earlier, only few varieties were being grown in the region (Mohanty, 2015). Food insecurity had already become a major issue in the district, and the Kondh community was reporting negative impacts of the shift away from millets on their household food and nutrition security. NIRMAN's study also found that farmers who switched to other 'new' crops, mainly cotton, induced by incentives provided by the state government, were left devastated from a loss of crops due to climatic vulnerabilities and pest/disease attacks, and the farmers were keen on reviving their traditional millets-based farming. In response to this need, and by adopting a community-led approach, NIRMAN started facilitating village level institutions for the affected communities to affirm their control over their own food production system and improve livelihoods (Mohanty, 2017). This involved helping the villages set up and manage community seedbanks in the first instance to overcome the problem of local seed and grain shortages and thus to restore community's access to healthy and culturally sought-after food. NIRMAN also responded to the need expressed by the Kondh communities for reviving *BurlangYatra*. Drawing on the rich local and contextual knowledge that it has of its project area, which included 24 villages in the Tumudibandha Block of Kandhamal district, NIRMAN facilitated the celebration of the festival by bringing 448 farmers together in 2015.

Since 2015, It has grown over the years, as evidenced by the increasing number of villages and farmers participating. The event was held over two days in 2016 and was estimated to have attracted over 700 farmers (Mohanty, 2017). In 2018, it was held as a week-long event, drawing as many as 800 farmers to the event (Mohanty, 2017). In a bottom-up approach, every year, a different village self-selects itself to host the festival and invites farmers from surrounding villages to participate, and this is on a voluntary basis. The growth of the festival has been facilitated by NIRMAN. Importantly, though, the festival remains under the control of the KutiaKondhs. It is the Indigenous community leaders who decide the time of the festival, which, in this case, is the post-harvest season. The place and the timing of the festival thus have clear social and cultural meanings for the KutiaKondhs. The community then plans and manages the different activities at the festival following their own socio-cultural norms and inclusion of sacred elements. This aligns with "culture controlled" (Butler, 2007) festivals or events, as described in literature, where such control has provided Indigenous communities with a means to reclaim heritage, increase economic independence, and preserve culture (van Den Berg, 2005). Thus, as a coordinated and purposeful community-driven and bottom-up event, the festival exhibits self-organising behaviour, that is both intentional and decentralized. In the current revival mode, a number of civil society actors have been involved in the revival

process, some of whom are not indigenous; however, the process remains bottom-up and culturally embedded, guided by indigenous farming community norms and values of spiritual and ceremonial significance.Older farmers from the community noted how little the festival has changed over time in terms of how the festival is celebrated. The primary motivation for celebration, has remained the same "to come together to offer gratitude to mother earth and seeds which sustain life on earth". The need for revival of the festival was described by the farmers in the study as not simply a response to the overall decline and neglect of millets and the loss of genetic diversity of crops but also to the increasing disconnection to millets-based farming that many of the farmers, especially the younger ones, were experiencing and the loss of traditional knowledge about production, processing, and use of millets. The persistence and the revival of the festival seen against this rests on the notion of (place-based) cultural sustainability, where food and nutrition interlock with biodiversity, seeds, lands, and knowledge of an Indigenous food system. This can be linked to a 'sense of community' defined as "process in which the members interact, draw identity, social support, and make their own contributions to the common good" (Bess, 2002). This has been shown to act as a strong influencing factor in other community action contexts (Amundsen, 2013). This also resonates with findings in community resource management literature, which show that when a local community cares about each other and the 'place' they inhabit, community agency emerges, and the capacity for them to act collectively is increased (Theodori, 2004; Brennan, 2005; Seixas, 2008). Thus, the sense of community is integrated with a sense of place and belonging (Kusel, 2001; Wiersum, 2004). The developing alliances between the Indigenous communities from Kandhamal, neighbouring districts, local CSOs such as NIRMAN, and other regional and national CSOs suggest the emergence of 'bridging capital' (ties between groups) and 'linking capital' (vertical relationships) in addition to 'bonding capital' (group cohesion) (Magis, 2010; Maclean, 2014; Wilson, 2012). By allowing for Indigenous farmers from different villages to connect despite the geographically sparse distribution of the settlements, the festival creates bridging ties. The relationship between the communities and the CSOs (including networks) at different levels—regional and national—suggest linking ties. Importantly, in contrast to observations made in literature (Ahmed,2014) about 'disadvantaged' communities in 'resource poor' contexts (i.e., high-risk semi-rural and urban environments) relying on 'linking capital' to have access to sources of power and wealth and greater access to resources and opportunities, the experience in the context of Kandhamal appears to be different. The CSOs, in this case, have taken the initiative in developing alliances based on trust, a shared vision, and the values of those of the communities they are working with to facilitate a purposeful coordinated action.

In the context of *BurlangJyatra*, NIRMAN's role has therefore been in providing essential support in mobilising collective community action and a focus for renewed optimism to halt the erosion of biodiversity, livelihoods, Indigenous knowledge systems, local food grains, and food security. NIRMAN, using its relationships with other local/national organisations and with local government agencies to draw support for a number of other activities, programmes, and events that they are engaged in, and which are often organised by the local communities themselves, is consistent with 'multi-faceted networks' observed in Asia, which are seen as critical to the success of community-based conservation projects (Wilson, 2006). CSOs such as NIRMAN could be thus considered as 'bridging organizations' playing a facilitating role in mobilising resources towards what the Indigenous communities value. This is consistent with newer understandings in literature where self-organising behaviour in social-ecological systems can be intentional as opposed to autonomous and could include processes actively driven by multiple stakeholders (Hahn, 2017).

Performing *BurlangJyatra*

Millet Warriors, the tribal women plays a vital role in the performing *BurlangJyatra*. It starts with women farmers carrying seeds kept inside specially painted pots on their heads arriving at the host village in a procession that is then followed by the worship of seeds with the traditional lighting of diyas (i.e., tiny cup-shaped oil lamps made of baked clay). This is followed by a collective exhibition of seeds, and then the exchange of seeds takes place between the farmers. Celebratory traditional music and dancing by men and women farmers from both the host and the visiting communities accompany the event. Beneath this simplistic and commonplace description of the festival, however, a closer look reveals the elements that are key to the celebration.

Central to the festival's identity is the display and the exchange of local seeds—not just of millets but also pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables intercropped with millets, as well as paddy of different varieties, which are not only successfully grown by the farmers but also have

desirable qualities such as resistance to pests and diseases, good taste, nutritional quality, and high yields. These seeds placed in colourfully painted clay pots are kept in an open space in the centre of the host village throughout the festival. At the 2017 festival, it was reported that more than 90 types of seeds of millets, pulses, and oilseeds were exhibited by the farmers (NIRMAN, 2017). The 'sharing' through exchange of seeds takes place between the women farmers, reflecting what has long been observed in many Indigenous contexts that women play a pivotal role in the conservation of biodiversity (Gadgil, 1992; Mishra, 2009; Shukla, 2010). Among the Kondhs as well, women play a key role as 'primary caretakers' of millet farming, whether it is to do with seed collection, selection, preservation, or storage of the local resilient varieties (Sahu, 2018). The entire seed exchange ceremony is presided over by the village priest (also a woman) who affirms the spiritual 'value' of seeds as a 'gift' from Earth-Goddess (*DharniPenu*) to be safeguarded and handed down through multiple generations of families. The Kondhs also have 'seed-mothers' (*bihanamaa* in the local dialect) in their community whose main responsibilities include identifying, collecting, multiplying, and conserving traditional seed varieties and motivating farming families to use them (Nayak, 2016).

The millets grown by farmers are primarily consumed by their own households, which makes the preparation of millets-based food a part of their everyday lives. Millets are taken at breakfast, lunch, and dinner with different types of millets cooked as both light dishes such as porridge, gruel, and pancakes and as main meals, the latter often mixed with vegetables and legumes grown along with the millets. Millets were described as highly nutritious and as "tasting much better in comparison to rice and wheat" by the participants in the study. While the women gather together at the festival, they discuss amongst themselves millets-based food recipes, the different methods of processing and cooking to make palatable dishes from the different varieties of millets, and the specific health benefits from consumption of particular millets at different life stages (i.e., those suitable for young children, for women during pregnancy and lactation, and for the old and the infirm). Along with millets, information and recipes for a variety of native fungi, plants, and animals that are used for food or medicine and which have been used by the community for countless generations are also shared. NIRMAN observed that, whereas millet-based food was earlier limited to preparing a few traditional meals, in recent years, this has been expanding through exchange of recipes from other millet-growing regions in the state and outside of it, facilitated by the local CSOs. In the 2018 festival, the CSOs even set up millets-based food stalls to display 'new' millets-based foods that could be prepared. This was described as a useful way to reintroduce an interest in

traditional foods among the Indigenous communities themselves through the sharing of newer and innovative recipes from different millet-growing regions. One participant also described it as a useful way of stimulating the demand for millets in non-Indigenous/urban areas, as the festival also attracted visitors from nearby semi-rural/peri-urban areas. The sale of millets-based foods produced by Indigenous households was described as creating 'newer' opportunities for supplementary sources of income. The purchasing of millets for consumption (as opposed to growing themselves) or growing millets for the market economy was, however, not considered central to their Indigenous food or agricultural practices, although if surpluses are left, it is not an unusual practice for the farmers to sell the surplus in the local village markets.

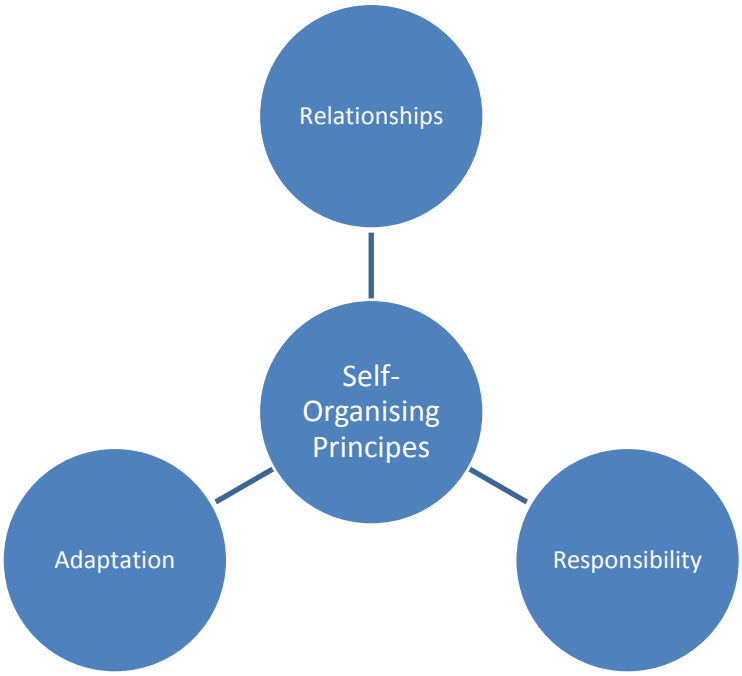
Since Kandhamal is characterised by undulating topography, different soil types, and large areas of land held as commons, the practices of growing different varieties of millets (and other crops) by the farmers along with the livestock and the poultry that they keep are highly location specific. At the same time, the farmers confront many of the same production risks and uncertainties from unfavourable weather conditions, outbreak of pests, and lack of irrigation, among others. At the festival, the farmers—old and young, men and women—gather together informally and share their experience, knowledge, and practices of farming. They give and receive advice and suggestions from each other, for instance, on preparing land, sowing seeds, water and soil conservation, protection of seeds and plants, weed management, choosing cropping systems, and harvesting, among others.

Social bonding is an important component of the festival. The event starts with the visiting farmers holding a procession in the host village, which is accompanied by traditional music and dancing. In the evenings, they form groups and perform traditional dances and folk singing. The festival also ends in a similar spirit. As in the case of other community festivals (such as those at the time of sowing and harvesting), Kondh communities consider festivals as occasions for the farmers "to meet up, sing, dance and celebrate their ecology and their oneness" (Sarangi, 2018). Communal feasting provides the other avenue for social bonding among the community. Food is cooked onsite and shared among all those present.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, I focused on an indigenous rural community seed festival traditionally and historically celebrated by the indigenous millet farmers in the district of Kandhamal in Odisha, which declined but has been revived in the last decade with the support of civil society action. At this event, millet farmers from different villages, women and men, old and young, come together to share knowledge, values, and practices, including the exchange of Indigenous heirloom seeds between themselves. However, in the dominant revitalisation of indigenous food system narratives, such community seed festivals remain largely underappreciated (and underexplored). The analysis presented in this paper is an attempt to address this gap.

Investigating *BurlangJyatra* through a social-ecological lens that looks at linked social and ecological systems allowed for a greater understanding of the festival's meaning and significance. Relationships, adaptation, and responsibility emerged as the key principles around which the festival is self-organised and which together link the social and the ecological in a dynamic sense (Saxena, 2020).



These principles, driven by processes of intergenerational participation and interaction, social learning, and communication, can be seen as being linked to the process of fostering or catalysing 'social-ecological memory', which carries and transmits knowledge, experiences, and values of millet-based biodiverse farming. This in turn has the capacity to help the

communities enact stewardship of their social-ecological landscape and be resilient to changing conditions at the local scale. The festival is thus deeply embedded with social-ecological meanings. The festival's revival from within the community and facilitated by local civil society action in a bottom up approach outside of the state and the market forces illustrates it as a form of grassroots self-organising for resilience in the specific context and which draws on values of an Indigenous knowledge system.

Two key learnings emerge from this paper. First, there is the need to go beyond a simplistic celebratory and promotional discourse around such festivals as rural, historical, socio-cultural traditions to recognise their deeper significance in 'reconnecting' (Folke, 2011) and sustaining biodiverse farming at individual and community levels. It is a form of self-organising grounded on values of an Indigenous knowledge system focusing on relationships, adaptation, and reciprocity as key to social-ecological resilience. Second, the paper contributes to offering a new understanding of using a social-ecological framework at the community scale as a useful approach to support revitalisation of indigenous food systems for food and nutrition security, biodiversity conservation, and biocultural diversity. This would mean extending the primary focus from the millets supply chain to the social-ecological co-dependence rather than improving certain varieties/species of millets for sole purposes of productivity, profitability, and/or consumption leading to monocultures as promoted in mainstream policy discourse (Makkar, 2019). The adoption of value chain development as the sole response/strategy to millets revival can compromise the capacity of the Indigenous communities to be stewards of agro-biodiversity and diet/nutrition-diversity. Research is beginning to show that food insecurity and susceptibility to serious health issues experienced by the Indigenous communities are not from "inherited traits in their flawed cultures"; rather, they are from the erosion of Indigenous food systems (Coté, 2016). While this paper suggests that community seed festivals potentially play a vital role in revitalising Indigenous food systems, it acknowledges that this does not automatically demonstrate significant or positive outcomes. In their review of Indigenous Australian festivals, for example, Whitford and Ruhanen stated the limited research on identifying the extent to which Indigenous festivals promote positive sociocultural benefits and facilitate Indigenous community development. Very little (if any) work has been undertaken since then, although it is well accepted that these festivals provide a forum for community cohesion and celebration, for strengthening and enhancing of cultural knowledge, and for development of social capital. Going beyond this, this paper suggests that there is a need to consider how the social-ecological 'values' of such festivals might usefully

be assessed. Except for a few localised reports of success in terms of restoring lost varieties/species and increasing food/nutritional diversity, there has been no systematic documentation and assessment of such festivals on health and well-being, biodiversity, agency, empowerment, or other such indicators of social or ecological resilience at individual or community levels. Further research particularly drawing on Indigenous methodologies (Evans, 2014; Walter, 2019) on appraisal of impacts to account for the social-ecological value could be relevant. This would also help in interrogating the risk factors from external and internal challenges to such festivals, for example: to what extent these festivals risk not being 'owned' by the Indigenous communities and instead run the risk of being appropriated/co-opted by non-Indigenous or mainstream actors; or to what extent the 'commodification' of such festivals could conflict with renewal of traditions and the values associated with 'community vs. competition, harmony with nature vs. domination of nature, diversity vs. specialization, and restraint vs. exploitation' (Lyson, 2004). In the case of internal challenges, questions around how the festival accommodates conflicting interests and how divisions within the community itself (such as demographic changes in age structure and gender balance, as from out-migration) are dealt with, especially when relevant to self-organising ability, warrant attention. These are some of the areas that could inform further research. Far from romanticising indigenous community festivals experiencing resurgence in some pockets in India as a celebration of resilience, there is also the uncomfortable reality of a history of social exclusion, economic deprivation, geographical isolation, and political marginalisation faced by such Indigenous communities. The increasing 'cultural alienation' under globalization and neo-liberal food regimes and the gross violation of land rights, intellectual property rights, and customary laws of Indigenous communities call for much-needed discussion on the contradictions posed by mainstream development policy discourses. Current discourses around food and farming sovereignty (Pimbert, 2011), the 'Right to Food of Indigenous Peoples' (International Indian Treaty Council, 2002), and the emerging understanding about food not as a commodity but as 'commons' (Vivero-Pol, 2017) engage with some of these concerns. Within resilience thinking and the social-ecological perspective itself, which has often been critiqued for being apolitical , issues of power, agency, conflict, and inequality are increasingly being addressed (Olsson, 2017; Fabinyi, 2014; Österblom, 2013). There is also attention being given to diverse forms of social-ecological memories as critical to adaptability and resilience (Nykvist, 2014). Both these developments offer the potential for greater understanding of self-organising for ensuring the vitality of Indigenous food systems and suggest directions for further research.