

The Transition of Hidol from Domestic Kitchens to Commercial Markets in the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community

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ABSTRACT:

The practice of fermentation has long been a significant cultural element in Northeast India. Fermentation is also considered for its medicinal properties because of the health benefits associated with the consumption of fermented food products. This ethnographic study investigates the shift from the production of homemade fermented food products to the commercialization of this traditional process in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. This practice is often associated with women in the community. Urbanization has contributed to the erosion of these traditions as the community navigates various markets for these products, highlighting the transitional process. This study aims to explore the socio-economic impact of this transition on the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, while also providing an overview of the evolving gender roles as women transform traditional practices into business opportunities. The limitations and challenges inherent in this process reflect the impact of different gender roles and their contributions to communities. The research methods employed in this study include semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The significance of this study lies in examining the evolution of kitchen made products to local markets within the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, focusing on the emergence of employment and the empowerment of women within the community.

Keywords: Bishnupriya Manipuri, Fermentation, Hidol, Commercialization, Domestic Kitchen, Cultural Significance.

INTRODUCTION

Northeast India has multiple cultures and ethnicities. This region includes an amalgamation of diverse cultures, religions, and traditions; however, they are all linked by the shared practice of fermentation (Upadhyay, Pandey, & Dhar, 2017). The tradition of fermentation is associated with overall benefits to a community, focusing on the social, economic, and medical aspects of the communities associated with fermentation. Within the diverse regions of different ethnic groups, the Bishnupriya Manipuri community holds a rich tradition of preparing a fermented

dry fish paste called *hidol*¹ (also known as *hentak*² in Meitelon and *shidol*³ in most parts of Assam and Tripura) (Muzaddadi & Basu, 2012). This staple food product surpasses the idea of mere sustenance and embodies the community's cultural identity.

‘Why is the consumption of fermented food products essential for people?’ The probiotic nature of fermentation makes fermented foods essential for human health (Rawat K., Kumari, Kumar, Kumar, & Gehlot, 2018). They provide gut friendliness, good digestive sustenance, immunity, and metabolism. The consumption of fermented foods is also associated with cultural identity. Fermented products, such as bamboo shoots and fermented dry fish, are also associated with several communities, drawing on stories and memories of the growth of a community, although age-old practices in all communities have progressed or been passed on to women. Women are often considered torchbearers of tradition in society. Consequently, the responsibility for preserving cultural identity often falls on women, akin to the role of holding a family together. Most of these communities have cultural significance, such as the *Ima Market*⁴ in Manipur, *Khasi kongs* running the market space in Meghalaya, and *Baideos*⁵ in local bazaars in Assam.

According to the historical context, Bishnupriya Manipuri is an ethnic group that migrated from Manipur to Bangladesh and other parts of the country due to political turmoil and oppression in search of a stable livelihood (Devi, 2018). This community has established several educational institutions, religious places of worship, and cultural associations. Some studies state, *‘Bishnupriya Manipuri is an ethnic group from Manipur in Northeast India* (Sinha, Singh, & Balakrishnan, 2023).’

Fermented dry fish are consumed by most communities in northeastern India. There are several procedures for preparing it, that vary across communities. It can be consumed in various forms. They have different names in various communities. It is known as *‘hidol, hentak, ngari*⁶ (Jeyaram, et al., 2009), *shidol* or *sheedol* and *tungtap*⁷ in most parts of Northeast India (Das & Deka, 2012).’ Consumption of this product is beneficial to human health.

Fermented dry fish paste, also known as *hidol* in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, has been consumed since ancient times. There are no records of how this practice began, given that this community follows *Vaishnavism*⁸ and believes in consuming no meat or vegetables such

¹ Hidol, a traditional delicacy of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, is a solidified paste produced through the fermentation of dried fish (*Puntius Saphore/Puntias Saphore*) and taro stems (*Alocasia odora*).

² Hentak serves as an alternative to hidol and is predominantly consumed by the inhabitants of Manipur.

³ A solid, pasty product shaped like the fish species *Puntius spp.*

⁴ Ima Market, located in the district of Imphal, Manipur, is the largest market operated exclusively by women. This market offers a diverse range of products, including vegetables, fruits, textiles, toys, fish, spices, and utensils.

⁵ Baideos are the female local vegetable sellers in the state of Assam.

⁶ Ngari is a sun-dried, non-salted fish (*Puntius Sopore*) that undergoes traditional fermentation processes in the valley region of Imphal and its surrounding areas.

⁷ Tungtap, a culinary specialty of the Khasi community in Meghalaya, is distinguished by its soft and spongy texture, and is crafted from the fish species known as *Puntius Saphore*.

⁸ Vaishnavism is one of the major forms of modern Hinduism.

as garlic, onion, and ginger (Vaishnavism). The Bishnupriya Manipuri community has a rich history marked by numerous contributions and developments over the years. They are mostly habituated in the Barak Valley and Brahmaputra region of Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya, and very few are found in Manipur.

The youth in this community have grown up watching their mothers, sisters, or grandmothers introduce the practice of making *hidol* for their families at home. This practice is mostly carried out by women in the communities. It is the women who pass it on to their next generations as a practice. *Hidol* is not only consumed as a singular product but is also amalgamated and consumed with many products, such as *erolpa*⁹ (*eronba/eromba*¹⁰ in Meitelon), *chinchu*¹¹ (*singju*¹² in Meitelon), *pura hidol paltoi*¹³ (roasted fermented dry fish chutney), *hija hidol paltoi*¹⁴ (steamed fermented dry fish chutney), *khar*¹⁵ (boiled vegetables with soda and *hidol*), and added to leafy vegetables (Pal, Upadhyay, Chauhan, Bain, & Singh, 2024). The process of making *hidol* in this community was much lengthier as the entire process took place in a big *Benki*¹⁶, which consisted of ground dry fish (*Puntius Sophore/ Puntias Sophore* (Muzaddadi & Basu, 2012)) of approximately around 10-12 kgs and *taro stems (alocasia odora*¹⁷) (Space, 2020). The stems and fish are pounded together to mix the phosphorus in the dry-fermented fish and the poison in the taro stems. The mixture is pounded until it becomes stickier and cannot be pounded further. Sometimes, bananas or whole wheat flour are included in the process to enhance the stickiness of the paste. This paste is then stuffed into bamboo sticks to initiate fermentation. Bamboo sticks were used as containers. Since production of bamboo has reduced, it has forced the people to use containers to store *hidol*, but instead of keeping it outdoors, the mixture was kept in closed tight spaces in refrigerators. The practice of storing *hidol* in bamboo is not ancient. It had just stopped with the advent of refrigerators, as the bulk production of fermented products had been reduced.

⁹ Erolpa is a traditional ethnic dish of the Bishnupriya Manipuris, characterized as a curry prepared with *hidol*, which is combined with mashed potatoes, chilies, and various seasonal vegetables.

¹⁰ Eronba, also known as Eromba, is a traditional dish of the Meitei community and holds a cultural significance comparable to that of *erolpa* for the Bishnupriya Manipuris.

¹¹ Chinchu is a traditional salad from the Bishnupriya Manipuri cuisine, typically characterized by its spiciness and composed of fresh greens, herbs, and occasionally fermented dry fish.

¹² Singju is a traditional Manipuri salad and holds a cultural significance comparable to that of *chinchu* for the Bishnupriya Manipuris.

¹³ Pura Hidol Paltoi is a traditional chutney from the Bishnupriya Manipuri cuisine, composed of fermented roasted dry fish and chilies, typically consumed as a side dish.

¹⁴ The Hija Hidol Paltoi is analogous to the Pura Hidol Paltoi, with the primary distinction being the preparation of the dry fish. In the former, the fish is steamed or boiled, as opposed to being roasted.

¹⁵ Khar is analogous to the dish *ooti*, which is consumed by the Meitei community. Within the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, Khar is prepared using soaked peas and cooked with soda, often incorporating banana plant or papaya.

¹⁶ Benki is a colloquial term used for a wooden mortar among the Bishnupriya Manipuri community.

¹⁷ *Alocasia odora*, also referred to as the night-scented lily or the giant upright elephant ear, is locally known as 'Maan Kochu' or taro stem.

Fermentation is an ancient process (Muzaddadi & Mahanta, 2013) that focuses on the cost-effective preservation of foods. This process also delves into the diverse cultural and geographical landscapes of the country. The development of biotechnological tools can explore the potential of fermentation techniques as an essential aspect of commercial production, creating income opportunities for local communities. Different fermented products are mentioned in Northeast India, such as bamboo shoots, soybean, apong¹⁸, judima¹⁹, ngari, hentak, tungtap, and shidal, which are mostly highlighted in these studies on fermentation in Northeast India.

One study (Ranjita, 2019) highlighted the nutritional benefits of fermented products, which can be considered a cheap source of plant protein compared to animal and milk products. The presence of probiotic components in fermented foods makes them beneficial for the immune system and metabolism of the host.

Women are often referred to as the primary upholders of cultural traditions because of their expertise in conventional fermentation techniques carried out in several households, which provides survivability and better well-being (Tamang, Chettri, & Sharma, 2009).

During the colonial period, the influx of trade merchants and the exploitative nature of trade during this era further impacted local food traditions, fostering a unique reliance on fermentation products similar to those in Southeast Asian cultures.

The fermentation of various products within these communities is often contingent on seasonal availability, as exemplified by bamboo shoots, which are accessible only during specific months of the year (Rawat K. , Kumari, Kumar, Kumar, & Gehlot, 2018). This seasonal dependency illustrates the adaptability of food practices to environmental changes. Despite the widespread consumption of fermented foods across the region, each community exhibits distinct consumption patterns. For some, these foods are valued for their medicinal properties, while others appreciate them for their flavor or have integrated them into their daily diets. Fermented foods serve functional roles, such as *preservation* and *flavor enhancement*, and act as condiments that fulfill both nutritional and culinary requirements of the consumers.

The development of fermentation techniques in Northeast India exemplifies the interplay between cultural practices and adaptation. The evolution of these traditions highlights how communities respond to environmental and social changes. Fermentation stands as a testament to sustainable practices that preserve cultural heritage while maintaining traditional and cultural continuity.

Migration has significantly influenced the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, facilitating a transition from rural to urban settings. This shift has led to changes in social, economic, and cultural dynamics, impacting their traditional practices and, consequently, their cultural heritage and culinary traditions, which are vital to their daily lives. Urbanization, driven by the quest for economic advancement and improved living conditions, threatens the traditional

¹⁸ Apong is a fermented alcoholic drink customarily produced by the indigenous tribes of Northeast India.

¹⁹ Judima is a traditional rice wine crafted by the Dimasa community in Assam.

lifestyle. However, it has also afforded the community opportunities for greater exposure and the development of a distinct identity in the global arena. Despite the considerable risk of traditional practices being eroded, urban growth has had a stabilizing effect on communities at risk of losing their cultural identity. Urbanization, however, has enabled Bishnupriya Manipuri people to engage in entrepreneurial ventures related to fermentation and marketing, thereby challenging and redefining traditional gender norms in the community. This evolution empowers women but may also lead to tensions within the household dynamics.

While urbanization may challenge traditional practices within communities, it concurrently presents opportunities for adaptation and community empowerment. By effectively navigating these challenges, both men and women can play a role in preserving cultural heritage while adapting to new societal demands, offering insights into the resilience of cultural practices in the face of change.

The theoretical framework employed in this study is pertinent to the nascent commercialization of *hidol* in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community of Northeast India. Both economic development and cultural theories align with the objectives of this study. Economic Development theory (Economic Development (Theory), 1967), which examines the influence of economic and social conditions on individual and community development, is applicable to the analysis of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community's conditions in this study. This theory facilitates an examination of the fermentation process, which is a significant contributor to the development of both men and women in the community. The emergence of small-scale businesses and entrepreneurial opportunities has been observed in India. Employment development theory is a substantial framework for exploring various aspects of employment in each context.

Cultural theory investigates the cultural beliefs, practices, and values that shape social behaviors and identities. This theory serves as a foundation for examining traditional practices deeply embedded within the community and their transformation into commercial practices to ensure their sustainability. Cultural theory underscores that fermentation is a longstanding cultural practice associated with Northeast India and is integral to nearly all regional communities.

The synthesis of economic development and cultural theories aims to deliver a thorough understanding of the dynamics between traditional fermentation methods and modern commercialization processes. This framework investigates how cultural heritage is maintained during economic shifts and emphasizes community empowerment as they adapt to these transformations.

Research Problem/Statement of Purpose

Hidol, is a fundamental component of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community's diet and is intricately linked to their cultural identity. This practice has evolved over generations, influenced by factors such as urbanization, economic aspirations, and the integration of domestic cultural practices into commercial markets, creating distinctive employment opportunities. The commercialization of *hidol* presents a compelling area of study within the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, particularly concerning women who have traditionally been

engaged in weaving and handloom activities. This research seeks to explore the transition of *hidol* production from a domestic setting to a commercial enterprise while examining the implications of commercialization on the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of the community.

Research objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- a. To examine the socioeconomic effects resulting from the shift of *hidol* from domestic kitchens to commercial markets within the Bishnupriya Manipuri community.
- b. To evaluate the cultural adaptation of *hidol* production in response to market demand within the Bishnupriya Community.
- c. To investigate the challenges and limitations faced in the production of *hidol* as a commodity in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community.

Research questions

The research questions of this study are as follows:

- a. What are the socioeconomic effects of transitioning the production of *hidol* from domestic settings to commercial markets in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community?
- b. How can the cultural adaptation of *hidol* production be assessed in response to various market demands?
- c. What challenges does the Bishnupriya Manipuri community face due to the production of *hidol*?

Research Design

This study has employed a *qualitative ethnographic research design*. This design has explored the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, which allowed the researcher to immerse in the culture and community setting for a long time to observe the patterns and cultural significance of the people within the community while documenting the interactions and lives of the participants involved in the study.

Data Collection

The different tools used in this study were both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observations. The interviews were designed to explore the *experiences, perspectives, motivations, and challenges* faced by women in the community while transitioning from domestic kitchens to commercialized markets. The sample size of the study is 10, as it is a *pilot ethnographic study*. Secondary data were collected from journals, books, and online databases such as JSTOR, Research Gate, Google Scholar, and INFLIBNET's Shodhganga.

Data Analysis

The data collected were scrutinized to check for significant growth in the socio-economic conditions of the Bishnupriya Manipuri due to the initiative of transforming *hidol* production into a local market.

Ethical Considerations

The respondents were provided with consent forms before the interviews and the observational process. They were also informed of the purpose of the study, allowing them to withdraw at any time, and proper measures were taken to ensure their confidentiality.

FINDINGS

The analysis was conducted using semi-structured interviews and participant observation. These headings represent the principal themes of this study and are further categorized into sub-themes to facilitate a more profound understanding of *hidol*'s transition from domestic kitchens to commercial markets within the Bishnupriya Manipuri community.

Socio-Economic effects of the transition

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community has experienced a significant transformation in its socio-economic landscape, particularly in terms of business and employment. This transformation is notably attributed to the commercialization of *hidol*, which has concurrently enhanced the community's standard of living and health. This development has facilitated the entry of both men and women into entrepreneurial production, resulting in shifts in household dynamics and community empowerment.

Sub theme 1: Income Change

“While growing up, I never needed to work. However, following my marriage, I relocated to Guwahati and assumed the responsibility of supporting my family, as a single income was insufficient for household expenses. Consequently, I began producing and selling hidol on a weekly basis, which provided a substantial source of income and enabled me to cover my child's educational expenses.”

This transition has contributed to household stability while generating substantial opportunities for women in the production processes. The data collected from the interviews indicate a notable impact on family living standards, as the increased earnings of previously unemployed women now constitute a significant source of family income. The community recognizes the importance of local market commercialization in enhancing the living standards. However, not all community members perceive commercialization as having a positive economic impact. An elder from the community expressed concern, stating, *‘I fear that in search of profits, the age-old traditions and rituals that made our food special will get lost and that will be a major loss for the upcoming generations.’* This statement underscores the complex interplay between economic opportunities and cultural preservation.

Sub theme 2: Role Change

“After my marriage, I became a member of a joint family. As the youngest daughter in this household, I was consistently perceived as the youngest individual, a perception that was disconcerting given my previous role as the eldest child in my family of origin. Consequently, I resolved to engage in the sale of hidol, inspired by a friend who had successfully initiated this enterprise in her locality. I contemplated establishing a similar venture in my own area, which not only provided me with a sense of contributing meaningfully but also elevated my status within the family, ensuring that my presence and voice were acknowledged.”

The commercialization of *hidol* has significantly impacted the roles of women by integrating them into the economic sphere and offering employment opportunities, as well as social and individual identities. Initially, women in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community were primarily engaged in domestic roles; however, this shift has enabled them to assume entrepreneurial responsibilities, thereby altering the household dynamics. This transition has allowed women to enter a domain traditionally dominated by men. Observations from the community suggest that some perceive women as ‘losing their domestic touch due to their involvement in market activities.’ This statement reflects the notion that growth is a matter of choice and is perceived based on convenience.

Sub theme 3: Impact of increased income

“Managing the household expenses independently proved challenging, as I was the sole income earner in my family. Recognizing the necessity of supplementing my income to support my ailing parents, given my role as the eldest daughter, I resolved to initiate a supplementary venture. My unmarried status is a consequence of the substantial responsibilities I bear. Upon learning about women in certain regions engaging in the production of hidol as a small-scale enterprise, I decided to embark on this endeavor as a side business. My strategy involved distributing the product weekly by depositing containers in local shops. I negotiated with a shop owner, agreeing to provide him with a commission in exchange for attracting additional customers. Within a month, I began receiving increased requests for the product.”

Economic empowerment has facilitated women’s active participation and confidence in discussions pertaining to finance, education, and household management. Interviews predominantly indicated that women possess sufficient confidence to make household decisions because of their financial contributions. These contributions have enabled them to enhance their families by providing educational opportunities for their children. The community, primarily based on agriculture, has experienced changes in living standards due to urbanization, necessitating dual-income households to meet daily needs. During participant observation, it was noted that not all individuals embraced this change, with some expressing concerns that it might lead to familial conflicts, thereby disrupting traditional roles maintained by the community for generations.

Sub theme 4: Social Status Change

“I am from a middle-class background and while growing up I had numerous dreams and aspirations. I was consistently aware of the necessity to engage in a profession that would not only elevate my personal circumstances but also contribute positively to my community. This conviction motivated my professional endeavors. Currently, I am the proprietor of three small

enterprises specializing in the sale of northeastern food products, with a primary focus on hidol and hukon²⁰, which are staple foods within my community.”

Employment often enhances women’s social status, as it is closely tied to identity and social change, encompassing independence, empowerment, and upliftment. Participation in occupational settings is swiftly recognized, thereby elevating individuals’ status within familial and community contexts. Interviews revealed that women experienced increased respect from peers and family members because of their role in generating a stable income. Initially, many women were solely identified as homemakers; however, they are now acknowledged as providers, alongside their spouses. Despite these positive developments, some community members expressed concerns about the implications of this newfound recognition, which entailed significant pressure. It has been observed that there is apprehension regarding the dual roles women are expected to assume due to the commercialization of a product, which is time-intensive in nature.

Traditional Fermentation Practices and Cultural Significance

Fermentation is a community-oriented practice. The tribes and non-tribes have diverse ways of storing *hidol*, unlike the Bishnupriya Manipuris. Usually, it is stored in a *matka*²¹, but Bishnupriyas store it in bamboo sticks or containers in their refrigerators. This is an age-old practice which has been passed on from mothers to daughters and has been carried ahead. This is associated with the cultural identity of the community.

Sub theme 1: Cultural Significance

“Having been raised in a Bishnupriya Manipuri community, my relocation to Guwahati has immersed me in a diverse cultural environment. This transition has highlighted the unfamiliarity of our traditional products to others. Specifically, there is a lack of awareness regarding hidol and its associated benefits. A prevalent stereotype exists concerning the odor of hidol, leading to its general dismissal within society. This realization has prompted me to consider that future generations may miss the opportunity to experience the cultural significance of consuming foods that are considered “normal” within our community.”

The practice of traditional fish fermentation embodies a rich tapestry of societal and family bonds that have been passed down for generations. Most respondents stated that ‘*hidol is not just a means of sustenance but also a part of their culture. Except during the celebration of religious festivals, hidol is used on almost every occasion.*’ It is something the community relies on even during the worst health conditions. It is considered medicinal, which is why whenever someone loses their appetite or has an upset stomach, they generally have hot steamed rice with *hidol*. It is a comfort food for almost everyone in the community. It has also been noted that this community does not rely on meat consumption, but their dependency on *hidol* is equivalent to survival. This sentiment reflects the traditional significance of cultural and collective identities. The relationship between culinary practices and cultural significance harbors a collective sense of belonging and continuity within the community. These practices

²⁰ Hukon is the colloquial term for fermented dry fish in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community.

²¹ Matka is an earthen vessel used for storing items in huge quantity.

have been passed down through generations, reinforcing strong familial ties and communal heritage amidst external pressures for change.

Sub theme 2: Knowledge Transmission Method

“I often observed my grandmother and mother preparing hidol in the Benki (mortar), and they would meticulously explain the entire process to me with the intention that I might convey this knowledge to future generations. However, the challenge arises from the pervasive influence of technology and the urban environment in which my children are situated, leading to their clear disinterest in the traditional method of hidol preparation. They express a preference for purchasing it, akin to the practices of individuals from other communities. I do not blame them for this. The process is indeed quite laborious, and given the current demands on time, it is understandable that individuals may find it challenging to engage with it!”

The transmission of cultural practices related to food often occurs through informal channels, such as familial communication, where skills, recipes, and methods are exchanged between the elderly and the children. Two respondents noted that their children expressed interest in understanding the production of *hidol* and its distinction from the consumption practices of the broader community. Upon inquiry, the respondents were keen to ‘*elucidate the differences between the preparation of hidol and hentak*,’ emphasizing the unique characteristics of *hidol* compared to *hentak*. The primary distinction lies in the type of fish used and the subsequent storage process of the paste. *Hidol* is exclusively prepared with fermented dry fish, whereas *hentak* can be prepared using both fresh and dry fish. The duration of fermentation also varies notably between the two; *hidol* undergoes a quicker process, unlike *hentak*, which takes one to two months to ferment. The initial step involves sun-drying the fish to achieve a crispy texture, which facilitates easier grinding. After grinding the fish in a wooden mortar, a whole stem of *kochu* (*Alocasia odora*) is added to both *hidol* and *hentak*, and they are further pounded in a wooden or iron mortar with a pestle until a paste-like consistency is achieved.

The respondents took pride in sharing the process of preparing *hidol* because of the emotional and familial connections it fostered. During the participant observation, it was noted that elders took pride in sharing the process of making *hidol* but also shared their gloom about how the process is getting lost due to the dependency on market-based products. This method of transmission not only keeps the practice alive but also highlights the correlation between culture and fermentation, ensuring that the younger generation is mindful of and acknowledges both the technique and the significance of fermentation as a cultural context.

Sub theme 3: Traditional tools & Maintenance

“Benki and duhoni are integral to our process. Grinding must occur within the Benki; otherwise, the fish and kochu²² may not be adequately ground to form the paste, potentially compromising a batch of hidol, which requires significant effort. The substantial time and energy invested in washing and drying the fish underscore the necessity of supporting precision throughout the process.”

²² Kochu is a colloquial term used for taro stems in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community.

Traditional tools used in the process of making *hidol* hold cultural significance as they involve the methods and techniques that introduce the various practices of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. Various tools are significant in the community for different practices. Some tools are associated with food, others with handloom and weaving practices, and others with agriculture. During the observation, one of the community members explained the significance of cleaning the mortars and pestles with care, as these tools carry history and have been passed on for generations. It is associated with respect and honor for the ancestors. The dedication to maintaining the longevity of the tools portrays the dedication and commitment of the community members to safeguard their age-old practices. Most interviews focused on migration, distorting the community's history. The migration has left the community with limited information about the practices and cultural methods, due to which the coming generations will be restricted to limited information about the community.

Sub theme 4: Change in methods over time

“In the initial stages of my career in hidol production, I consistently utilized the Benki for grinding fish. However, as I have aged, my physical strength has diminished, necessitating the use of a grinder for processing the dried fish. Although the grinder does not replicate the exact texture achieved with the Benki, it serves as an adequate alternative. I also store the hidol in a container. Having engaged in hidol production professionally for the past two decades, I have found that storage has become less challenging. While the traditional method was indeed labor-intensive, it was considered authentic; however, contemporary practices now prioritize convenience.”

Fermentation has undergone significant evolution over the past few decades, primarily influenced by factors such as resource availability and fluctuations in market demand. Traditionally, *hidol* was stored in bamboo sticks; however, with the advancement of time and acceleration of global processes, these methods have evolved. Previously, production occurred two to three times annually because of the labor-intensive nature of the process, resulting in large-scale production. Currently, the consistent availability of resources allows for the preference of fresh batches of *hidol*, facilitating the commercialization of these fresh products rather than older ones, which are susceptible to spoilage due to changing weather conditions. One respondent remarked, *‘I still use the traditional method of making hidol, but I also consider market trends. As our processes evolve, embracing innovation is essential for growth.’* Observations revealed that most respondents maintained small warehouses for product storage, enabling batch production and market distribution. One respondent even distributed her products nationwide through local carrier services, a development made possible by changes in the storage practices. The consumption process has also evolved, with students and young professionals often transporting *shidol* in batches because it is unavailable at their places of study or work. The integration of traditional and modern methods underscores the resilience and adaptability of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. The members endeavor to preserve their ethnic identity while engaging with market dynamics; however, some express concern that commercialization may dilute traditional practices, while the majority recognize that these traditions are dynamic and have continually evolved. This evolution reflects their commitment to cultural authenticity while facilitating knowledge transmission and growth at the individual

and community levels. The community acknowledges that balancing traditional and contemporary practices offers opportunities for commercialization of the products.

Cultural Adaptation and Market demand

The Bishnupriya Manipuri people are attached to their culture and traditions. This community does not consider the process of preparing *hidol* a culinary task but embodies ancestral wisdom, social rituals, and collective memory. They maintain their traditions by reinforcing their cultural identity in the face of urbanization and modernization. They understand that maintaining its traditional and cultural practices is essential for passing down values and stories to future generations, ensuring that their cultural essence remains intact for a long time.

Sub theme 1: Feelings about changes in traditional practices

“Having lived for an extended period, I have observed numerous transformations, such as the transition from traditional mortar to modern grinders, from bamboo sticks to contemporary containers, and from reliance on sunlight to the adoption of refrigeration. It is my belief that our ancestors would not be pleased with these developments. The introduction of urban characteristics by the younger generations is eroding the authenticity of my community. Historically, our community has been rural, with a strong dependence on agriculture, handloom, and weaving. However, the commercialization of traditional practices, such as the business surrounding hidol, is a source of dissatisfaction for me.”

The community, characterized by its longstanding history and evolutionary development, places significant emphasis on adherence to traditional customs, values, and practices. Respondents frequently highlighted that the production of fermented products transcends mere culinary endeavors and serves as a crucial connection to their ancestral heritage and cultural identity. The transition towards commercialization raised concerns among respondents regarding the potential erosion of the community's intrinsic essence. This concern reflects a profound emotional attachment to traditional practice. The community is currently experiencing a period of tension, illustrating the challenge of balancing cultural preservation with the necessity of adapting to contemporary technological and societal demands. The impact of urbanization is evident, as the community faces increasing pressure to adopt new market practices. This shift may either facilitate the preservation of cultural identity or require adaptation to advanced technological contexts to enhance the community's socioeconomic conditions.

Sub theme 2: Cultural Identity

“I am a Bishnupriya Manipuri woman married to a Meitei man. The Bishnupriya community has often met identity conflicts. We have been subjected to derogatory labels, which is regrettable. However, the hidol serves as a potent symbol of identity for the Bishnupriya Manipuri community. I take immense pride in seeing the emergence of many entrepreneurs who are starting ventures centered around hidol.”

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community has long grappled with issues of identity, a struggle worsened by the various names attributed to them and the lack of official recognition, underscoring their ongoing conflict with the government's neglect. While the community's

adaptation to commercialization and urbanization has been perceived as beneficial, given their limited visibility, market demands have facilitated their increased presence. Despite the community's participation across various sectors, entrepreneurship and business remain unexplored territories. An elder within the community remarked, *'Business is detrimental; it will contaminate the environment, and we belong to a farming community. Men should refrain from engaging in business, and women should focus on childcare rather than undertaking men's roles.'* This perspective reflects the conservative views of the older generation, who perceive progress as being adversarial. Conversely, other community members involved in business express pride in their Bishnupriya Manipuri heritage while acknowledging their evolving identity as businesspeople, which has become integral to their self-conception.

Sub theme 3: Changes in sourcing of ingredients

"While observing my sister, I have seen her use bananas and whole wheat flour to create a paste, rendering the hidol stickier. This traditional method is not commonly observed in contemporary practices. While authenticity remains significant, it is equally crucial to consider the way information about the process is disseminated. Historically, the fish used for hidol were directly caught and dried, but now they are readily available in the market, eliminating the need for prolonged preparation periods."

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community has witnessed significant transformations in its traditional practices and methods. According to the data collected, the preparation of *hidol*, which was once exclusively stored in bamboo sticks, has now been adapted to being stored in containers or standard polythene bags for commercial purposes. This evolution signifies a blend of modern convenience and the preservation of traditional elements. Over time, the texture of *hidol* has changed, resulting in a less dense consistency that eases a more efficient production process. The ingredients have similarly evolved; while the community once adhered strictly to specific resources, there is now a greater degree of flexibility. Several types of fermented dry fish are currently incorporated into *hidol* production. This transition sustains production levels while accommodating the effects of urbanization. However, it may also stand for a shift away from traditional methods that emphasize local sourcing and community ties.

Challenges and Limitations

Market challenges

- While the production of *hidol* is a novel occupation for the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, it has been practiced by various other communities for decades. This established history presents a challenge for members of the Bishnupriya Manipuri community who want to enter the business. As this occupation is new to the community, marketing efforts may progress at a slower pace for those involved.
- The commercialization of *hidol* is still in its infancy among the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, resulting in a lack of information regarding government policies and schemes designed to support small-scale enterprises in the community. This gap in support may hinder growth opportunities for both men and women and impede efforts to enhance economic stability in the community.

Limitations

- One of the primary limitations of this study is its reliance on a pilot study design with a limited sample size, which affects the generalizability of the findings. As this study remains in its preliminary stage, insights regarding the commercialization of *hidol* necessitate further research with a more robust dataset to ensure its validity.
- The occupation has been introduced by marginalized groups within the community and is often viewed with contempt by other social groups because of its association with unpleasant odors and a perceived low status. This perception could skew the data, as participants may stand for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- While commercialization may offer improved opportunities for the community, some individuals resist changes because of their fear of losing traditional practices and cultural identity. It is evident that the older generation resists entrepreneurship within the community.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the reasons behind the Bishnupriya Manipuri community's desire to transition the production of *hidol* from kitchens to local markets. Additionally, this study focused on the socioeconomic aspects, cultural adaptation, and challenges associated with this transition. The most prevalent insights from the interviews were as follows:

- The commercialization process has emerged as one of the most advantageous activities within the community, as it has generated numerous employment opportunities for individuals across various age groups, including the elderly, middle-aged, and young. This development has enabled community members to enhance their standard of living. This observation is consistent with existing research on the positive impact of traditional food practices on current and future generations. Furthermore, this transition has altered household dynamics, empowering women to participate in decision-making processes concerning domestic affairs.
- The commercialization of *hidol* represents a significant source of cultural pride and happiness for the Bishnupriya community owing to its indigenous nature. *Hidol* embodies cultural identity, ancestral wisdom, and the integrity of the community. These elements risk being lost if the practice of fermentation is discontinued and if there is a lack of knowledge about this process, which is essential for preserving traditions and legacies. Despite the transformations and evolution over time, the community has diligently adapted to modern techniques, successfully integrating them with traditional practices without compromising their cultural identity.
- The data successfully identified numerous factors associated with the commercialization process, including market competition, lack of governmental support, community-related stigmas, and traditions, techniques, and identity crises. The study also acknowledges limitations concerning generalizability due to the small sample size and potential bias towards lower socioeconomic groups.

- The theoretical implications of this study underscore the significance of both economic development and cultural theories in interpreting the findings. Economic development theory elucidates the integration of traditional practices with economic opportunities, thereby facilitating community prosperity. Concurrently, cultural theory emphasizes the preservation of cultural significance and identity, even amidst the challenges posed by commercialization and urbanization.

The practical implications for policymakers and stakeholders within the Bishnupriya Manipuri community are as follows:

1. There is a need for targeted support and policies aimed at small-scale entrepreneurs, with particular emphasis on women, to assist them in navigating the challenges of market dynamics and entrepreneurship.
2. Additionally, a visible platform for commercializing traditional products should be established to preserve cultural knowledge and identity.
3. Significant efforts should be directed towards creating platforms that facilitate the smooth transmission of cultural practices to future generations.
4. Furthermore, addressing the stigma associated with *hidol* and other fermented products could enhance community acceptance and market growth, thereby benefiting the community.
5. Future research should focus on conducting large-sample studies to improve the generalizability of the findings, examine the long-term benefits of commercialization on various traditional methods, and compare the techniques used in the Bishnupriya Manipuri community with those of other communities.

The transition of *hidol* as a commercial business represents a complex relationship between the preservation of culture and economic opportunities, as well as impactful social changes. However, the aspect of commercialization and urbanization has created a lot of opportunities, but it has also created sizable number of challenges in maintaining the authenticity of traditions while marketing their traditional homemade products. This study contributes to understanding the practices of indigenous communities for economic development while preserving cultural heritage.

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