

# Exploring the Food Culture and Dietary Practices of the Thakar Tribe in Ahilyanagar District, Maharashtra

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**Abstract:** Food culture refers to the practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food. This ethnographic study delves into the food culture of the Thakar tribe of Udadwane Village, an agrarian community who used to be hunters and gatherers, utilizing participant observation, interviews, and rapport establishment. The aim is to study the culinary practices, dietary pattern, beliefs, taboos, seasonal changes and rituals associated with the food and underscores the importance of recognizing food as more than mere sustenance. The findings shows that rice is the staple food of the tribe. The daily meal includes bhaat, waran and bhakar. They are dependent on forest produce and kitchen-garden. They consume a wide variety of wild vegetables throughout the year like Kaudar, kaili, hareedi. The consumption of crabs holds a significance in various life events and rituals of Thakars. Food restrictions, particularly observed by pregnant women, highlights cultural beliefs and taboos. The Thakar tribes' connection to the nature is evident in every meal-from foraging in the forests to cultivating their own crops. The communal aspect of food preparation and consumption strengthens social bonds and ensures that their cultural heritage remains vibrant and alive, rooted in the very flavours that define them.

**Keywords:** Food culture, Thakar Tribe, Dietary Practices, Communal Food Practices, Ritualistic Consumption.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Food is much more than nourishment; it is a reflection of culture, identity, and social connection. Through ingredients, preparation, and eating practices, food tells stories of history, environment, migration, and tradition. It fosters community, strengthens bonds, and serves as a medium to celebrate life events and rituals.[2]

Food culture refers to the practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food. Food is not just nourishment; it is a vital part of culture that connects people across generations, communities, and environments. It reflects local resources, seasonal availability, traditions, and social practices, shaping the way individuals interact with their surroundings and with each other. Food culture encompasses the beliefs, practices, and experiences around producing, preparing, and sharing food, and it plays a key role in maintaining health, social bonds, and cultural identity.[7]

Anthropologists view food and foodways as tools with which to understand individual cultures and societies, especially when they are situated in the context of global and historical flows and connections.[6]

The study was conducted among the Thakar, a Scheduled Tribe concentrated in the Sahyadri mountain ranges of Maharashtra, who have transitioned from a nomadic hunting-gathering lifestyle to agriculture and low-wage manual occupations. The ethnographic fieldwork took place in Udadawane village, which has a total population of 1,874 distributed across four hamlets. [5]



The aim of this research is to study the culinary practices, dietary pattern, beliefs, taboos, seasonal changes and rituals associated with the food and underscores the importance of recognizing food as more than mere sustenance among the Thakar tribe.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the Thakar tribe residing in Udadawane village in December 2023. The research aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of their daily dietary patterns, staple foods, seasonal variations, ceremonial dishes, taboos, beliefs, and traditional cooking techniques. Data were collected through participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. All qualitative data were systematically coded and analyzed thematically to identify major patterns within the community's food culture.

## III. FINDINGS

### *Dietary Patterns*

Dietary habits refer to the long-term dietary patterns and habits that an individual forms and maintains in their daily life. Dietary behavior is an essential and ongoing activity in daily life, which involves internal, external, and conscious activities related to eating. [4]

The Thakar tribe's diet is deeply rooted in locally available resources, with rice forming the core of their daily meals. Their everyday diet typically includes rice, dal, and simple vegetable preparations, along with *bhakars* made from *bajra*, *jowar*, or rice (Fig.1). The community cultivates seven varieties of rice, among which *Kolpi* and *Rupam* are consumed regularly, while the remaining varieties are sold in the market. Their diet is complemented by pulses such as *Urad* – Black gram (*Vigna mungo*), *Toor* – Pigeon pea (*Cajanus cajan*), *Harbara* – Chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*), *Masoor* – Red lentil (*Lens culinaris*), *Mung* – Green gram (*Vigna radiata*, and *Pavta* – Hyacinth bean (*Lablab purpureus*) and a wide variety of vegetables, mostly grown in household kitchen gardens. Cooking is primarily done on wooden chulhas, using oils like *Khurasni* – Black sesame (*Sesamum indicum*), soybean, and peanut, which are affordable and readily available.

Alongside plant-based staples, the tribe consumes a variety of fish, both fresh- *phinnis* (*Stolephorus spp.* or *Sardinella spp.*), *daudya* (*Puntius spp.*), and *wadis* and dried - *Vakat* – Butter catfish (*Ompok bimaculatus*), *Mandeli* (Mandela) – Golden anchovy (*Coilia dussumieri*) and *Bombil* – Bombay duck (*Harpadon nehereus*). They also consume four types of crabs: *Kirra*, red with white eyes from the mountains; *Ghirinti*, red with yellow eyes from farms; *Kekadi* – Large black river crab (*Barytelphusa cunicularis*); and *Belkud*, white crabs available during the monsoon. Mutton, chicken, and eggs are usually reserved for special occasions or visiting guests. This pattern highlights both cultural tradition and economic pragmatism.

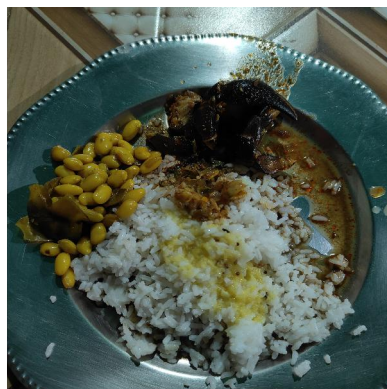


Fig 1: Traditional meal consisting of *Bhaat*, *Urad Dal*, *Singra*, and *Popatchi Bhaji* prepared by the community.



### Seasonal Variations in Diet

The Thakar tribe adjusts its diet according to seasonal availability. In summer, they prefer lighter, less spicy foods and consume *Phannas*-Jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) either raw or as a curry. During the monsoon, (Fig 2) *Raan*, *Kaili*, *Bargai*, *Haredi* and *Diachi* are locally foraged wild edible plants commonly consumed by the community, including leafy greens, roots, and tubers. Their exact taxonomic identities remain unidentified due to their localized nomenclature and limited documentation, along with local fish and crabs particularly white *Belkud* form the main diet. In winter, dried fish (*vakat*, *mandela*, and *bombil*) provides protein and warmth, supplemented with vegetables such as *Waal* Hyacinth bean (*Lablab purpureus*) from their gardens. These seasonal adaptations reflect the tribe's close relationship with nature and sustainable food practices.



Fig 2: Monsoon foraged foods like Haredi, along with local fish and crabs

### Life-Cycle Dietary Practices

Dietary practices among the Thakar tribe also vary according to life stages, reflecting nutritional needs and ritual customs. During pregnancy, women follow a regular diet of rice, dal, vegetables, and some non-vegetarian items, but after childbirth, they consume *bhakar* made from *Bajra* Pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) and *Nachni* Finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*) to promote lactation. The mother gradually returns to her normal diet over the first twelve days, while infants are fed exclusively on mother's milk for six months before gradually introducing rice *pej* and solid foods. Birth rituals, such as *Panchvi* (on 5<sup>th</sup> day) and *Baravi* (on 12<sup>th</sup> day), involve symbolic food offerings, including roasted crabs, steamed rice balls with jaggery filled *laddoos* called *Unde* (Fig 4), which are shared with guests.

During marriages, the tribe's food culture has evolved from serving rice and urad dal on *schanda* leaves (Fig.3 )to offering a variety of vegetable *bhajis*, *bhakar*, and sweets like *boondi* and *Unde* (Fig 4). In cases of death, food practices are deeply intertwined with rituals. For the first two days, neighbors provide meals, while the person performing rites follows a restricted diet. Offerings such as *Nevedya* (rice and jaggery) and *Utaran* (half-cooked *bhakar*) are made to the deceased, with additional offerings during *Pind-daan* on the 10th day and subsequent ceremonies. These practices demonstrate the deep connection between food, life-cycle events, and cultural traditions.





Fig 3: *Schanda* leaf used as a traditional plate to serve food to guests.



Fig 4: *Unde* (traditional sweet) distributed among guests

### ***Festive and Ritual Foods***

Food carries symbolic meaning in Thakar festivals, representing cultural identity, gratitude, and community cohesion. During *Sakrat*, the preparation of *Dhirdiya*—a sweet rice flour pancake—celebrates the harvest, emphasizing thanks for nature's bounty. Holi is marked by sharing *puranpoli*, fostering joy, unity, and renewed social bonds. *Akhaaj*, celebrated before the sowing season, combines feasting with prayers for a fruitful harvest, illustrating the tribe's reliance on natural rhythms.

Other festivals, such as *Panchami* and *Pola*, honor family deities and cattle, reflecting the integration of spiritual beliefs with daily livelihood. Pitra rituals connect the tribe to their ancestors, using offerings like *Patwal* to maintain continuity





and gratitude across generations. Diwali, with its sweets and occasional non-vegetarian dishes, celebrates light, righteousness, and family togetherness. Through these rituals, food functions as a medium of sustenance, celebration, and social cohesion.

### ***Food Taboos***

Food taboo is any unacceptable food items in the society that arise mainly based on religious, cultural, historical and social principles. [1]

The Thakar tribe follows certain food taboos guided by traditional beliefs. During pregnancy, women avoid foods such as papaya, pineapple, honey, and jackfruit, which are believed to generate excessive body heat or cause prickly skin in the baby. Women are prohibited from entering the kitchen during menstruation to maintain ritual purity, and after a snake bite, non-vegetarian foods are avoided for 2–3 months. Certain birds, including crows, cranes, and sparrows, are also not consumed. These practices reflect a precautionary approach to health, embedded in cultural knowledge passed down through generations.

### ***Traditional Recipes and Cooking Methods***

Traditional food is an integral part of cultural identity. The food itself and the associated preparation techniques and social customs serve as a reminder of the past and provide a connection to historic and cultural roots.[3]

The Thakar tribe has a rich culinary heritage, preparing dishes using locally available ingredients and simple techniques. *Phannaschi* bhaji, made from unripe jackfruit, is cooked with spices like cumin, garlic, onion, and turmeric. *Patwal*, a layered crab dish using aluchi leaves and besan, showcases intricate preparation methods. *Dhirdiya* is prepared during the *Sakrat* festival from sun-dried rice and jaggery, while *Singra* is a spiced crab curry cooked with local masalas, and *Kaudarchi* bhaaji utilizes wild *kaudamuli* vegetables.

Traditional cooking techniques, such as *Jeevanta Phordni*, involve placing a heated rock in a mixture of garlic, green chilies, and coriander to add tadka to dal. This creates a smoky, aromatic flavor unique to Thakar cuisine. These methods highlight the tribe's resourcefulness in using minimal tools while preserving flavors and culinary identity.

### ***Hunting, Gathering, and Food Preservation***

The Thakar community employs specialized tools for hunting, fishing, and gathering. The *Galori/Galoti* is used for hunting small animals and birds, while crabs are caught using the *Gawani*, a long bamboo stick, and stored in *Kirkhind*, (Fig 5) a woven bamboo basket to maintain freshness. Fish are trapped using the *Tondiya* (Fig 6), a bamboo contraption that allows easy entry but prevents escape.



Fig 5: Crabs are stored in *Kirkhind*, a woven bamboo basket





Fig 6: Fish are trapped using the *Tondiya*

In the kitchen, grains are ground into flour with the *Jaath*, dry spices crushed with the *Gota Ukhar*, and wet spices prepared using *Patta Varoota*. Without refrigeration, dry staples like rice, lentils, potatoes, onions, sugar, salt, and spices are stored in *tippies* (bamboo or clay containers) for up to a year. Vegetables are kept in *toplis* for 1–2 days, while dried fish is sun-dried and stored in a *topli* above the *chulha* for 3–4 months.

These practices demonstrate the tribe's ingenuity and deep understanding of their environment, ensuring food security, preserving seasonal abundance, and maintaining traditional culinary practices without modern technology.

### ***Changes in Food Culture***

The evolution of the Thakar tribe's food culture reflects their ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions and shifting agricultural practices. Traditionally a hunter-gatherer community, the tribe's diet relied heavily on forest products, including wild vegetables like *Kandamuli* (Fig 7), which were once abundant in their natural habitat. Meat from wild animals, such as boar and wild lizard (*ghorpad*) used to be consumed occasionally prior to government ban on the hunting of these animals. However, with fluctuations in rainfall and other climatic changes, the wild vegetables have become scarce. This scarcity pushed the Thakar community towards agriculture, leading to the cultivation of staple crops such as rice and urad dal, which now form the backbone of their daily meals.

This transition also influenced farming practices. While older methods involved directly sowing seeds into the soil, modern approaches are more structured, with saplings planted according to the monsoon season to ensure better yields. The shift from foraging to farming reflects not only the need for more reliable food sources but also the gradual influence of external agricultural techniques introduced over time.

Alongside these changes, daily cooking practices have evolved. For example, sesame oil, once a staple in Thakar kitchens, is increasingly replaced by soybean or peanut oil due to availability and affordability. Similarly, the scarcity of wild vegetables has led people to purchase more vegetables from markets rather than relying solely on forest produce. These adaptations showcase the resilience and flexibility of the Thakar tribe, who have successfully modified their food culture while retaining key aspects of their culinary identity.





Fig 7: Wild vegetable like *Kandamuli*

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the Thakar tribe's food practices are closely tied to their culture, environment, and traditions. Their seasonal diets, festival foods, and life-cycle meals reflect both nutrition and ritual beliefs, while taboos, traditional cooking methods, and storage practices reveal their practical knowledge. Thakar community balances tradition and resourcefulness, maintaining cultural identity while adjusting to changing circumstances.

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