Twenty-One Millet Co-wives against One Rice Co-wife: Millet and Rice Cultivation in the Dandakaranya Forest, 1956–1987

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Summary

After Independence, Indian government reports designated millets cultivated by Indigenous communities to be "coarse cereals" while hybrid varieties of rice were described as "superior." The contest between the two crops came to a head in a refugee-resettlement scheme conceived in 1956 to rehabilitate Partition refugees by sending them to Dandakaranya Forest. Indigenous communities countered the official deprivileging of their foodways through an oral epic. The epic enacts the conflict between Indigenous and refugee foodways with 21 co-wives representing millets clashing with the newest rice co-wife, hinting at Indigenous recognition that rice was treated with approval by men in power.

The years 1956–1987 marked a shift in the cultivation of millets within central India's Dandakaranya Forest. Indigenous communities in the forest had traditionally cultivated millets. Yet in the decades following Independence, the Indian government instituted a comestible hierarchy wherein rice was designated as "superior" to millets, with profound impacts on the region's ecology. Rice needs 2,500 millimeters of water, whereas millets require only 200–300 millimeters, making them ideally suited to the Dandakaranya region with its scarce rainfall. Rice has required forest clearing; millets can be sustainably grown without degrading the forest ecology. Moreover, millets are more nutritionally dense than rice. Yet Indigenous foodways were disrupted to make way for crops grown by Partition refugees. The contest between millet and rice demonstrates how Indigenous farmers were coercively assimilated into the global food system by means of a government policy to make use of refugee cultivators to transform local crop cultivation.

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Fig.1. Deforestation by the Dandakaranya Development Authority. Partition refugees cleared Dandakaranya Forest as part of the Indian government's rehabilitation scheme.

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The impetus for this major agricultural shift was a resettlement project—the Dandakaranya Project—conceived in 1956 to rehabilitate Partition refugees from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) by sending them to Dandakaranya Forest. Refugees were resettled on Indigenous homelands with the official rationalization that this was a way for the Indian state to develop "backward" areas. Government experts drew on the principles of colonial-era scientific forestry, which considered forests marginal or wastelands. The region was inhabited by *adivasis* (Indigenous communities), including tribes such as the Gond, Baiga, and Dongria Kondh, who cultivated and consumed millets. The environmental impacts of the resettlement project are of relevance here. If the land was yielding nutritious millets, why was it designated as marginal or wasteland? Conversion meant that millets would be replaced by hybrid crops (such as rice), which were then neither grown nor eaten by *adivasis*.

Refugee settlements were deforested prior to the establishing of homes, and refugee families aided in forest degradation as they gathered firewood, uprooted saplings, and earned their meagre daily wages in the work of forest clearing—in addition to the cultivation of hybrid crops. Over the course of the resettlement, more than 77,938 square kilometers (30,092 square miles) were deforested.

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Fig.2. This photograph of Indigenous farmers was taken by a government photographer to publicize the gratitude of *adivasi* recipients of state benevolence. Not depicted in these photos was the rapid land alienation Indigenous communities suffered due to the project.

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Gourd and rice cultivation were repeatedly mentioned in refugee memoirs as aspirational placeholders for a return to normalcy. According to one refugee memoir, bottle gourds signified the plenitude of the refugee transit camp. Yet there was a problem with this picture. In lush Bengal, bottle gourd and rice paddy reliably yield abundant harvests, but they were unsuited for a region where water was scarce.

While *adivasi* cultivators had adapted their diets to the region's scarce rainfall, agronomy journals depicted Indigenous farmers as failing to adapt to modern agricultural techniques. Today, India is the world's largest producer and exporter of millets. However, in the decades after India's Independence, government reports designated millets "coarse cereals" while they privileged hybrid rice, which they called a "superior cereal." Official designations impacted the material reality of which crops received state support. The government provided hybrid seeds and managed all aspects of cultivation among the refugees.

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Indigenous communities countered the official deprivileging of their foodways through the epic *Lachmi Jagar*, sung by women for women. The 30,939 lines of *Lachmi Jagar* were first transcribed in 1996 by the Hindi poet Harihar Vaishnav, based primarily on the version known by one of the singers (*gurumai*): Gurumai Sukdai; Vaishnav's translation from Halbi to Hindi and English was subsequently abridged and revised in collaboration with many others, including the anthropologist Chris A. Gregory. Indigenous women sing *Lachmi Jagar* in the Halbi language for 36 hours over an 11-day period in the months between October and February. This historian reads a portion of the epic against the backdrop of the historical event of the Dandakaranya Project that disrupted Indigenous foodways. The new rice wife clashes with her 21 millet co-wives, chief among them *kuttu* (buckwheat), *chaulayi* (amaranth), *kosra* (common millet), *kodo* (ditch millet), *kutki* (little millet), *bajra* (pearl millet), *jowar* (sorghum), *cheena* (proso millet), *kangani/kakun* (foxtail millet), *jhangora/sawa* (barnyard millet), and *ragi/mandiya* (finger millet).



Fig.3. Like Figure 2, this photograph of Indigenous farmers was taken by a government photographer to publicize the gratitude of *adivasi* recipients of state benevolence.

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As the epic is a living tradition, we cannot know whether this episode in the epic was composed and orally transmitted prior to the Dandakaranya Project or directly after it. Nonetheless, the clash between the 21 millet wives and one rice wife enables the community to make sense of the agrarian transformation in which the region was embroiled.

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What might we learn by studying deforestation and foodways in the context of state-driven planning that sought to remake Indigenous diets in marginal ecological spaces? State-driven displacement of millets in favor of rice in India has its counterpart in the Philippines' Masagana 99 program of 1973 and Indonesia's displacement of the millet sorghum by hybrid rice in the 1950s under its transmigration program. Today, NGOs in Indonesia and the Philippines are working with communities to revive these earlier millets; in the Indian context, fieldwork conducted by this researcher shows that *kodo* (*Paspalum scrobiculatam*) and *kutki* (*Panicum sumatrense*) continue to be staples of Indigenous Gond diets. Epics like *Lachmi Jagar* ensured Indigenous cultivators in Dandakaranya did not forget their own foodways. Sidelined by the policies encouraging refugee settlers to cultivate rice, millets are now receiving limited official acknowledgement, as awareness of persistent water scarcity has finally secured government attention. The United Nations declared 2023 the International Year of Millets. However, in the intervening period, Indigenous cultivators were disparaged for growing nutritionally dense millets and discouraged by a lack of institutional support. They faced rapid land alienation; and the landscape of Dandakaranya Forest bears the scars of these coercive changes in agriculture (see Figure 1).

Further readings:

- Baka, Jennifer. "Do Wastelands Exist? Perspectives on 'Productive' Land Use in India's Rural Energyscapes." In "Energizing the Spaces of Everyday Life: Learning from the Past for a Sustainable Future," edited by Vanessa Taylor and Heather Chappells, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society*, no. 2 (2019): 57–64. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8741 .
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- Gregory, Chris A., and Harihar Vaishnav. *Lachmi Jagar: Gurumai Sukdai's Story of the Bastar Rice Goddess*. Kondagaon: Kaksad Publications, 2003.
- Guha, Sumit. *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Rangarajan, Mahesh. *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces, 1860–1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Sena, Amiya. *Aranyalipi* [The forest chronicle]. First published 1966. No pagination.
- Sisodia, J., Vipul N. Singh, and J. P. Mishra. "Agricultural Development in Tribal Madhya Pradesh." *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics* 25, no. 3 (1970): 190–97.

Related links:

- Sahapedia. "In Praise of Lakshmi: Gurumay Performing the Jagar Part 1." Performed in Bastar, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch
- Ramadurai, Charukesi. "Why 2023 Is the Year of Millets." *BBC*, 9 February 2023. https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20230208-why-2023-is-the-year-of-millets

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Pankhuree Dube is assistant professor of modern South Asia and environmental history at Middle Tennessee State University. Her prior academic positions include an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at Dartmouth College and serving as visiting assistant professor for "Asia and the Environment" at Hamilton College. Over the last 15 years she has conducted fieldwork and research in regional archives on the Pardhan Gond *adivasi* (Indigenous) community of central India. Her research has received support from the Social Science Research Council, the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the Association of Asian Studies. Her recent publications include articles in *Settler Colonial Studies*, *Social History*, and the *Journal of British Studies*.
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