



Traditional knowledge and method of various rice preparations in Assam

A Bora*

Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam-786 004, India
E-mail: amtitabora895@gmail.com

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Food habit reflects the culture of a society. Food habit of a society depends on different matters like geographical location, climate, environment, religion, taste etc. Assam, a north-eastern state of India is rich in paddy cultivation. Rice is staple food of Assam and people of Assam used to make various rice preparations like *jalpan*, various rice cakes, rice beer etc. since ancient times. These preparations are part and parcel of Assamese traditional food culture. Traditional knowledge and method is still applied in preparing all these preparations. Besides these preparations have social and cultural value also. This paper is about traditional knowledge and methods of preparing various rice preparations in Assam.

Keywords: Assam, Method, Rice preparations, Traditional, Knowledge

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Assam is situated in the north-eastern part of India. This state of India is well known for natural resources and its natural beauty. During colonial era, territory of Assam covered large and varied regions comprising the entire valley of the Brahmaputra River, Khasi and Jaintia hills, Garo hills, Mizo hills and Sylhet. But after India's independence, some territories of earlier Assam were separated to form new states. Present Assam covers an area of 78,438 km² and the state is bordered by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh to the north, Nagaland and Manipur to the east, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram and Bangladesh to the south and West Bengal is to the West. It is home of different tribes like the *Ahoms*, the *Mishings*, the *Bodos*, the *Deoris*, the *Kacharis*, the *Garos*, the *Koch*, the *Mech*, the *Karbhis* etc. Rice is staple food in Assam. From ancient times people used to cultivate paddy here. As Assam is rich in paddy cultivation, people of Assam earned the knowledge of using rice by different ways. Though now-a-days food culture of Assam has been changing with the change in time, yet Assam is well known for various traditional rice preparations like *jalpan*, various rice cakes, rice beer etc. In this paper an attempt has been made to study about traditional knowledge and method of different rice preparations prevalent in Assamese society since ancient times. The main objectives of this paper are: 1) To find out

traditional knowledge and method of rice preparations in Assam; and 2) To study about socio-cultural value of these preparations in Assamese society.

Methodology

To study about traditional knowledge of various rice preparations in Assam, one has to rely on historical documents. The approach of this study is historical and exploratory in nature. To serve the purpose of the topic, both conventional and analytical methods of investigation were followed. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in this research work. Primary sources include- accounts of foreign travellers who visited Assam during Colonial era including W.W. Hunter, William Robinson, Buchanon Hamilton, Edward Gait etc. Secondary sources include books, journals, magazines, internet etc. To co-relate the traditional knowledge of past with present times, a comparative study has also been done.

Results and Discussion

In Assam, chief livelihood of people is agriculture. Paddy is cultivated here extensively. Rice was the staple crop in Assam all through the ages as it is at present. Assamese historical literature contains mention of varieties of rice grown in Assam. For example the *Yogini Tantra*, an early 16th century Sanskrit work of Assam, speaks as many as twenty varieties of rice such as- *raja*, *soma*, *briha*, *banya*, *raktasali*, *keteki*, *narayana*, *madhava*, *pradipa*,

*Corresponding author

ashoka etc. The *katha Guru Charit*, a literary work of medieval Assam also contains numerous references to rice cultivation and mentions its varieties. The *Fatiya-i-Ibriya* and the *Alamgirnama* both speak of extensive rice cultivation in Assam¹.

W.W. Hunter in his book *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol- I mentions about four main varieties of rice cultivated in Assam-1. *Ahu* or *Aus*, 2. *Bao*, 3. *Lahi*, and 4. *Sali*. The *ahu* rice is sown on highlands during the month of June and reaped in September without irrigation. It is sub divided into different kinds, like- *ahu*, *guni*, *pijli*, *ahubara* etc. *Bao* or marsh rice is sown in about April and reaped in November or December. It requires deep water, but should be planted when the water is low. *Lahi* rice is cultivated on low lands during the rainy season and grows well in water up to two feet deep. It is subdivided into the following kinds- *mankimadhuri*, *kharikajaha*, *malbhog*, *bora*, *silguri* etc. *Sali* rice is sown in June and reaped in December. It requires plenty of water. Some varieties of *Sali* rice are- *bar sali*, *saru sali*, *Kapau sali*, *rangasali*, *maguri*, *kala sali* etc.². Now a day also these types of rice are cultivated in Assam.

Early Assamese literature provides numerous references to the use of various rice preparations. The *Padma Purana* of *Sukavinarayandeva* gives a long list of cooked menu including varieties of rice cakes. *MadhavaKandali* (awell known scholar of medieval Assam) also mentions about *Kharikajahar pitha* (one kind of rice cake). *Katha Guru Charita* also gives information about different rice preparations in Assam³. Traditionally an Assamese cultivator generally takes three meals in a day. Early in the morning he takes rice mixed with split peas and vegetables. The second meal is taken by him at noon. If the cultivator is in the fields, he takes *komal chaul* or *komal* rice with molasses and banana. In Assam three peculiar varieties of rice are found- *Chakua*, *Bora* and *Joha*. *Chakua* and *Bora* are so soft that people of Assam used to take them unboiled, just soaking them in water which is then called *Komalchaul* or *boka chaul*⁴. If someone is at home, they eat boiled rice with fish curry. About evening they have their supper, which consist of the same substances that formed their morning meal but freshly cooked⁵.

In Assam the rice plant is known as 'kathiya', unhusked rice is called 'dhan', husked rice is called 'chaul', cooked rice is called 'bhat' and powdered rice is called 'Pithaguri'. *Jalpan* plays an important role in Assamese traditional food culture. *Jalpan* is prepared by various rice preparations like- roasted and ground

rice (*xandoh*), flattened rice (*chira*), puffed rice (*muri*), cooked glutinous rice or *bora saul* etc. Generally these preparations are eaten along with curd (*doi*), cream, molasses etc. It is also remarkable in this regard that as Assam is homeland of different tribes, so they named these rice preparations in their own way. But in this paper, only those names are used, which are found in historical documents and widely used in Assamese society including all tribes.

Traditional Knowledge and method of preparing different rice preparation are as follows:-

Akhoi- A quantity of paddy is placed in an iron pan which is kept out in the dew during the night and inside the house during the day time, for three consecutive nights and days. A quantity of sand is then heated in a pan and the paddy is sprinkled upon it. The grain is then separated from the sand and the preparation is completed by removal of the husk⁶.

Xandah- *Xandah* is also a traditional popular *jalpan* in Assam. To prepare *Xandoh*, the rice is soaked for three or four days and then it is fried. The fried rice is pounded in *dheki*. *Dheki* is a homemade wooden mill in Assam to pound grains. It is a foot pounder for husking grains and it serves as a grinder also⁷. *Dheki* is seen in almost all the houses of Assamese rural society (Fig. 1). To keep a *dheki* in the houses of Assam is an age old tradition.



Fig. 1 — Dheki

Chira-Chira is prepared by boiling paddy in water for about an hour. It is then dried and dehusked, afterwards parched in a wide mouthed earthen pot over a fire and pounded while still hot⁸. Some other method of preparing *chira* is to immerse the paddy in water in a cooking vessel, and to place it over the fire till the hand cannot well bear the heat of the water. It is then removed from the fire and allowed to stand till next morning, when the water is drained off. The paddy is then parched and afterwards pounded, when the husk is separated from the grain by winnowing⁹. *Chira* is served with molasses and curd to the guests in wedding and other family or community functions.

Muri- To prepare *muri*, paddy is first boiled and afterwards parched and dehusked. Generally Assamese traditional *Jalpan* is prepared by adding *chira*, *akhoi* and *muri* together with curd and molasses.

Various types of rice cakes are being prepared in Assam. By Assamese, rice cakes are called *pitha*. *Pithas* are often made from *bora saul* (a special kind of glutinous rice). Some of the *pithas* are *til pitha*, *chunga pitha*, *ghila pitha*, *xutuli pitah*, *dhup pitha*, *bhapotdiya pitha*, *pheni pitha*, *pani pitha* etc. Among these mostly popular are *til pitha*, *ghila pitha* or *telpitha* and *sungapitha*.

Til pitha It is long and thin in shape and very unique in look and taste. A tasty mixture of sesame seeds and molasses is covered with a thin layer of rice powder. Generally to prepare this *pitha-bora* rice is used.

Sunga pitha- This type of rice cake is made by wrapping rice powder and sugar paste in banana leaves, stuffing it in hollowed out pieces of bamboo and roasting it over a wood fire. This is a tube shaped cake and cutting into pieces it is served with hot milk¹⁰.

Ghila pitha or Tel pitha- This type of *pitha* is made from rice powder and molasses. It is fried in mustard oil. Salt can also be used instead of molasses to make taste salty. Generally earthen fire place (*Chowka*) is used to prepare *pitha* (Fig. 2). In villages of Assam, tradition of keeping *chowka* is still prevalent. Fewer spices are used in rice cakes. These are not only delicious but also healthy for the digestive system.

Some other rice preparations are:

Payas or Parmanna- *Payas* is also very delicious and it is prepared by boiling rice in milk and adding sugar in it. *payas* has been a favourite dish of the Assamese people since ancient days¹¹.

Poitabhat- The practice of taking *Poitabhat* is also a tradition of Assam. Cooked rice is kept overnight



Fig. 2 — Earthen place (chowka)

in cold water and it is taken as the first meal in next day morning. This preparation keeps the stomach cool in summer days. *Poita bhat* is still prevalent in Assam and it is very delicious to take *poita bhat* with fried small fish.

Luthuri pitha - It is the common food for very young children between one and six months old. It is made by boiling rice in water in the same way as sago or arrowroot is prepared for infants in western countries¹².

Sijua Pitha- It is made by boiling *pithaguri* or rice powder in water till the water evaporates, it is then left till it cools down, after which it is eaten with milk, molasses and bananas. It is believed in Assamese society that *Sijua pitha* provides nutrition to weak and sick people.

Liquid preparations made from rice

Preparing different types of alcoholic drinks by using rice is also a tradition of Assamese society. Rice beer is termed by different names by different tribal people of Assam. Tribes of Assam like the *Ahoms*, the *Mishings*, the *Mikirs*, the *Karbhis*, the *Deoris* and other various tribes take rice beer and it is a popular beverage of various tribes of Assam even today. William Robinson has written in his book *A Description Account of Assam*, about the traditional method of preparing rice beer by the *Mikirs* that “a certain quantity of rice is steeped in water for some time and when sufficiently saturated, the water is

squeezed out, the rice dried, pounded and made into cakes, which are placed in the smoke of a fire for eight or ten days, at the end of which time the cakes are again put into water and there allowed to stand for a day or two, when the liquor is drawn off”¹³.

The *Mising* tribe of Assam terms rice beer as *Apong* or *Laopani*. The *Ahoms* term it as *xaj*. *Xaj* is made of fermented rice and a mix of rare species of herb. The *Deori* tribes call it *suze*, the *Bodos* call it *jumai*, the *Mikirs* call it *morpo*, and the *Tiwas* call it *zu* etc.

All these rice preparations are part and parcel of Assamese food culture. It is tradition of Assam to serve guests with *jalpan* and rice cakes during the times of national festival ‘Bihu’ and wedding ceremony and other community feast. In Assam, all tribes prepare these preparations during national

festival *bihu*. Likewise, the *Deuris*, the *Tiwas*, the *Mishings*, the *Ahoms* etc. tribes consider rice-beer as a holy drink. The *Deuri* people considered rice beer as the most valuable item for entertaining guests. The *Tiwa* people believe that rice beer has been sent to The Earth by *Mahadeva*, their supreme God. The *Mishings* also believe *apong* as a prestigious item for entertaining guests and every family should keep some *apong* to welcome guests. The *Garos* use rice beer as a kind of nutritious food and the young children are exposed to tasting this drink very early on. They also offer rice-beer to their gods and goddesses¹⁴. So, it can be easily assumed that all these traditional rice preparations occupy special position in Assamese society and culture. Some pictures of Assamese rice preparations have been provided [Fig-3(a) to (i)].



Fig. 3 — (a)Komalchaul, (b)xandah, (c)chira, (d)ghilapitha, (e)til pitha, (f)jalpan, (g)ricebeer, (h)akhoi, (I)muri

Conclusion

Now a days, preparation methods or techniques of these rice has been changed with the changes of time due to the development of modern technology. Instead of *dheki*, in present times most of people in Assamese society prefer to use electrical grinder to pound rice. Likewise rice cakes are baked or fried in gas stove instead of earthen fire place (*chowka*). However, traditional knowledge of preparing these dishes is still prevalent in Assamese society. Assamese traditional food culture cannot be complete without inclusion of *jalpan*, rice cakes and rice beer. These preparations are part of socio-cultural heritage of Assam. Besides *jalpan* which is traditionally taken as a light food in Assamese society, these beverages can be very good commodities as these are free from spices, delicious and are easy to prepare. It is also worth mentioning that rice cakes are much more nutritious than biscuits which are taken with milk, tea or coffee for taste. Traditionally made rice beer of Assam also has several health benefits. So, there maybe scope of scientific study or research in the following fields-

1. Uses of Assamese traditional rice preparations may be more healthy and nutritious than commonly available patent food in the market.
2. Scientifically prepared and preserved Assamese rice beer may prove to be beneficial for human health or some particular diseases. So, initiatives should be taken in this regard.

Conflicts of Interest

Author declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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