

# SALVAGE CROPS, “SAVAGE” PEOPLE

## A comparative anthropological and archaeobotanical investigation of Millet Assemblages in India

Sofia Filatova<sup>\*</sup>, Ashutosh Kumar<sup>\*</sup>, Nidhi Trivedi<sup>\*</sup>, René Cappers<sup>\*</sup> & Peter Berger<sup>\*</sup>

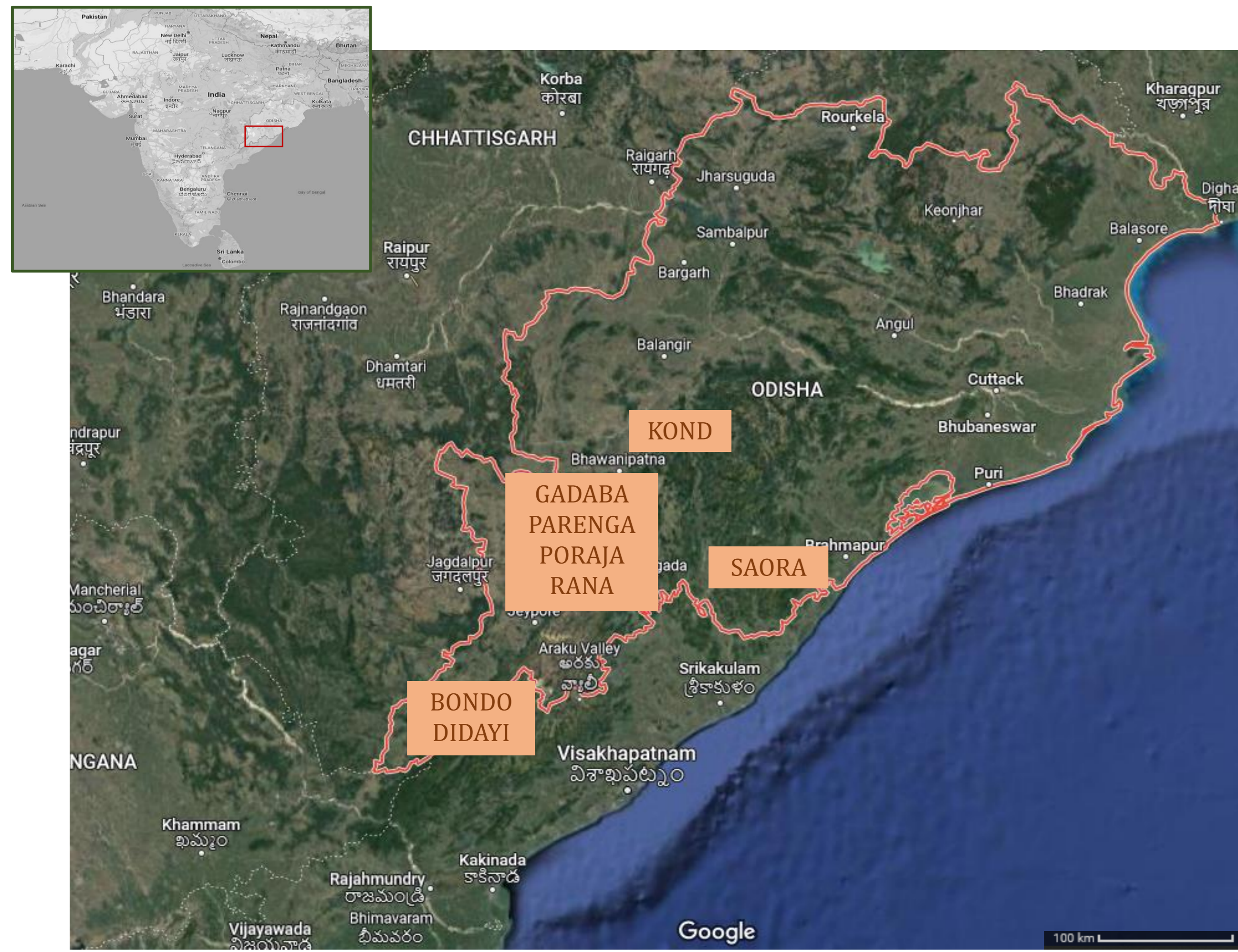


Figure 1. Location of the research area on the Indian Subcontinent and within the state of Odisha (maps after: maps.google.com). The main Ādivāsī communities inhabiting the hinterlands in the southern part of the state are indicated by their names [after: 2]. The communities are distinguished on the basis of a variety of characteristics, such as language, mode of subsistence, social organisation and belief systems with their related expressions [1].

### MILLETS IN INDIA

*Eleusine coracana* (L.) Gaertn | Finger millet, ragi | Eastern Africa | 900 BC  
*Echinochloa frumentacea* Link | Sawa millet | India | 2000 BC (?)  
*Paspalum scrobiculatum* L. | Kodo millet | India | 1000 BC (?)  
*Panicum sumatrense* Roth | Little millet | India | 2500 BC (?)  
*Panicum miliaceum* L. | Broomcorn millet | Western and Eastern Asia | 1800 BC  
*Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench. | Sorghum | Eastern Africa | 1700 BC

A selection of millet species that are cultivated in India today, indicated by their scientific name, common name, origin of domestication and first appearance on the subcontinent [after: 3, 8 and 9].

### METHODS

- **Ethnographic study** in the Eastern Ghats in southern Odisha of two Ādivāsī communities with different traditions in millet cultivation: shifting cultivation with multicropping, whereby millets are the primary crops, and complementary monoculture of millet (on permanent dry fields) and rice (on terraced riverbeds).
- **Ethno(archaeo)botanical study** of indigenous knowledge and classification of landrace diversity and agricultural practice [e.g. 10].
- **Archaeobotanical study** of the macro-history of millets in India and Odisha in particular.

### OBJECTIVES

- Our **scientific objectives** are: **(i)** to investigate the entanglement of crops in Ādivāsī socio-cultural dimensions in the context of current changing circumstances; **(ii)** to use the study of present changes in crop selection in their socio-cultural context to understand changes in crop selection in the past; and **(iii)** to apply the knowledge of past crop selection to understand present entanglement of crops and culture.
- Our **societal objectives** are: **(iv)** to challenge the representation of indigenous cultures; **(v)** to contribute to a mutual understanding of the value of food sovereignty; and **(vi)** to promote the utilisation of archaeobotanical data on crop selection in the formation of agricultural- and food policies.
- We will pursue a variety of questions that can be posed both within the study of modern Ādivāsī communities as well as within the study of past millet-cultivating communities. For example: how is crop selection related to the morphology and ecology of a crop (**fig. 2a-b**)? And, in what way are division of labour (**fig. 2c**), culinary traditions (**fig. 2d**), storage practices (**fig. 2e**) and ceremonial traditions (**fig. 2f**) shaped by crop selection and vice versa?

### FROM BACKWARD CROPS TO SALVAGE FOODS

Millets are a staple in, amongst others, the Eastern Ghats in the south of the Indian state Odisha (**fig. 1**). The hinterlands of this region are inhabited by indigenous communities collectively known as Ādivāsī, which literally stands for “(descendants of the) original inhabitants of a given place” [1]. Until recently millets were labelled a poor people’s food due to their important role in the subsistence of lower income populations and Ādivāsī groups, who are considered “backward” by mainstream society [2]. In 2017, the government of the state of Odisha launched the Odisha Millet Mission, with the aim to increase the production and consumption of millets due to their high nutritional quality and sustainable character. As a result, millets are acquiring a new status, transitioning from “primitive” crops consumed by “savages” to middle-class salvage food of the future. Such a drastic change may have a significant impact on the subsistence and culture of Ādivāsī in Odisha, where millets are part of an assemblage that includes, among other things, the surrounding landscape, agricultural technologies, cuisines, world views and ceremonies [e.g. 3].

Changes in crop spectra are not a modern phenomenon. Various archaeobotanical studies have related the appearance of crops in a given region to a diversity of factors, such as intensified contact between neighbouring or distant communities, changes in the scale of production and labour and an increased requirement for crop by-products [4-7]. These changes have contributed to shaping past and modern society and we argue that in order to understand crop-culture entanglements in the present and their impact on the future, we also need to understand the complexities of such dynamics in the past. **Our project therefore aims to integrate anthropological and archaeobotanical data on changes in Millet Assemblages and crop selection in the tribal regions of southern Odisha.**



Figure 2. Example of the use of finger millet in Odisha. A: Inflorescence (Keutoguda, India); B: Polished seed (Jalaguda, India); C: Pounding/polishing (Jalaguda, India); D: Beer brewing (Petpada, India); E: Storage for sowing (Keutoguda, India); F: Altar for the *nandi* deities in a Joria village. A garland of finger millet hangs above the mural and seeds of finger millet lay in and under the basket (Jalaguda, India) (A-E: R. Cappers & Digital Seed Atlas; F: P. Berger & Frobenius Institute [11]).

### REFERENCES

1. Carrin, M., 2021. In: *Brill's encyclopedia of the religions of the Indigenous people of South Asia online*.
2. Carrin, M., et al., 2021. In: *Brill's encyclopedia of the religions of the Indigenous people of South Asia online*.
3. Bergamini, N., et al., 2013. In: *Diversifying food and diets: using agricultural biodiversity to improve nutrition and health*: 313-325.
4. Berger, P., 2018. *Pseudis, 64*: 245-264.
5. Kojak, M.B., 2003. In: *Introduction of African crops into South Asia*: 23-48.
6. Reddy, S.N., 2003. In: *Indian ethnobotany: new perspectives from the field*: 327-341.
7. Fuller, D.Q. and Kingwell-Banham, E., 2018. In: *Beyond stones and more stones*, Vol. II: 145-169.
8. Cappers, R. and Neel, R., 2021. *Handbook of plant palaeoecology*.
9. Fuller, D.Q. and Castella, C., 2022. In: *The Oxford handbook of early Southeast Asia*.
10. Cappers, R.T.J., et al., 2016. *Digital atlas of traditional agricultural practices of food processing*.
11. Berger, P. In press. *Subaltern sovereigns: Rituals of rule and regeneration in Central India*. Berlin: De Gruyter GmbH.

### AFFILIATION

- Groningen Institute of Archaeology
- Institute of Indian Studies

CONTACT  
sonja.filatova@rug.nl  
p.berger@rug.nl



university of  
 groningen



NWO  
Netherlands Organisation  
for Scientific Research