

The Bio-Cultural Diversity of Jowar / Sorghum

Atukula Panduga of the
Indigenous Gond Community of
Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district,
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CULTURAL AFFILIATION OF MILLETS

Even today, Jowar (*Sorghum vulgare*) and other millets play a prominent role in the traditions and cultures of the indigenous communities of India. Indigenous communities, especially the indigenous Gond community (Koreti, 2015; Koreti, 2016) of Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district of Telangana celebrates *Atukula Panduga* (festival of harvest), a traditional annual festival usually observed during the month of February which coincides with the end of Rabi crop season. During the festival, each family harvests a few well-developed Jowar panicles from their respective farms, tie them together into bunches and offer them to the traditional gods installed at the village shrine. Traditional rituals are performed, followed by a communal feast with dishes cooked of millet and other traditional foods. Communal feasts and celebrations are unique features of most of the indigenous communities of India. Usually, the traditional festivals of *Gonds* include offering of dishes cooked from minor millets of foxtail and little millets to gods. The customs and traditions of the majority of indigenous communities of India display a very deep connection between millets and their cultures (Niyogi, 2018; Siripurapu and Singhdeo, 2019).

Traditionally, millets are the major crops of *Gonds*. Similar to other indigenous communities

of the Indian sub-continent they too follow very unique customs and rituals for cultivation and harvesting of millets. For instance, *Gonds* perform many elaborate rituals not only for initiation of the crop sowing but also ending it. For instance, after harvesting they move the harvest from farms to granaries at home and start consumption of Jowar and other harvested food grains only after the observation of *Atukula Panduga*. This age old tradition which is rooted very deeply in their traditions and culture and a symbol of humility and expression of gratitude towards the mother earth. Majority of the farming communities of Telangana state observes *Bhulakshmi Amma Panduga*, (*Bhu* means earth in Telugu) which is similar to *Atukula Panduga*. Likewise, *Nuakhai* (also known as *Nuakhai Juhar / Nuakhai Parab / Nuakahi Bhetghat*), is one of the most ancient festivals, observed usually during the months of August - September by the agrarian communities of the Indian state of Odisha, particularly people of the Western Odisha (Singh, 2012). The word '*nua*' means 'new' and '*khai*' means 'food' in Odiya, the regional language of Odisha state.

The indigenous Yimchunger Naga community of Nagaland celebrate the *Metumniu* festival in the month of August after harvesting millets crops. The indigenous communities inhabiting the hillock regions of North Coastal Andhra Pradesh celebrate *Mandukiya*, a mass community festival, during June-July, during which

*Jowar diversity at Ringanguda village, Chirrakunta Grampanchayat,
Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district, Telangana state*



Erra Jonna

“A Durra race tall pigmented sorghum landrace with basal tillers, white midrib, semi-compact elliptic panicle, ear length 20.0 cm, ear width 4.9 cm, brown glume colour with 1/4th grain covered, light red coloured lustrous seed, seed size < 4.6 mm, has good nutritional quality and diversified food value.”

(Pandravada, et al., 2013, pp 468)

Tella Boda Jonna

“A Durra race tall pigmented sorghum landrace with basal tillers, white midrib, loose-elliptic panicle, ear length 17.5 cm, ear width 3.7 cm, partly straw and brown glume colour with 3/4th grain covered, creamish straw coloured lustrous seed, seed size < 3.7 mm”

(Pandravada, et al., 2013, pp 468)

Konkadala Jonna

“A Durra race tall pigmented sorghum landrace with basal tillers, white midrib, compact elliptic panicle, ear length 17.3 cm, ear width 3.6 cm, brown glume colour with 1/4th grain covered, creamish straw lustrous seed, seed size < 4.6 mm”

(Pandravada, et al., 2013, pp 468)

traditional recipes cooked of finger millets are offered to oxen as a sign of gratitude for their contribution to agriculture. The indigenous Pahadi Korwa community of Chhattisgarh dangles millet panicles at their courtyards to ensure successful game and bountiful harvest. Many indigenous communities of Madhya Pradesh state are known to apply a paste prepared from mixing turmeric and finger millet flour on the bride and groom during the wedding rituals (Niyogi, 2018). Many scholars agree that strong affiliation of millets to the indigenous cultures and traditions may have played a vital role in preserving them and saving the valuable germplasm from local extinction (Niyogi, 2018; Siripurapu and Singhdeo, 2019).

GOND, THE LARGEST INDIGENOUS POPULATION OF INDIA

The indigenous Gond community is one of the 688 scheduled tribes and also the largest indigenous populations of the Indian sub-continent. They primarily inhabit the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Jharkhand & Telangana (Koreti, 2015; Koreti, 2016). Similar to many Indigenous communities of the world, *Gonds* have a very rich and vibrant culture and traditions. *Gonds* are primarily animistic when it comes to religion. They have an extremely rich and elaborate oral religion, involving religious beliefs, rituals, rites and institutions intricately interwoven with nature, agriculture, livestock, biodiversity and their societies (Pallavi, 2014; Koreti, 2015).

Gonds believe in the supreme being and one of their main gods is *Bhagvan* (the Creator). The gods are addressed as 'pen' (singular) or 'pennoo' (plural). *Bara-Pen* or *Budhal-Pen* (the





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Gonds observe many traditional festivals of *Akhari*, *Jiwati*, *Pola*, *Diwali Nawo tindana*, *Dussera*, and *Phag* or *Shimiga* festivals (Furer-Haimendorf, 1979; Koreti, 2016). Many of their traditional festivals are closely connected with the agricultural season. During *Atukula Panduga*, *Gonds* offer *Jowar* panicles to *Pedda Devudu* (*Bhagvan*). *Jowar* panicles are offered also to *Gansam* or *Bagroom-Pen* represented by a totem pole erected at one of the corners of the village borders. In addition to *Gansam* or *Bagroom-Pen*, three more totem poles representing three other Gods are erected at the other three other corners of the village borders. In total there are four totem poles erected at four corners of any Gond village. They believe that the four gods guard their village and ward off any evils and adversaries. Villagers even quoted that none of the residents of their village were affected from the COVID-19 as they are guarded and protected by their Gods at the village boundaries.

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GONDS, MILLETS, FOOD AND FODDER SECURITY

Millets occupy a very special place not only in the culture and traditions of *Gonds* but also have a very special place in their agriculture, food and fodder security. The community weighs upon the unique characteristics of these miracle food grains. Many Gond farmers vouch for the indigenous Jowar varieties as they can withstand high temperatures and survive under erratic and unpredictable rainfall patterns. The *Gonds* of Telangana state cultivate Jowar for both food and fodder purposes. Jowar stalks are usually fed to their large cattle herds and is known to save them from starvation during lean seasons & adversities.

The community plans their agriculture production in such a way that grains are harvested and stored for the whole year. Roti (flat bread) and gatkan (porridge) cooked out of Jowar flour is the staple food of *Gonds* of this part of the country. Even the renowned agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan, is known to have quoted '*millet as the orphan crops*' due to less attention from the government as compared to paddy, wheat and even with the others food grains. But indigenous communities with their strong association and cultural affiliation with these orphan crops conserved them and prevented them from local extinction.

“Jowar plays a crucial role in our diet and culture. It is our legacy which was inherited from our ancestors and passed down the generations. Our ancestors carefully developed these crops and seeds and their legacy should be continued down the generations. Unfortunately, we lost many crops and seed varieties in time, and the area under millets cultivation has also decreased due to various reasons. Input intensive cotton almost took away 80 percent of our traditional millets cultivation area. There are both good and bad experiences with cotton but Jowar is a crop that provides a secure and stable supply of food and fodder.”

explains Sri. Kantha Rao.



“Although rice distributed through the public distribution system (PDS) has replaced millets and decreased the household consumption of millets considerably, but we still consume Jowar and other minor millets due to our cultural association with them”

states Sri. Kanaka.



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