

Vol II Issue II Dec 2012I

ISSN No : 2249-894X

*Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal*

*Review Of
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2249-894X

Review Of Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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TRADITIONAL FOOD HABITS OF THE BODOS OF NORTH EAST INDIA: A FIELD STUDY

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Abstract

This is a brief overview of the traditional food habits of the Bodos North East India. Food is the culture and the culture is the identity of any communities. The traditional system of fooding, preparing, rituals, taboos or health care varies community wise. But the significance of the word TRADITION is decreasing day by day, in short the word tradition itself changing traditionally due to the global impact of globalization and as well as due to socio-economic development of the society.

INTRODUCTION .

Tribals constitute an important segment of the population of India, representing almost 8.2% of the total population of India; it is about 12.4 % of the total population of Assam (according to 2001 census report). Assam is the home of as many as different tribes like Bodo, Dimasa, Garo, Deori, Missing, Karbi, Tiwa, Rabha, Sonowal, Hajong and other sub tribes. Majority of tribal population of Assam lives in the forest ecosystem and has its own socio-cultural pattern, tradition and typical food habits. Mostly their diet comprises varieties of unconventional foods, viz. meats and fishes, edible forms of flowers, fruits, roots, tubers, leaves, stems, seed, and wild mushrooms. Meats and fishes are most influential dish of the tribals. They mostly eat vegetables of leafy varieties, which grow as wild weeds. And depend on such a natural product for their food. In time of scarcity or when the food is in short supply people are mostly dependent upon various dried food and various wild plants. Food is a pre-requisite not only for attaining good health but also for maintaining adequate growth and body equilibrium. The choice of food is deeply related to life style of an individual and above, in which he is living. However, the food habits are greatly influenced by thoughts, believes, notions, traditions and taboos of the society. Apart from these socio-cultural barriers, geographical locations, the religions, education and economic factor do alter the food behaviors (habits). These factors are the determinants of the food pattern of the individuals in a given society but bound to vary from a society to other, one area to other and so on. Through this paper it is tried to highlight the traditional food habits of Bodo. Bodo is one of the tribe of Bodo group people under greater Mongolian race. Their basic concentration is to be found in the Western part of Assam, particularly the north bank of Brahmaputra, besides that they can be found in different parts of Assam as well as in Nepal, Bhutan, North-Bengal and boarder areas of Bangladesh.

2.1 OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION:

Extensive field study on food behavior of Bodos in undivided Darrang district of Assam showed that the Bodos are the greater food lover. A leisurely meal of many items which requires long hours of labor, preparation and ingenuity in the kitchen has long been a major part of Bodo culture. The traditional Bodo cuisine is one of the famous cuisines of [Assam](#). It is characterized by very little use of spices but strong flavors due to the use of endemic exotic herbs, fruits and vegetables that are fresh, dried or fermented. A traditional meal of Bodo begins with a Kharwi, a class of dishes named after the main ingredient. The food

is usually served in [bell metal](#) utensils. The meal is concluded with goi-phathwi ([betel nut](#) and leaf). The common foods of Bodos are rice with meat, fish, rice-beer (zau), vegetable, alkali dish (Kharwi), bathwn etc.

2.1.1 RICE:

Rice is the staple food of Bodos. All major preparations are of rice. As a staple diet rice is eaten in different ways such as roasted, grounded, boiled or just soaked. The large varieties of rice are found among the community. The most popular and costly rice is the zwsa or scented rice. Some other kind of rice is namely- maibra, maima, aijong, mainagri etc. are available in the area. Wngkham gwzang is a favourite traditional dish of Bodo during the summer season. Cooked rice is soaked overnight in order to prepare Wngkham gwzang and served the next day and garnished with bathwn. A special class of rice preparations cake is called [phitha](#). Phitha are generally prepared only on special occasions like the bwisagu (a spring festival), magw (harvesting festival) and some other festivals. They prepared various type of cake like laodum phitha, enthab phitha, anasi phitha, asi phitha, hasung phitha etc.

2.1.2 MEAT:

Bodo peoples are very much fond of meat. The highly prized means of diet is pork. Meat is the essential item for the guests in the Bodo society. So, to meet the immediate necessity as food when any guest visit ones house and to some extent for the purpose of economy they keep chickens, ducks, pigs and goats at homes. They generally eat the flesh of pig (oma), ducks (hangshw), chicken (dao), pigeons (pharow), deer (mwi); tortoise (khasew); rabbits (sesa), neolai (mongoose) and many other wild animals. They have the custom of community hunting and fishing for food. They dry the meat of deer, pork and preserve for a long period and use it as food when they are busy with their agriculture works and in Bodo this sort of dried meat is famously known as bedor gwan. The combination of dried pork and pulse is one of the most delicious traditional dishes of Bodo. Onla wngkhwi is also one of the popular dishes of the tribe which is being prepared with rice powder and some special [herbs](#), plants, edible roots or flowers. In order to make it more delicious meat like - duck, pork, chicken etc. and small fishes are being added.

2.1.3 FISH:

The most important ingredient is the fish, harvested from the rivers, ponds and lakes in the region. They consume almost all kind of fishes that can be found in their locality. Most traditional rural households have their own ponds for [pisciculture](#). Besides that whenever the small fishes are available they dried in sun or in smoke. This sort of dried fish is called Na gwan. Another most salivary created dish prepared from fish is famously known as Napham. Besides the Bodo another tribes of North East India also prepare this short of delicious peculiar item. They grander the small dry fishes with arum stem and add some kharwi or alkali as needed and stored it in a dry bamboo tube (owa hashung) and cover the mouth of the tube with the leaves of the plantain (thair bilai) very carefully so that insect can not inter in the tube. This is called Napham and it can be preserved for two to three years. This is one of the special traditional dishes of the tribe. Another favorite traditional dish of Bodo peoples is small fish roasted in plantain is known as na menai. In order to prepare this small fishes cleanly washed and wrapped in the plantain and keep it inside the fireside. Besides meat and fish, they have the habit of consuming another most important and popular traditional dish known as Samo (snail). They consume different type of snail like samo phisa, samo ladai and samo lingri. Collecting the snail from the fresh water rivers or the ponds or from paddy field and keeping them one or two nights under water and cleaning them until becomes bright and preparing in a scientific method and eating in a rhythmic manner is one of the symbol of very rich culture. And besides that they consume various kinds of insects like silkworms, bees, red ants, grasshoppers, crabs, frogs and many other insects that are found in the water or in the jungle.

2.1.4 RICE-BEER (ZAU):

The favorite beverage of the Bodo is known as Zau or Zumai is a kind of rice beer. The zau is prepared by steeping rice in water for two or three days. Another kind of liquor is also prepared from zau by filtering in a scientific traditional method. It becomes colorless like water and has a strong pungent taste and very strong like European whisky.

The rice beer zau has great importance in Bodo society. It is used in social function as well as it is also offered to the chief God of Bodos i.e. Bathwu Bwrai and another gods and goddesses. The Bodos are the hard working class of peasants. Their main livelihood is cultivation, so, doing hard labor in the field they take zau to get relieve from tire or to become fresh. Besides that they welcome their guest by offering the zau and pork and then they become very happy and it is their traditional custom. Rice beer has its medicinal

value also. Whenever they suffer from some disease like disorder of bowel or other stomach problems they use zau as medicine to get relief from the disease.

To prepare zau a medicine called Amao is essential. The Amao is prepared from rice powder, a kind of wild plant called Mokhna (*clerodendrum viscosum*), some leaves of jack fruit, sugar cane, pineapple and roots of agsrchita (*plumbago zeylenica*) a kind of small plant, all these things are mixed and ground together. Along with them two old Amao which is called Amao mwkhang is added. Without Amao mwkhang the amao can not be prepared. After that some larus are made. Thus larus are dried in sun for three or four days and make ready for use.

Rice is cooked and place on plantain leaves in order to make it cool. The Amao according to need (2 or 3 p/kg) is grounded and mixed with the cooked rice. Then it stored in an earthen pot or silver pot and covers the mouth carefully. After three or four days a delicious smell come out and it inform the consumer that zau is ready to use. It can be kept maximum six to seven days. After that its taste becomes sour and unbearable. But one kind of zau which is being prepared from Maibra, one kind of special variety of rice can be kept upto maximum six months. Its taste is very delicious, sweet like honey and has very strong flavor.

The zau can be filtered by traditional process. The zau is kept in an earthen or silver pot and water is added as per need, then the mouth of the pot is covered by another pot from where a bamboo or plastic pipe is joined to another pot where the vapor will come out and pour in the pot. That pot where the vapor poured is kept under water so that the vapor transfers in the form of water. It is a traditional scientific process of filtration. They burn according to their calculation (1.5 to 2 liters/kg). It is called zau gwan or sereb or phithikha in different dialect areas of the language. Even the process of filterization is also different in area to area.

2.1.5 VEGETABLE AND TRADITION OF FERMENTATION:

The environs of Assam are rich in vegetation. The green leafy [vegetables](#) are called gwthag megong, in Bodo, are an important part of the traditional Bodo food. Some of them are cultivated while others grow wild. The wild vegetables are of different tastes. Among the favorite wild vegetables, the most common are sibru (kind of thorny plants used as vegetables), dwishrem (a kind of small creeper of sour taste), lapha saikho (*malva verticillata*), jwglauri (a scented plant) nakhi (a plant of bitter taste), khungkha (a plant of bitter taste), ganga mala (a small plant), raidwng (cane tree) and dingkhiya ([fern](#)). Another favorite wild vegetable is anthai bajab or bwrma dari (a small plant with scent) is used in the fish curry, especially with the kushia na (fish) and mutton. There is a bewildering variety that is eaten a hundred different green vegetables, people believe that one can consume the dish during the bwisagu (month of April) then he is saved from different diseases. mwiphrai, lai (*Brassica juncea*), manimuni (*cantella asiatica*), bwrwm bwthrw (*leucas longifolia*) masundri (*hottunia cordata*), bala bothua (*chenopodium album*), khiphi bendwng (*paederia foetida*), mande (*ip[imoea aquatica*), Khuthra (*amaranthus viridis*), mati galdab, dwisrem, helesi (*enhydra fluctuans laur*), zari bilai (*acmella paniculata*), simri mwikhi (*oxalis comiculata*), sibru, mwidru, mezenga (*zanthoxylum oxyphyllum*), mwitha (*hebecus sabdarifolia*), dauphenda (*casearia glomerata*), thunthuni hara (*drymaria cordata*) etc. and roots like potato, tharun (yam), thaso bedor (arum beet) and spices like dundia (*coriandrum sativam*), narsing leaves (*murraraya koenigii*), khasidhara (*eryngium foetidum*), bwrmadari, Other cultivated green vegetables are cabbage, cauliflower, cucumber, radish, pumpkin, beet, carrot, tomato, potato, white guard, papaya, bitter melon etc. and some beans like lentil, white lentil, pulse, grams, mustard seeds, sesame also they consume. One of the favorite dishes among Bodo people is lapha mwidru which is prepared with lapha (*malva verticillata*) by boiling. They also have the system of fermentation of green vegetables as well as roots. They fermented bamboo shoot. Bamboo is available in the forests of Assam and its neighboring states. A few varieties of bamboos are chosen best for culinary purpose. Bamboo shoot is called "mewai" in Bodo. The shoot is cleaned, peeled off and grated or cut fine pieces and keep it for ten or fifteen days in an earthen pot. After that it is dried in sun for two or three days and keeps it in an earthen or glass pot. This preparation can be stored for months. Mewai has a special pungent smell which may attract or repel one to have a taste of it. It is a bit sour in taste. They have the habits of fermenting radish, white gourd and some kind of wild flowers like-gambari (*gmelina pedunculata*), sewali, basukhi, kharo khandai (*oroxyllum indicum*), methekha, siphung bibar, etc. Radish and white gourds are sliced into small thin pieces and dried in the sun and kept in dry places. Whenever green vegetables become crisis in rainy season or whenever they are busy with their cultivation they prefer the fermented items. They also dried the jute leave which is called Narzi a bitter taste leaves and kept in a dry place and use whenever necessary. Most of the wild vegetables have medicinal values.

The Bodos are also very fond of wild Mushrooms. They have the knowledge to identify the wide varieties of mushrooms and never mistake in identifying the edible from the poisonous varieties. In Bodo mushroom is called Mwikhwn. They collect the mushroom from nearby their home and wash it cleanly and add salt,

chilies and mustard oil and pack with a plantain leave and keep inside the fireside. Chili .fanlu khebzrang (capsicum chinense), khunthai, khangkhila phitai,

2.1.6 ALKALI DISH (KHARWI):

Kharwi or Alkali is also one of the most popular traditional dishes of Bodo cuisine. Traditionally Kharwi is prepared from the burnt ashes of the bark and other parts of local variety of giant banana, mustard plant, stem of sesame. It is kept in a small earthen pot over which water is poured and placed in a small container. The traditional Bodo cuisine is impossible without kharwi. It is used in any item e.g.- meats, fishes, vegetables etc. Nowadays Sodium Bicarbonate is used in preparation of the Kharwi dish. Ondla kharwi is another most popular and delicious dish of Bodo cuisine. Ondla means rice powder and it is prepared in a technical way. The fermented vegetables or dried meat or fish or green vegetables are cooked with rice powder and kharwi. Besides that one of the most popular uses of kharwi is as shampoo. The village people whenever they got dandruff they use the kharwi to wash up their head.

2.1.7 BATHWN:

Side dishes called bathwn is very popular in traditional Bodo dish. They prepared varieties of bathwn like na bathwn (pounded fish with chilli, ginger, garlic), khangkhri bathwn (pounded crab with chilli), gangzema (water bug), falwo bathwn (pounded chili with ginger, garlic) etc. they also prepare vegetable bathwn like dundia ((coriandrum sativam), mwitha (hebecus sabdarifolia), etc.

3.1 FOOD TABOOS:

In Bodo cuisine alkali and turmeric are never use together in any preparation and another is sour and bitter ingredients are never combined in cooking. They never eat green leafy vegetable at night and also never eat sour and bitter at night. In religion most of them are Hindu and a little numbers of Christian. The Hindus never take beef, dog, cat, fox, snake, tiger, elephant, rhino, vulture, crow etc., if they take these animals the society punish them according to their customary law.

4.1 CONCLUSION:

Bodos have a rich traditional food habit which represents the socio-cultural aspect of the society. As a matter of fact, in spite of the numerous traditional dishes in the Bodo society, we have often seen that some new food items are made up by the people, and the reason may be due to modernization and influence of the neighboring communities. In course of time, it is seen that some of our food items are getting extinct from the society which shakes the identity of the Bodos. Therefore, it is our prime duty and responsibility to maintain traditional food habit in our day to day life.

Due to the influence of globalization the food habits of the tribes have been vitally changing day by day and therefore the tradition is fast giving way to modernity withal its hybrid dimensions. From zau or zumai to McDonald and from kharwi to KFC the culinary globalization can be seen in the Bodo kitchen.

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