

Food-Habits in Pre-Colonial Assam

Arani Saikia

Postal Address: B. Bora Road, Fauzdaripatty Nagaon, P.O. Nagaon 782001, Assam, India

ABSTRACT: *Discourses on food habits of its people facilitate the understanding of the varied cultures of the North-East India. Culinary practices of the region are culturally distinctive; expressing both identity and difference. History of food-habit is as old as history of mankind itself. Its study is, therefore, an important component of social history. This paper is an attempt to explore some of the pre-colonial food practices of Assam with special reference to the Brahmaputra valley. It will also look into of the making of the unique indigenous culinary culture of the region.*

KEY WORDS: *Food-habits, History, the Brahmaputra valley, Cultural practice*

I. INTRODUCTION

Food-habit of a community is influenced by geographical as well as social environment. Food procurement and its preservation are conditioned by the climate, varying seasons, community size, economic condition, infrastructure and technological knowledge. Traditional norms, religious belief and societal values also influence consumption pattern. At an advanced stage of social development, taste becomes an important indicator of food-habit. The study of the pre-colonial food-habits of Assam is both interesting and important. An attempt will be made to reconstruct the food-habits of the people of the Brahmaputra valley.

II. METHODOLOGY

The approach of this study is historical and exploratory in nature. To serve the purpose of the topic, both conventional and analytical methods of investigation are followed. For the history of pre-colonial period, one has to rely on secondary sources. Whenever possible, it is necessary to co-relate the secondary data with primary data. Since tradition continues within society so participant observation is also helpful in bringing out primary information. Folk memory of more than two hundred years corroborates the secondary data.

2.1.Body of the Text

The far reaching effects of colonialism did not spare the Indian culinary practices. As elsewhere in the subcontinent, changes came to the traditional food habits of Assam. For academic purpose, the indigenous culinary culture can be termed 'pre-colonial food-habits'. The word 'pre-colonial' refers to an era prior to the advent of the British. The 'pre-colonial Assam' is close to the concept of 'pre-modern Assam.' Assam had been under the Ahom rule for nearly six hundred years. She came under the British occupation in 1826. Until then the people of Assam had been following what may be termed as medieval customs and habits. Since ancient times to the late medieval period, the state remained comparatively in an isolated position as she was not connected with the Indian mainland either through polity or through commercial activities. Several regions in India suffered severe famines in the medieval as well as colonial days. But there was hardly any famine in Assam. She was rich in natural resources. In 1826, the Brahmaputra Valley had a population of about one million (Guha,1977,19). In relation to her population, there was abundant surplus land resource. The villages were self-sufficient. The market for food products was not developed because of the transport bottle-neck and the poor purchasing capacity of the people due to large non-monetized sector in the economy. People developed their food habits with locally available edibles. A proverbial statement says that there was neither scarcity nor plenty. The people of Assam developed their own mode of living so also their unique food and drink. Certain food habits of the *Kiratas* mentioned in the *Yogini Tantra* were still in practice in the medieval Assam.

Assam is a part of the greater sub-Himalayan region. The beauty and abundance of living space in Assam have had attracted different groups of people in different time. She has been the host to many exotic cultures. Every new ethnic group brought with them their own food-habit and other cultural resources. No group lived in isolation. Compelled by the physical conditions, they learnt to live and work together. There were natural exchange of ideas of life and living. Even the most conservative social group was open to the idea of new items of food which was made possible perhaps because of the introduction of one or two varieties of fruits and vegetables in a locality. The expansion of *Keya Gollas* i.e. the grocery shops of the traders from distant

states like Rajasthan in Assam from the late eighteenth centuries served as a stimulus to go for change of food-habit (Bhuyan,1974,101-104). Rice and its derivatives were the staple food in Assam. Paddy was the main food crop of the land. It is extensively cultivated in Assam. There were two types of rice – *ahu* or sown rice and *sali* or planted rice. Boiled rice is called *bhat* in Assamese. Depending upon the process of husking of the grain, there were two types of rice for cooking- *ukhuwa* or brown rice and *aroi* or white rice (Hunter,1982,45). In case of *ukhuwa*, the paddy is boiled and then dried in the sun and then husked. In this mode of husking, the nutrition value of rice is preserved. In case of *aroi*, the grain is dried in the sun and then husked in *dhenki* or a large wooden mortar. *Dhenki* was common in every household. It was a foot pounder for husking grains. It served as a grinder also. Both single boiled *Aroi* rice and double boiled *Ukhuwa* rice were common among the people of Assam. Rice was boiled in water and the starch was drained out. The peasants in Assam cultivated varieties of rice. Among them mention may be made of *Bora, Joha, Komal, Betguti, Malbhog* etc. Every variety has a distinctive smell and taste of its own. Steamed *Bora* rice is very delicious. *Joha*, the super fine rice has a appetizing fragrance. It has been the best kind of rice cultivated in Assam occupying a pride of place in Assamese food culture. At present, *Joha* rice of Assam is all set to international market.

Assamese society was mainly rural and agricultural by nature. The process of urbanisation was slow and life in town was usually an extension and continuation of the life in the villages. People generally took three meals a day (Hunter,1982,250). Early in the morning they took the first meal. The practice of taking *poita bhat* was common in most of the families. Cooked rice was kept overnight in cold water and it was taken as the first meal next day morning. It was generally taken with additions of pickle, roasted fish, roasted vegetables, green chilly, salt, mustard oil etc. *Kharoli*, a kind of sauce made of ground mustard seed and salt was prepared in most households. In some parts of the valley, there was the practice of having *maar bhat*. It is rice boiled with some vegetables and salt without draining out the starch. Some other items made of rice were also consumed. Those items were *komal chaul*, a kind of tiffin rice, *cira*, parched rice pounded and used as food, *akhai*, parched paddy free from the husk, *muri*, puffed rice, *sandoh guri*, coarse powder of parched rice, *pitha Guri*, powdered rice etc. These were generally taken with milk and *gur* or molasses. In the rural areas, the first meal of the day was carried to the field for the working peasant who left home early in the morning. The peasants used to start work before sunrise. The main meal of the day was taken at about noon. The boiled rice was taken with varieties of accompaniments. Taste was the keystone of the Assamese cuisine. There are six tastes- sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter and astringent. According to the Ayurvedic tradition, each taste consists of a combination of some two of the five basic elements, namely earth, water, fire, air and ether (Achaya,1999,206). As elsewhere, all these tastes were included in varieties of food items of Assamese people also. There was variation of quality and quantity.

The kitchen was a domain of the women. They were expected to develop their culinary proficiency. They were often guided by the traditional sayings. Folk sayings such as the *Dakor Boson* recommend many a things regarding selection, preparation and presentation of food items. The kitchen of the Ahom king was best left to the care of the '*Sangmais*'. They were usually drawn from the Barahi community who were known for their quality cooking and faithfulness. The officials who supervised the working of the kitchen were called *Sangmai Barua*. The *Sangmais* had no copybook to follow. They developed their own expertise to suit the varying tastes of different kings and queens.

The trans-Himalayan tribes follow some peculiar food habits. They take boiled, alkaline and sour preparations alternatively. *khar* or alkali, *tenga* or sour and *teeta* or bitter were given prime place in Assamese cuisine. *Khar* was an indispensable food item of the region. It is served as the first course to be taken with rice. The ashes of dried bark and root of the plantain tree contain alkaline properties. The people used to preserve the ash-leach for its salty and alkaline properties. A dish seasoned with that liquid is also called *khar*. That homemade alkali was used in different curries of vegetables like papaya, gourds, black gram, leafy vegetables. *Pasala* was another distinctive item prepared with *khar*. The basic ingredient of *pasala* is the tender part of plantain sapling. *Khar* was recommended once in a week for its medicinal properties. Fish- vegetable curries seasoned with either lemon juice, tamarind or *thekera* (*Garcinia cowa*), a locally available citric fruit were popular *tenga* items. *Kharisa* was widely used. The popular method of preparation was to cut or thresh the bamboo shoots into small pieces and then to preserve with a little amount of *thekera* until it became fit for use. Dried *kharisa* was also a good ingredient for several dishes. The item *teeta* was prepared with vegetables like bitter gourd, *neem* leaves (*Melia indica*), cane shoots, *teeta phool* (a red and bitter flower), *teeta bhekuri* (*Solanum indicum*) etc. Another bitter item was *shokota*. It was prepared with dried tender leaves of the jute plant. *Teeta* was recommended once in a fortnight. These items were common in the kitchen of both the rich and the poor.

Curry is an indispensable accompaniment to rice. Both vegetarian and non-vegetarian curries were taken. The Assamese people were generally non-vegetarian. Fish, meat and eggs constituted their non-vegetarian resource. The Hindus, even the Brahmins of Assam were generally non-vegetarian unlike the rest of India. This difference was due to the non-Aryan influence over the Assamese culture. Assamese curries were milder by nature. Humid climate of the region would have led to digestive disorders for the people unless they followed a certain food practice for cooling stomach. Hot spices were not available. The traditional Assamese delicacies required minimum use of spices. Condiments and spices like turmeric, ginger, garlic, mustard seeds, black pepper, *hing* (asafetida) were available in pre-colonial Assam. One or two items of curry had to be complimented with vegetable or fish. Intelligent housewives loved to select and serve dishes in such a way that they match each other in flavour and texture. Many women perfected in this art of blending and presentation. They handed it down to their successors. The vegetarian dishes included curries of mixed vegetables. The collective term for vegetables was *Saak-Pachali*. This term is comprehensive and it covers ripe vegetables, leaves, herbs, tubers, roots, flowers and pods. The green vegetables used in the diet of the people consisted more of leaves and tender stems than fruits and roots. There were several varieties of local potatoes like *kaath aloo* or hard yam (*Dioscorea alata*), *moa aloo* or sweet yam (*Dioscorea esculende*), *mitha aloo* or sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*), *ada aloo* (*Dioscorea* sp.), *miri aloo* (*Dioscorea villosa*) and *sina aloo* (*Dioscorea batatas*). Different varieties of gourds were cultivated namely, *panilau* (bottle gourd), *rangalau* (pumpkin), *komora* (white gourd melon), *jika* (*Lufa acutangula*), *bhul* (*Lufa cylindica*). Brinjals of different sizes were favourite with the people. *Kochu* or arums were numerous- *maan kochu* (*Alocasia indica*), *dohi kochu* (*Alocasia cucullata*), *kola kochu* (*Colocasia esculenta*) were the popular varieties. Both leaves and roots were generally used in different curries. Arum was suited for leaf covered baking system. People generally used banana leaves for covering. Arum leaves with green chilly, salt, some sour vegetables were tied in banana leaves to make a protective packet and put into fire, the packet was taken out when the content inside was boiled. Arum leaves with local tomato and fish were particularly popular. Another favourite item of arum was the curry prepared with fish, black pepper, ginger and garlic.

Various pulses were used for vegetarian dishes. Black gram or mati dali (*Phaseolus radiates*) has been occupying a pride of place in Assamese food. It was used extensively. Soaked, cleaned, boiled matidali was popular both as adkharia and tenga. In adkharia the spices like ginger, garlic, chilly were dominant as condiments. Autenga (*Dillenia indica*) which is a locally available citric fruit was much used with matidali to prepare a tenga. A feast was incomplete without matidali. Some other varieties of pulses commonly cultivated were mogumah (*Phaseolus mungo*), kolamah (*Lathyrus odoratus*), barkolai mah (*Lathyrus sativus*), garo mah, dafala mah, miri mah. Raw plantain or kachkol was cooked as a vegetable. The koldil or banana cone was used to prepare tasteful dishes. The thinly pieced banana cone with pigeon meat made a specialty. Green chilly was very popular. Several kinds of chillies like bhot jalakia, bih jalakia, konjalakia were used. The indigenous tomatoes known as kon bilahi (*Lycopersicon lycopersium*) was small in size but it bore a distinctive taste. A kind of fern, dhekia sak (*Diplazium esculentum*), had been the commonly used herb. It grew abundantly in the moist soil. A dish prepared with dhekia and kon bilahi was liked by all. Addition of fish made it more delicious. Solid and leafy vegetables were important ingredients of Assamese delicacies. There was a tradition of taking mixed curry of fourteen leafy vegetables on particular occasions. There was also a custom of taking an item prepared with one hundred different herbs. Seasonal herbs like lai (*Brassica competiss*), lapha (*Malva verticillata*), paleng or spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*), chukka or sour spinach (*Rumex oleracea*), khutora (*Amalanthus*), doron (*Leucus limifolia*), nefafu (*Clerodendron corlobrokianum*), manimuni (*Centella asiatica*), matikaduri (*Alterneuthera sessilis*), kolmou (*Ipomoea aquatica*), maralia (*Spermacoc luispida*), helanchi (*Antidesma ghasembilla*), babari (*Artimica vulgaus*), sukloti (*Pogostemon benghalensis*), bhebelilota (*Paederia foetida*), masandari (*Houtoenia cordifolia*), jilmil (*Chenopodium album*), podina (*Mentha viridis*) were grown in the kitchen garden of every family.

Assam is a land of rivers and countless water bodies. There was plenty of fish. Anyone could obtain fish for the pot with little effort. Collective fishing was more rewarding and it provided a good deal of excitement and joy. Fish flesh was favourite with all sections of the people. It was the main source of protein for them. Moa (Ompok moh), puthi (*Puntius* sp.), singora (*Mystus vittatus*), kawai (*Anabus testudineus*), goroi (*Channa punetatus*), karati (*Gadusia chapra*), punga (*Tetradon*), chanda (Chanda nama), khalihona (Khalisa lalia), , darikona (*Rasbora daniconius*), misha (*Maerobranchium* sp), eleng (*Rasbora elenya*) were fishes of smaller variety. The bigger ones were magur (*Clarius butrachus*), bhargon (*Cirrhina reba*), cheniputhi (*Puntius*), kurhi (*Labeo calbasu*), rahu (*Labeo rohita*), pabha (Ompok padba), bahu (Catla), sital (*Notopterus chitala*), kandhuli (*Notopterus*), sol (*Channa striatus*), silgharia (*Labeo pungsia*), kash (*Silonia salienio*), basa (*Eutropichthys vacha*), ari (*Aorichthys seenghala*), boral (*Wanago attu*), kharia (*Notopterus* sp), pithia (*Tor putitor*) were some local kinds of fish people relished.

Some fishes such as *saal(Channa marulius)*, *sengeli(Channa sp)*, *singi(Hetetopheustus fossilis)*, *mirika(Cirrhina mrigala)*, *neria (Clupisoma garua)* were not allowed to enter the kitchen of the caste Hindus. The habit of taking dry fish was common among the tribal people. History of Assam if not as much as her geography, determined the food ways of her people. She had been the homeland for a good number of hill and plain tribes belonging to the Mongoloid group of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. Being a frontier state, she formed a mosaic of the Aryan and the Mongoloid culture. Fish-eating is probably a pre-Aryan custom and in Assam it might have been borrowed from the Mongolian people (Barua,1986,137). The number of food items used by the people of Assam had increased over a long time because of some historical currents. The cultural interaction among the varied tribes of the region as well as its neighbouring countries of the east is also evident in the inclusion of those food items that were called by their place of parent origin. *Miri aloo, sina aloo, maan kochu, bhot jalakia, ahom bogori, garo mah, diphla mah* and *miri mah* were later on accepted as popular Assamese food items .

The common modes of cooking were boiling, steaming, frying, baking, grilling and baking in foil of banana leaf. There was minimum use of oil. Fish fry was in vogue, but for fish curry, the practice was to drop cleaned raw pieces in boiling vegetables. A favourite curry was prepared with fish and alkali extract of banana roots. Traditional wisdom, aphorisms of Dak recommend *sol* fish with radish, *kawai* with spinach, *rahu* with *autenga*, *magur* with *chukka* , *moa* with *babari*, *barali* either with tamarind or ginger juice. Fish cooked with bamboo shoot was a delicious dish commonly used. Different types of skewed fish were popular. Small fish conditioned in a bamboo stem was a popular method of fish preservation among some tribes. The *Kamarupa Yatra*, an old Assamese treatise, recommends the meat of duck, pigeon, tortoise and wild boar for the caste Hindus (Choudhury, 1959, 350). Chicken was prohibited for them. Otherwise pork, mutton and different birds were taken by the people. The Muslims used to take beef but avoided pork. Meat was generally roasted. Meat curry was also popular. It was prepared with mild spices such as chilly, ginger, garlic and black pepper. Deer meat was an all time favourite. There were different species of birds in Assam. Different methods were used for killing different birds for the pot. Meat of duck was relished by the people of Assam. A preparation of duck meat with *lai* or the *komora* was a specialty. Duck was also prepared with *kharisa* or bamboo shoots. Every family preserved a pot of *kharisa* which was a ready ingredient of the kitchen. Duck egg was consumed by the people but it was looked upon as a 'hot food'. Under the influence of the Neo-Vaishnavite faith, people considered a general taboo to take meat of certain animals and birds traditionally considered unclean by the Hindus (Baruah,1985,421). Other food related taboos restrained some food items for certain seasons or in odd hours. There has been tradition of avoiding certain items at a single time. These beliefs stand scientific reasons.

The Ahoms were fond of dry fish powder, larvae of amoroli ants, crab meat, cocoons of endi(Samia ricinia), muga(Antheria assamensis) and pat(Bombyx mori) worms (Gogoi,2006,113).The use of salt was very limited. As sea-salt and brine salt were not easily available, alkali was used in place of salt. Some amount of salt could be procured from the brine springs. Six thousand paiks were employed in the brine springs of Barhat, Jaipur and Mohong (Bargohain, 1992,82). The salt gathered from the brine spring was hardly meant for daily use by the common folk. It was said, ' Lon dane son dane saman', gift of salt is equal to gift of gold. People were more fond of curd than milk (Robinson,1975,271). Doi or curd was much consumed by the rich. Payash was known but it was not a common dish. Jalpan meant a light food. A particular variety called komal rice and cira soaked in water and then drained were taken with curd and liberal dose of molasses. These were traditional jalpan to serve guests in wedding and other family or community functions. Sandah guri or roasted rice powder was taken with milk, curd and banana. Different types of pithas and larus made from rice powder, molasses, shredded coconut, sesame seeds, served the purpose of modern day snacks. Pitha is a rice cake fried or baked. Til pitha, ghila pitha, gokul pitha, sutuli pitha, pani pitha, chungga pitha, pheni pitha, tekeli pitha, sapara pitha ,garu pitha were favourite with every household. Til pitha is prepared with fresh powdered bora rice, fried sesame powder mixed with molasses. No oil is necessary. Baking and rolling required an expert hand. Magh bihu was essentially is a festival of food. Women folk drew their talents to prepare a range of jalpan, pitha and larus. Family and community feasts were common during the bihu festival.

The use of wheat products were not known in pre-colonial Assam. There was no confectioner, no butcher and no baker (Bhuyan,1963,63). Fruits occupied little place in the daily routine .It is strange to note that the use of tea or coffee was earlier unknown for the people of this region (Barpujari,1994,201). Later by the mid-nineteenth century Assam was developed as an agricultural estate of tea-drinking Britain (Guha,1991,210). The country liquor known as *laupani* or *saanj* was fermented rice beer. It had been a popular beverage among the tribal and Ahom communities. Use of opium was widespread in Assam.

Both men and women took it. Its harmful effects were not at all considered by them. People believed that opium cures dysentery which was a major killer. Many went on believing that opium gives longevity. Traditionally, *tamol-pan* or areca nut and betel leaf were essential elements of Assamese culture. *Tamol* is taken with pan, lime and tobacco. It was customary to chew it after every meal. Dining habit followed cultural norms. The fact is that eating is considered culturally ordered interaction. Rich or poor people followed some simple etiquette of dining. Meals were generally served on a large circular bell metal dish called *kahi* and bowls called *bati*. People used to take meal sitting on the floor or on a stool called *pira*. The floor close to the kitchen was kept clean. Resourceful families used to have a raised earthen platform on which food was served to the head of the family. People used only the right hand in eating. No one should rise from his or her meal when others were still eating. A pot full of water with a *gamocha* and a bowl were kept in a corner of the floor. A guest was generally received by offering of *tamol-pan* served politely in a *xarai* or a *bata* (traditional bell-metal utensils). No ceremony was complete without a respectful offering of *tamol-pan* to the concerned deity. The lady who cooked for the family usually took her meal only after all the members had dined out. The adult female members also had the practice of taking meal after the male members of the family had their meal. In community feasts and wedding parties plantain leaf cups called *dona* were used in place of utensils. Since every household takes good care of the guest, the guest had to admire sincerely the food served by the host. The tradition lingers on.

The kitchen or the hearth was an area of high purity. The married and the senior most woman of the family had the sole right on the kitchen. She got entry into the kitchen after some initiation rites. After a death in the family, food was not cooked in the kitchen till the end of the mourning period. Abstention from food called *brata* was as much a part of food-habit as eating. A common form of fasting permitted only fruits between sunrise and sunset. Modern practice of not eating certain things on particular day of the week has had a ritualistic tradition of partial or total abstention from food on *punnima* or a full moon day and *amavasya* or the night of the new moon and such other occasions. On appropriate occasions, split mug, gram, fruits were offered as *prasad*.

III. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reveal that the peculiar behavioural patterns and material culture of Assam made the distinct food-habits of this land. Cultural interactions of different tribes of course influenced the people, but there had been a very slow process in assimilation of food-practices. Food taken was simple and healthy. This kind of diet kept hunger away from the rural people and maintained their nutrition. On the whole, taking food was an enjoyable activity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Achaya, K.T., *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999
- [2] Bargohain, Jatindra Kumar, *Asamar Sanskritik Itihash*, (Assamese) Bhagawati Praakashan, Golaghat
- [3] Barpujari, H. K., (ed), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol-III, Publication Board Assam, Gauhati, 1994
- [4] Barua, B.K., *A Cultural History of Assam: Early Period*, Bina Library, Gauhati, 1986
- [5] Baruah, S. L., *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1985
- [6] Bhuyan, Dr S. K., (ed), *An Account of Assam by Francis Hamilton*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, Gauhati, 1963
- [7] Bhuyan, S. K., *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, 1974
- [8] Choudhury, P.C., *The History and Civilisation of the People of Assam in the 12th Century AD*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, Gauhati, 1959
- [9] Gogoi, Satyen, *Ukiai Ukiai Relgari Chali Jai*, (Assamese) Students Stores, Guwahati, 2006
- [10] Guha, Amalendu *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society Polity Economy*, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1991
- [11] Guha, Amalendu, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, 1977
- [12] Hunter, W.W., *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol-1, B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1982
- [13] Robinson, William, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Sanskaram Prakashak, New Delhi, 1975