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Insect Delicacies: A Review of Edible Insects as Sustainable and Nutritious Food Sources in Tribal Communities of India

Bhattacharyya Sohini*, Patel Leena Lopamudra, Khosla Mousumi, Meher Priyanjali, Dore Pushpanjali, Harit Kumar Ajay and Singh Manoj

Department of Zoology, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

**Corresponding Author*

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Abstract: Insects have long been a component of human diets across the world, particularly in indigenous areas where they are a staple of traditional cuisines. This review focuses on the use of edible insects in Indian tribal societies, with an emphasis on their cultural value, nutritional content, and ecological sustainability. Tribal people in India have a long history of integrating insects into their meals, frequently treating them as luxuries rather than survival food. This cultural acceptability has cleared the path for promoting insect consumption as a long-term solution of food security issues. Additionally, edible insects contain a wide range of nutrients, including protein, good fats, minerals and vitamins, making them great sources of nutrition, especially in areas where access to traditional protein sources is restricted. From an ecological standpoint, farming insects uses much less resources than traditional cattle, resulting in lower greenhouse gas emissions and environmental effect. Moreover, insects may be raised utilizing organic waste, providing a solution to waste management problems in tribal groups. Despite their cultural acceptability and nutritional benefits, mainstreaming the use of edible insects remains a difficulty. These include regulatory obstacles, concerns about food safety and cleanliness, and the necessity for mass awareness and education efforts.

Keywords: Edible insects, Tribal communities, Nutritional benefits, Cultural significance, Ecological sustainability, Food security

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Introduction

Food and nutrition are thought to play a significant impact in fostering health and well-being. The reason for this is that individuals obtain these essential nutrients necessary for energy. Nutrients have vital roles in promoting excellent health and well- being while also preventing the emergence of health issues and disorders (Mudambi and Rajagopal, 2007). For decades,

indigenous communities have relied on insects for subsistence, nutrition, and cultural significance. These time honoured custom displays a thorough awareness of local ecosystems, resource usage, and sustainable eating practices (Chakravorty, 2014). In tribal cultures, insects are not only regarded as survival food, but also as delicacies that are frequently included into traditional cuisines and culinary activities. The intake of insects extends beyond plain nourishment to complicated rituals, social gatherings, and communal festivals. Various bug species, including crickets, grasshoppers, ants, and termites, are gathered seasonally or during special festivals to represent abundance, fertility, and oneness with nature (Costa-Neto, 2016).

Despite India's rapid modernity and urbanization, many tribal communities continue to consume edible insects, demonstrating the durability of traditional knowledge systems and sustainable eating practices. However, this rich cultural history faces modern difficulties such as shifting food habits, environmental deterioration, and socioeconomic constraints (Gahukar, 2011).

In light of these issues, there is a rising appreciation for the need of conserving and strengthening the cultural legacy of insect eating among tribal groups. Exploring edible insects as sustainable and nutritious food sources is critical for tackling urgent global concerns such as food security and environmental sustainability (Gahukar, 2011).

Significance of Edible Insects

Edible insects are rich in protein, good vitamins, fats, and minerals. They provide a nutritionally rich alternative to traditional protein sources like meat and fish, especially in areas where availability to diverse and healthy meals is restricted. Incorporating insects into meals can help reduce malnutrition and satisfy dietary needs, particularly in vulnerable groups such as children and pregnant women (Van Huis *et al.*, 2013). Insects are incredibly nutritious, with the primary nutrients being proteins, oils, vitamins, minerals, and carbohydrates, all of which are required for all over human development (Dobermann *et al.*, 2017). In contrast to meat, insects tend to be more nutritious and healthier than food. The following are the significance of edible insects:

(i) *Resource Efficiency*: Insect farming requires far fewer resources than traditional livestock agriculture. Insects may be cultivated on organic waste, minimizing the need for arable land and freshwater resources. Furthermore, insects have a higher feed conversion rate, which implies they can convert feed into edible biomass more efficiently than traditional cattle, reducing the environmental impact of food production (Van Huis *et al.*, 2013). In fact, insects transform a low-protein meal into protein at a rate that is 12 to 25 times higher than vertebrates. In terms of protein yield per unit area, insect farming consumes just about one- eighth of what is necessary for cattle production.

(ii) *Reduced Environmental Impact*: By stimulating bug consumption, we can lessen the environmental impact of traditional cow rearing. Insects create less greenhouse emissions, consume less land and water, and produce less waste than cattle, pigs, and poultry. Accepting insects as a sustainable protein source promotes biodiversity conservation, decreases deforestation, and combats climate change. Food production in its current form is expected to cause further deforestation, environmental degradation, and greenhouse gas emissions. Large-scale livestock and fish production facilities impose large environmental costs. Land use, in particular, will play an important role.

(iii) *Resilience to Climate Change*: Insect farming is more adaptable to the effects of climate change than traditional agriculture. Insects are adaptable to a wide range of climatic circumstances and can thrive on marginal soils unsuited for conventional crops. This resilience improves food security by providing a consistent source of nourishment despite Environmental uncertainty and harsh weather occurrences.

(iv) *Food Security*: Insect farming may provide a consistent source of protein and nutrients year-round, minimizing reliance on seasonal crops and outside food assistance (Dobermann *et al.*, 2017).

Investigating edible insects as sustainable and nutritious food sources is a holistic method for addressing the interconnected challenges of food security, nutrition, and environmental sustainability. Incorporating insects into the solution can result in more resilient and sustainable food systems that benefit both humans and the environment.

Cultural Significance:

Insect eating is profoundly intertwined in Indian tribal cultures' historical and cultural fabric, stretching back millennia, and embracing a rich material of customs, beliefs, and behaviours. Chakravorty (2014) investigated the historical and cultural relevance of insect eating in the societies.

Ancient Origins: Insect intake dates to prehistoric times, when indigenous people used insects as a primary source of nutrition. Archaeological evidence indicates that insect feeding was common among early human communities in India, revealing a deep-rooted custom that precedes written history (Chakravorty, 2014). The ancient Romans consumed a wide range of insects, including beetles, caterpillars, and locusts. Crickets, grasshoppers, and ants have been eaten for centuries and are still considered delicacy in many parts of the world, including Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania. Entomophagy has been a part of human history for thousands of years and is a widespread feeding practice for many cultures throughout the world (Fig. 1).

(a) *Cultural Diversity*: India's tribal populations are very diverse, with each having its own set of customs, dialects, and culinary habits. Insect intake varies across groups, with some insects cherished as delicacy in one tribe but rejected in another (Ganguly *et al.*, 2023; Olivadese and Dindo, 2023). Over 2000 bug species are consumed globally (Kafle *et al.*, 2024). The Coleoptera order contains the most edible insects used as feed across the world, followed by Lepidoptera, Hymenoptera, Orthoptera, Hemiptera, Isoptera, Odonata, Diptera, and other orders. These insect species include a wide range of nutrients, including protein, fat, minerals, Fiber, ash, amino acids, and more (Fig. 2).

(b) *Seasonal Harvesting*: In many tribal groups, insect gathering follows seasonal patterns that coincide with natural cycles and ecological rhythms. Certain insects are gathered at certain times of year, in accordance with agricultural activity, monsoon seasons, or migration patterns. This seasonal harvesting reflects indigenous knowledge systems and traditional ecological calendars that have been passed down through centuries.

(d) *Culinary Traditions*: Insect eating is an important aspect of tribal cuisine, with insects integrated into a variety of meals, snacks, and traditional treats. Culinary techniques such as roasting, frying, and fermenting are used to improve flavor and texture, converting insects into tasty and healthy food. Insect-based foods are frequently shared during communal events, which promotes social bonding and cultural identity (Van Huis and Oonincx, 2017).

(e) *Medicinal and Therapeutic Uses*: In addition to their culinary uses, insects are revered for their therapeutic virtues in indigenous groups. Certain insects are said to have medicinal powers and are used in traditional medicines for everything from stomach issues to skin problems. These therapeutic uses exemplify indigenous societies' holistic approach to health and well- being (Yen, 2009; Orkuzs, 2021).

Nutritional Composition:

(i) *Nutrient content of edible insects*:

Edible insects' nutritional profiles reveal their promise as high-quality sources of protein,

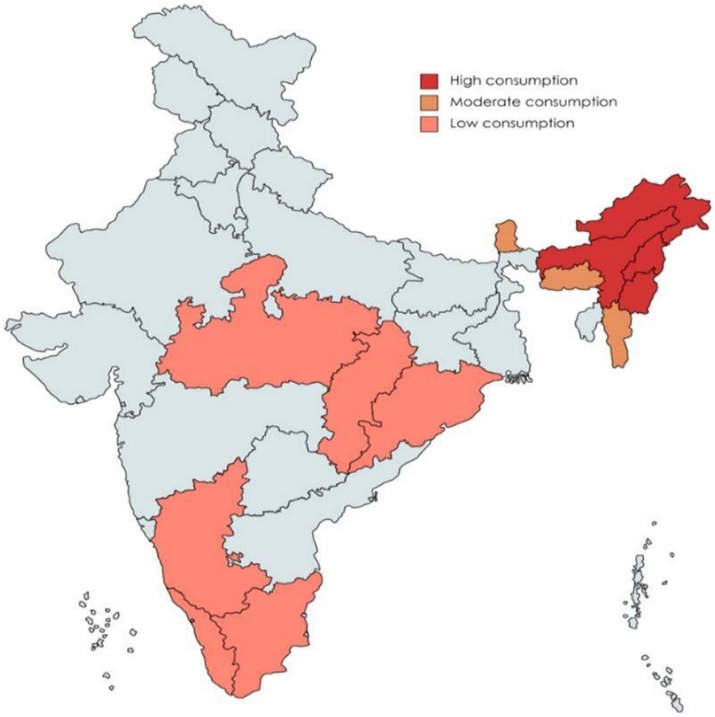

Fig. 1: Map showing Entomophagy in India (Devi *et al.*, 2024).

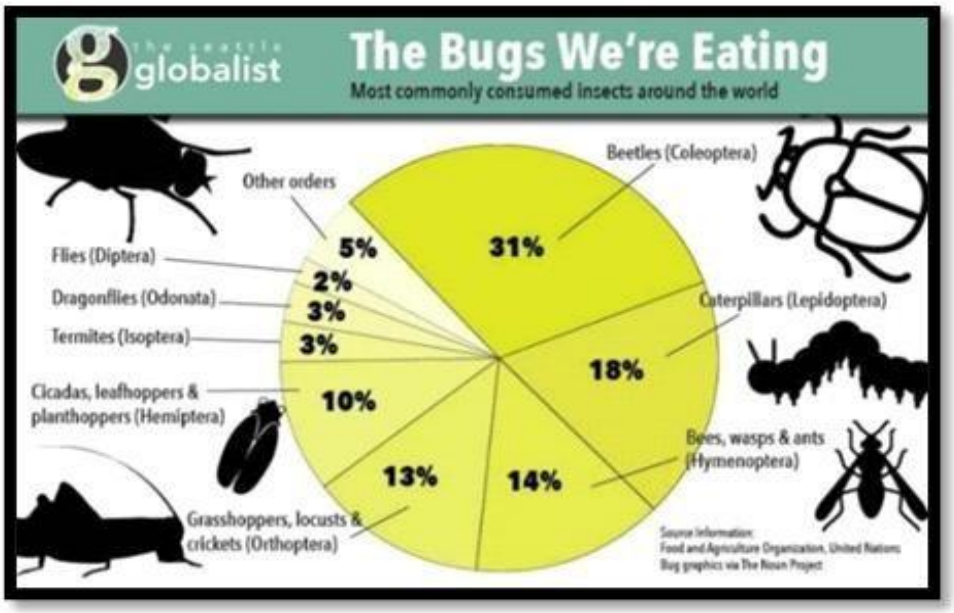

Fig. 2: World-wide ist of edible insect species (Source: The Seattle Globalist, 2013).

healthy fats, vitamins, and minerals (Fig. 3). Here is a summary that focuses on key nutrients:

(i) *Protein Content*:

Edible insects are an excellent alternative protein source with great nutritional value and potential health advantages. Protein levels vary per insect species, although they typically range from 40% to 75% of dry weight. Certain insects, such as crickets and mealworms, provide protein levels

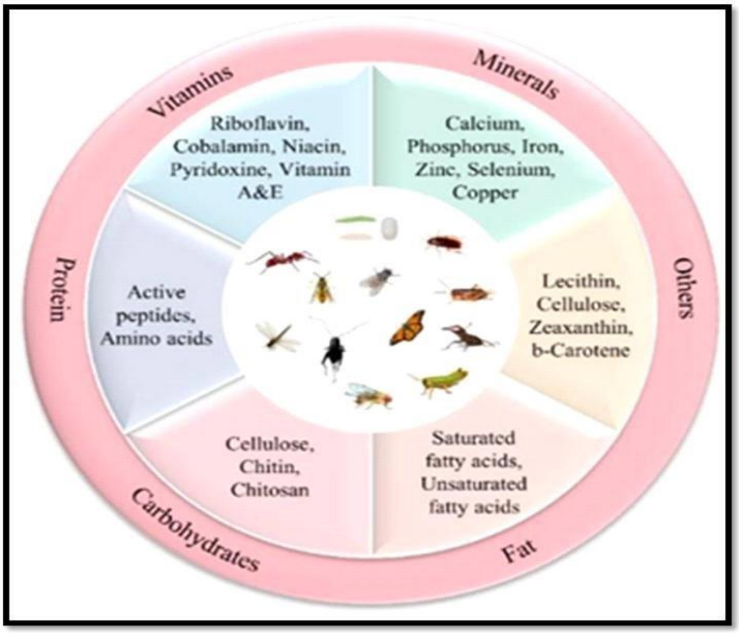

Fig. 3: Nutritional composition of edible insects (Zhou *et al*., 2022).

equivalent to or higher than typical cattle such as beef and chicken. Protein from insects is regarded as high quality since it provides important amino acids for human health, such as lysine, methionine, and tryptophan (Van Huis *et al*., 2013).

(ii) *Vitamins*:

Edible insects are rich in vitamins, especially B vitamins including thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, pantothenic acid, and cobalamin. Certain insects contain substantial levels of vitamin B12, making them essential nutritional sources. Insects contain vitamins A, D, and E, which promote general health and well-being (Zhou *et al*., 2022).

(iii) *Minerals*:

Edible insects include important minerals that are required for a variety of physiological activities. These include iron, zinc, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, and selenium. Iron levels in insects may be exceptionally high, with certain species possessing more iron than regularly eaten foods such as beef and chicken (Megido *et al*., 2018).

Ecological Significance:

Insect farming has significant ecological advantages over conventional cattle farming, emphasizing its potential to contribute to sustainable food production and environmental protection (Oonincx *et al.*, 2010). Following is the ecological benefits of insect farming:

(a) *Require fewer resources*: Insect farming requires far fewer resources than traditional livestock agriculture. It requires minimizing land usage, water use, and greenhouse gas emissions per unit of protein produced. Unlike traditional cattle, which require large expanses of land for grazing and feed production, insect farming can be done vertically or in small areas, reducing land pressure and habitat degradation. Furthermore, insects have a higher feed conversion rate, which means they can convert feed into edible biomass more efficiently than traditional livestock, resulting in fewer resource consumption and environmental impact (Van Huis *et al*., 2013).

(b) *Potential for Waste Management*: Insect farming provides a long-term solution to organic

waste management by transforming it into protein-rich insect biomass. This process, known as bioconversion, reduces the volume and toxicity of organic waste while also creating important animal feed. Insect larvae, such as black army fly larvae and mealworms, are very good at digesting organic waste and converting it to protein and fat (Payne *et al*., 2016). These larvae can be collected and utilized as animal feed, aquaculture, or even human food.

(c) *Biodiversity Loss*: Livestock production causes biodiversity loss through habitat damage, overgrazing, and conflict with local species. Large-scale livestock operations can require considerable land change, resulting in habitat fragmentation and biodiversity loss (Aigbedion-Atalor *et al*., 2024).

(d) *Resource Intensity*: Animal husbandry is resource-intensive, necessitating a huge quantity of land, water, and feed to maintain animal numbers. Feed crops, such as soybeans and corn, require a large amount of agricultural area and water to grow. Insect farming uses less land, water, and feed than conventional animal production. Insects may be fed a wide range of organic waste items, lessening the strain on agricultural land and freshwater supplies.

Challenges:

The broad acceptance of edible insects in tribal cultures has several obstacles, including legislative impediments, food safety concerns, and social stigma. These challenges are:

(a) *Regulatory Barriers*:

Many nations, including India, have weak regulatory systems controlling the production and sale of edible insects. The lack of defined criteria and standards for insect cultivation and processing stifles the growth of insect-based food companies. Regulatory restrictions such as licensing requirements, food safety standards, and labelling rules can be substantial obstacles for small-scale insect farmers and entrepreneurs, restricting their ability to enter the market and develop their businesses.

(b) *Food Safety Concerns*:

Food safety is a top priority in the use of edible insects as food (Van Huis, 2015). There are worries about the presence of pollutants, infections, and allergies in insects, especially those taken from uncontrolled conditions or fed on waste products. Proper hygiene standards, sanitation protocols, and quality control techniques are critical for ensuring the safety of insect-based food items (Hanboonsong *et al.*, 2013, Haldhar *et al*., 2021).

(c) *Social Stigmas*:

Negative beliefs and cultural taboos around the use of insects as food can stymie acceptance and adoption, leaving customers hesitant to try insect-based goods. To combat these societal stigmas, there is need for extensive awareness efforts, and educational initiatives (Halloran and Flore, 2018; Kim *et al.*, 2020).

(d) *Cultural Acceptance*:

In tribal societies where insect ingestion is already a part of the customary diet, cultural acceptability may not be an issue. Preserving and promoting the cultural relevance of insect eating in tribal societies is critical to ensuring its continuing acceptability and incorporation into contemporary food systems (Ramos-Elorduy, 2009; Ghosh *et al.*, 2017; Batat and Peter, 2020).

(e) *Market Access and Infrastructure*:

In tribal areas, insect growers and entrepreneurs face problems due to a lack of market access and infrastructure. Investment in infrastructure development, market connections, and value chain integration is critical for unlocking insect farming's economic potential and providing possibilities for tribal communities to improve their living (Rumpold and Schlüter, 2013).

(f) *Current Research Initiative*:

Ongoing scientific endeavors and legislative attempts in India to encourage the sustainable

production and consumption of edible insects reflect an increasing recognition for insects' potential as a sustainable food source (Schösler *et al.*, 2012; Shelomi, 2015; Shockley *et al.*, 2015).

Environmental Impact Assessments:

In Indian settings, research studies compare the environmental effect of insect farming to that of conventional cattle production. These studies assess the ecological sustainability of insect-based food systems by looking at aspects such land use, water consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity protection (Meyer-Rochow, 1975)

Policy Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns:

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), research institutes, and advocacy groups lobby for policy reforms and regulatory frameworks that promote the sustainable production and consumption of edible insects. They use education and community outreach programs to educate politicians, enhance stakeholder understanding, and encourage public acceptance (Halloran *et al.*, 2017).

International Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange:

Collaboration with international organizations, research institutes, and worldwide networks promotes information sharing and capacity building in insect farming and entomophagy. These partnerships use global experience and best practices to help India establish sustainable insect-based food system (Yen, 2009).

Conclusion

Edible insects provide a possible alternative to create food security, combat hunger, and improve environmental sustainability in India's tribal populations. By capitalizing on the nutritional, cultural, and ecological benefits of consuming insects, stakeholders can establish more resilient and sustainable food systems that benefit both people and the environment. By emphasizing these research paths and policy measures, stakeholders may aim to mainstream insect eating as a sustainable, nutritious, and culturally acceptable food alternative, therefore contributing to food security, nutrition, and environmental sustainability objectives.

Author Contributions

SB, AKH, and MS framed the study idea and edited manuscript. SB, LLP, MK, PH, and PD wrote the paper. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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