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Traditional Food: An Overview Of Gorkha Cuisine In Assam

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Abstract: Assam a Northeastern state of India is also renowned for its rich culture, tradition and heritage and its delicious cuisines. Food is one of the most essential requirements for human existence. Food goes beyond mere sustenance. Food serves not only as a means of nourishment but also a way for individuals which give a peculiar identity that has possess and practiced by his family, community and caste from generation to generation. It becomes a reflection of community's history, geography, climate, religion, economy and cultural values. It also serves as a vital element of social life, cultural expression, and community identity. The present study is an extensive study of diverse common food habits and culinary practices irrespective of different division amongst the Gorkha community in Assam.

Index Terms - Culture, Cuisine, Custom, Food, Gorkha, Taboos, Tradition, Vedic.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Humans have also been called a food-seeking race. Food is one of the most essential requirements for human existence. In the Vedas, the word "Anna" or food means the essence of life. In the Upanishads too, food is described as a vital element: "Anna Brahma", meaning "food is divine" It is not only the primary source of energy and nutrients necessary for the growth, development, and maintenance of the human body, but also serves as a vital element of social life, cultural expression, and community identity. Before agriculture, humans have depended on nature's offerings- roots, fruits, honey, meat, fish- for survival as raw. Over time, humans began to cultivate crops. agriculture, fire and animal husbandry evolved with knowledge and labour. From nature's wild roots and fruits, humans began domesticating crops and animals through cultivation and breeding. This transformation was a major step in civilization and breeding. This transformation was a major step in civilization, turning food into not just a means of survival, but a reflection of culture, society, religion, and rituals. When edible substances are prepared through various processes and made suitable for consumption is called food. This food is also divided into two broad categories- primary foods and secondary food. People of Assam generally have rice (Daal-Bhat) as their primary food while various products made of rice or other considered as secondary food of the Gorkhas in Assam. Foods are generally distributed in four categories based on how they are eaten- "Charba-Choshya-Lehya-Peya". 'Charba'- foods that are meant to be chewed and consumed, 'Chosya'- consumed by sucking, 'Lehya'- foods that are licked, 'Peya'- this refers to liquids or drinks.

1.0.1 Importance and Relevance of the study:

In the current times, cultural displays showcasing the lifestyles of indigenous communities of Assam are drawing significant interest. Food traditions are a crucial part of this cultural identity. By studying food habits, we can better understand once culture. If detailed research conducted, it will be highly beneficial for understanding the socio-cultural landscape of this communities. These studies could serve as primary material for broader anthropological and cultural investigations. Moreover, this knowledge can be shared through cultural exhibitions and social documentation to highlight their relevance and uniqueness.

2.0 Method of Research:

The current research topic is analytical, descriptive and empirical one. The study is based on the secondary sources of data. The secondary data has been collected from various research articles, books, journals, Newspaper, internet sources.

3.0 Background: Food and Gorkha Identity:

Through historical and anthropological evidence, it is observed that different ethnic communities have inhabited Indian land at different times. These communities have brought with them diverse food habits, clothing, customs, and traditions. The Gorkhali community of Assam is no exception to this phenomenon. The food habits of our ancestors are deeply rooted in their environment, beliefs, and daily lives. Over time, these habits evolved into traditions, shaping the cultural identity of their communities. When a specific way of cooking, eating, or choosing food is passed down through generations, it becomes more than just nutrition- it becomes a symbol of heritage and belonging.

The Gorkha community in Assam is a rich mosaic of various castes, sub-castes, languages, and belief systems. It includes groups such as Bahun, Chhetri, Tharu, Rai, Limbu, Magar, Tamang, Gurung, Kami, Newar among others. These communities represent a blend of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Kirat traditions, yet collectively identify as Gorkhas in Assam. While they differ in their languages, attire, food habits, and cultural practices, a unifying factor among them is the Nepali language, which serves both as their mother tongue and lingua franca. The Gorkha community's dietary customs are equally diverse, featuring both unique regional dishes and shared traditional foods. Broadly, Gorkhas are categorized into two groups based on cultural and religious practices: Tagadhari (sacred thread wearers), who are typically high-caste Hindus, predominantly vegetarian and abstain from alcohol; and Matwali, who may consume non-vegetarian food and alcohol. The dietary rules of high-caste Hindus are often guided by sacred texts such as the Puranas, the Upanishadas, the Bhagvat Gita and Manusmriti. The Bhagvat Gita classifies food into three categories: a) Sattvik (pure), b) Rajasic (Stimulating) and c) Tamasic (dulling) and have equal impact to human body accordingly. Whatsoever, most of Gorkha people commonly consume bhat (rice), dal (lentils), tarkari (cooked vegetables), and achar (pickle) as part of their everyday meals. This paper primarily focuses on the foods traditionally prepared in the households of Gorkhali Hindus, while also acknowledging the culinary contributions of other associated communities.

3.0.1 Traditional Gorkha Food: Gorkhali community largely beliefs in Hindu religion and their food is also associated with religion and festival based.

3.0.1.1 Bhat: Gorkha people along with other community in Assam love to have bhat (rice), dal (lentils), tarkari (cooked vegetables), and achar (pickle). They having meals 3-4 times a day having breakfast at 7-8 am, lunchtime 12-1 PM, snacks 4-5 PM, and dinner at 8-9 PM. But most of the people eat heavy meal (rice) twice a day- morning & evening. Often, the meal includes bhat, dal, tarkari and achar (pickle, chatani).

3.0.1.2 Chamre Bhat: Chamre in Gorkhali cuisine is a traditional and simple dish made primarily with rice mixed with ghee (clarified butter) and cashew nuts or raisins (optional) for garnish. Cook rice as usual add ghee and mix well so it coats every grain, add cardamom powder for fragrance. We can added potato, carrot, garlic and onion according to our taste.

3.0.1.3 Kheer/Payash: Kheer is another very popular food item prepared and consumed by the Gorkhali people, especially in birthday, shradha, marriage, puja etc. kheer is prepared in cow milk, and sugar also added cardamom, cashew, raisins and garam masala for fragrance.

3.0.1.4 Khichidi: Khichidi is another popular items cooked in Gorkhali houses. Khichdi generally prepared in Saraswati puja and Makar Sankranti. Good quality rice and lentils wash it and when fry pan hit add mustard oil add onion and garlic fry it until the colour of onion will change then add lentils (dal) and rice, add veggies like potatoes, cowflower, cabbage, carrot for taste. Serve warmly.

3.0.1.5 Dhakane: Dhakane is prepared by rice and milk. Soak the rice 1 hour before cook. Fry the rice deeply in ghee when the colour of the rice is brown then add milk, sugar, cashew, raisin, and garam masala. Fry it until it dry. Serve warmly. This is especially cooked during "Teej" festival.

3.0.1.6 Puwa: Puwa is a traditional dish made from rice flour. To prepare it, first roast the flour in ghee until it turns golden brown. Then add sugar and stir continuously over a low to medium flame. Sprinkle a little water as needed to maintain the desired consistency. Spices such as Chausur

(Garden Cress) are added for their well-known medicinal benefits. Puwa is commonly served warm to new mothers, as it believed to help relieve postpartum pain and aid in recovery.

3.0.1.7 Sel Roti: Sel Roti is a beloved traditional food in Gorkha community. It is a homemade, ring-shaped, sweet rice bread deeply fried in oil or ghee. It is made from better of ground rice flour, sugar, milk and water. One can flavoured with cardamom, cloves or ghee. The batter is poured by hand in a circular motion into hot oil, forming rings like a doughnut but thinner, crispy on the outside and soft inside. Sel-roti is a must-have during Hindu festivals such as Dashain, Tihar and Teej. It is also prepared on various rituals and ceremonies like pujas, weddings and other religious ceremonies like pujas, weddings etc. during the Bhaitika (Tihar), sister often prepare Sel Roti for their brothers as a symbol of love and care. Making Sel Roti is often a family bonding activity, especially in rural households in Assam.

3.0.2 Popular Gorkha Soups:

3.0.2.1 Gundruk: Gundruk is a traditional fermented leafy green vegetable that holds a special place in Gorkha cuisine and culture. It is primarily made by fermenting leafy greens such as mustard, radish, or cauliflower leaves, and sometimes includes radish roots. It is a practical method to preserve surplus leafy greens during the harvest season (mainly October and November), ensuring a supply of vegetables during winter when fresh produce is scarce. To prepare, large quantities of leafy greens are harvested and allowed to wilt for a day or two. The wilted leaves are shredded, packed tightly in earthenware container is sealed and kept in a warm place for about a week. After fermentation, the greens are sundried, resulting in a tangy, earthy, and umami-rich ingredient that is both shelf-stable and nutrient-sense. It is commonly served as a side dish, in soups (like gundruk ko jhol), pickles (achar), or appetizers, and is considered a comfort food for many Gorkha diaspora.

3.0.2.2 Sinki: Sinki is a traditional Gorkhali fermented vegetable dish, closely related to Gundruk but distinct in its use of radish tap roots. Rather than leafy greens. The preparation of sinki is a time-honoured method of preserving surplus radish produced at home. Fresh radishes are allowed to wilt for a few days. The leafy tops are removed, and the radish tap roots are shredded or chopped. A 2-3 feet deep pit is dug and warmed with small fire. The bottom is lined with bamboo and straw. The shredded radish is tightly packed into the pit, then covered with vegetation, rocks, wood and mud to create an airtight seal. The radish ferments for 20-30 days, primarily through the action of lactic acid bacteria, without added salt. After fermentation, the sinki is sun-dried and can be stored for a year or more. Sinki consumed as soup, pickle or appetizer.

Gundruk and Sinki is more than just a food- it is a symbol of resourcefulness and tradition for the Nepalese and their diaspora, cherished for its flavour, nutrition, and cultural roots.

3.0.2.3 Jwano ko Jhol: Carom Seed Soup is known as Ajwain soup or Jwano ko Jhol in Nepali. It is a traditional Nepali soup made primarily with jwano (carom seeds/ajwain). It is well-known for its medicinal and digestive benefits and is commonly prepared in Gorkhali households, especially for those recovering from illness, suffering from colds or digestive issues, or for postpartum mother. The soup is often given to new mothers to help increase breast milk production and strengthen the uterus after childbirth. It is also used as a home remedy for colds, coughs, and stomach discomfort.

3.0.2.4 Sollar: Sollar is also very popular in Gorkha community. Solar is prepared using curd as the main ingredient. Begin by grinding the curd together with salt and turmeric. In a heated pan, saute roughly chopped onions, garlic, and methi leaves in mustard oil until fragrant. Next, add the ground curd mixture along with some water to make it light, stirring gently to combine. This dish is delicious and perfect to enjoy warm.

3.0.2.5 Mohi: Mohi (lassi in Hindi) is another popular beverage in Gorkha community.

3.0.3 Light Foods:

3.0.3.1 Babar: Babar is a traditional Nepali dish, similar to a pancake or South Indian dosa. It is made by preparing a batter from rice flour mixed with salt and sugar. Mashed banana is sometimes added for extra flavour, depending on personal preference. The batter is poured onto a hot tawa (frying pan) and cooked until golden brown. Babar is a popular choice for breakfast in many Gorkhali households.

3.0.3.2 Chiura: flattered rice or chiura is popular food in Gorkha community. Generally, Gorkha people used to have chiura on the occasion of 15th of Asara (Second half of June, popularly known as Asar Pandrah in Gorkhali) month and during Dasain (Durga Puja) with curd and banana.

3.0.3.3 Khatte/Bhuja: It is traditional snack made from steam rice. In the traditional method, clean, good-quality sand is first heated in a pan. Steamed rice is than added to the hot sand and stirred until the

rice kernels puff up, becoming light and airy. Once puffed, the rice is separated from the sand, allowed to cool. And immediately packed to prevent moisture absorption and maintain its crispness.

Gorkhali people also used to have bhuteko makkai (popcorn), bhuteko Bhatmaas, halwa, kodo ko roti, phapar ko roti, muroi, chhurpi etc. as side dish in their daily diet.

3.0.4 Sweets: Various sweets are prepared by the Gorkha in Assam. Most of these are seasonal and religious oriented.

3.0.4.1 Kuraone: Kuraone is a traditional dish made from milk. The milk is simmered over low heat until it thickens and becomes nearly dry. Roasted wheat flour (atta) in ghee is then added to it, along with a small amount of sugar, peanuts, cashews, and cloves. The mixture is stirred well and ready to eat.

3.0.4.2 Bigauti: It is made out from cow's colostrum milk, the nutrient-rich first milk produced after giving birth. The thick colostrum's is gently boiled until it transforms into a soft, cottage cheese-like texture. Gorkha people forbidden to have milk up to 10 days from the cow of newly given birth and prepared bigauti in place having it in liquid form. This traditional preparation combines cultural heritage with powerful nutrition and unique sweets in Gorkha cuisine.

3.0.4.3 Kasar: Kasar is a sacred and popular laddoo in the Gorkha community. To prepare it, rice flour is lightly roasted in a pan. Separately, jaggery (gur) is melted until its rich gel-like consistency. The roasted flour is then mixed into the jaggery, along with dry fruits like cashews peanuts etc. while the mixture is still warm, it shaped into round laddoos. Kasar is traditionally prepared on the eve of important big ceremonies such as Upanayana Sanskar, marriage etc. It is first offered to the gods before being distributed among family and guests.

3.0.4.4 Laddoos: Gorkha community used to prepare various types of laddoos and are very popular. Laddoos like Til (sesame), Chiura (flattered rice), Muri (puffed rice), Nariyal (coconut), generally prepared during Makar Sankranti.

3.0.5 Achar: Gorkha people used to have various kinds of achar in their diet. Achar like, Bungo ko Achar (achar made from banana flower), Gundruk, Sinki, Khalpi (fermented ripened/matured cucumber pickle), Mula ko achar (Fermented radish achar), Til ko achar, Til-Matar ko achar etc.

3.0.6 Popular Non-Veg in Gorkha Community:

Gorkha community loves to eat non-veg, especially mutton. Most of them cook meat in various ways by cutting goat in their homes. Especially-

3.0.5.1 Pakku: Cut the meat in large pieces and add onion, ginger, garlic, cumin, pepper, garlic and salt to taste. Then heat oil in a 'Bhaddu' (a Gorkhali cooking pan) and cook the meat over low heat. Stir occasionally. Vaddu is a thick and deep dish. The meat cooked in this way is called pakku. This meat is very tasty to eat. Gorkha people cook and eat pakku occasionally and especially during Durga puja.

3.0.5.2 Rakti-Bhudi: Rakti is traditional Gorkhali dish made from goat's blood and stomach (bhudi). First, the goat stomach is thoroughly cleaned, boiled, cut into small pieces, and washed again. In a pan, oil is heated and spices such as chili, onion, garlic, cumin powder, turmeric, and salt are added. The mashed goat blood is then added to the mixture and stir-fried until dry. This flavourful and spicy dish is called Rakti-Bhudi in Gorkhali cuisine and is known for its rich taste.

3.0.5.3 Sukuti: Sukuti is a traditional method used by Gorkhali people to preserve excess mutton for future use. The meat is sliced into strips, then hang over an iron frame placed above the cooking fire, allowing it to dry gradually with the smoke and heat. When needed, the dried meat is soaked in boiling water to soften it and then cooked with available spices. This preserved meat can be last for over a month and enjoyed as a flavourful and protein-rich dish.

Gorkhali people are also known for preparing a variety of flavourful non-vegetarian dishes. Popular items include mutton curry, dry-fried mutton, chicken curry, chicken dry fry, as well as duck curry, pigeon curry, fish curry, and dry fish preparations – all of which are widely enjoyed and commonly consumed within the community.

4.0 Taboos in Gorkhali Foods:

Scholars of Indian civilization and culture have declared that the essence of the four Vedas, the carriers of Indian civilization and culture, is contained in the Manu Samhita. Therefore, the Manu Samhita is a mirror of the Indian society. This scripture contains detailed descriptions food policy, guidelines on eating and non-eating. According to Manu-

“Whatever exists in the world, all that Prajapati has ordained to be the food of living beings; all, both mobile and immobile, is the food of creatures.” (Dutt, 1909)

Because in a food cycle in the nature we found the “The immobile are the food of the mobile (creatures), the toothless one are the food of the toothed creatures; the handless, are that of the hand-possessed ones; and the timid, that of the brave.” (Dutt, 1909)

Even than traditionally every community have their certain rules and taboos. Gorkha community also have certain rules and taboo. These are-

- If a spoon accidentally falls from the hand while cooking, it is believed that a guest will soon arrive at the house.
- Consuming fused or conjoined fruits and vegetables is traditionally believed to lead to twin pregnancies.
- A portion of daily meals is first offered to the deity before it is consumed by the family.
- Before eating, especially among males, it is customary to offer a small portion of food and water beside their plate as an offering to God.
- Eating or serving food with the left hand is considered impure and disrespectful in food practices.
- Papaya is traditionally avoided during pregnancy due to the belief that it may cause miscarriage.
- Pregnant women are advised to avoid black-coloured foods due to the belief that it may result in the baby being born with a darker complexion.
- During her menstrual cycle, a mother is traditionally discouraged from feeding her children, as it is believed to cause early loss of their teeth.
- It is considered inauspicious to bring turmeric from the mother-in-law's house.
- When black lentils (Kalo Maas ko dal) are being cooked, young girls are traditionally restricted from entering or touching the kitchen.
- On the day before the Shraddha ceremony of one's parents, a son and in-laws must consume a single meal of sattvik (pure) food, and should avoid salt and oil.
- During the Sorah Shraddha- sixteen days before the Durga Puja, Gorkha people pay homage to their ancestors up to sixteen days by lighting a lamp (diya), offer dhop in the kitchen. In these days only Sattvik food are cooked, and offering cooked foods including milk, ghee, curd, achar etc. besides the lamp for the name of ancestors. The head of family couple consumes the offerings as prasada in honour of the forefather.
- Following the death of one's parents, individuals traditionally abstain from consuming non-vegetarian food, onion, garlic, bottle gourd (lau), and ash gourd (Kumro) for a year, until the completion of the first death anniversary (Shraddha).
- After the death of the mother, it is customary to refrain from drinking milk.
- Upon the death of the father, children traditionally avoid consuming cream and curd.
- During the Hindu month Sawan, members of Gorkha community abstain from eating fiddlehead fern (Niguro).

5.0 Conclusion:

The food habits of our ancestors were closely intertwined with their environment, beliefs, and everyday lives. Over generations, these practices gradually transformed into enduring traditions that shaped the cultural identity of their communities. When methods of cooking, eating, or selecting food are passed down through families, they come to represent more than just sustenance- they become symbols of heritage and belonging. In conclusion, food consumption reflects broader concepts such as foodways, cuisine, and food systems. It embodies a community's fundamental understanding of food, shaped by both historical and contemporary influences. These practices also reveal how food is used to express identity, social values, status, power, creativity, and a sense of belonging. Ultimately, an individual's food culture is evident in their food choices, preferences, serving style, and eating habits.

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