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Coalition for Food-Systems Transforma(c)tion in India

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WORKING PAPER

FORESTS, HOSTELS AND FOOD:
Food Sovereignty among the Madiya Gonds of Gadchiroli, Maharashtra

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FORESTS, HOSTELS AND FOOD:
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About CoFTI

The **Coalition for Food-Systems Transforma(c)tion in India (CoFTI)** was born out of the United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit 2021 with a commitment to reshaping India's food system so that safe and nutritious food is accessible to all. Its mission addresses hunger and malnutrition while championing biodiversity, climate resilience, and the protection of livelihoods. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, CoFTI works to create sustainable and equitable solutions that balance the needs of people, planet, and economy. Grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Coalition drives positive change across seven key areas of work, ensuring that India's food systems remain resilient for both present and future generations.

CoFTI's approach is anchored in **three core objectives**.

1 THOUGHT LEADERSHIP	**USING RESEARCH, INNOVATION, AND EVIDENCE-BASED INSIGHTS TO SHAPE EFFECTIVE POLICIES AND GUIDE THEIR IMPLEMENTATION.**
2 COLLECTIVE ACTION	**OFFERING A COLLABORATIVE SPACE WHERE STAKEHOLDERS CAN UNITE, SHARE RESOURCES, AND WORK TOGETHER ACROSS ITS AREAS OF FOCUS.**
3 BUILDING CONNECTIONS	**FOSTERING STRONG LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS TO ENABLE THE EXCHANGE OF KNOWLEDGE AND STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS**

Through these objectives, CoFTI serves as both a catalyst and a convener, ensuring that India's journey towards a just, sustainable, and nourishing food future is grounded in shared purpose and actionable solutions.

CoFTI Core Group comprises of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Welthungerhilfe India (WHH), Food Future Foundation (FFF), and Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), which hosts the Secretariat of CoFTI.

The Core Group has evolved to CoFTI's Transformation Council (2025–26), a strategic advisory body driving high-potential initiatives through a cross-sector cohort. It unites civil society, government, academia, and private sector stakeholders to advance collaborative food systems transformation in India.

The CoFTI Fellowship Programme

The CoFTI Fellowship Programme (2025) was conceptualized to nurture early-career researchers in India by supporting them to explore and generate evidence on critical food systems issues. Designed as a structured three-month fellowship, it combined rigorous selection, thematic focus, and a mentorship model curated, hosted and implemented by CoFTI Secretariat with support from WASSAN and Welthungerhilfe (WHH) India. Through guided research and collaborative knowledge creation, the programme culminated in the Fellows producing six working papers, an Issue Brief, and a detailed survey-based analytical report.

The CoFTI Fellowship Programme was carried out from August to November 2025 followed by a rigorous process of review and finalisation of the outputs. Applications were invited from early career researchers for specific thematic areas identified through consultations with CoFTI members. The programme received nearly 500 applications from which eight fellows were selected by a panel including the CoFTI Core group members and other subject experts who are also members of the Coalition. A team of subject experts was invited to mentor the Fellows. The CoFTI Fellows received an honorarium to support their research during the Fellowship, and the final topics were decided jointly by the Fellows and their assigned mentors.

Of the eight fellows selected, seven successfully completed the CoFTI Fellowship programme. Five Fellows undertook original research projects from conceptualisation to manuscript preparation, while two contributed to the development of a CoFTI Issue Brief and a survey-based analytical report.

Voluntary mentorship by CoFTI members: A defining feature of the fellowship was its mentorship model. Members of CoFTI, Core Group, and the Secretariat have voluntarily mentored the fellows throughout the programme.

The fellowship culminated in the presentation of findings, followed by review, revision, and publication as part of the CoFTI Working Paper Series, with opportunities for further research collaboration and publication.

The CoFTI Secretariat was responsible for the overall design and coordination of the Fellowship programme. This included developing the fellowship framework, managing the selection process, facilitating mentor–fellow engagement, and coordinating the review, editing, design, publication, and communication of the Fellows' outputs. As the institutional anchor of the Secretariat, WASSAN also played a significant role in the operational management and smooth implementation of the fellowship programme by providing administrative, human resource, and design support, which was instrumental in ensuring the effective delivery of the programme.

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The views expressed in this working paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of all contributors, participants, or partner organisations.

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List of Abbreviations

ABBREVIATION	FULL FORM
PDS	Public Distribution System
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BSc	Bachelor of Science
B.Com	Bachelor of Commerce
BP	Blood Pressure
R01-R13	Respondent 01 - Respondent 13
PESA	Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act

Executive Summary

Food sovereignty, broadly understood as the right of communities to define, control, and sustain their own food systems, offers an important framework for understanding Indigenous food practices. While discussions of food sovereignty in India often focus on agricultural policy, nutrition, and welfare provisioning, the everyday experiences of Indigenous food systems across forests, homes, and educational institutions remain relatively unexplored. This study examines food sovereignty among the Madiya-Gonds of Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, exploring how village-based forest–farm ecologies interact with urban institutional diets through youth migration to Adivasi Youth Hostels in Nagpur.

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in the villages of Bhamragarh, Hemalkasa, and Palli in Bhamragarh Tehsil, alongside semi-structured interviews with thirteen Madiya-Gond hostel residents (seven female and six male, aged 15–29) in Nagpur. Village elders were also interviewed. The study employs food sovereignty, vernacular food literacy, and epistemologies of the South as analytical frameworks, recognising oral narratives, experiential learning, and intergenerational knowledge as legitimate sources for understanding Indigenous food systems.

Findings reveal that Madiya-Gond diets remain deeply embedded in forest–farm ecologies. Wild greens (*raan bhaji*), bamboo shoots (vastey), mushrooms, forest fruits, dried fish, and preserved foods such as sun-dried mango and *mahua*-based products complement cultivated rice and millets. Migration to urban hostels, however, partially attenuates food sovereignty. Hostel meals are highly standardised - *"roti, sabzi, daal, chawal"*, limiting dietary diversity and eliminating access to wild foods. Although some youth bring traditional foods from home, such practices are occasional. Separation from forest and farming environments also weakens vernacular food literacy—the ecological and cultural knowledge transmitted through gathering, rituals, and intergenerational teaching. Participants expressed a desire to incorporate forest foods into hostel meals, suggesting that educational mobility and culturally grounded food practices can coexist when institutional support is available.

The study argues that food sovereignty in urban institutional contexts encompasses cultural continuity, ecological engagement, and dietary autonomy, not merely nutrition. It highlights the importance of recognising vernacular food literacy as a vital knowledge system and recommends integrating traditional foods, supporting community food enterprises, strengthening community stewardship of forest-based food resources, and creating educational opportunities that sustain Indigenous food knowledge and practices.

1

INTRODUCTION

Food sovereignty - defined broadly as the right of people to define their own food systems, produce culturally appropriate foods, and have control over production, distribution, and consumption - has emerged as a key framework for understanding indigenous food systems. Food sovereignty debates in India often focus on agriculture, nutrition, or welfare provisioning, overlooking how indigenous food systems are lived, negotiated, and transformed across everyday spaces such as forests, homes, and educational institutions. Among the Madiya-Gonds and other Adivasi communities in Gadchiroli district, situated in Eastern Maharashtra, the migration of their youths to Adivasi Hostels in Nagpur city for education, food sovereignty can be examined through the lens of forest-farm access, wild edible foods, institutional diets, youth mobility, and cultural transmission. Educational mobility through Adivasi Youth Hostels represents a significant transition point where village-based food systems intersect with standardised, urban, and commodified diets.

Based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in forest-adjacent villages of Bhamragarh Tehsil in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, and semi-structured interviews with Madiya Gond youth residing in Adivasi hostels in Nagpur, this study examines how food sovereignty is sustained, reshaped, and partially suspended across village and hostel contexts. Drawing on oral narratives from village elders and hostel-residing youth, and analysing through the framework of indigenous food sovereignty and vernacular food literacy, the paper argues that Madiya-Gond food systems remain vibrant and ecologically grounded in forest–farm relations, even as institutionalised diets in hostels standardise food practices and weaken youth food autonomy. By tracing everyday meals and wild food access, the study shows that food sovereignty is not merely about access to calories but about control, ethics, and cultural continuity. This study moves beyond deficit-based narratives of tribal food decline and instead foregrounds indigenous food knowledge as a living system, while exploring how state educational infrastructures may reshape food autonomy during an important generational stage.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study has the following research objectives:

1. To examine how forest–farm access and indigenous ecological practices sustain food sovereignty among the Madiya-Gond community in the Bhamragarh Tehsil of Gadchiroli, Maharashtra;

2. To analyse how educational migration and residence in Adivasi Youth Hostels in cities reshape food sovereignty and food literacy among Madiya-Gond youth; and

3. To explore how the everyday experiences of Adivasi youth across village and hostel settings contribute to understanding the relationship between educational and welfare infrastructures and Indigenous food systems.



Photo Credit: Sanjivani Atram (WASSAN - RRA Network)
A woman in the millet field in Gadchiroli district

2
METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design and Respondents

This study has employed a qualitative research design using primary data collected from semi-structured interviews and field-based observations, analysed through qualitative content analysis. Seven women (ages 15-27) were interviewed at the Adivasi Youth Hostel for girls and six men (ages 16-28) were interviewed at the Adivasi Youth Hostel for boys. The demographics of the survey respondents are given in Tables - 1 and 2. The semi-structured interviews in Bhamragarh Tehsil were held with individuals in Bhamragarh, Hemalkasa and Palli villages. Respondents in Bhamragarh Tehsil were selected using convenience sampling through a mutual contact who facilitated initial introductions within the community. This initial sampling subsequently developed into snowball sampling, as participants recommended other community members who were willing to participate in the study.

Table - 1: Demography of the interview respondents from Adivasi Youth Hostels in Nagpur

Name/Participant Group *	Age Range/Education	Gender Identity	Geography (Village/District)
R01	18 years old	Female	Etapalli, Gadchiroli
R02	15 years old	Female	Belgaon, Dhanura, Gadchiroli
R03	18 years old	Female	Dudhmala, Gadchiroli
R04	BA Final Year	Female	Hodari, Bhamragarh, Gadchiroli
R05	BSc 2nd Year	Female	Kudkeli, Bhamragarh, Gadchiroli
R06	B.Com Diploma	Female	Gopnar, Bhamragarh, Gadchiroli
R07 (Receptionist at the Adivasi Girls Youth Hostel)	27 years old	Female	Daudi Par Bazaar, Bhandara
R08	BA 3rd Year	Male	Kotgul, Korchi, Gadchiroli
R09	Physical Education 3rd Year	Male	Kothi S, Bhamragarh, Gadchiroli
R10	29 years old	Male	Sonsari, Kurkheda, Gadchiroli
R11	27 years old	Male	Samudrapur, Wardha
R12	Polytechnic 3rd Year	Male	Aheri, Gadchiroli
R13	27 years old	Male	Manger, Etapalli, Gadchiroli
R02	15 years old	Female	Belgaon, Dhanura, Gadchiroli

* R - Respondent (Names of the respondents have been hidden for their privacy)

Source: Mahika Mor

Table - 2 : Demography of interview respondents from Bhamragarh Tehsil

Name/Participant Group *	Age Range/Education	Gender Identity	Geography (Village/District)
R01 (7 Women, interviewed as a group)	(Middle-aged to older women)	Female	Palli Village, Bhamragarh, Gadchiroli
R02	40 years old	Female	Bhamragarh, Gadchiroli
R03	40 years old	Male	Hemalkasa, Bhamragarh, Gadchiroli
R04	52 years old	Male	Kiyar Village, Bhamragarh, Gadchiroli

* R - Respondent (Names of the respondents have been hidden for their privacy)

Source: Mahika Mor

2.2. Study Setting

Gadchiroli district, situated in North-eastern Maharashtra, is bordered by the states of Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh (Khonde *et al.*, 2016). About 76 percent of the district is covered with hills and dense forests (A.V. *et al.*, 2025). The estimated population of Gadchiroli is cited to be around 1,072,942 (Jungari & Paswan, 2019). As per the 2011 census, the tribal population of Gadchiroli is 38.17% (District Administration, Gadchiroli). The Madiya-Gonds are one of the adivasi groups residing in this region. It has been observed that school and college-going adivasi youth from this region often travel to nearby cities to pursue education and professional opportunities.

The Government of Maharashtra provides free hostel facilities to adivasi students in Adivasi Youth Hostels in cities (separately for girls and boys) based on merit, along with a monthly allowance. The two Adivasi Youth Hostels that I interacted with admitted students post matriculation—pursuing senior secondary education, graduation and post-graduation. These hostels provide accommodation only to students and not to working professionals. The hostels do not have a mess and students engage outside tiffin services for their daily meals. The tiffins are delivered twice a day and the students pay for them from their monthly allowance. These hostel food arrangements, shaped by state provisioning and market-based tiffin services, provide an important institutional context through which questions of food sovereignty and dietary agency can be examined.

2.3. Analytical framework

Scholarly work on tribal food systems often frames change in terms of decline or marginalisation. However, the interview transcriptions from Bhamragarh Tehsil in the Gadchiroli district and conversations with the migrated adivasi youth in Nagpur complicate that narrative.

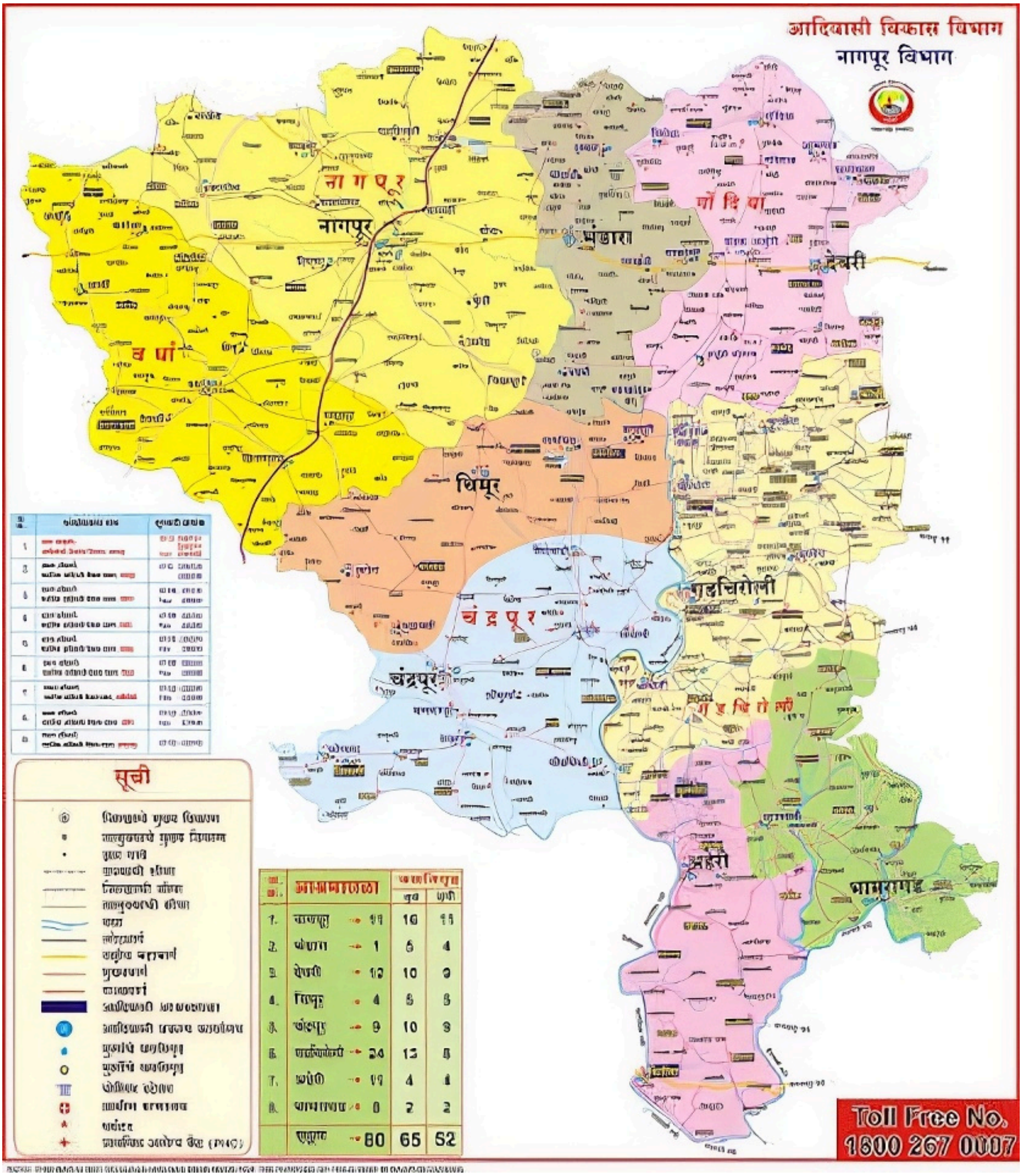
They show a vibrant, living food regime where wild vegetables, roots, tubers, *mahua*,[1] fish, and locally preserved items (for example, dried mango) are central to everyday meals and festivals in the villages. **Participants described these foods as integral to subsistence, cultural identity, and collective community practices rather than as supplementary food sources**.

At the same time, migration for education into hostel settings introduces standardised diets, commodified foods and altered tastes that influence younger generations' relationship to indigenous dietary practices. This study uses food sovereignty and vernacular food literacy as frameworks to guide data interpretation. By reading empirical material through these lenses, the study captures both the persistence of indigenous food regimes and the ways in which they are negotiated across village and institutional contexts. This analytical approach is underpinned by a methodological commitment to recognising oral and experiential knowledge as central to understanding indigenous food systems.

Formal education systems, influenced by colonial legacies, have often given limited recognition to Indigenous cultures, languages, and oral knowledge traditions, resulting in comparatively less attention to the intergenerational knowledge systems (Shukla, 2025). Here, the study uses the framework of the *Epistemologies of the South*. This was a concept developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos as a way of dealing with multiple knowledges, epistemes, and ontologies. As this research focuses on oral narratives and knowledge that is often undocumented, it engages with forms of knowledge that have historically received limited attention in mainstream research. Here, the strategies associated with Epistemologies of the South, particularly those addressing absences and forms of knowledge that are often undocumented, broaden the analytical lens for understanding diverse knowledge systems and ways of knowing (Escobar, 2020).

[1] Madhuca longifola is an Indian tropical multipurpose tree. All parts of the *mahua* tree are used for food, medicine, and other purposes.

Studying food sovereignty among the Madiya Gonds provides an opportunity to better understand vernacular food literacy as an important form of Indigenous knowledge. Their oral narratives provide complementary perspectives to documented knowledge systems, offering insights into Indigenous understandings of food and the environment.



Source - Adivasi Development, Nagpur. Dt. nil.

Figure - 1: Adivasi Development Department Map, Nagpur Division



Figure - 2: Adivasi Girls Youth Hostel in Nagpur city

3

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Food Sovereignty

Most scholars find it hard to define food sovereignty. According to Patel, "it is the sort of thing one knows when one sees" (2009). According to the Nyéléni Declaration of 2007, "Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems". The global food sovereignty movement has also been described as a "movement of movements" (Pimbert and Claeys, 2024). This paradigm travels unevenly into contexts like India where it intersects with structural barriers like land ownership, gender, social and cultural contexts; policy priorities about agroecology, organic farming, and genetic resources; and lived realities like labour cost, labour availability, and aspirations. Food sovereignty is not just access to food but the power to shape the system including agroecology, land/territory, genetic resources, labor, and cultural appropriateness.

In India, some scholars and practitioners increasingly argue that discussions on food sovereignty should also consider broader questions of social equity, inclusion, and livelihoods of historically disadvantaged communities, in addition to those of farmers. Sen argues that famines are not caused by a lack of food, but by a lack of "entitlements and capabilities", or the social, political and economic means to produce or acquire sufficient food(1981). With indigenous communities like the adivasis in India, self-determination is paramount where the people have power over the food's production, consumption, and distribution. Here, food sovereignty is tied to control over forest-based livelihoods and the ability to maintain traditional diets despite external pressures from deforestation and resource exploitation (Asztalos Morell *et al.*, 2025). The Madiya-Gonds in Gadchiroli maintain a diet deeply rooted in their local ecosystem. Their diet includes a variety of *raan bhaji* (wild greens), mushrooms, bamboo shoots (*vastey*), and forest fruits. They also possess intergenerational traditional knowledge that links food directly to health. For example, a plant called *Geda Purga* is used for fever, and *Kadu Bhaji* is consumed for its health benefits, including boosting the immunity of newborns through breast milk.

In the Indian context, food sovereignty discussions also encompass the production and consumption of culturally appropriate traditional foods, including millets (Patel *et al.*, 2013). Some scholars have argued that the increasing reliance on standardised food grains, including subsidised rice distributed through the Public Distribution System (PDS), has contributed to changes in dietary diversity and food cultures, with potential implications for nutrition and health (Patel *et al.*, 2013). These discussions also emphasise strengthening the role of communities, including urban populations, as active participants in food systems rather than solely as beneficiaries of food assistance programmes (Patel *et al.*, 2013).

An important perspective within food sovereignty discussions in India emphasises creating opportunities for urban vulnerable populations to participate more actively in food systems as enablers as well, in addition to their role as beneficiaries of government-supported food programmes (Patel *et al.*, 2013). Millets and native rice varieties were once the backbone of the Madiya-Gond diet, cultivated through shifting cultivation. Historically, the community cultivated numerous millets, including *Kodo, Kutki, Kohla, Arku, Gunku, Budda*, and *Ikka*. A staple of their diet is ambil, a fermented drink made from ragi, jowar, maize, wheat or rice, valued for its ability to keep the stomach 'cold' and refreshed. However, the introduction of the Public Distribution System (PDS) and hybrid seeds has influenced the community's role in the food systems, contributing to a shift from self-reliant food production towards greater reliance on externally supplied food grains.

The government provides monthly rations of approximately 25 kg of rice and 10 kg of wheat. Some community members suggested that this has reduced the incentive to continue cultivating a diversity of traditional grains, while increasing reliance on the rice distributed through the Public Distribution System. The decline in diverse grain cultivation and preparation and consumption practices also points to changing food knowledge and competencies, highlighting food literacy as a crucial but often overlooked dimension of food sovereignty.

4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Food Literacy

Food sovereignty is inextricably linked to food literacy, which provides the essential knowledge, skills, and awareness needed for individuals and communities to exercise that right (Powell & Wittman, 2017). Food literacy is defined as the "scaffolding" that empowers individuals, households, and communities to protect their diet quality and strengthen their dietary resilience over time (Farrell, 2021). At its core, it involves the ability to plan and manage food resources, select appropriate items, prepare meals, and eat in a way that meets nutritional needs (Farrell, 2021).

Food literacy has expanded from simple nutritional knowledge to a critical understanding of the power imbalances within the global food system and the sociocultural influences that shape our eating practices (Farrell, 2021). For communities such as the Adivasis, food sovereignty is dependent on the recognition of vernacular food literacy - informal knowledge passed down through rituals, forest gathering, and oral traditions, as well as knowledge passed down from elders (Shukla, 2025).

Shukla (2025) argues that vernacular food literacy, acquired through mundane activities like food consumption, production, post-harvest rituals, or even youths' leisure and entertainment activities, often receives comparatively less recognition than formal, text-based forms of literacy within mainstream education systems. A respondent in Hemalkasa village noted that their ancestors identified which plants were medicinal or poisonous through a "practice of the tribal community over many years."

Many of the respondents from the Adivasi Youth Hostels mentioned going for regular walks in the forests ("roaming in the jungle"), or bike-rides with their friends back in their villages, gathering flora and fauna along the way. On the surface, these seem like mundane leisure activities but are actually sources of vernacular literacy. This informal knowledge is part of a "submerged" iceberg of practice, where the most visible performances (like cooking) are supported by a deep, unrecognised base of intergenerational learning & environmental interaction (for example, many youth hostel respondents described learning about forest foods by accompanying their parents and grandparents into the forests). Recognising these informal and vernacular literacies may have broader policy relevance. For example, the Ranbhaji Mahotsav (wild foods festival), provides opportunities to document and showcase knowledge of forest foods shared by youth and elders, while supporting local livelihoods and contributing to sustainable development (Shukla, 2025). However, as young people move away from forest-based everyday environments into urban and institutional settings, these vernacular food literacies are increasingly disrupted, reshaped, or rendered invisible by standardised and commodified food systems.

4.2. Institutionalised and Commodified Diets

A research study from Africa notes that young people from rural areas frequently migrate to urban centres, driven by dreams of economic success and a perception of agriculture as an unprofitable, "backward" livelihood (Dietz, 2018). Upon arrival, many youth enter a state of "waithood", where low wages in the informal sector prevent them from achieving the financial stability required to start families or maintain traditional diets (van Soelen & van Hoolwerff, 2018). Another study from Canada notes that in cities, youth often undergo "dietary acculturation", abandoning traditional whole foods for ultra-processed, commodified diets that are calorie-dense but nutrient-poor (Yusuf & Mensah, 2018; Slater *et al.*, 2018). This often leads to a "deskilling" process, where the intergenerational transfer of traditional agricultural and cooking knowledge is severed by the urban lifestyle (Slater *et al.*, 2018). Studies from Canada and Portugal note that when youth move to institutions such as hostels or university dorms, their food literacy is restricted by the environment; for example, a lack of cooking facilities prevents them from practicing food preparation skills they may have previously possessed (Farrell, 2021; Silva, 2025). A similar pattern was observed in the Adivasi Youth Hostels in Nagpur, where the absence of kitchen facilities limited students' opportunities to cook and engage with traditional ingredients and foods.

A comparative study of the elderly care regime in Sweden shows how institutional canteens follow economic regimes of cost-effectiveness, resulting in standardised, 'one size fits all' meals that ignore the ethnic and cultural diversity of their residents (Asztalos Morell *et al.*, 2025). These environments frequently treat food as a commodity intended to meet caloric needs rather than a source of cultural identity and wellbeing (Asztalos Morell *et al.*, 2025). The "standardised" meals observed in Swedish care homes find a parallel in the Adivasi Youth Hostels in Nagpur, where meals were characterised by a repetitive, market-based menu of "*roti, sabzi, daal, chawal*," with comparatively limited inclusion of traditional Indigenous foods. Students in Nagpur hostels report a "fixed" menu consisting of common market vegetables like *aloo-baingan* (potato-brinjal), cabbage, and cauliflower. In contrast, their village diets consist of fresh, seasonal produce from the farm and forest, including mushrooms, bamboo shoots (vastey), and dozens of wild greens. Interviews with students suggested that food in these hostels was often perceived primarily as a means of satisfying hunger rather than as a source of wellbeing. Students also reported that meals were frequently served cold, were overly oily, and lacked the variety and taste associated with home-cooked food.

A study notes that the latest version of Canada's Food Guide offers a "quantitative, Western biomedical discourse of food and eating" as the only right approach (2021). New immigrant mothers, due to a lack of representation of their traditional foods, find it hard to follow the guide. Often, the absence of their traditional foods from the guide led to these foods being thought of as unhealthy. This may contribute to immigrants placing less value on their previous food knowledge as they increasingly rely on the authoritative knowledge provided by dietitians and other community service providers (Farrell, 2021).

A respondent from the Bhamragarh Tehsil also explained that educated adivasi youth in their community often face a "mental attack" where traditional foods like *Kosri* (millets) are viewed as a sign of being "undeveloped" or "not in the mainstream". This has contributed to greater preference for the polished white rice in place of a more diverse traditional diet. Some respondents also associated these dietary changes with increasing cases of diabetes and hypertension in the community. Similar to the "Western biomedical discourse" described in the Canadian context, the Public Distribution System (PDS) primarily focuses on staple cereal distribution, while the diversity of foods in Adivasi food systems receives comparatively less attention.

Existing literature describes food sovereignty as the ability to sustain culturally appropriate, ecologically rooted food systems and examines how public policies, standardised diets, and institutional settings may influence Indigenous food practices and vernacular food literacy. However, there is limited empirical work that links forest-based food regimes with educational migration into hostels in the city, and little attention to how Adivasi youth in India actively negotiate food sovereignty and food literacy across village and city hostel contexts—particularly in forest-dependent regions like Gadchiroli. Moreover, most of the research found on the Madiya Gond community deals with menstrual health and construction of period huts (Surma Ghar) and a quantitative study of medicinal plants collected and used by the Madiya community in Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh (Ghosh, 2017; Jakhi, 2021, Jungari & Paswan, 2019; Khonde *et al.*, 2016; Setiya *et al.*, 2025; Siddiqui & Karuna, 2025). There is a gap in the existing data on the indigenous food practices of the Madiya adivasi community.



Photo Credit: Aniket Likhar (WASSAN)
Madiya women with traditional gourd water bottles and paddy-straw brooms.

5 ANALYSIS

The research scholarship highlights the continuing role of commons-based and forest foods in diets and resilience. Narayanan (2021) shows that free collection of uncultivated food meaningfully diversifies diets and lowers the cost of food, especially in drought-prone regions. Forest conservation and food provisioning are often viewed as competing land uses (Milbank, 2023). However, research shows that forest cover is positively associated with dietary quality (Milbank, 2023). The field data during the course of this research indicate that in the villages of Bhamragarh Tehsil, food practices remain deeply rooted in a forest-farm ecology. Interviews with women in Palli village show that wild edibles, especially *vastey* (tender bamboo shoots) and mushooms, are "most loved by all" and that foraging in the jungle and field-edges remains a regular part of life. The presence of "farms adjacent to the jungle" and continual forest access suggests that these communities retain significant autonomy in gathering and consumption of wild foods. According to the transcriptions, foods such as *ambil*, sun-dried mango strips, *mahua*-based sweets and wild greens form staples alongside rice, rather than being mere supplementary items.

On the other hand, for the youth who have migrated to hostels in Nagpur, the food sovereignty regime is weaker. Hostel meals are reported to be repetitive and standardised (*"roti, sabzi, daal, chawal"*), wild food access is lost ("not having access to jungle foods"), and taste/identity shifts are evident. While youth sometimes bring snacks from home like *chakkali* and *chivda*, or wild edibles like mushrooms and *kadu bhaji*, such practices are episodic and do not restore full food autonomy. It was also noted that these foods from home were openly shared with friends from the hostel who were also adivasis, but not with friends from their respective colleges. Most of the interviewees also reported there being minimal discussions on 'village food' or 'foods from home' with their friends in the city. This may point to a certain sense of insecurity about what might be perceived by their peers as 'village food'.

While the village base retains many sovereignty attributes, migration and institutionalisation attenuate them for youth. *Vastey* (tender bamboo shoots) and wild mushrooms are the most loved and remembered wild edibles by all of the youth interviewees. When asked which food from home they would like to have



Figure - 3: Forest-farm ecology (farms adjacent to the forest)

When asked which food from home they would like to have incorporated into their tiffins, if given the option, many of them responded that they miss vastey and would love it in their tiffins.



Photo Credit: Mahika Mor
Vastey (Tender Bamboo Shoot)

5.1. Everyday Plates

Mandal *et al.*'s ethnobotanical work in eastern India documents culturally significant wild edibles and macro-fungi supporting nutrition and livelihoods. A growing evidence base documents the nutritional and cultural importance of indigenous and uncultivated foods - from forest greens and mushrooms to small fish - within adivasi diets. Studies highlight the potential of indigenous and uncultivated foods to address "hidden hunger" and to support place-based food sovereignty when access to these resources and associated knowledge systems is sustained (Ghosh-Jerath *et al.*, 2016, Kapoor *et al.*, 2022). A typical lunch in an adivasi home in Bhamragarh tehsil includes rice, dried fish, some vegetable or leafy greens (mostly either grown or foraged), some other meat almost every alternate day, and ambil. Whereas a typical lunch meal served in the tiffins at Adivasi Youth Hostels includes the standardized meal of roti, sabzi, daal, chawal. The youth's experience in hostels shows a loss of food diversity and limited agency over diet ("some of them cook on induction cooktop in the hostel because tiffin food lacks variety"). The institutional food regime contrasts with the village system where households decide. Similarly, market influences in these villages - where wild edibles are "not important enough to sell in markets" - show that the community's economy is oriented less to external markets and more to self-provisioning.



Photo Credit: Mahika Mor
Wild Mushrooms

Migrating youth have altered food landscapes: outside tiffins, urban snacks (*"pani puri, biryani, ice cream, balushaahi"*), and no foraging. The data shows that youth go home only occasionally (a youth hostel respondent mentions "going home only for Diwali and had not gone home the previous year"). This physical and social distance weakens the link between youth and village food systems and may reduce sovereignty. Literature on indigenous food sovereignty emphasises that sustaining such systems through youth is crucial for continuity. Distance from home limits frequent engagement with the forest–farm landscapes. Currently, most of the respondents were able to identify wild edibles, having gone with their mothers and fathers on walks to surrounding jungles. They also know how to cook. However, one of them was unable to remember or identify any of her childhood's wild edibles, having "lived outside her home for several years now". Continued distance from the everyday plates of home and the farm-forest access may result in a loss of embodied ecological knowledge.

For youth in urban hostels, food sovereignty is partially suspended - while educational mobility is advanced, food autonomy is diminished. The transition from the village food system to the hostel mess is both nutritional and cultural: youth miss wild foods, feel that hostel menus lack variety, and express preferences for village foods. Jernigan *et al.* in their paper 'Food Sovereignty Indicators for Indigenous Community Capacity Building and Health' position food sovereignty as a culturally grounded pathway to improve health (2021). For Adivasi youth, food sovereignty can include connotations of being able to carry their food culture into urban settings, maintaining foraging links, sharing wild foods, asserting taste preferences, and preserving knowledge. Without this, the youth's food identity and autonomy may weaken.



Photo Credit: Mahika Mor
Walking Interview in Bhamragarh Tehsil

6 CONCLUSION

The transcriptions from Bhamragarh Tehsil show that tribal food systems are founded on active engagement with forested landscapes, seasonal knowledge, and communal practices. Migration and institutional diets reshape these practices but do not eliminate them; instead, they open sites for negotiated continuity. Urban institutional food environments often emphasise caloric provision over the broader cultural and well-being dimensions of food. While youth may know which foods are healthy, institutional and economic conditions often limit their ability to access or choose them. Policies and programmes that recognise Indigenous foodways and provide greater space for them within institutions, particularly schools and youth hostels, may support the continuity of these food practices while accommodating young people's educational mobility.

Greater alignment between formal schooling and the lived realities of urbanised youth may help bridge this gap. For youth migrating from rural areas to urban centres, food literacy acts as a protective scaffolding, preventing the "deskilling" that occurs when traditional practices are replaced by commodified, standardised institutional diets in hostels (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014).

In essence, recognising vernacular food literacy is akin to valuing not only the instruction manual of a tool but also the knowledge of the person who has spent a lifetime mastering its use. Greater recognition of these knowledge systems may help ensure that the lived expertise of Indigenous communities is documented and carried forward alongside more formal institutional approaches. Greater recognition of vernacular food literacy within policies and institutions may create opportunities to incorporate traditional, nutrient-dense food practices into institutional settings, enabling young people to maintain connections with their food traditions.

Policy Implications

Policy implications emerging from the field include:

1. Explore opportunities to integrate tribal food knowledge into hostel mess planning (for instance, seasonal wild greens and preserved items)

2. Support community food processing and value chain initiatives that can strengthen local livelihoods while maintaining traditional food practices (for instance, mahua value-addition and aam papad cooperatives)

3. Recognise the role of existing governance frameworks, including the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), in supporting equitable commons governance and community access to foraged foods.

4. Develop educational activities and curricula that encourage young people to document, learn, and engage with Indigenous food practices through initiatives such as field visits and recipe workshops,



Photo Credit: Aniket Likhar (WASSAN)
Traditional seeds varieties from Kurkheda Block of Gadchiroli District

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Photo Credit: Aniket Likhar (WASSAN)
Traditional desi poultry rearing with bamboo baskets and paddy straw for warmth and protection.

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WORKING PAPER

FORESTS, HOSTELS AND FOOD: Food Sovereignty among the Madiya Gonds of Gadchiroli, Maharashtra



Photo Credit: Mahika Mor
Bridge to Bhamragarh

COALITION FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMA(C)TION IN INDIA

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