

Culinary Traditions of The Biате Community of North East India

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ABSTRACT

Tribal communities play a significant role in shaping India's diverse cultural landscape with the Biате forming a significant ethnic group in the Dima Hasao District of Assam. The Biates maintain a strong connection to their traditional food systems, which reflected both their cultural identity and way of life. This paper focusses on the ethnic food recipes of the Biате community, exploring how their traditional dishes are deeply rooted in agriculture practices and locally available ingredients. Rice, the staple food of the Biates is central to their cuisine and is often accompanied by a variety of vegetables, roots, tubers and wild herbs. These ingredients are prepared using indigenous methods that have been passed down through generations. The study aims to document these unique food traditions, highlighting the cultural significance, preparation techniques, and sustainability of Biате ethnic recipes in the context of North East India.

Keywords- Ethnic food recipes, Wild edible vegetables, culinary tradition, Biates.

INTRODUCTION

Food is a fundamental aspect of human's life. From the early days, even when men knew no knowledge of cultivation of crops, man depend on hunting and gathering for their means of sustenance for survival. The food habits of a community are shaped by its surrounding ecology, including availability of food resources, and the condition of soil. Besides, cultural traditions and religious beliefs play a substantial role in influencing what we consume (Baro, Maneswar, 2016).

In the Biате terminology food is called "*Fak*" and it consists of both cooked and raw, solid and liquid. The staple food of the Biates is "*Bu*" boiled rice and they consumed it with a green leafy vegetable according to what is available to them as they follow the sustainable level of food consumption. They consume rice on a daily basis. They take two principal square meals a day, one in the morning and evening, breakfast consisting of tea and biscuit, lunch and dinner consists of rice and curry.

METHODOLOGY STUDY AREA

The research is on the Biате tribes of Fiangpui village of Dima Hasao district of Assam and the data is collected by primary method of data collection like observation and interview method. For this study, participant observation method is applied to know about the food tradition of the Biате community people. Various methods of food preparation were observed in the Biате inhabited village Fiangpui.

THE STUDY TRIBE- THE BIATES

The Biates are one of the tribes of Kuki-Chin Mizo group and are racially part of Mongoloid or Indo-Mongoloid or Tibeto-Burmese group. They are one of the oldest tribes in North East India. The Biate society is patriarchal in nature and they practice monogamy form of marriage. They are mainly concentrated in the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya and the Dima- Hasao District of Assam. Besides these two regions, they are also found in the Northern part of Mizoram, Churachandpur District of Manipur and South Cachar of Assam. The present data is collected from the Biates of Fiangpui village of Dima Hasao district of Assam.

TRADITIONAL INGREDIENTS AND FOOD RESOURCES

The Biates depended on rice heavily as their principal food like many other indigenous communities of North East India. The Biates traditionally cultivated rice through the method of jhum or shifting cultivation. It is prepared by boiling in water and commonly served with wild or cultivated leafy vegetables. Its cultural significance is emphasized by the presence of folktales, of Fapite, the goddess of paddy which reflect the deep spiritual connection the Biates maintain with rice cultivation and consumption. Their diet highlights a wide collection of both domesticated and wild ingredients. They cultivated vegetables like squash, pumpkins, papaya, beans, chilies, gourd, yams, spinach etc.

These ingredients are prepared with simply boiled, steamed or cooked with mild seasoning allowing natural flavors to come through. Meat is also an important component of the Biate diet and they consume pork, chicken, fish, beef, deer etc. Pork is their favourite delicacy. During important occasions like Christmas and New Year, *Sumrisi changal an* (Eurya acuminata) leaves, pork cooked with *Sumrisi* leaves and *changal an* (alkaline water) is a delicacy and a mandatory major dish among the Biates. Cats, dogs etc. are not consumed by them mirroring cultural taboos and food ethics. Animals such as pigs, cows, goats, and chickens are commonly domesticated to support both their nutritional requirement and customs.

WILD EDIBLES AND FORAGED VEGETABLES

The use of wild edibles is deeply implanted in the culinary traditions and cultural heritage of the Biates who have developed a deep connection with their natural environment. They consumed variety of wild edible vegetables, including tubers, shoots, stems, tender leaves and even flowers. These were eaten either as part of regular meals or as seasonal delicacies, often added to soups, stews, or simply boiled with salt and chillies. Some of the commonly foraged items include bamboo shoots, wild mushrooms, ferns, plantain flowers, and wide range of leafy green that naturally grow in the forested areas. Some of the list of wild edible vegetables consumed by the Biates are-

Sumrisi (Scientific name- Eurya acuminata DC, Common name- Tapering leaf Eurya).

Khanghu (Scientific name- Senegalia pennata), Common name- Climbing wattle.

Samtrok (Scientific name- Solanum anguivi), Common name- Indian night shade.

Rongta (Parkia timoriana (DC.) Merr., Common name- Tree bean.

As Kar and Borthakur (2008) note, such plant not only add flavour and colour to meals but also enhance their nutritional content. Hence, the Biates incorporated wild edible

vegetables from root, shoots to leaves into their dishes. The importance of wild edibles remains particularly strong in Biate rural villages where access to markets is limited and forest continues to be a vital source of daily sustenance. On the otherhand, urban and semi-urban Biate households have accommodated by collecting saplings and seeds of these wild plants and cultivating them in their home gardens.

TRADITIONAL COOKING METHODS OF THE BIATE COMMUNITY

The traditional cooking techniques of the Biate people of North East India reflect their deep connection to the land and the seasonal resources available to them. Their culinary practices passed down through generations from their forefathers are rooted in simplicity, sustainability and efficiency. The primary methods of food preparation include boiling, smoking and fermentation with minimal uses of spices or oil.

Boiling is the most common cooking method among the Biates. Vegetables such as squash, spinach, papaya, pumpkin, cabbage, beans etc. are typically boiled, preserving their natural flavours and nutritional content. Meat, including pork, fish and chicken is also boiled often with a basic seasoning of garlic, ginger, onions and salt.

One of the most distinctive boiled dishes in Biate cuisine is *Changal*. The traditional recipe involves the use of alkaline water, known as *Changal*, which is prepared from the ashes of firewood collected from the hearth. In rural Biate villages, the ashes are filtered using a small traditional basket called *Changal farh*, producing a brown-coloured alkaline liquid. This water is then added to green leafy vegetables like pumpkin leaves, spinach and also other vegetables like papaya, squash, potato etc. to create a flavourful dish (Lalsim, R.2012). The use of *Changal* imparts a unique taste and also serves as a natural preservative.

Smoking is another essential cooking and preservation technique among the Biates, particularly for meat. In earlier times, when hunting was a major food source and meat was not always readily available, the Biates developed smoking as a method of preservation. After a successful hunt, meat such as wild Boar, deer etc. would be cut into small strips and hang over a firewood hearth inside the kitchen. It would be smoked continuously for two or three days until thoroughly dried. This process enhances the flavour of the meat and also extended the shelf life of the meat. In recent times, smoking pork has become a common practice. Smoked meat remains a favourite delicacy in Biate cuisine and is often rehydrated and boiled when consumed.

Fermentation holds a special place in traditional Biate food culture. This method of preservation is deeply embedded in their culinary heritage and continues to be practiced widely. Two of the most common fermented foods are bamboo shoot (*Tuai thu*) and soyabean (*Bemer thu*). To ferment bamboo shoots, the shoots are first sliced into small pieces and mixed with water. The mixture is then stored in a glass or plastic bottles and left to sundry for about a month. Over time, the mixture develops a distinctly sour taste. Properly fermented bamboo shoot can be stored and consumed for upto a year, making a valuable ingredient during season when the vegetables are scarce. Soyabeans, on the otherhand are fermented to produce *Bemer thu*, which is fried with garlic, ginger, onions and chillies mixed together.

Historically, the Biates did not use cooking oil in their food preparation. This aligns with their preference for boiling and smoking, which rely more on moisture and heat rather than fat for cooking. However, the culinary landscape began to evolve with the advent of Christianity introduced by the British missionaries in 1890 (Lalmuanpuui et.al, 2021). Along with religious transformation came increased contact with outside cultures, modern cooking practices and new ingredients including oil and processed spices. Over time, these changes enriched the culinary practices of the Biates, although many households continue to preserve traditional methods alongside modification.

ETHNIC FOOD RECIPES OF THE BIATES

One of the most important and traditional curry of the Biates is a wild greeny leaf called *sumrisi* cooked with pork meat, *changal* (alkaline water), chillies, and *an ibai* (rice flour) is the delicacy of the Biates. Besides alkaline dish, the Biates also consume boiled leafy vegetables or meat. Another traditional delicacy of the Biates is *mercha deng* (chutney), which is prepared by grinded chilli and *ngathu* (dry fish) with slices of onions and salt. *Baipok*, a curry prepared from a handful of dry chilli flakes, a teaspoonful of *chang-al* or soda, four to five pieces of *ngathu* (dry fish), a tablespoon of *ani baih* (rice flour), and salt boiled in water is the all-time favourite dish of the Biates. Some of the ethnic dishes of the Biates are-

- a) ***Voksa neh Rimaia changal* (pork with pumpkin leaf curry):** In this curry, the pumpkin leaves are deeply cleaned, and chopped. First of all, a water is boiled in a pot, and then 6- 7 chillies are added to it. Next, finely chopped pork is added to the boiling water. When the meat is half cooked, the pumpkin leaves are added along with a spoonful of *changal* or alkaline water (soda) and *an ibai* (rice flour) to the curry with a pinch of salt.
- b) ***Changkha changal* (Bitter gourd curry):** *Changkha* or bitter gourd is the favourite vegetable of the elders as it has medicinal properties too. The Biates consume it in the form of *ibut* (boil), *changal* (cooked in alkaline water) or *zei* (fry). Out of this, the most preferred one is the *changal an* (bitter gourd cooked in hot water with *changal* (alkaline water or soda), chillies, *ngathu* (fermented dry fish) and salt.
- c) ***Arsa Faipui* (Chicken curry with rice):** This dish is a delicacy for the Biates. To prepare this dish, in a pot, a handful of chillies, is added along with a handful of rice to the pot. Then, a finely chopped chicken with garlic and ginger minced together along with salt and *changal* is added to the curry. Then, the mixture is stirred well until the all the ingredients are thoroughly cooked.
- d) ***Voksa neh antram but* (pork boil with spinach):** This is the simplest and the healthiest recipe of all the ethnic foods of the Biates which is prepared with spinach leaves, boiled with pork and salt.
- e) ***Voksa neh sumrisi changal* (pork curry with Eurya Acuminata leaves):** This is the most prepared and the favourite dish of the Biates. It is served on big occasions and community feast like Christmas, New Year and during other occasions like Nulding Kut. This dish is prepared by firstly adding the chillies in a pot of boil water, thereafter the *Sumrisi leaves* (*Eurya acuminata*) are added to the pot with a pinch of *changal* or alkaline water or edible soda, then it is cooked until the leaves become completely

tender and then a pork is added to the curry with a pinch of salt and then it is cooked for an hour.

- f) ***Mercha deng***: This is a side dish which is served with rice. This dish is prepared by grinding roasted chillies, to which *ngathu* (fermented dry fish) along with finely chopped onions and salt are added.
- g) ***Chi al an (salted veg curry)***: In Biata terminology, “*chi- al*” (salt) and “*an*” (curry) refer to a salted vegetable curry. In this dish, various green vegetables, thinly sliced are added to a pot of hot water along with 5- 6 pieces of green chillies and salt, and then consumed once the ingredients are fully cooked.
- h) ***Changvui izei (Fried banana flower)*** : The *Changvui* (banana flowers) are peeled and cut into small pieces and fried with a little amount of mustard oil with onions, chillies and a pinch of salt.
- i) ***Tuai changal (Bamboo shoot curry)***: To prepare *tuai changal* (Bamboo shoot curry), the *tuai* (bamboo shoot) is first of all thoroughly cleaned and boiled in a pressure cooker until tender. Then, it is added to a pot of hot water along with green chillies. Next, *changal* (edible soda) is added to the curry, followed by 5- 6 pieces of *ngathu* or fermented dry fish. Lastly, salt is added to taste.
- j) ***Rongtra deng (parkia beans or stinky beans chutney)***: *Rongtra* is a popular and delicious food among the Biates. The beans can be eaten raw or by cooking with *changal* (alkaline water or edible soda) or by making chutney. To prepare, the hard cover is peeled and the seeds are washed and consumed. It is also sliced into small pieces and then mixed with paste of *mercha* (chilli) and *ngathu* (fermented fish) and consumed as chutney.
- k) ***Vok iril changal an (pork intestine)*** : The main ingredients of *vok iril changal* are Pork intestine, cooking soda, *an ibai* (rice flour), *phakphai* (aromatic leaves) and chillies. Besides, the liver, and fats are also added to it to enrich its taste. For preparing this dish, firstly, the whole intestine of pork is cleaned with salt and cooking soda. Then the long intestines are chopped into short pieces which is again washed with water and boiled for more than an hour with salt. Then, in a pot of hot water, chillies, pork intestine, liver and fats, are added to it. Next, *chang al* (edible soda) is added and cooked for an hour. Some prefer to add *changlong* (banana stem) to enhance its flavour. Then, it is ready to serve.
- l) ***Arsa changal (chicken curry)*** : To prepare, *Arsa changal*, the ingredients required are-chicken pieces, ginger and garlic pastes, chilli, *Changal* (edible soda) and salt. First of all, the chicken and chillies according to the desired quantity are added to a pot of hot water. Once, the chicken is half cooked, the *changal* (edible soda), garlic, ginger paste and salt are added to it and cooked for half an hour until done. Then it is ready to be served.



Fig- Rongtra Deng (*Parkia* or stinky beans chutney)



Fig- Voksa neh Antrum but (*Pork* boiled with spinach)



Fig- Baipok An (*Changal* (Alkaline) with ngathu (fermented fish))

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that food is deeply intertwined with culture, environment and tradition among the Biате community. Their traditional food system is based on locally grown

agricultural products in their kitchen garden or jhum fields, foraged wild vegetables, roots and tubers as well as fish and meat acquired through rearing, hunting and fishing. Rice is their staple food and meal patterns typically include three meals a day and complementary dishes vary seasonally. These culinary practices hold strong cultural significance demonstrating not only the community's connection to nature but also their cultural beliefs and traditional knowledge. However, considerable changes have occurred in their food habits due to the influence of Christianity, modernization and urbanization.

In the recent days, due to modernization and improvement of lifestyles, the younger generation increasingly preferred fried and spiced foods like Chips, Burger, Sausage, other processed snacks and fast food over traditional dishes like those prepared with *Changal* (alkaline water or edible soda) replacing the old traditions of ethnic dishes. Additionally, *Chial an* (Boiled vegetables with salt and chillies) which was once their favourite delicacy is leading to a gradual loss of culinary heritage.

Today, the Biates consume oil and spices for cooking meat like pork, chicken, beef, fish etc. and they began to make fruit, vegetable and meat pickle with varieties of Indian spices. This shift reflects a waning of traditional cuisine that once played a central role in the Biate cultural identity. In comparing with the food system of the neighbouring tribes like the Mizos and Hmars, Kukis several similarities emerged such as the reliance on rice, boiled vegetables and the consumption of fermented dry fish (*Ngathu*) ethnic food recipes pointing to a shared regional identity. However, distinct elements like the process of preparation of ethnic dishes, the use of *changal* and specific foraging practices highlight the uniqueness of Biate culture. Future research should focus on documenting traditional recipes and cooking methods to safeguard this heritage while initiating cultural education that encourage younger generations to connect with their food traditions.

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