Page 496 - 512 **DOI:** *https://doij.org/10.10000/IJLMH.1111068*

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 8 | Issue 6

2025

Custom, Cuisine, and Culture: Locating Khaar and Tenga in the Larger Prism of Food Traditions

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ABSTRACT

Food is arguably, yet invariably more than merely a means of sustenance – it blends different 'flavors,' essences, and peculiarities of cultures, traditions, societies, and 'life' itself. This paper attempts to celebrate food and its peculiarities, particularly regarding the Assamese culinary tradition, while comparing and picturing it alongside food from other cultures and placing it on a larger culinary plane of practice, precision, and popular culture.

'Traditional' Assamese cuisine is a piquant admixture of dishes from the pakghor (kitchen) of the xipini (weaver) to the middle-class household, seeking to embrace 'modernity', not only in terms of lifestyle but also in terms of culinary habits, traversing from the 'coolie' lines to the kitchens of the ornately imposing Burra Bungalows (whoever can forget the majesty of the Thengal Manor in Titabor or the Chameli Memsaab bungalow in Cinnamara, Jorhat!)

While Assamese cuisine presents a wide range of delicacies, ranging from Pitha, Laru, Baahor Gaaz (bamboo shoot), Outengar Jul (Elephant apple curry), various Pitikas or mashed delicacies, different types of Bor (fritters), Xaak (leafy vegetables), Maahor Dali (Black Dal cooked plain or with outenga or sometimes with duck), Mangxor Jul (meat curry, often mutton), two principal elements that can be said to 'define' Assamese food are Khaar, which is alkaline in nature and Tenga (which is typically acidic). A large chunk of Assamese culinary tradition can be said to revolve around Khaar and Tenga and their tug of war, as they are entirely opposite in taste and composition, and it is generally advised not to have Khaar and Tenga together. Therefore, if the meal starts with khaar, it ends with tenga which is ideally a tangy curry with fish.

This paper would be an attempt to traverse from the kitchen of the Burra Sahib to the commoner -weaving tapestries of food, history and orality, along with the evolution in Assamese culinary tradition – essentially cuisines that link the royalty to the commoner, as picturing Assamese cuisine vis a vis cuisines and culinary traditions from other cultures.

Keywords: Khaar, tenga, pakghor, Pitika, Assamese cuisine, history, food, evolution

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I. INTRODUCTION

Food is so much more than a basic amenity, inevitable for sustenance. It brings to life the nuances of the soul of a community of people, represents the sensitivities and idiosyncrasies of its geographical space, the aspirations, traditions, and counter traditions that a society witnesses, holds dear and preserves, or discards. It represents the evolution of cultures, the contradictions within, religious and social sensibilities, and so much more. Food is invariably intertwined with culture, religion and politics.

K.T Achaya, in *Indian Food: A Historical Companion*, takes us back to the Taittriya Upanishad, which includes a paragraph on how food springs from different elements of nature and how "from food are all creatures produced, by food do they grow."[2]

In my most outrageous of thoughts, food is somewhat of a selcouth, outlandish patisserie of succulent eclectic flavors, enriching the palette with salubrious goodness – celebrating life, bemoaning it, loathing and loving it, all at the same time – it is a little bit of music, of gallantry, of heroism, of childhood, youth and old age, of travel, of philosophies and counter-philosophies, of sympathies and antipathies, of friendship, of love and longing – all coupled together with olfactory memories. Food is a little bit of everything – everything 'human'. A palette of food carries so much to behold, so much to inhale, so much to taste and so much to remember!

Food brings to the fore vivid memories connected with a person, place, or situation – memories, good and bad, but forever present in the crevices of one's heart. Food is the perfect symphony among our senses of smell and taste and our gift of consciousness and remembrance – a bottle of lemon pickle brings so many happy memories of childhood – a plate of puchka or papdi chaat can make one reminisce fond memories of school and college, of those friends who have disappeared into oblivion, or of the puchka seller who would offer an extra puchka, free of charge in one of the good days!

Food is a vital part of the life and soul of a community – a large part of the essence of a community is defined by its food, and thus, it represents the crux of the 'culture' of the community. Food celebrates cultures, traditions, philosophies, and memories; it acts as a thread that binds a people together. Food is, thus, a 'living' part of a community's heritage.

In the introductory chapter in *Forgotten Foods: Memories and Recipes from Muslim South Asia*,

[2] K.T Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 61.
Achaya states how food in the Indian ethos, especially the one surrounding the so-called Aryan belief, was not simply a 'means of bodily sustenance', but indeed a part of the 'cosmic moral cycle' – here, cosmos and morality plausibly indicate a desired symphony between the two.

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Siobhan Lambert Hurtley talks about 'Heritage food' – probably that is what *Khaar* and *Tenga* are – 'Heritage food of the Assamese', like the Amritsari fish or the Sindhi Kadhi or the Bengali Rosogolla – but then again, *Khaar* and *Tenga* are elements – and these two basic elements can form part of a wide variety of recipes – they are like the cocktail mixes from which one can fashion a whole range of fancy varieties of beverages. They are versatile within their own 'genre' of being versatile. But at the same time, they are also unique and peculiar in their form and manifestation.

The said edited book on forgotten foods essentially celebrates the 'family foods' of the contributing authors, basically, food that became 'signature dishes' of their families, many of them belonging to erstwhile royal families, and the recipes, often palpable innovations and specialties of their household cooks. But we all have our family specialties, I believe, something which is not peculiar to royalty or the elite sections of society - while theirs leave a mark for others to emulate, we all have that one dish that is unique to a family's tastes and preferences.

Mina Holland in her interesting *Edible Atlas: Around the World in Thirty Nine Cuisines* writes, "India remains a country of home cooks" – this is interesting in the sense that every family has its own style of cooking one specific dish! And hence, the importance of 'personal touch' – I almost entered into an argument with a friend who was assigning a mathematical basis to perfecting a recipe – I have always had a problem with the idea that something as creative as cooking can have anything to do with something as wry and technical as mathematics (though a number of scholars who have produced work on the interaction of mathematics and culture would have an entirely different picture to present) – despite the importance of proportions in ingredients, one cannot ignore the 'twist' each home cook or chef gives to a dish and makes it his or her own! My grandmother, who was not a great cook in the conventional sense of the term would perfect certain recipes that no one else could – those were her 'specialties', and no matter how much we would try to ape her, jotting down all the right proportions and ingredients, it never tasted the same.

For me, one dish that my family and I have been glued to for years together now is the *Bilahi dia Maasor Tenga* (Tomato fish curry), a seemingly common dish in most Assamese households, but with a twist – we add *Khajur* or dates and jaggery, to give it a delectable blend of sweet and savoury. (The recipe is given at the end in the piquant Tenga section)

Talking about food and heritage, two C's stand out prominently in the world of food – Cuisine and Culture – food thrives on the interlinkage of both – Linda Civitello writes an interesting account of the entwining of the said C's in *Cuisine and Culture – A History of Food and People*.

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Again, cuisine, when entwined with culture, presents before the reader or researcher a host of questions – some the author has touched upon – questions about using cutlery, eating vegetarian vs. nonvegetarian, the question of the civilized and savage, and so on and so forth. [3] Linda writes how food and eating habits can be used as a political weapon – a phenomenon which is all the more pronounced today, not just here in India but worldwide – sometimes out in the open, sometimes more subtly, but it is certainly there. S. L. Hurtley mentions in passing, *Raja, Rasoi aur anya Kahaniya*, a television show that once aired on Epic Television and thereafter, the first season was picked by Netflix owing to its popularity. The show celebrated recipes from various states, mostly kitchens of the erstwhile royal households, scions of which have tried and preserved signature recipes of their households - that entail as part of the said 'heritage' of the regions and particular communities in the states.

When we talk about culture, a whole lot of other connotations come into play – like that of religion, identity, of stigma, of class, of morality even, and of rights and preferences over and above everything else. But then again, exercising individual 'rights' and food preferences are also subject to sanctions imposed by the society, and sometimes, by class and one's conscious aversion of not indulging in food that is not 'sanctioned'. (I mention an anecdote by Sri Lankan Malay author Alwis in the course of the next part of this paper, whereby she talks about foods that are despised by a great lot of the society).

Food is, again, inevitably linked with the Chef – whose role and stature are determined by time, space, and situation. Also, about taste, Civitello mentions that taste is 'taught' – this sounds reasonable to a great extent However, it cannot be discounted that taste can also be acquired – and that again depends a great deal on choice. Aversion to food is undoubtedly rooted in conditioning – both familial, religious and social, extending into the political.

Food has always had a curious connection with religion, in the sense that one has a direct or indirect bearing on the other, which in most cases transpires into politics, more so today. As an example, the Hindu God Krishna's association with agriculture, which is indicated by – his partnership with Balarama, who is known as 'Haladeva' or the God holding the plough (hala) and his own assumption of the title 'Go-pala', presumably has had far-reaching effects, especially with reference to the taboo on beef-consumption. While along with the influence of the Buddha who apparently preached that - cattle should not be unnecessarily killed as they provide us with milk and help in agricultural production, the emergence of the cult of Krishna

[3] Linda Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), xvi.

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in an agriculture-based society of which cattle was an integral and indispensable part contributed to the taboo on beef-eating, which was evidently prevalent among the Hindus earlier, as Krishna apparently stopped the practice of offering sacrificial cattle to Indra, and this escalated into a full-fledged conflict between the two. This itself can be counted as a controversial topic, as beef eating has always espoused both intrigue and controversy among our non-Muslim and non-Christian populace, which can and has on many accounts taken the shape of communal violence directed and contrived by political agenda.

II. FOOD AND PLEASURE: LOCATING ASSAMESE FOOD IN THE LARGER PALETTE OF TASTE AND TANG

Food can be more pleasurable than most things in the universe – remember Sally's 'foodgasm' in the 80's romcom "When Harry met Sally?" Well, we all have witnessed that at some point in our lives, and that recipe which made that come alive, has and will forever live with us. I cannot forget the Shah Nauz I tried in Peter Cat in Park Street, Calcutta. While the restaurant has had a legacy of its own and is more famous for its *Chelo Kababs,* this chicken recipe – 'a special feast of spring chicken stuffed with mutton keema and chicken liver', as is mentioned in their menu, was an absolute delight to my senses, and so were the undefeatable flavored and plain rosogollas and a platter which served luchi, *Begun bhaja* (fried eggplant), aloo sabzi and chana dal along with a sondesh or alternately a plain Rosogolla, in K.C Das, New Market, Calcutta. Calcutta has always been my go-to food haven, closely followed by Goa, but Calcutta has always seemed to be closer to both the heart and home. *Nanking* in Vasant Kunj, New Delhi serves an amazing fried rice with chicken and bacon, and I also like their Calamari and Grilled Salmon. The Sharabi da chicken in Lord of Drinks, CP was another moment of foodgasm for me: the juicy chicken with a dash of rum, literally 'set on fire' and the roasted smell along with the perfectly blend masala mix was to die for.

Delhi has an amazing chain of Kulfi makers by the name of *Kuremal Kulfi* who offer the best sorbets – my favorite is the jamun sorbet which melts in your mouth and takes you into a heaven of culinary delight.

Going back to Assam, *Nilakantha* in Jaji, Sivasagar has one of the most filling and authentic Assamese thalis. I can also not forget the curious fried chicken I had in a small roadside stall in Dergaon, during a survey in Upper Assam. That taste still lingers after years of trying fried chicken at different places. I went looking for the stall in one of my trips to Sivasagar later on, but could not find the transitory stall.

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III. Recipes as a Living Atlas: Food, Imaginations and Ingredients

Food comes with tapestries of images of various forms and embodiments. Manju Malhi in the introduction of *Recipes from an Indian Kitchen: Authentic Recipes from Across India,* paints a picture of the kitchen as somewhat of a sacred cove where the woman is the queen – so, one can imagine the quintessential idea of an Indian woman, fresh out of a bath, with a towel wrapped around her wet hair, who enters the kitchen after having offered prayers to the Gods – while this is an extremely stereotypical picture, its veracity cannot be denied – while kitchen has now long ceased to be a 'sacred grove' with the woman as the Goddess, it is more about necessity in most households and about passion in some, and both necessity and passion are not gender specific, until conditions are created as such – though there is no denying of the fact that women have been traditionally tied to the kitchen.

Among the roughly 76 percent of women in the world (WIEGO, 2022) who still render unstipulated yet given 'compulsory' domestic labor, kitchen work falls within the major to-do lists every day. However, what is problematic is specifying gender roles for the kitchen, as there are exceptions – and that does not depend on the social or financial stature of the family – where the woman may be contributing to most of the housework and still spending less or no time in the kitchen. My mother who has maintained the house all by herself has for most part of her life hated cooking.

Malhi, in her description about 'Eastern food'[4] includes Bengal and the North Eastern states in the same category, which again is problematic, because apart from some 'bhapa' dishes, the use of steamed cuisines in the Bengali thali is relatively less, not attempting to generalise at all – there are however certain similarities between Bengali and Assamese cuisine, (for example the use of the all-pervading panch phoron or *paas phoron* in both) as there are similarities between palates in Assam, specifically Upper Assam with Nagaland and Manipur, particularly, the use of the *Bhoot Jolokia* or Ghost chilli and the ubiquitous bamboo shoot, which is much loved in the other parts of the North East as well – Manipuri cuisine again stands out because of its own peculiar blend of spices and ingredients. In contrast, the Naga, Mizo, Tripuri, and Khasi cuisines are relatively simple, despite using a good amount of chilies, bamboo shoots again, and dry fish.

Felipe Fernandez Armesto in *Near a Thousand Tables – A History of Food* talks about food that can be traced back from the earliest of times to the modern day 'microwave cooking' – here, foods eaten whole can be taken into account, and also foods as snails, squids, silkworms, etc:

[4] Manju Malhi, *Recipes from an Indian Kitchen: Authentic Recipes from Across India* (New Delhi: Paragon Books, 2017), 14.

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maybe sometimes "food that is eaten uncooked and unkilled"[5]: essentially, food which connects the 21st-century palette to that of our 'hominid ancestors' as the author puts it. Silkworm is quite a delicacy in most parts of the North Eastern part of India, especially among the tribal communities. This reminds me of a TV show on TLC which was called *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern* where the host, Andrew would cover 'unusual' recipes from across the world, mostly including foods that most people cannot imagine can be eaten or at least eaten raw or half cooked or even boiled, for example a whole turkey, along with its feathers or ant eggs! A more common example of this category of food is oyster.

Food preferences are shaped to a great extent by the region a person is located in. Pushpesh Pant writes about a friend who would cook Kashmiri recipes in Delhi, akin to *Pravasi* Bengali recipes, 'modified traditional recipes, partly due to the non-availability of Kashmiri ingredients, as well as changes in tastes from imbibing local influences over time". [6]Anahita Dhondy in her beautifully curated Coffee Table Book on Parsi Cuisine writes, "Food preferences change with time and by geography". [7]Preferences are thus, shaped by geography and surrounding situation. Uncooked food has a lot to do with the prevailing circumstances of a geographical area – a friend from a remote village in Manipur once told me that his mother knew how to 'cook' chicken without using oil or fire – which implied that she marinated it with some local herbs and they would eat it raw, mainly because when she was young, transporting cooking oil to their village was a costly affair.

IV. ASSAMESE FOOD THROUGH THE AGES

While the Assamese culinary palette is now dotted with recipes from different cultures, the fundamental nature of Assamese cooking is characterized by maximum taste using minimum ingredients and almost next to none spices.

For the Assamese, the *Khaar* and the *Tenga* along with their numerous variations, as well as different *Pithas, Larus* and a host of delicacies define the 'taste' of the community, and thus forms part of its heritage. But then again, are all cuisines part of the 'heritage' of the community? Or are there specific foods that are 'essentially' Assamese or essentially Bengali/Punjabi/Sindhi, that form part of the talked 'heritage'? But how does a particular dish or a genre of food be classified as 'heritage food'? Does it depend on popularity, comfort or ancestry? Probably a mixture of all of these.

[5] Filipe Fernandez Armesto, *Near a Thousand Tables – A History of Food* (New York. The Free Press, 2002), 3.
[6] Pushpesh Pant, *From the King's Table to Street Food: A Food History of Delhi* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2024), 9.
[7] Anahita Dhondy, *The Parsi Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family* (Gurugram: Harper Collins, 2021), 25.

 [ISSN 2581-5369]

Again, food has always been linked with health and by extension, to medicine – which explains all the prohibitions around food. In *Food and Indian Doctors: 600 BCE to 600 CE,* Colleen Taylor Sen writes how Indian food has always been 'virtually interchangeable', while at the same time, the existence of 'contradictory food' in juxtaposition is also not absent from Indian cuisine. [8] Here, I am tempted more than ever to mention the *Khaar* and *Tenga* again. With regard to 'preserving tradition', I remember having watched an episode of Chef's table on Netflix where Pasta chef Ethan Funke talks about how he has always aspired to be a tiny conduit in the preservation of tradition – in this sense, not giving up on handmade pasta. *Khaar* and *Tenga* are 'tradition', they are history, they are therefore, a part of the Assamese heritage.

I was discussing about a new recipe I had experimented recently – combining banana flower with shredded cabbage, beans and tomato with a friend. He immediately pointed out that adding tomato to the banana flower was not 'wise' as the latter is 'basic' or alkaline in nature, while tomato is acidic, which brought to my mind, the salubrious tug of war between *Khaar* and *Tenga* – the alkaline and the acidic, both of which are the two quintessential elements of Assamese cuisine.

Khaar and *Tenga* are essential because of their ubiquitous presence in the kitchen of the erstwhile royalty, and by extension, the kitchen of the *Burra Sahibs* (which again represented a wide range of delicacies and condiments from across the world, which would be shipped mostly from Calcutta – most of these kitchens did not give up on the 'mains' of 'Assamese' food) to that of the coolie lines and the common folk.

The *Burra Sahib* bungalows apart from their magnificent architecture boasted of large orchards and kitchen gardens, where a wide range of fruits and vegetables would be grown[9] for recipes that the chef could experiment, using his expertise. If we can still talk about 'authenticity', despite the many illusions attached with it, the kitchen of the *Burra Bungalows* represented a true blend of Assamese food that have been cooked and the recipes of which have been passed down orally from generation to generation, and a range of dishes from around the world, which the chefs in these kitchens would either pick from somewhere or were specially 'trained' in

[8] Colleen Talyor Sen, *Feasts and Fasts: A History of Food in India* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2015), 117.
Eating contradictory foods have always existed somewhere or the other. Again, contradictions are subject to a particular culture and its sanctions. It is advised that tomato and cucumber should not be consumed together, while we make salads consisting of the two fairly frequently. Similarly, mango and milk are generally advised not to be ingested together, but whoever can avoid the amazing mango milk smoothie!
[9] Moumita, Choudhuri, "Back then at the Burra Bungalows of the Tea Estates", *The Telegraph*, December 30, 2018.

 [ISSN 2581-5369]

order to preserve their 'authenticity' and aesthetic appeal.

Talking about preserving authenticity and retaining their soul, while adding new flavors to suit evolving tastebuds and situations, Rizwana Morseth de Alwis pens an interesting anecdote in the talked book – *Sri Lankan Malay Cuisine Walks the Tightrope* – where she talks about how the Malay cuisine, specifically the achar and watalappan have incorporated new flavors, while still staying true to their original substance. In fact, the Malay Pittu or Puttu is a great deal similar to the *Sunga Pitha* of Assam, where ground rice powder is stuffed into bamboo hollows sometimes with a coconut filling and steamed or roasted in fire, much like the *baingan ka bharta* or even the mediterranean *Baba Ganoush* (apart from its tahini) is so much similar to the Assamese *bengena pitika* (where the aubergine is roasted and mashed; thereafter, coriander, finely chopped onions, a dash of mustard oil, some salt and some lemon juice (optional) is added to it.

While these dishes are much sought after, there are others which are not held quite so dear, especially in public parlance, because of certain key ingredients not being considered 'palatable', so to say, though many a times they do turn out to be exceptional in taste, if not appearance. Again, many of them are despised because of religious sanctions.

Alwis writes about the highly disparaged dish called Offal, [10]which is somewhere sandwiched between the era of contestations between multifarious food blogging on one hand and the wave of veganism on the other, it brings to my mind the *murighonto* which is popular in Bengal and Assam and is prepared out of fish head and lentils. The *murighonto* like Offal or the babath still does not find place in the curated menus of fine-dine restaurants, despite it being a celebrated dish in weddings and festivities, especially in rural Assam and Bengal. I can particularly relate to the author's dilemma in her fondness for babath and concern for popular prudence, as hanging out with vegan acquaintances, expressing a liking for *murighonto* is no less than sin, more so, as I have been more or less actively involved in animal welfare (not so much animal rights though, unlike my vegan friends).

V. THE FOOD STORY

Strolling around the streets of Calcutta, I came across a book store called STORY in Salt Lake. In the tastefully decorated bookshop, I found one book that aroused my interest as a student of history and as someone who is extremely passionate about food – *The Calcutta Cookbook: A*

[10] Rizvina Morseth de Alwis, "Sri Lankan Malay Cusinine Walks the Tightrope," in *Forgotten Foods: Memories and Recipes from Muslim South Asia*, ed. Siobhan Lambert Hurtley, Tarana Husain Khan, and Claire Chambers (New Delhi: Verson, 2023), 64.

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Treasury of Recipes from Pavement to Palace, by Meenakshie Das Gupta, Bunny Das Gupta and Jaya Chaliha. It seeks to cover recipes from the streets of Calcutta to the more 'luxurious' ala-carte combinations picked and preferred by the 'elite' sections of the society, though the word elite again has contradictions within itself and it is sometimes hardly connected to wealth. Talking about Heritage again, places like the India Coffee House in College Street have stood the test of time. The coffee, the Mutton sandwiches, Fish Kaviraji add up to the ambience marked by the heyday of the yesteryears, that song by Manna Dey and people in their 60s and 70s reminiscing about their college days, their first romance, and the lectures by some professor who spoke to the walls, like Newton would do!

The authors write about the essence of Bengali cooking as a 'delicate balance between the main ingredients and its seasoning', and the 'trump card of Bengali cooking' – 'the addition called phoron or sambhara'. [11]In case of Assamese cooking, the dal, when not plain boiled, requires the addition of 'paas-phoron' (a combination of five essential ingredients: fenugreek or methi, cumin seed or jeera, nigella seed or kalonji, fennel or saunf and black mustard) for taste enhancement. Dal generally is cooked in the simplest possible way, sometimes tomato, elephant apple, spinach or other leafy vegetables are added to it. Potato may be added to dal or rice and thereafter mashed with hot oil, dhaniya or coriander leaves, with or without onions, and salt. Like Bengali cooking, Assamese cooking too is all about balance and precision.

A large part of my interest was piqued by my stay in Upper Assam, especially in Kaziranga, where I came across a world of selcouth recipes, some even unimaginable to most people – a good example is a chutney made out of red ants!

VI. MEAT AND LEAF: THE *MANXO-XAAK* COMBINATION:

Meat is cooked with herbs and vegetables – meat of pigeon, duck and mutton. *Haahe Maahe* is quite a popular dish, especially in Upper Assam – duck is cooked with urad dal or black lentils and basic spices, mostly being limited to garlic, green chillies, ginger paste, and is slow cooked so that the spices, the duck and the dal get properly blended. Pigeon meat is cooked with dal and rice, in the form of a porridge and served as *Bhog* in a number of temples, mostly dedicated to the Goddess. I came across a mutton recipe with mixed herbs in *Ambrosia: From the Assamese Kitchen* by Jyoti Das, where mutton is cooked with a variety of *Xaak* or leafy vegetables as spinach, fenugreek leaves, drumstick or moringa leaves, mustard leaves, coriander leaves, onions, ginger, garlic, green chillies and other basic spices as turmeric, jeera, and salt.

[11] Minakshie Das Gupta, Bunny Dasgupta, Jaya Chaliha *The Calcutta Cookbook: A Treasury of over 200 Recipes from Pavement to Palace* (Haryana: Penguin Books, 1995), 19.

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Though fusing meat with vegetables is common among different cultures too, the Assamese version stands out because of the use of minimum spices, and sometimes restricting to only ginger, garlic, turmeric and at the most, whole cumin. Pork is cooked with a variety of *Xaak*, like *Mejenga*/ michinga leaves, *Noltenga* (Indian chestnut leaves), roselle or *tengamora*, etc, while the favorite still remains the dish where bamboo shoot is added, along with the sinful *Bhoot Jolokia* or Naga Chilly. In a number of dishes, especially the ones cooked by the Misings, as I have had the opportunity of feasting wildly in Mising households during my stay in Kaziranga, Pork or *Gahori* is made with a variety of wild leaves, and just with ginger and garlic, without oil, as pork produces a lot of oil by itself; sometimes schezwan pepper is added which leaves a tingling sensation on the tongue and produces a sort of a zing effect. Pork is also cooked with Axone or fermented beans across different parts of the North East. The Mizos cook meat with rice which blends into a delicious porridge.

VII. RICE AND FISH IN ASSAMESE CUISINE:

Rice is the staple food of the Assamese like nearly half of the world's population, according to the *Cambridge History of Food* which is more of a compendium of food and its different manifestations. The Assamese, like the Bengalis and other East Indian cultures are avid rice producers and eaters, so much so that the rice powder is used in most sweet delicacies, where Maida or wheat flour is used by others.

Rice has been experimented in different combinations and in different forms in the Assamese cuisine, totally harnessing its versatility. So, the same rice which is steamed and eaten as a staple is also fermented and had as *poita bhaat*, ground and made into *pitha* and *laru*, and also used as a supplement to cornflour (much before our people got to know about the usage of cornflour) in dishes as *Pithali* – something that I tried for the first time in a Bodo Bajwi dhaba in Goalpara, Assam. The *Pithali* is cooked by combining *xaak* and *pithaguri* or rice powder. The rice powder gives it an amazingly slurry consistency and makes it appear and taste soup-like.

Despite the prevalence of Vaishnavism in the region, fish has always been a constant in Assamese cuisine, like in Bengali, so much so that fish is hardly considered non-vegetarian: like the Bengali Brahmin would say that 'fish is the fruit of the ocean', in order to justify consuming it – Assamese Brahmins too have always eaten fish, almost, always.

I once had a fish curry cooked with raw mango pulp and jaggery at a relative's place in Bihpuria,

[12] Jyoti Das, *Ambrosia: From the Assamese Kitchen* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2008), 154.

near Lakhimpur in Assam. The sour and savory, along with a dash of sweetness oozing from the jaggery, made it highly tempting, and when I tried the dish at home later, I added some raisins to raise its taste further. It tastes best with Rohu or *Bhokua* fish, fried till golden brown, added to the raw mango curry, and slowly cooked until the gravy becomes thick. One can add some chopped coriander to garnish. (The raw mango can be boiled or roasted before it is mashed for the gravy).

This can again form part of the larger corpus of the *Tenga* heritage, where the savory conquers the taste buds and leaves one spellbound by its salubrious wonder.

The Assamese have also been fond of *Misa Maas* or prawns/shrimps, though it is not as widely used in cooking as in Bengali cuisine, Bengal being a hub of prawn seed cultivation, the business being at the epicenter of a nexus of business, mafia, and politics. I remember craving misa maas as a kid, and my mother would often fry the shrimp in mustard oil until they took a beautiful golden-brown form. I started adding chopped garlic and cooking the shrimp or medium-sized prawns in butter, though traditionally, we hardly use any butter in our cooking.

Many traditional recipes are garnished with what the Assamese call *Maan Dhaniya* or *Bangali Dhaniya* (Mexican coriander) instead of the common coriander.

VIII. THE LARU PITHA EXTRAVANGAZA

The Assamese cuisine is incomplete without an assortment of *Laru* and *Pita.* Bihu is incomplete without these two mains in the culinary repertoire. Laru is similar in appearance to the laddoo which is spherical in shape, and is made using either coconut or sesame (both black and white), and also out of rice flour. The coconut ladoo or laru finds mention among the 26 recipes from across the country that Dr. Jay Polmar handpicked for his *Indian Cuisine: 26 Delicious Recipes,* though unlike the traditional Assamese *laru*, the recipe posited by the author is simpler as it just contains a mixture of desiccated coconut nd condensed milk, where the coconut is lightly fried in dry heat and condensed milk added to it, after which, lemon sized balls are made from the mixture. In the traditional method, coconut or *narikolor laru* is fashioned out of grated coconut, sugar/ jaggery: the coconut is dry fried along with sugar or jaggery, till it blends together. It is allowed to sit for sometime, and while still warm, small lemon sized balls are shaped and allowed to cool.

Pitha, on the other hand comes in different shapes and sizes. Jyoti Das begins her recipe catalogue by listing the *Kholasapori Pitha* at the top. The *Kholasapori* can be said to remotely resemble the French ‘crepe’, though here, instead of wheat flour, the principle ingredient is rice flour. The cooking process is extremely simple, and on the risk of repeating what has already

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been written in recipe books, the *Kholasapori* is made out of a batter of rice flour and water and spread over a flat tawa, much like a dosa, a pancake or a crepe. Once it is cooked, a filling is added, consisting generally of jaggery alone or shredded coconut added to it, to make it more appetizing. Jyoti Das in fact suggests that the versatile *Kholasapori* can be served with mutton curry, [13]which reminds me of the School of International Studies canteen of JNU, where Babu Bhaiya, the canteen owner has been serving mutton keema with something like a porotta over many years now; I once ate uttapam with the keema which probably resembles the combination suggested by Das.

Apart from the *Kholasapori*, other more important *Pithas* include the amazing *Til Pitha* (which is made out of ground bora saul or sticky rice, spread over dry, on a hot tawa and filled with a mixture of gur or jaggery and *til* or sesame. The same method of making *Til Pitha* can also be used to prepare *Narikol Pitha* or Coconut pancake, only in place of the *til* filling, a filling of shredded coconut and sugar or jaggery is used. Another popular *pitha* is the *Bor Pitha* or *Ghila pitha* where a semi watery dough of rice powder, jaggery and water is fried making circular *pithas*. *Ketli pitha* or *tekeli pitha* is made by preparing a mixture of rice powder, jaggery and coconut, and the mixture is placed in the lid of a kettle, and then it is covered with a thin muslin cloth and after that, the kettle is filled with water, the lid with the mixture is placed on the kettle and it is allowed to steam. These *pithas* resemble the idli in appearance, though the texture is coarser than that of idli.

There are several variations that these *pithas* have undergone over the years, though the basic ingredients remain the same. The cook may enjoy the liberty of adding different variations and new exciting flavors to these recipes, while preserving the authenticity of the original recipe, as the addition of various fruits to the *ketli pitha*. thus, again implying the importance of personal touch.

While food represents a veritable palette of emotions, customs and culture, all in one serving, This paper was an attempt to look at the Assamese tradition of cooking through the prism of a broader and comprehensive lens, by placing it on a larger plane of world cuisines, weighing tastes, temperaments and traditions.

I once read somewhere that "**If we must eat to live, then naturally the pleasure of eating must also be preserved",** to which I would like to add**, "and hence, keep the chef and their tradition alive".**

[13] Jyoti Das, *Ambrosia: From the Assamese Kitchen* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2008), 27.

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IX. RECIPES STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

The 'basic' *Khaar*

The *Khaar* is 'basic' in both nature and implementation. It probably derives its name from *khara* which means salty, as *khaar* was evidently used as a supplement to salt.

Masor muror khaar

Ingredients:

Fish head (3-4 pieces)

Jika or ridge gourd (2-3 medium chopped) or alternatively *Sevali Phool* or coral jasmine (40-50 gms)

Salt (as per taste)

Ginger (few shreds)

Mustard oil

Kolakhar (ash of banana leaves mixed with water) or soda

To cook: First fry the fish heads in mustard oil and keep them aside. In the same kadhai, fry the ridge gourd for roughly 1 minute, cover the lid and let it slow cook till it releases water and becomes soft. In case of sevali phool, fry the flowers in low flame for few seconds, add some water, cover the lid and let the flowers cook in the steam. After the ridge gourd becomes soft or the flowers mushy, add the fried fish heads and break them roughly with the spatula. Cover and cook for few more minutes, remove the lid and add the *Khaar* (two-three spoons of Kolakhar or two pinches of soda). Cook for another minute, add some fresh mustard oil and few shreds of ginger. Serve.

Omitar Khaar

1 raw papaya

Kolakhar or soda

Ginger shreds

Mustard Oil

Chickpea (optional)

To cook: Dice the papaya into medium cubes. Add two spoons of mustard oil and add the papaya after the oil is heated. Fry for a couple of minutes, reduce the flame to low and cover it with a lid. After two-three minutes, add some water, cover and cook until the papaya becomes soft.

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(Add the chickpea before adding water). Alternatively, the papaya and chickpea can be first pressure cooked. After the papaya and chickpea become soft, and the water is reduced, add the ginger flakes and a dash of fresh mustard oil. Serve.

The piquant *Tenga*

Bilahi dia Maasor tenga

3-4 medium sized tomatoes, sliced

4-5 pieces of Rohu/Bhokua fish

4-5 dates soaked in water

1 teaspoon of jaggery powder or a portion of whole jaggery

Mustard oil

Turmeric powder

Paas phoron

Salt

Coriander leaves (optional)

To cook: Fry the fish pieces in mustard oil until golden brown and set aside. In the same oil, add paas phoron and after they start to crackle, add the sliced tomatoes. Cook them in medium heat for sometime and cover for about five minutes so that they become soft. Remove the cover, add the dates, jaggery, turmeric powder and salt, and give them all a good mix. Add two-three cups of water, add the fried fish, cover and cook for about 15 minutes. Remove the lid. If the curry has become thick and the tomatoes entirely soft and mushy, add the coriander leaves and serve with steamed rice.

Outengare Maas

Elephant Apple (1-2)

Mustard Oil

4-5 Fish pieces

Paas Phoron

Salt

Turmeric

To Cook: Cut the Elephant apple into two halves, take out the seed and boil it for two-three

whistles, then mash it. (Traditionally, a *bothi* is used to chop, which is an iron-made vegetable chopper with a stand, which is seated on the floor and a foot is used to put pressure on the stand, while chopping vegetables). Heat Oil, Fry the fish pieces and set aside. In the same oil, add paas phoron, and once it starts to crackle, add the elephant apple, a pinch of turmeric powder and some salt. Add Water, cover it and let it cook for some time. Remove the lid, add the fish, cover it again and let it cook for some 10 minutes. Serve.

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 [ISSN 2581-5369]

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