



FOOD CULTURE OF RURAL KHASI PEOPLE, MEGHALAYA: A LESSON OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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Food culture can be defined as the attitude, beliefs and practice that surround the production and consumption of food in a large scale. Food culture is incorporated with the ethnicity, cultural heritage and religious belief of the people. Traditional foods and cuisine are passed down from one generation to the next within families and communities. Traditionally, the Rural Khasi people derived local food items from their localities, villages and seasonal markets. Rural people since time of immemorial learn to live a simple life and identify the type of crops and vegetables that grow with different climatic condition and type of soil. Till date, the rural khasi people adopt the method of cultivation, harvesting and collecting of food item in a unique and traditional way. Similarly, the food culture is apparently remained unchanged except in different festive occasions. Food is an essential part of people's lives, and not just a means of survival. It is also the main factor in how we view and differentiate people and influences the impacts on their culture. Different cultures have varieties of food and ingredients and this is a fusion of foods with their culture. During the beginning of COVID 19 Pandemic lockdown, the social and economic life of the people is at agony and distress. Many households in rural areas experiences starvation and the Government tries hard to assure people not to live a fearful life by distribution of food items at the minimum price or sometimes free of cost. The Covid 19 Pandemic has changed people's perception and many rural household in the villages of South West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya went back to the traditional food culture of the previous century.

Keywords: *Food culture, Rural Khasi People, Khasi Society, Matrilineal Society, Covid 19 pandemic*

1.1.Introduction: Food Culture:

Traditionally, cuisine is passed down from one generation to the next. It also operates as an expression of *cultural identity*. Food items are differed from one ethnic group to the others based on various factors.

Food culture (by definition) refers to the practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of **food**.

Cultural identity is the **identity** or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct **culture**

Cultural identities are influenced by several different factors such as ones religion, ancestry, skin colour, language, class, education, profession, skill, family and political attitudes. Culture is what makes everyone different from who they are and where they originate. It embraces all the aspects of human life and their way of communicating and interacting with other human beings. Food is an essential part of people's lives, and not just a means of survival. It is also the main factor in how we view and differentiate people and influences the impacts on their culture. Different cultures have varieties of food and ingredients and this is a fusion of foods with their culture. There is a strong link between culture and food; this includes their religion, tradition. Media plays an important role supporting in retaining culture and food identity. The myriad of published cookbooks and food magazines, culinary festivals, TV shows, celebrity chefs, blogs has completely changed the meaning of food.

1.2.Profile of Meghalaya and Khasi People:

Meghalaya is home to 86 Percent of Tribal people (Census 2011). In villages almost 100 percent of residents are Tribal people. According to Census 2011, population in Meghalaya was 29, 66,889 which shows a decadal growth rate of 27.95 percent compared to 2001. The projected population in 2020 is 36, 88,942. There are three major tribes in Meghalaya i.e The Khasi, Garo and Jaintia. Rural areas are predominantly inhabited by the indigenous Tribal people.

The Khasi people are indigenous ethnic group of Meghalaya with around 56.4 % of the population of Meghalaya. Though around 74.54 % of the Khasi populace has embraced Christianity (census 2011) and the

rest still follow and practice their age old indigenous religion, which is known as *Ka Niam Khasi* or *Niam tre*.

The main crops produced by the Khasi people are betel leaf, areca nut, oranges, local Khasi rice and vegetables. The Khasi people do not have sub-tribes, a confusion that sometimes arises from the expression *Khyntiam*, *u Pnar*, *u Bhoi*, *u War*. Khasi inhabiting the northern part are known as Bhoi, as that area is often called Ri Bhoi. People in the east are known as the Pnar, and they call their land as Rilum Jaintia. The South is called War or Ri War, because of its mountainous regions and soil fertility.

The Khasi language is classified as part of the Austro-Asiatic language family. According to Peter Wilhelm Schmidt, the Khasi people are related to the Mon-Khmer people of South East Asia. Multiple types of research indicate that the Austroasiatic populations in India are derived from migrations from Southeast Asia during the Holocene period. Many of the words are similar to other Austroasiatic languages such as Palaung and Khmer language

1.3 Matrilineal Society of Meghalaya:

Meghalaya Matrilineal society exhibits the uniqueness of culture and believes in the diversified culture of India and the world. Amongst the three main tribes of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo peoples, Khasi and Jaintia have traditionally followed the same culture and lifestyles. Mostly talk, matrilineal society in Meghalaya reflects the “Khasi and Jaintia tribe” or the “Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum” where many scholars and academicians draw their attention to the Khasi Matrilineal Society. The Khasi Society is a society whereby descent and succession are from mother’s clan and the ancestral property passes through the youngest daughter. Some of the common characteristics that pertain to the uniqueness of the Khasi matrilineal society are:-

1. **Marriage and lineage systems:** Marriage cannot take place within the same clan (Kur, Jait). Marriage is considered as sacred and pure. Marriage pattern and lineage system are usually centered on women. Children of Khasi women have traditionally inherited their title from the mother. The lineage is traced in mother’s line and the property by the youngest daughter of the family (Khaduh). With the passing of times, ancestral property is being divided among daughters of the same families

but additional property is inherited by the youngest daughter (Khaduh). Men are deprived of their right to inherit ancestral property, even though in recent times some families provide ownership property right to their sons with the concept of equality amongst siblings but the share of son's property is less than of daughters. The youngest daughter (Khaduh) is being considered in the community not only as the custodian of family's property but as the keeper of the family's legacy.

2. The Khasi political system is symbolized by the Dorbar which is the Systems of local governance among the Khasis. One of the Khasi prominent writer, Mrs. Patricia Mukhim notes four stages of Dorbar namely, Dorbar Ing (Family Dorbar), Dorbar Kur (Clan Dorbar), Dorbar Shnong (Village Dobar) and Dorbar Raid (Dorbar of Cluster of Villages). Traditionally, in the Khasi Society, women were debarred to participate in the decision making process especially in the Village Dorbar and Dorbar Raid or Hima. They were not the electorate to these dorbars (Councils) in election of Village Headman or members of the Village Councils. In Khasi Society, "U Rangbah khat-ar bor" and "ka kynthei shibor" which means men have twelve unit of power or energy while women have only one unit.

2.1.Objectives:

1. To summarize the prominent food items generally use by Khasi people in Meghalaya.
2. To study the various traditional food items used by rural Khasi people in southern part of Meghalaya during the time of difficulties.
3. To study the food culture and practices of rural people.

2.2.Methodology;

The study is based on primary investigation and interaction with some households belongs to the War Area which falls under the Southern part of Meghalaya bordering Bangladesh.

3. Finding

The Khasi society is matrilineal and women play an important role as part of the major work force of the tribal community. The typical Khasi meal consisted of a plateful of rice, one or two pieces of meat and vegetables including potato. The diet is monotonous and has very little change in terms of the methods of preparation. The only spices used in cooking are onion, turmeric, salt, ginger and green chillies. This typical

meal is eaten twice or thrice a day. Though the typical Khasi diet is still being followed obviously changes are being observed due to influences from the outside world. The items consumed were categorized into cereals, pulses, flesh foods, green leafy vegetables, other vegetables, roots and tubers, fruits, dairy products, flesh foods, fats and oils and sugar and jaggery.

3.1. Food culture or practice of rural khasi people: Normally, rural khasi people use to take four meals a day:-

1. Morning tea: Majority of households used to take red tea and a plate of rice with few items like meat, potato chips, dry fish.
2. Lunch: Rice, meat (pork/beef/chicken/egg/dry fish) and vegetables
3. Afternoon Tea: Some households still take tea and a bowl of rice. Few households can afford to buy bread and snack. Only during some special occasion or during free time that people used to prepare their local traditional cake, bread and snack.
4. Dinner: almost similar to lunch

3.2. Traditional food items of rural Meghalaya with reference to the War area of South West Khasi Hills

District: Most of the food made in the area is made from Red rice which is locally known as khaw saw. It has high nutritional value. The unpolished rice is rich in antioxidants and micro-nutrients like Vit B, Iron, Calcium and Zinc.

3.3. Major food items:

A: Staple food item:-

1. Rice (Ja): Local rice (Red), and non-local rice; sometime mix local and non-local rice produce a different taste.
2. Jadoh: In Khasi language, 'Ja' means rice and 'Doh' means meat. The traditional jadoh is made with short grain red rice with pork
3. Ja phandieng: Rice made from Phandieng (cassava). Phandieng(cassava) skin is removed and expose to the sun light for few days to make it dry out water. Later on, the root can be grinded through local motar (wooden thlong) and Pestle (wooden synrei). Once it becomes powder like flour, it is ready to cook in the way rice is prepared. Sometime, the powder is mixed with rice to make it tastier. This is the traditional food of the people residing in the southern part of Meghalaya called the war people.

This type of food is traditionally meet the requirement of the people especially during the difficult times like epidemic in the past 5 decades and even during the period of covid 19 lock down.

The cassava powder is also used to make steam cake. Sometimes once the skin of cassava gets removed, it can be simply cooked by using only water till it is become soft and ready to eat. The war people earned some amount of money by carrying these types of food items and sell during the local market day which is being held once in 4 days. This is one of the sources of earning by the war people.



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4. Ja-tle: 'Ja' means rice, tle means 'palm tree'. Jla-tle means rice mixes with palm powder. The particular palm is usually found in the forest. Traditionally people in the olden days cuts the palm tree into pieces of which they take out only the soft layer of the palm, then the soft layer is left to dried up in the sun or roof top. Later they ground it into powder. This powdered palm is then cooks and prepared as rice or sometimes makes with red rice. The powdered palm can also be used to make cake. Most people in the Southern part of South West Khasi Hills District, during the Covid 19 pandemic used the traditional method of preparing this Jatle.
5. Ja-riewhadem: It is prepared from maize. The ripe maize is left to dry up in the sun or hang on the roof top. This dried maize is either ground in the grinding stone or in a wooden mortar (Thlong) and pestle (synrei). This semi-powdered maize is then cook as rice or sometime mixed with rice.

3.3. Snacks:

1. Pusaw: Literally ‘pu’ is a short form of ‘kpu’ which means bread, ‘saw’ means red. Pusaw is a traditional Khasi snack made of local red rice. The rice is first thoroughly cleaned then soaked in water for at least two hours. After the water is drained using traditional baskets known as *Khoh or Shang*, the rice is grounded to powder using a mortar and pestle. The traditional method of making Pusaw involves first making a paste by mixing the fine rice powder with a small amount of warm water. Then, edible soda is added in the proportion of 1 kilo rice to a pinch. A minimal amount of sugar is also added to the mixture at this time. Next, the cooking pot is heated in a traditional clay stove and oil is slowly added. Once the oil is hot, the paste is poured into the pot and the pot is covered with a lid. On top of the lid, some heated charcoals are kept so that same amount of heat is getting from all sides.

2. Pumaloi is one of the favorite rice dish of khasi people. Pumaloi essentially means powdered rice, which has been steamed. A unique pot called *Khiew Ranei* is used to cook the rice. It is cooked on medium heat with just the right amount of water, and balancing the amount of heat.

3. Putharo- It is a flat shaped steamed rice cake prepared with ground rice batter that is ladled into an earthen pan called ‘sarao’ placed over a wood fire.

4. Pusyep- It is a steamed rice cake made with ground red rice batter that is put on a cloth (placed over a mould) and then steamed. It has a soft and crumbly texture.

5. Pukhlein- It is powdered rice, sweetened with jaggery. The jaggery and rice mixture is fried together in a pan, to form a deep thick paste.

6. Pudoh- Pudoh is also a dish made from boiled, powdered rice stuffed with pork. The dust rice is steamed along with small pieces of pork to infuse the flavor.

7. Pusla- The powdered rice is mixed with jaggery and wrapped with la-met leaf and then steam in a pan.

3.4. Vegetables: Due to poor soil quality and climatic conditions, vegetables cannot be grown well in the region, so they have to depend on the market. But due to poor economic conditions, many of them could not even afford to buy it. So they have to use existing herbs as vegetables. Some of these herbs have medicinal value. Most of the commonly used herb are mentioned below;-

1. **Botanical name:** *Fagopyrum esculentum*

Local name: *Jarain (Khasi)*

Part used: *Leave*

Used for: *high blood pressure and constipation*



2. **Chameleon Plant: Botanical name:** *Houttuynia cordata*

Local name: *Jamyrdoh (Khasi), Macha duribak (Garo)*

Part used: *Whole plant*

Used for: *treatment of cholera, dysentery and blood purification*



3. **Mint Or Pudina:**



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Mint is one of the oldest culinary herbs known to mankind. According to Macrobiotic Nutritionist and Health Practitioner Shilpa Arora ND, "Mint has very powerful antioxidant properties. The leaves can be juiced or made into a raita. Mint is excellent to manage blood sugar levels and treat skin conditions. In summers, one should particularly add mint to their diet. Mint is very cooling and aids in digestion and breathing disorders too."

4. Jatira is a wild edible commonly found in Meghalaya. The leaves and stems of the water celery are a good source of protein with vitamins A, B & C, iron, calcium.

3.5. Meat: Mostly people eat pork, beef and chicken but not regularly as the local market are operated once in 4 days or weekly basis. *Doh Khleh* is a delicious salad made out of minced pork, onions and chillies.

4. Suggestions:

1. The agriculture department should conduct study on the health benefits of the traditional staple food especially Ja-Tle and Ja-Phandieng.
2. Effort should be made to encourage rural people to identify the traditional herbs and vegetation as traditional food items for the overall benefit of the society.
4. **Conclusion:** There is a strong link between culture and food. Media plays an important role in supporting and retaining culture and food identity. Food culture shows the ethnicity of people of any particular tribe which can easily differentiated from other tribes. Mostly speaking, the traditional food culture of the tribal or rural people has changed with the passage of time due to the improvement in the socio-economic life of the people. But in times of pandemic and social chaos when the world is in complete crisis, people start to realize the value of traditional food items for survival.

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