Food as Agency in Odia Folklore: Ritual, Transgression, and Power

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Abstract. Food in Odia folk traditions is never a neutral presence; it becomes a marker of agency, survival, intimacy, and domination. Folktales, ritual texts, and oral narratives from Odisha often stage food as both sustenance and transgression where feeding, refusing, or consuming another becomes a site of power. In mythic tales, food mediates kinship and conflict; in ritual texts, it transforms into offerings that negotiate between human and divine realms; in darker strands of folklore, cannibalistic desire unsettles social order and dramatizes anxieties around scarcity, hunger, and morality. This paper undertakes a qualitative study of Odia folktales to explore how food operates as a cultural code that communicates values, fears, and resistances. By situating food within the intersections of ritual, gender, and power, the study highlights how Odia folklore renders the everyday act of eating into a profound symbolic act.

Keywords: Odia folklore, food as agency, ritual texts, cannibalism, power

1 Introduction

Food, one of the primary needs of both humans and animals, plays a multifaceted role in cultural narratives. Food helps in imparting values, asserting identities, and shaping and extinguishing power dynamics (Mintz and Du Bois). In social and cultural narratives around food, eating and cooking pose pertinent questions about equality, nourishment, gender and social hierarchy (Counihan 1999). Counihan affirms the existence of the power which:

> society allocates or denies to men and women through their access to and control of one essential resource: food. Men's and women's ability to produce,

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> provide, distribute and consume food is a key measure of their power. This ability varies according to their culture, their class, and their family organisation, and the overall economic structure of their society (2).

Interestingly, in an Indian context, men would traditionally eat first, and the women would eat last. However, this unequal practice has continued into modern times. In an Indian household, it is common that a husband eats while the wife, simultaneously, prepares hot *phulka* and serves him. In a similar vein, it is unimaginable for most husbands to eat their wives' leftovers, yet it is anticipated that a wife should eat her husband's. Additionally, even in contemporary times, when an Indian working couple returns from work, it is common that the husband turns to the television to watch cricket, whereas the wife heads to the kitchen to make dinner. Furthermore, on festival and celebration days, the Indian women spend all day in the kitchen making special dishes for the family to enjoy. Even in the 21st century, a nuclear family dinner table, where adults and children eat together, replacing the patriarchal traditional family kitchen, signifies only a minor transformation. Furthermore, just as when and with whom one eats are crucial in food narratives, so too is the knowledge of whom one should not consume food from in terms of the caste system. In India, those of lower castes or those who are considered 'untouchable' are not allowed to handle food (Appadurai 497). Stimulatingly, it is known that aristocratic families in colonial India in the late twentieth century often employed a Brahmin as their cook. But the argument rages on as clients refuse to eat from Swiggy and Zomato even when the delivery boys from Swiggy and Zomato identify as Muslim or Christian (Kikkon 296).

Taking this discourse forward, Odia Folktales are passed down through generations, and they understand the nuances of the longstanding discourse around power, resistance and survival while being a "repository of invaluable folklore collections, such as stories, myths, riddles, proverbs, arts, crafts, sculptures, dance, music, and other cultural expressions passed down through generations" (Pradhan and Goswami 234). Odia, being one of the six classical Indian languages, is a treasure house of culture, and Odia folktales can be seen as a storehouse of ancient wisdom. Odisha is an agrarian state with a rich history of maritime tradition. In Odia folktales, food is a significant tool for

conferring ritual offerings, religious fasts, community feasts, and domestic cooking (Dash). Odisha is a state that has frequently battled famine and drought since the colonial period till the early 90s (Sarkar and Mukherji). Hence, these discourses often become stimulating, given Odisha's intricate relationship with hunger and food scarcity. Odia folklores such as *Maadahaandi Katha*, *Budha Chingudi Katha*, *Tuan Tuin Katha* (also known as *Tipa Tipi Katha*), and ritual texts like *Lakshmi Purana* and *Khudurukuni Brata Katha* revolve around various nuances of food, eating habits and culinary practices, where these habits and practices negotiate with Odia social past and present realities. However, there is little academic research on Odia folktales in terms of food narratives compared to other regional Indian traditions, though these tales are dramatic, magical, violent, witty, and stimulating. Hence, this paper examines how food becomes a symbol of power and resistance in these raw Odia tales. Moreover, this study scrutinises how these stories address gender, caste, and social boundaries through food narratives and inspects the moral instructions and lessons these tales offer while depicting food that represents cruelty and desperation.

2. Review of Literature

The relationship between food, folklore, and social structure shapes and reflects social reality and hence, Mary Douglas' influential work on purity and danger (1966) deals with important notions like purity and pollution, which can be applied to food and folklore. Lévi-Strauss's classic study, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969), demonstrates the transformation of food as a universal symbolic process. A. Appadurai's important work, *Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia* (1981), introduces the term 'gastro-politics', which argues how food is used as a tool for controlling society in the Indian context.

Khare's study examines the idea of purity and power in the Indian homes in his work *The Hindu Hearth and Home* (1976). He further explores the relation between religion and food in his other work, *The Eternal Food* (1992). Further, Uma Chakravarti

scrutinises the significance of control based on gender through food on gender in Indian society in her seminal work *Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India* (1993).

Similarly, Counihan's study, *The Anthropology of Food and Body* (1999), investigates how gender is expressed through food habits. Jones, M. O's *Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity* (2007) emphasise the crucial role of folklore in studying food and the importance of food preparation. Further, Pamantung et al's study *Abstraction of Minahasan Folklore in Food Tradition* (2021) shows how food names and traditions are an important aspect of Minahasan cultural memory. Likewise, Priyadarshini et al, in their work *Gastronomic Identities* (2024), underpin the link between food and identity while focusing on the concept 'gastronomic identities.'

Additionally, Pradhan and Goswami's article *Exploring the Elements of Spirituality in the Folklore of Odisha* (2025), directly investigates the spiritual significance rooted in the folklore of Odisha, while Bag's study, *Folktales of West Odisha* (2020), provides a detailed examination of the oral narratives specific to West Odisha. Moreover, Dash's work, *Socio-cultural and Literary Potential of the Traditional Odia Oral Narratives* (2022), provides a critical review of the significance of Odia oral narratives known as *Kathanis* while Ray's study *Type of Ritual Food in Odisha* (2020), focuses specifically on food in ritual contexts and documents various types of ritual foods (*bhog*) prepared in Eastern Odisha.

However, there is hardly any academic research based on how food works symbolically across Odia folktales. There are studies of ritual foods, documentation of stories, and theoretical frameworks about food and power. However, there is no sustained analysis of what food means in these narratives, and this paper aims to bridge this gap.

3. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine selected Odia folktales through a close reading and a focus on food as a symbolic system. These folktales are

chosen based on their prominence in Odia literary and cultural narratives and their explicit engagement with food-related themes. This study will analyse these narratives through two primary theoretical lenses and one supplementary lens. This study primarily uses Carole Counihan's feminist analysis of food and power (1999) and Mary Douglas's framework of purity and pollution (1966). Counihan's feminist food studies approach reveals how food is a central tool in social relationships between cooperation and conflict, and independence and dependence (Counihan, 1999). Similarly, according to Douglas, food operates as a boundary marker in social systems, and if the boundary is breached, then it must be restored. Additionally, these western frameworks are combined with Uma Chakravarti's concept of 'Brahmanical patriarchy' (1993), which explains how caste purity and gender control intersect in Hindu society. Through the lens of this Indian framework, this paper scrutinises how food practices in Odia folktales reflect broader patterns of social organisation.

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Food, Agency, Purity and Pollution

Laksmi Purana is an Odia ritual text, written by medieval Odia poet Balaram Das in the 15th century, and thrives on local folklore. It revolves around the conflict between Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Jagannath, the Lord who is an integral part of Odisha's collective cultural consciousness. In this text, Goddess Lakshmi is banished from the Jagannath temple as she visits her devotee, Shriya *Chandaluni*, a lower caste woman. As Uma Chakravarti observes: "caste hierarchy and the gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the brahmnical social order" (Chakravarti 579). Hence, Jagannath and his elder brother, Lord Balabhadra, rebuke Lakshmi, calling her a *chandaluni* for crossing the social boundaries of casteism and polluting the sacred Jagannath temple by associating with someone who is 'untouchable.' Lakshmi pollutes herself by visiting Sriya's 'polluted' hut and, thus, threatens the established social norms (Douglas). This narrative, further, emphasises the "social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence (Chakravarti 579).

Interestingly, Balaram Das, who identifies himself as a Shudra (low caste) writer (Mohanty 2008), rewrites Lakshmi from a distinct perspective where Lakshmi's powerful response turns food into a weapon. This can be analysed through Carole M. Counihan's association of food with female agency, where she affirms:

> The predominant role of women in feeding is a cultural universal, a major component of female identity, and an important source of female connections to and influence over others. Hence, although there are other components of female identity and other sources of their authority, the power of women is to a great extent the power of food (152).

Similarly, in the *Lakshmi Purana*, as the goddess of fortune who controls food and sustenance, Lakshmi curses the two brothers to starve until they receive food directly from Lakshmi's hands. The curse becomes a reality and holds for twelve years till the two brothers meet Lakshmi again. This narrative inverts the typical gender power struggle where the supreme deity of Odisha, Lord Jagannath, becomes powerless without the provision of food from Lakshmi. Even Jagannath's divine status becomes obsolete when he is consumed by hunger. This folktale accentuates the autonomy of the one, here Lakshmi, who produces, distributes and withholds sustenance no matter where she stands in the social, domestic or divine hierarchy (Counihan 1997). These cursed, twelve years of starvation are synonymous with famine for the two brothers. Here, even the logic of pollution is exposed, where the once-polluted hands of Lakshmi prepare sacred food for divine consumption of Jagannath and Balabhadra. Here, the hunger of the two brothers contradicts the caste-based rules, which can be selective and can be broken depending on convenience (Douglas).

Moreover, when Lakshmi returns to the sacred space of the Jagannath temple. She transforms food into a device of social reform. She imposes the condition that in the premises of the temple, all castes must sit together and share *Mahaprasad*. Here, food becomes a mechanism for blurring the boundaries of the caste hierarchy, acknowledging equality among human beings (Mohanty 8). Hence, the distinction between purity and pollution becomes impossible to maintain (Douglas 1966). The historical struggle of women to refuse to cook or demand recognition of domestic labour resonates with

the resistance of Lakshmi (Counihan 1997). This narrative accentuates the agency of women, where invisible domestic labour like cooking has been a tool of suppression for women. Rather, Lakshmi uses the same act of cooking (providing food) as a form of resistance against patriarchy, subtly and passively challenging the rooted hierarchy.

4.2 Food, Suppression, Empathy and Punishment

Another Odia popular ritual text is *Khudurukuni Brata Katha*, which is observed by Odia unmarried girls for the well-being of their brothers. This ritual text is based on the folklore of Tapoi, who can be seen as the Odia counterpart of Assamese Teejamola or English Cinderella (Guptha and Sandhya). This folktale is particularly important as here food can be seen as a significant tool not only for jealousy and suppression but also for empathy and punishment.

Odisha has a rich tradition of maritime trade with various far-off islands such as Java, Sumatra and Bali. The Odia mariners engaged in sea trade are particularly called *Sadhaba Pua* (Patra). Tapoi is the youngest sister of seven *Sadhaba Pua* and is dearly loved by them. In this folklore, food can be seen as a motif of jealousy, which gradually turns into abuse and a power hierarchy is created through the denial and contamination of food (Dougals). When the brothers are away for their sea trade, Tapoi is mistreated by her six sisters in law. Once being treated as a princess, now Tapoi is tasked with herding the goats in the forest. Each day, one of the sisters in law is supposed to pack her meal before she goes to the forest. Interestingly, Counihan observes that:

> Giving food to a great extent defines the nature and extent of female power. It is a power largely exercised over family members and only occasionally beyond to members of the wider society. Giving food connects women to close relatives through an extremely intense emotional channel; women become identified with the food they offer (154).

Here, the sisters-in-law identify themselves with the food they offer to Tapoi on the day of their turn. The elder sisters-in-law would take a torn basket, line it with a leaf, fill it with wet mud scraped from a mouse hole, scatter only a handful of rice on top, then

cover everything with salt mixed with ash. Here, the food, which is essential for survival, becomes a medium of torture and subjugation. Only the youngest sister-in-law, who loves Tapoi, would send nourishing and wholesome food when it is her turn.

The motif of food carries two opposite meanings. In the context of the elder sisters-in-law, food is weaponised as domination and humiliation, whereas the youngest sister-in-law uses the same food as a representation of her sympathy and affection. Moreover, in this text, food brings out the intra-gender conflict frequently found in the Indian patriarchal households having joint families, where women compete within the rigid domestic boundaries. The power dynamics become inter-gender once the brothers return from the trade and find the vulnerable Tapoi abandoned in the forest. After finding the truth, they decide to punish the sisters-in-law except the youngest one by asking Tapoi to cut her elder sisters-in-law's noses as a punishment. When Tapoi complies, the dynamics of vulnerability reverse entirely, making Tapoi powerful and an agency for justice. Here, food is an important device to expose characters, as it does for Tapoi's sisters-in-law, both positive and negative. This folklore further shows how by controlling food, the sisters-in-law almost control Tapoi's dignity. Further, the tale accentuates how the corruption of this basic need called food can lead to severe consequences, including stern punishment like mutilation of the body.

4.3 Food, Moral Instruction and Social Control

Various folkloric narratives construct a simple equation between food and labour, which argues that self-reliance through labour offers more sustainability than relying on charity (Gaybullaevich 182). In the popular Odia folktale *Maadahandi Katha*, the protagonist is Chakulia Panda, a poor Brahmin boy who lives with his widowed mother. Following his hereditary occupation, he begs for food around the village and survives on the alms he receives. One day, he fails to get any offerings and is pelted by the village children. Interestingly, even though Panda is positioned at the top of the caste hierarchy (Chakravarti), this food refusal and public humiliation, paradoxically, make him morally and economically vulnerable. His hunger and the food scarcity in his life particularly represent his marginality here. Hungry and desperate, Panda goes to the village

pond where he drinks water from his cupped hands, pretending each cup of water is one delicious Odia dish. He hums:

> I eat *bhaata* (rice), I eat *daali* (dal), I eat *aambila* (a sweet and sour stew), I eat *mahura* (a mixed vegetable curry), I eat *kheeri* (rice pudding), I eat *kakaraa* (a sweet, deep-fried cake made of semolina and jaggery), I eat *chakuli* (a thin, soft pancake made of rice and cereals) (*"Maadahandi Katha,"* trans. Mohanty).

Goddess Ganga, who lives in that pond, takes pity on his hunger and poverty and sends a magical pot filled with aromatic, delicious, limitless food; every food the poor protagonist had imagined while drinking water. Now every day, Panda comes to the pond and finds a floating magical pot as a blessing of Goddess Ganga, a pot representing the mythical *Akshaya Patra,* an inexhaustible vessel with a never-ending supply of food.

With Goddess Ganga's limitless food, Panda's situation shifts from scarcity to abundance and eventually to excess (Sahlins). Easy access to food makes Panda and his mother idle, and he stops his hereditary occupation of begging. An abundance of food removes his need to exert effort (Sahlins). The eventual excess of food becomes a test of Panda's character, making him lazy, wilful, complacent and taking the blessing for granted. It angers Goddess Ganga, who plans to teach Panda a fitting lesson. Counihan affirms: "Control of alimentation is a source of power because food is a very special substance. It satisfies the most basic, compelling, continuous, and agonizing human need. It satisfies hunger" (53) and Goddess Ganga plays with Panda's hunger by sending him a vessel filled with invisible violent forces, such as kicking, punching, pinching, slapping, biting, hair-pulling, scratching, poking, and pushing. Panda opens it, expecting food and is brutally attacked. He closes the lid, stopping the assault, goes home, and leaves the pot in the kitchen.

At night, his mother opens the vessel and is similarly attacked. Here, the punishment by the Goddess uses food as a mechanism of moral instruction and behavioural regulation (Nurullaev) for both the son and mother. This situation also clarifies the normative rule of the society, which believes that hunger motivates labour and satiation brings idleness. The same hunger and food are first used as blessings by the goddess, while

later on, it is transformed into punishment. The same food, which was a sacred gift, converts from nourishment to violence, an impure symbol of moral decadence (Douglas).

Panda's mother closes the lid after being severely beaten and puts it in the backyard. That night, some thieves find the pot in the backyard and open the lid. The invisible forces attack them so violently that they flee, abandoning their stolen treasures. The goddess weaponises the vessel as a divine retribution not only for the mother-son but also for the thieves to punish them for their dishonest profession. In the morning, Panda and his mother discover the treasure, take it home and then live happily ever after. Thus, this tale draws attention towards the notion of sustenance and the sustainability of food access. It emerges as a warning against food dependency, where Panda's survival totally depends on the magical food vessel, making him powerless and vulnerable when the Goddess changes her mind (Douglas 1966). Consequently, the folktale accentuates that, in the long run, dependence on external food sources can only bring precarity rather than agency, power, control or authority.

4.4 Food, Violence and Unwitting Cannibalism

Cannibalism is considered to be one of the greatest taboos across cultures. However, deliberate and unwitting cannibalism still finds its way into regional folklore (Das) and oral traditions like it does in the Odia folktale *Budhachingudi Katha*. In the story, the protagonist, an old man, catches a big prawn and asks his wife to cook it. While he goes to bathe, the wife cannot resist tasting the cooked prawn. She eats one piece of prawn after another until only the gravy is left. The tale brings forth the gendered rule woven around food distribution within these families, where the women must eat after the husband, and where the best food must be saved for the men of the house and reestablishes the argument of Counihan, where she affirms "men eat first, best, and most" (2). The tale represents the notion of food access in the family, which signifies power and makes the one powerful with maximum food accessibility, like the old man in the story. He decides what to do, when to eat and how much to eat. Chakravarti observes:

> The general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which were shaped social practices (Chakravarti 579).

But it is perceived that not only the religious traditions but the everyday, regular, mundane traditions, including household chores around food, cooking and eating, have also been crucial in subordinating the role of women in India.

Hence, according to the tale, the wife's act is a moral code broken and a social boundary breached. Her act is a moral violation of the gendered food hierarchy constructed by the patriarchal society (Douglas). The eats first, which is a male entitlement and the fact that she cannot control her female restraint, is a moral degradation on her, something that pollutes her body, and she must purify herself by self-inflicted violence to restore the order (Douglas). Terrified of her husband's anger, she cuts flesh from her own thigh, cooks it and serves it to her husband. Here, the wife's action is a reflection of the fear women live with in a patriarchal household around food (Counihan 1999) and a subtle hint of existing domestic violence. She knows the consequences of a woman/wife's greed and her uncontrollable hunger.

The husband returns and happily consumes the curry, unaware of the horrible truth. Here, the wife's flesh becomes the replacement for what she has consumed. It is a self-inflicted punishment she takes on for herself for defying the normative gendered role of her family. Her body becomes an object to be used, served and consumed in her patriarchal household (Counihan 1999). However, while the old man is still eating, a house cat discloses the truth, and now the man is enraged. He confronts his wife, asking how she could savour the prawn and save her thigh for him. However, here the tale confuses the reader as to whether the man's anger is for cooking the thigh or for the wife breaking the norm. Out of rage, he drags his wife to the pond in the backyard and drowns her. The old man consuming his wife's flesh becomes a cannibal literally, though he might have been consuming his wife, symbolically, for years.

With the consumption of the flesh, his aggression disguised as subtle cannibalism translates into extreme cannibalism, triggering his violence, which was already present in him. He becomes what he eats. The violence inflicted on the wife confirms what she

had already anticipated: the importance of the meal/food is more than her life; it has always mattered more. Thus, in this tale, food becomes an enforcer of patriarchal rules, where anyone breaking them has to pay the price with their own flesh.

4.5 Food, Greed, Humour and Revenge

The story of Tuan Tuin is a popular folklore involving two young siblings and a tiger. This tale is interchangeably used for the characters Tipa and Tipi, like in the Odia folktale anthology *Utkala Kahani* by Gopal Chandra Praharaj. In some stories, Tuan and Tuin's parents are alive and are on a trip to another village to sell paddy, while in other narratives, the siblings are orphans. In this particular folklore, the paper examines how food becomes a driver for the plot and Odia cultural symbolism.

One day, Tuan and Tuin plan to make *Chakuli Pitha*, a popular local pancake made from fermented rice and cereal, which represents the agrarian lifestyle and food practices of the Odia community and symbolises a sacred ritual offering. As back in those times, the villagers of Odisha were largely dependent on the forest to collect their regular firewood, Tuan and Tuni go to the forest to collect wood and are confronted by a tiger, the king of the forest. The tiger threatens to kill them for stealing wood from his forest without his permission. Stimulatingly, being killed and mauled by tigers and bears, respectively, had been a common phenomenon in Odisha villages. Here, the folktale draws attention towards the human-tiger conflict (HTC), where reports confirm "822 cases of human casualties between 1990 to 2009 in India (Chowdhury et al.)." As a result of this conflict, here the tiger is seen as a wild animal, a threat representing pollution that must be kept away at any cost.

After being confronted by the tiger, the sibling negotiates with the tiger by inviting him to their house to have *Chakuli*. The tiger complies with the request. The house/kitchen of Tuan and Tuin is a pure space where preparing *Chakuli* for family members and guests bears a sacred, moral, emotional and ritual significance. To maintain the sanctity of this space (and of the society), the pure and the polluted should be put in their proper places (Douglas). But by inviting the polluted Tiger to the house as a guest, Tuan and Tuin blur the boundary between the two, which must lead to chaos as a punishment.

Taking this conflict forward, back at home, Tuan and Tuin finish all the *Chakuli* while tasting them one by one. Here, like *Jataka Tales* and *Panchatantra*, this folklore uses the motif of greed creating chaos and confusion to drive the plot. Now, the siblings plan to deceive the tiger by making *Chakuli* with small white pebbles, placing it near the door, and hiding inside a large mud cooking pot. Polluting the sacred offering of *Chakuli*, which symbolises hospitality, with small white pebbles makes the life-sustaining food dangerous and destructive (Douglas). The tiger comes on time, finds the *pitha* (cake) near the main door. While tasting the pebble *Chakuli*, his teeth break one by one, making the hungry tiger enraged, who unsuccessfully searches for the sibling. Being angry, he carries the mud pot on his head and returns to the forest. Tuan and Tuin's action of polluting the food meant for the guest. Now it leads them to physical danger, threatening their lives and leading society towards disorder (Douglas).

While still on the way, Tuan and Tuan try to keep calm, but Tuan's greed for the fermented rice cake catches up with him. His belly swells with gas, and inadvertently, he farts loudly. This fart became an extension of the consequence of their greed, signifying a polluted body with an unhealthy digestive system. Like many regional and global folktales, *Tuan Tuin Katha*, too, aims to restore the disordered community through humour and laughter. The tiger mistakes the sound for a gunshot, drops the vessel and flees in fear. Tuan and Tuin come back home feeling victorious. The community's moral code, carelessly broken by Tuan and Tuin, is now reaffirmed. Moreover, with this, the folktale, through an ethical teaching, makes sure that the boundary between purity-impurity, sacred-profane, and human-animal is restored (Douglas).

Additionally, this particular revenge by the sibling can be seen as a repercussion of the Human-Tiger Conflict (HTC), which had scarred the village communities in Odisha for a long time. The tiger's fear of the gunshot can be seen as a result of the colonial brutality of tiger hunting and the eventual extinction of the tiger species (Mitra). Here, Tuan's gluttony becomes an unexpected weapon for the tiger and evokes its traumatic memory of hunting. In this context, planning to make *Chakuli*, inviting a guest to have *Chakuli* and overeating *Chakuli* and preparing a polluted *Chakuli* serve as a narrative tool that brings out the vulnerability of both human and animal, reshaping their power dynamics.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines how food becomes a powerful symbol in Odia folktales and reveals the prevailing dynamics of caste, gender, power and morality. The cultural narratives around food in the discussed ritualistic texts like *Lakshmi Purana* and *Khudurukuni Barata Katha*, and popular folktales like *Maadahandi Katha*, *Budha Chungudi Katha* and *Tuan Tuin Katha* introduce food as a component more than sustenance. This study, while appreciating the cultural richness, also asks uncomfortable questions regarding the power relations, rigid social boundaries and patriarchal structure they naturalise and scrutinise the resistance and marginal survival strategies demonstrated in the folktales. The existing anxieties around domestic violence, caste discrimination and gender equality make these folktales more relevant and timeless, as even in the contemporary educated society, unfortunately, these issues have not been eradicated. These folktales do not provide any easy solution, but they prompt us to address the longstanding ethical concerns related to these relevant social complications.

This study has its own limitations. As the Odia language contains thousands of folktales from various communities and regions, this research deals with a few folktales which might not cover the richness and diversity of the tradition as a whole. Various other such folktales may produce different patterns, refine the food interpretations presented here and propose new themes around sustenance that have not been covered in this discussion. Future researchers can include more relevant folktales having comparative folklore research with South Asian traditions, East Asian traditions or Western traditions. Such wider and deeper analytical comparisons could find both local uniqueness and shared universal human patterns in these timeless folktales

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