

MEAT BASED ETHNIC FOODS OF RABHA TRIBE IN GOALPARA DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

A study was carried out from January, 2019 to December, 2019 in five remote villages densely populated by Rabha tribe in Goalpara district of Assam. The main objective was to documents the methods of preparation, key ingredients and significance of various meat based ethnic foods of this tribe. A total of 11 ethnic foods are described in this paper with elaborate description on their methods of preparation. All the foods are prepared with various ingredients including herbs like lemon leaf (*Citrus limon*), wild coriander (*Eryngium foetidum*), bay leaf (*Cinnamomum tamala*), curry leaf (*Murraya koenigii*), roselle leaf (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) etc. The main ingredients of the described foods are meat of some animals like fish (*Rasbora* sp., *Puntius* sp., *Labeo* sp. etc.), crab (*Sartoriana* sp.), snail (*Viviparus viviparus*), pig (*Sus scrofa domesticus*) and chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus*). It is the need of hour to promote the ethnic foods of this tribe (Rabha) for their commercial production, which will create employment opportunity particularly for the local youth of this tribe.

Keywords: Ethnic food, Rabha tribe, Meat, Goalpara district, Assam

INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity of ethnic foods is the fruit of human wisdom, struggling with the various environments including sentiment in the long history (Chun, 2018). Northeast India is a meat-loving region and the inhabitants highly prefer foods of animal origin (Govindasamy *et al.*, 2018). This region of India is occupied by numbers of ethnic tribes with wide cultural diversity (Teron and Borthakur, 2012). As per 2011 census, the region is inhabited by a total of 427 tribal groups with their own traditional cultural identity.

The Rabha, a tribe of Mongoloid origin is widely scattered and concentrated in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang of Assam. However, as per census 2011 data their main concentration is found on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in Goalpara district (93912) and Kamrup district (88191). This tribe has a special type of food system depending on their resources like- agricultural products and forest collection (Rabha, 2019). The traditional knowledge of food preparation has been moving generation after generation among the people of this tribe.

The importance of protecting traditional knowledge and its cultural environmental resources is crucial, particularly in the context of globalization and increased demand on natural resources worldwide (Rômulo and Rosa, 2005). Besides, scientific documentation is one of the fundamental methods of conserving traditional knowledge (Govindasamy *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the present study was undertaken to documents the methods of preparation along with significance of various meat based ethnic foods of Rabha tribe in Goalpara district of Assam.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Goalpara district is an administrative district in the state of Assam, India. It lies between latitude 25°53' to 26° 30' N and longitude 90°07' to 91°05' E and situated on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. The district is bounded by West & East Garo Hill districts (Meghalaya) on the south and Kamrup district on the East, Dhubri district on the West and mighty river Brahmaputra all along the North covering a total area of 1,824 sq. km.

The present study was conducted from January, 2019 to December, 2019 in five remote villages of the district covering Matia, Majerburi, Sarapara, Borobakra and Rampur. The selected villages are densely populated by Rabha population. Information was collected from various households involved in the preparation of the ethnic foods. During the study, it was found that women are mostly engaged or have expertise in the preparation of various ethnic foods. Therefore, focus group discussion was conducted in each village to collect data mostly from adult female informants in the age between 18 – 60 years. Data were collected by conducting personal interviews with the help of semi-structured questionnaires from 250 informants (50 male and 200 female). During the study, the key ingredients, methods of preparation, significance of the main ingredients/foods, mode of consumption etc. were documented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The present study describes the ingredients and detailed methods of preparation of 11 meat based ethnic foods of Rabha tribe in Goalpara district of Assam. Food wise key ingredients along with significance of all the food items are summarized in the table 1. Photograph of most of the ethnic foods/ingredients are given in the figure 1.

1. *Khuchia Phakai* (*Kuchia* cooked in bamboo stem)

Ingredients: *Khuchia* fish (*Monopterus cuchia*), turmeric powder, grinded ginger, edible salt, lemon leave (*Citrus limon*) and wild coriander (*Eryngium foetidum*).

Preparation: *Kuchia* fish (*Monopterus cuchia*) has to be clean first with salt to remove the slippery substance of the body. Body of the fish has to be beaten with regular interval with blunt side of knife. Then it is mixed with all the ingredients. Mixture is put inside the bamboo (*Bambusa tulda*) stem (the lower node of the stem left uncut). Banana leave (*Musa* sp.) is stuffed tightly with the mixture and roasted over the fire, making sure of not burning the bamboo stem. It is cooked for about 1½ hours after which, the banana leaves are removed and the bamboo stem is divided into two equal half. The food is now ready to eat (intestine part is removed before eating).

2. *Chukung dali mi* (Snail and moong dal)

Ingredients: Snail (*Viviparus viviparus*), moong dal, ginger paste, green chili, edible salt, turmeric powder, mustard oil, bay leave (*Cinnamomum tamala*).

Preparation: Snails (*Viviparus viviparus*) are collected from paddy field and washed with clean water. It is kept for a day in clean water. Then the mantle and whorl are removed with sickle. Snails remaining are now re-cleaned by rubbing with both palms. Only snails are first fried for 5 minutes to remove water from it. Mustard oil is heated on pan, where the other ingredients are added. The mixture is half fried. To this mixture, moong dal (which was soaked for 3–5 minutes on water) is added and cooked with water. When it starts boiling, pre-fried snails are added, thoroughly mixed and cooked at high flame for 40–55 minutes. Now, the food is ready to eat.

3. *Chukung monthophol khusarkai* (Snail and papaya)

Ingredients: Snail (*Viviparus viviparus*), Papaya (*Carica papaya*), *Khar* (edible soda), ginger paste, edible salt and chili.

Preparation: Mantle and whorl part of snail (*Viviparus viviparus*) is first removed with sickle and thoroughly cleaned with water. Snails, Papaya (*Carica papaya*) pieces and about 10 ml of *Khar*, ginger paste, edible salt, and chili are taken on a pan, thoroughly mixed. The mixture is fried for sometime till dry of maximum water. Now, water is added to the mixture till reaching slightly above the food. The food is covered during cooking and checked regularly till the completion of boiling of the ingredients. Within 40 – 45 minutes of cooking, the food will be ready to eat. It is served with rice.

Table 1: Meat based ethnic foods of Rabha tribe in Goalpara district of Assam

Sl. No.	Name of food	Key ingredients	Significance
1	<i>Khuchia phakai</i>	Cuchia fish (<i>Monopterus cuchia</i>), lemon leaf (<i>Citrus limon</i>), wild coriander (<i>Eryngium foetidum</i>)	Increase blood cell counts, improve eye vision
2	<i>Chukung dali mi</i>	Snail (<i>Viviparus viviparus</i>), moong dal, bay leaf (<i>Cinnamomum tamala</i>)	Improve blood counts, helps in digestion
3	<i>Chukung monthophol khusarkai</i>	Snail (<i>Viviparus viviparus</i>), papaya (<i>Carica papaya</i>), edible soda	Improve eye vision, helps in digestion
4	<i>Chukung tepai bamchikhali</i>	Snail (<i>Viviparus viviparus</i>), black gram (<i>Vigna mungo</i>), curry leaf (<i>Murraya koenigii</i>)	Improve eye vision, black gram keeps body cool
5	<i>Bak tepai bamchikhali</i>	Pork (<i>Sus scrofa domesticus</i>), black gram (<i>Vigna mungo</i>), rice flour powder	Eaten during cold season to keep body warm.
6	<i>Naa bekai</i>	Raw small fish (<i>Rasbora</i> sp., <i>Puntius</i> sp., <i>Labeo</i> sp. etc.)	Improve eye vision
7	<i>Bak khusarkai</i>	Pork (<i>Sus scrofa domesticus</i>), pork blood	Source of high nutrients, keeps body healthy
8	<i>Bak pukchung jawkai</i>	Pork intestine (<i>Sus scrofa domesticus</i>)	Gives protein, eaten only during marriage ceremony
9	<i>Khengargimi</i>	Crab (<i>Sartoriana</i> sp.), Roselle leaf (<i>Hibiscus sabdariffa</i>), bay leaf (<i>Cinnamomum tamala</i>)	Prevents the heart disease
10	<i>Mekha par aro nakhen</i>	<i>Tita phool</i> (<i>Phlogacanthus thyriformis</i>), dry fish (<i>Rasbora</i> sp., <i>Puntius</i> sp., <i>Labeo</i> sp. etc.)	Helpful in common cold, cough and joint pains
11	<i>To kaka khusarkai</i>	Chicken (<i>Gallus gallus domesticus</i>) (only neck part), edible soda	Traditionally eaten during marriage ceremony

*Italics words are Rabha words written in English



Figure 1: Photographs of some ethnic foods of Rabha tribe (Goalpara, Assam) – A. *Khuchia phakai*, B. *Chukung dali mi*, C. *Chukung monthophol khusarkai*, D. *Chukung tepai bamchikhali*, E. *Bak tepai bamchikhali*, F. *Bak khusarkai*, G. *Bak pukchung jawkai*, H. *Mekha par aronakhen*, I. A Rabha woman during preparation of ethnic food

4. *Chukung tepai bamchikhali* (Snail and black gram)

Ingredients: Snail (*Viviparus viviparus*), black gram (*Vigna mungo*), rice flour powder, ginger leaf (chopped) and paste, green chili, edible salt, edible soda, curry leaf (*Murraya koenigii*).

Procedure: Fresh water snails (*Viviparus viviparus*) are collected from the paddy field or nearby wetlands/streams. The mantle and whorl part are removed by sickle and washed with water. Mixed the clean snail with chopped ginger leaves (*Zingiber officinale*), ginger paste, green chili, curry leaf (*Murraya koenigii*) and edible soda on hot pan. The mixture is fried to dry excess water after which water is added till half the pan. When the water boils, grinded black gram is added with the fried mixture. When the water boils, little rice flour powder is added and mixed well to avoid sticking. After cooking for about 45 minutes, the food will ready to serve.

5. *Bak tepai bamchikhali* (Pork and black gram)

Ingredient: Pork (*Sus scrofa domestica*), grinded black gram (*Vigna mungo*), rice flour powder, edible soda, ginger paste, garlic paste, green chili, edible salt.

Procedure: Pork (*Sus scrofa domestica*) is to be cut into some small equal pieces. Pork pieces are added to the mixture of ingredients including grinded black gram (*Vigna mungo*). The mixture is half cooked till the excess water become dry. Then water is added and kept for boil. As soon as it starts boiling, rice flour powder is added, mixed well till it becomes watery paste. The food is cooked for about 1½ hours over low

flame to make it ready for serve. This food is mostly served during marriage ceremony with rice on banana stem part.

6. Naa bekai (Fish wrapped on banana leaf)

Ingredients: Small raw fish (*Rasbora* sp., *Puntius* sp., *Labeo* sp. etc.), turmeric, edible salt, garlic, onion, chili, ginger, banana leaf (*Musa* sp.).

Procedure: At first, banana leaf (*Musa* sp.) has to be put on fire for 2–3 seconds to make it soft. Small fishes (*Rasbora* sp., *Puntius* sp., *Labeo* sp. etc.) are thoroughly mixed with turmeric powder, edible salt, grinded garlic, chopped ginger leaf (*Zingiber officinale*) and chili. The mixture is then kept on a broad banana leaf (*Musa* sp.). Now, banana leave is folded carefully into small size and the roll thus formed should tie with its petiole. This roll is then put inside the ashes for cooking. After about 20 minutes, position of lying has to be changed to another side. After about 45 minutes of total cooking time, the food will be ready to eat.

7. Bak khusarkai (Pork and blood)

Ingredients: Pork (*Sus scrofa domesticus*), edible soda, edible salt, grinded ginger, garlic, chili, pork blood.

Procedure: Pork (*Sus scrofa domesticus*) is first chopped into some equal sized pieces. Pork pieces are now mixed with grinded ginger, chili, garlic, edible salt and thoroughly mixed on a pan. The mixture is cooked for some time to keep the excess water to dry. Then, edible soda (*Khar*) is added to the mixture and cooked for 5 -10 minutes. After that water is added and cooked again for about 1 hour on low flame. Now, the pork blood is to be mixed thoroughly and cooked for about 30 minutes after which the food will be ready to eat.

8. Bak pukchung jawkai (pork intestine)

Ingredients: pork (*Sus scrofa domesticus*) intestine, mustard oil, onion, edible salt, turmeric powder, chili.

Procedure: The whole intestine of pork (*Sus scrofa domesticus*) is processed for this food. To clean the intestine, it is gradually pressed from up to down by hand to release the inner waste materials. Water is poured through it to wash it fully. Intestine is now cut with sharp bamboo edge (pre-made). Long intestines are chopped to short which is washed with water and boiled for about 30 minutes with edible salt. After boiling, it is chopped again into small pieces and dried in sun light for 2–3 days. Dried pieces are fried with the other ingredients to make it edible.

9. Khengargi mi (Roselle leaf and crab)

Ingredients: Fresh water crab (*Sartoriana* sp.), Roselle leaf (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*), edible salt, chili, mustard oil, onion, garlic, ginger, turmeric powder, bay leaves (*Cinnamomum tamala*).

Procedure: Onion, garlic, ginger paste, turmeric powder, bay leaves (*Cinnamomum tamala*) are added in to the heated mustard oil on a pan. Body parts of crabs (*Sartoriana* sp.) and chopped Roselle leaf (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) are now added to the mixture. It is cooked to make dry, after which little water is added to form paste. The food is eaten in the form of paste with rice.

10. Mekha par aro nakhen (Tita phool and dry fish)

Ingredients: *Tita phool* (*Phlogacanthus thyrsiformis*), small/medium dry fish (*Rasbora* sp., *Puntius* sp., *Labeo* sp. etc.), edible salt, ginger, chili, edible soda.

Procedure: *Tita phool* (*Phlogacanthus thyrsiformis*) are collected, cleaned and taken on a pan. To this, edible soda, edible salt, grinded ginger and chili are mixed. The mixture is half cooked in high flame. When the food becomes dry, water is added up to half of the pan. Then, dry fishes (*Rasbora* sp., *Puntius* sp., *Labeo* sp. etc.) are added to the mixture and cooked till fish become soft. The food is eaten with rice.

11. To kaka khusarkai (Chicken khar)

Ingredients: Edible salt, chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus*) pieces (only neck part), ginger pastes, chili, *khar* (edible soda).

Procedure: Chicken pieces (*Gallus gallus domesticus*) are mixed with edible salt, chili, ginger paste and edible soda (*khar*). The mixture is half cooked with *khar* (edible soda) and when the *khar* (edible soda) become dry water is added equal to the food level. It items are cooked in low flame for about 40 minutes.

Discussion

Ethnic or traditional foods are those which indigenous peoples have access from locally, without having to purchase them, and within traditional knowledge and the natural environment from farming or wild harvesting (Kuhnlein *et al.*, 2009). All the described foods are prepared with various ingredients including herbs like lemon leaf (*Citrus limon*), wild coriander (*Eryngium foetidum*), bay leaf (*Cinnamomum tamala*), curry leaf (*Murraya koenigii*), roselle leaf (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) etc. However, the main ingredients of all the described foods are meat of some animals like fishes (*Rasbora* sp., *Puntius* sp., *Labeo* sp. etc.), crab (*Sartoriana* sp.), snail (*Viviparus viviparus*), pig (*Sus scrofa domestica*) and chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus*). Rabha tribe uses different kinds of spices in preparing the various ethnic foods, which give tasty or desirable flavor to the items. Most of these ingredients have high medicinal value, for which they are used by various ethnic tribes in Assam (Deka and Nath, 2014).

Bak khusarkai is the ethnic food of Rabha, which is almost similar in their ingredients with DohSnam of Khasi tribe (in Meghalaya). The product is rich in iron and fat due to the presence of blood and intestine (Govindasamy *et al.*, 2018). There is a tradition in Rabha marriage that the neck of red cock (*Gallus gallus domesticus*) (except head part) has to be cut and cooked with khar (edible soda). This is a traditional food very popular among the tribe known as 'To kaka khusarkai'. A single piece of this meat is given to everyone present in that ceremony. In the preparation of foods like *Chukung dali mi*, *Chukung monthophol khusarkai* and *Chukung tepai bamchikhali*, snail (*Viviparus viviparus*) is used as key ingredients. Snails have high medicinal value hence, usage in curing cancer (Babatunde *et al.*, 2013). Apart from its richness in nutritional value, they are also used in prevention and curing of diseases like hypertension, anaemia, and haemorrhoid and to restore vivility and vitality in men (Odunnaiya, 1991). The traditional healers in the adjoining areas of Gibbon wildlife sanctuary (Assam) use freshwater snail for better eye sight and cuchia fish to treat anemia (Borah and Prasad, 2017). Karbi tribe of Karbi Anglong district (Assam) also consumes raw blood or raw fish (*Monopterus cuchia*) to treat the disease condition like Anemia and Kala-azar (Teronpi *et al.* 2012).

Like most of the tribe in Assam, Rabha tribe also consumes pork (*Sus scrofa domestica*) particularly in their various ceremonial events. According to FAO, pork provides vitamin B6, B12, thiamine, niacin, riboflavin and pantothenic acid, which are beneficial for healthy growth and development in children and for the constitutions of adults. It may mention that the method of preparation of different foods sometime varies according to the availability of materials and overall traditional knowledge on processing of ingredients and methods of preparation. However, the advent of modern civilization has adversely affected the tradition and heritage of community and thus the younger generations are not exposed to traditional practices (Devi and Kumar, 2012). Therefore, it is very necessary to document more and more existing traditional knowledge in different areas among the tribes. It is also the need of hour to promote the ethnic foods of this tribe (Rabha) for their commercial production, which will not only generate local revenue but also create employment opportunity particularly for the local tribal youth.

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