

# Indigenous youth film project turns the lens on nutrition and food security

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A unique initiative is helping Indigenous people in India exchange knowledge about locally available foods to improve dietary diversity—part of the UN Sustainable Development Goal related to food

security and nutrition.

The project, coordinated by the University of East Anglia (UEA), is raising the visibility of the Santhal community, enabling the most marginalized to voice their own perspectives using cameras and filmmaking skills.

With support from UEA through the Global Research Translation Award entitled "Meeting the SDGs" and a local NGO partner (PRADAN), 10 Santhal youth were trained to make [films](#) about locally available foods and other issues of concern.

The nearly 50 films they produced were broadcast on a [YouTube channel](#) and screened in their local villages. The group also took part in interviews and discussions with viewers who attended the screenings.

Prof Nitya Rao, professor of gender and development in UEA's School of International Development, is the lead author of "Cameras in the hands of Indigenous youth: Participation, films and nutrition in India," published today in *Current Developments in Nutrition*.

Prof Rao says that "these young filmmakers are voicing a critical issue, whether endemic malnutrition or vast deforestation, as a call to policy-makers for remedial action."

"The role of self-expression, especially for Indigenous communities, is important given their historical marginalization. By enabling their participation in governance and the political space, transformative change alongside improved health and nutritional outcomes will be more achievable."

"The use of the YouTube channel as a digital 'space' created by the participants gave them an opportunity to set the agenda where they can

speak without interruption about their everyday needs and the challenges they confront."

The young filmmakers are from the Jamui district of Bihar, among the worst-off districts in India for meeting the SDGs.

While residing near forests, where they have access to highly nutritious foods, these communities are nevertheless more vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity compared to their rural counterparts. Forty-four percent of [indigenous children](#) under the age of 5 years are stunted, 45 percent are underweight and 27 percent are wasted. Less than 6 percent of [young children](#), women and migrating men have a diet that fulfills their minimum nutritional requirements.

A majority of the films drew on intergenerational and Indigenous knowledge about edible plants, insects, and rodents; skills in foraging and preparing food; awareness of the benefits of the food; and sustainability issues across the traditional food systems.

The filmmakers initially focused on responding to community needs and showcasing Santhal cultural practices. Their later films began to reflect on aspects of their culture that needed to be preserved, revived, or modified. Audience reflection supported this process, identifying both strengths and gaps.

There were many suggestions for further films that could document other food items and recipes, especially those linked to health and nutrition.

An 18-year-old female filmmaker says that her "grandmother becomes very happy whenever I ask her about local food and culture. She says that during her childhood there were no phones or [electronic media](#), or social media where she could have shared her knowledge. So it's a good

thing that her granddaughter is trying to preserve what is their own by making films around the [food](#) they get from the forest and reach out to many people around the world."

The project also sought to challenge unequal power relations between women and men in Santhal communities. While women are generally responsible for the collection and processing of all foods, it is important that men and upcoming generations learn about locally available foods and preparation methods, as it has been shown that [food security](#) improves when nutrition information is provided to both male and female heads of households.

Prof Rao says that "collective access to nutrition literacy is more effective than only women's access to it."

She cited a film that featured young boys hunting and cooking bamboo tree-dwelling rats [banwar], in which the filmmaker said "let us think if there are so many benefits in eating banwar, can women and girls not cook it in their home and eat it too?"

Prof Rao says that "the filmmakers have identified a gender discriminatory norm and through this film are attempting to reconstruct this cultural norm so that girls are not deprived of the benefits of this source of nutrition."

"As films are made, they challenge some of the biases and notions of 'shame', 'backwardness', or indeed 'modernity'. In creating a more respectful dialogue between different actors, we empowered the most marginalized, giving them voice in a society where they generally remain unheard."

The films have gained international recognition, with some being selected for the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit Youth Challenge and

the Science Film Festival, with screenings across South Asia. Additionally they have been used by universities in India as teaching and learning resources.

Local media coverage about the Santhal youth filmmakers brought them to the attention of senior political leaders, illustrating the potential of this medium for reviving, but also modifying, Indigenous practices.

Prof Rao says that "this demonstrates the liberating aspect of the project where the participants had the opportunity to talk freely in their own language about their own perspectives and practices without fearing alienation by the dominant culture."

**More information:** Nitya Rao et al, Cameras in the hands of indigenous youth: Participation, films and nutrition in India, *Current Developments in Nutrition* (2022).

Provided by University of East Anglia

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