

The Gastronomic Culture of the Deori Community Residing in Assam

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Abstract

The Deoris or Deuris are one of the distinct Tribal Communities of undivided Assam they are affiliated to the great Tibeto-Burman group. At present the Deoris are residing mainly in the districts of Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat of Assam, Lohit and Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. The traditional foods prepared by the people of North Eastern region are intimately connected to their sociocultural and ecological, spiritual, life and health. In each state, the food processing method or the culinary skills are somewhat different from others and based on the culture, variability in the materials used in the food, climate and overall knowledge of the processing and preparation as well. Identity is an important outcome, a condition created largely through heritage or firm grip into one's own roots which may or may not be conveyed through rituals as the vehicle of transmission. Food helps in the formation of a larger part of one's Identity. Food also is a part and parcel of one's Culture. Gastronomy is the study of food and culture, with a particular focus on gourmet cuisine. The term subsumes cooking techniques, nutritional facts, food cuisine and palatability plus applications of taste and smell as human ingestion of food stuffs. This paper will mainly focus on the food habits and food items, culinary skills, food processing of the Deori community of Assam under the broader context of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Deori, ethnicity, food, tradition, gastronomy, folk culture, symbol, identity, indigenous knowledge.

INTRODUCTION:

The North Eastern region of India indeed presents a glorious example of diversity which is followed by myriads of distinct aboriginal tribal communities inhabiting the region. The Deoris amongst them are no exception to this rule. The Indian Constitution has regarded the Deoris as a Scheduled Tribe of Assam. The present inhabitations of the Deoris are spread in Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Majuli Districts of Assam. Other than the state of Assam, the Deori villages are also found in Lohit and Tirap Districts of Arunachal Pradesh. As per semantics the word *Deori* means the offsprings of God and Goddess, *deu* means great, wise; and *o* and *ri* denotes male and female respectively. Deoris, like to proudly introduce themselves as *jimo-chan-ya*ⁱ amongst themselves (Deori: 2002). The etymological meaning of the Deori word *jimochanya* is- *jimo* means the sperm, semen or virile, *chan* means sun and *ya* means moon. The *jimo* is born from the sweet union of *chan* and *ya*, i.e., *purush* and *prakriti*.ⁱⁱ The Deoris were the levite or priestly class and functioned as the priests of the Chutiyas of Assam, who established their kingdom at Sadiya. According to W. B. Brown- "It has been observed that the original

seat of the Deoris was in the region beyond Sadiya.; and some of them still occasionally visit Sadiya for religious purposes”. It is also significant to note that the Ahom kingdom, dispersed all the Chutiyas to the different parts of Ahom kingdom as a state policy, but the Deoris were allowed to stay in their habitat (Sadiya) and continue their worship in the shrines there. This clearly indicates that the Ahom rulers did not equate the Deoris with the Chutiyas (Deori: 2002).

There are four broad divisions amongst the Deoris. These divisions are- a) Dibangiya, b) Tengapaniya, c) Borgonya, d) Patorgonyas. The division is termed as *gayan*ⁱⁱⁱ or *khel* by the Deoris. Each of the division is said to be originated from a particular river's or place's name the people who resided near the Dibang river named themselves as dibangiya, the people who resided near the Tengapaani river named themselves as tengapaniya, the people who resided near Bornodi river named themselves as borgonya, and patorgonya group is not found in the present time. The Patorgonya group is not traceable at present and it is presumed that the members of this group might have been amalgamated with the other existing groups of the Deoris or with the other communities (Deori: 2002). Every tribal community of Assam or the entire North East of India have their own food habits based on the location specific diversities on crops and forest resources, culture, ecological edges and seasonal variability. The processing of the foods and associated dynamics are transmitted from generation to generation and exchanged within and between the communities. Selectively, harvesting techniques and preservation methods of food based planting materials indicate the holistic sustainable view of the female category of the community. Across the culture and bioregional domain, knowledge related to ethnic foods and their consumption patterns vary on account on women's native knowledge, personal taste and demand of family members. These knowledge systems are basically governed and managed by the elder society and communicated through the traditional ways of communication (Christine and Karin: 2011). Due to conservatism in respect of their religious beliefs, the Deoris carry out their practices in the aboriginal forms.

Aims and objectives:

- An attempt to throw a light on the importance of ethnicity.
- To discern the Deori Community from a close proximity.
- To know the Indigenous Food Habits or the Gastronomic culture of the Deori community of Assam
- To understand the importance Food that plays a vital role in forming an Identity.

Methodology:

Historical, Descriptive and Analytical methods are used regarding the context of the paper. Primary data such as visiting some Deori villages of Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Sadiya of Assam tasting the dishes of Deoris knowing the culinary skills of the women of the community and Secondary data such as books, magazines, journals, articles, newspapers etc., are used in this working paper.

Food as a Symbol of Culture and an Identity marker: As an everyday activity, sustaining our life, eating experiences reveals complex relationships between food and society, involving material and symbolic aspects of culture. Bringing on stage of cultural values, food becomes a central identity marker, defining personality, social class, lifestyles, gender roles and relationship from family to community, to ethnic groups or nationality, changing through time and place. Food is caught in the dialectics of return to the origins, to traditions, ‘the search for the unexpected’ (Floch: 1995). On the narrative level, eating means living and meeting, being himself or herself and sometimes becoming

another too. Food and culture takes us through all the repertoires of social life; objects, places, situations, roles, practices and behaviours, involving all the sociological levels. It is found that, food practices involves familial traditions from the past that enables people to reconnect with familial relationships, bringing them to the present and passing them onto the next generations. Food embodies permanent dialectics between the attachments to our origins' with its emblematic or totemic dishes, its recipes, its rituals and practices. In the human realm, food procurement, preparation and consumption have evolved to an art form. We have transitioned from scavenging, hunting, and gathering whatever we could find to creating complex cuisines that help some people to reinforce their ethnic affiliations and may offer others taste of cultures. Knowledge of food that used to come down through culture-now comes through a variety of sources that all claim supremacy, but that are often inconsistent in their advice. Cultural values do influence our food choices. In a narrow sense, ethnic foods are defined as foods originating from a heritage and culture of any ethnic group who use their knowledge of local ingredients. However, the term ethnic food is ambiguous (Gibson: 2006). Thus, in broader sense, ethnic food can be defined as an ethnic group's or country's cuisine that is culturally and socially accepted by consumers outside of the respective ethnic group.

People from various countries are eager to introduce their own ethnic food to people from around the world. This usually begins with preparing the food and ends with eating it. Each country's food has its own story including history. Thus, it can be said that, we are what we eat. The importance of culture in our food habits is very much essential, without culture, eating simply is an animal act of survival; with culture, we have the potential to become the connoisseurs of food, creating meaning and purpose through the basic rationalistic processes. For a long time, studies on gastronomic heritage have preferentially and primarily looked at rural contexts, the agricultural world where everything we eat is generated and located. Each city has generated and developed a special relationship with the culture of food. It is determined by the surrounding territory, by the history of customs, by the creativity and savior-faire of its citizens and by the culture and various other influences (Harris and Ross: 1987). This working paper aims to study the Deori food habits in an applicative nature to recognize the true value of the community's traditional food, through an understanding of the producers, traditional culinary skills and techniques, folklore and cultural landscape in a holistic reading where the various elements combines to define and restore the gastronomic heritage in its cogent and complex historical-cultural unity. This paper aims to discover the gastronomic cultural heritage of the Deori community over the trajectories for a creative future, as the traditional gastronomic resources can be a precious capital knowledge, a resource of memory, of identity and of heritage which ultimately ties a knot with one's analogical roots. Gastronomy became a theme through which to recover pleasure, a significant feature of claiming one's identity, the idea that food traversed and unites the whole world, of democracy and authoritarianism, of equity and inequality. The cultural and political origins of the gastronomic association were born in the extraordinary cultural soup of the late sixties, a universal movement of freedom, hope and democracy, of the lack of prohibition to interpret the cultures of the tradition, the folklore. A historical trajectory of freedom that is also a constituent part of the project that has brought food to the attention of man and the world. The possibility of having food and its appropriate and wise use was one the constitutive traits that marked the space-time rhythms of our common path (Gehlen: 1985).

Today our society seems to have forgotten this cultural direction which, even ritually, taught us to share bread in a thrust of common survival which should also be the deepest sign of continuous search for

sustainability, a relationship that does not see food as a warrior commodity, as a product of conquest, but as a patrimony of ethical values too. A fundamental cultural process that taught and transmitted the formularity of recipes, forms and practices of the kitchen: for example the expressions 'just enough', 'a fistful', the rosary and its multiples and submultiples, as empirically experimented rhythms to mark the cooking time of foods and equip them with the sacredness that today's oblivion of modernity has erased (Dates:2009). The gastronomic culture risks losing one of the largest and in many ways forgotten cultural heritage if the stories of the elderly disappear with them. The kitchen is the essence of our being: we know that we are what we eat and eat what we are. However, to reproduce the vitality, the creativity that accompanies the preparation of a dish, it is necessary to have adequate documentation that represents holistically the whole gastronomic culture of any community (Jonathan: 1989).

Food Habits of the Deoris in their Socio-cultural context: The traditional foods consumed by the tribes of North Eastern region are intimately connected to virtually all aspects of their socio-cultural, spiritual life and health. The predominance of informal rural social institutions related to accessing the natural resources by rural women in the socio-cultural dimension (marriage, cultural functions, festivals, etc) of different tribal communities of Assam is one of the best sources of learning and intergenerational transfer and knowledge networking about traditional knowledge of ethnic foods. And also a range of rich diversities in the cultural and social dynamics of this particular community Deori have their great heritage pertaining to folk songs, proverbs, folk story, tales which are found to be the important modes of communication of the traditional knowledge system which takes place in the gatherings over food or in the kitchen that are codified into local dialects (Deori: 2013). The traditional foods processed and prepared by women and people of the Deori tribe are intimately connected to their socio-cultural, ecological, spiritual life and health. The processing and preparation of this community's ethnic foods not only demonstrates the creativity and treasure of food heritage of their tribe but also their incremental learning to sustain the life and the ecosystem as a whole. The processing method of the food items is somewhat different based on their culture, tradition, variability in the materials used in the food and overall usage of the preparations. The ethnic food items prepared and consumed by this particular community is a complex dynamics in which nutrition; health, food security, culture ethics, subsistence economy and ecological sustainability are integral components (Deori: 2007).

It is found that the new generation in the same community has undergone a rapid change in their diets over the past 20 years due to intervention of modern crop varieties, materialistic life and current trend towards increasing use of commercial food products. And for this community, traditional food use transformation has been radical, as people have moved from a diet in which the majority of nutrients drawn from local food, to more generic diet of store bought food, most of which are produced and processed far away from locality. Changing of cropping patterns, types of farming systems and fast foods through globalization process, accompanied by decrease in the usage of traditional vegetables, fruits and fermented ethnic foods of this community has resulted in many diseases (Deori:2013). From some observations it is revealed that increasing facilities of communication and road approachability have enlarged the social mobility in the different villages of the Deori community where they reside. The traditional knowledge related to processing and preparation of ethnic food items is transferred from one generation to other by various mode of communication amongst the Deori community of Assam. In this case, interactions with elderly and inter-and-intra communal people leads to learning about the food based knowledge system. In the remote villages where the Deoris resides, it is found that the women of this community to be more knowledgeable in the processing of the foods (Deori: 2013). And

undoubtedly, traditional knowledge of tribal women and their practices of ethnic foods preparation have many relations to the sustainable food and nutritional security of the health and ecosystems as well (Mintz and Bois: 2002).

Agricultural Practices: Agriculture and domestic animals are the main means of income to the Deori community as they are mainly an Agrarian community. Two types of rice in a year are sown in two times i.e., *aahu and shaali*^{iv}. Potato, mustard seeds, vegetables, *kath aloo*^v etc. are the main rabi crops. Besides this, sugarcane and cotton are planted. Separate gardens are prepared for banana, Beatle-nut and bamboo etc. Goat, hen, pig, pigeon, cow, buffalo are the main domestic animals. They produce agricultural products for their own consumption and sustenance (Deori: 2013).

Here is a list of some special food items of the Deoris which makes a larger identity as the Deori cuisine or the community's gastronomic culture.

Food Items of the community: Deoris are habituated to prepare their food in traditional way. They prefer boiled items. Rice, vegetables, meat, fish, egg, are the main source of food. However, they prepare these in different ways from that of the other ethnic groups. Presenting some special food items of the Deoris which they specifically prepare in their special events and festivals (Deori: 2013).

Pae jubura or pithaguri torkaari: Pae jubura means the curry which is served along with the boiled rice. The curry which in the local Deori dialect is known as *jubura*, is a stew made of local vegetables especially with leafy vegetables where the powdered rice is added to make it a thick consistency with little added salt with turmeric for the colour. The Deoris usually do not intake much of oily foods but they prefer rather smoked food items with little added salt for the taste with or sometimes without spices. Pae jubura holds a vital position in the dining platter of the Deoris in their regular meals and also in any events or festivals such as the *Bisu*^{vi} festival.

Midiji jubura or kosu xaak torkari: This is the curry or stew made from leafy veggies, (the stink lily) or amorphophallus paeoniifolius scientific name locally known as *kosuxaak/paat*. This leaf is available in the immediate surroundings of the villages. This leaf curry is made by boiling the leaves and stems in water in curry pot or bowl for few hours and then with little added salt it is stirred for seconds and served hot.

Dal jubura-lai, dhekiya mikaji, mikoga, marsa: *Dal jubura* means curry made of green leafy vegetables *lai xaak* known locally as (vegetable mustard) or brassica juncea the scientific name. The *lai xaak* grabs a central position in the dishes of Deori people. It is added in every curry and it is taken highly in their meals, sometimes added with meat items, sometimes cooked as boiled curry, sometimes chutney or paste is made of the leaves. Long leafy vegetables are something that is generally found in the Deori cuisine. Deoris do farming of green leafy vegetables in their fields or sometimes in their backyard, which makes it readily available for the people to pluck freshly and cook. Fiddle head ferns or diplazium esculentum the scientific name also as *dhekiya xaak* known locally is also a part and parcel of their leafy curry. The same process is used to cook, the leaves are tore apart and added in boil water for an hour and then it is fried with small potatoes or grams with little added salt for the taste and with or without turmeric powder. Though it is fried the folks make it sure that the amount of oil added to the curry is less and if added it should be of pure mustard oil. And *mikoga marsa* means all other edible leafy items.

Chu chu jubura: The pork meat locally known as *chu chu* in the Deori dialect. And *jubura* is the curry or gravy. Pork meat gravy or *chu chu jubura* holds a major position in the Deori dishes. This curry is usually served in special events, programs in community gatherings, marriages, bisu celebration luncheons and dinner party. Sometimes the pork is made with different ingredients to have a various

taste in the recipe but out of all pork with stink lily or lai xaak is their most preferable recipe of the community. The pork meat is chopped into fine pieces it is either boiled or sometimes put into bamboo fillers after smearing turmeric powder and salt. The bamboo filler is then blocked with wrappers or banana leaves and then allowed to get smoked for few hours and then served hot which is smoked pork. Likewise barbecued pork meat pieces are also preferred in the platters.

Kaji jubura: It is a mixed vegetable curry or gravy prepared out of all leafy vegetables. This curry holds a special position in the community's events, festivals, programs, feasts like it is served in the *bisu* celebration and *na-bhaat khuwa*^{vii}. It is made of thick consistency and served with rice in the meals. And also it is found at times serving along with the local brew or traditional drink called *suje* which together is called *suje-kaji*. It is prepared by either frying with less oil and salt or is either boiled. It is generally prepared for people in large gatherings.

Siya jubura: This is the traditional fish curry of the community which is commonly known as *Siya* or *maas torakaari*. It is either boiled or prepared as a curry. As the Deori's are primarily an agrarian community thus, they are found engaged in farming (crop cultivation), animal husbandry, fisheries, poultry farming etc. As they reside mainly near the river sides so fishing for them is a sort of occupation, they deal in large amount of fishing activities. And hence the folks are found very much occupied in fishing and thus, fish curry is a sort of mandatory item in their platter. Fish curry is prepared as a sour/tangy flavoured stew by adding *bilahi* (tomato), *outenga* (elephant apple), and *modolou xaak* or *modhuxuleng xaak* (a perennial edible shrub) or scientifically known as *polygonum microcephalum* or *polygonum chinense* where in the stew fried (big) fish pieces are added and stirred with salt turmeric powder to develop the taste. This dish is taken in the meals with rice and also served in special occasions such as feast, ceremonial functions etc.

Dibi jubura: This is yet another important food item in the Deori traditional cuisine. The black lentil/grams split or dal commonly known as *mati dail* or *dibi jubura* holds a special position in the platter of the Deoris. It is prepared as stew/curry by boiling it in low flame for hours and this item is served in the *bisu* celebrations and other functions such as crematorium ceremonies too. It is readily available in the kitchen of the community throughout all the seasons.

Meku jubura logot kukura: This is one of a delicious item in the Deori cuisine though all are specially prepared but this item is generally preferred by both insiders and the outsiders (for the outsider who have the minimum of the knowledge of the item) in their platter. The puffed rice powder commonly known as *handoh guri* is mixed with the local chicken pieces *kukura*. Here the rice powder is properly smeared in the local chicken pieces marinated well and kept for few minutes to mix well then the gravy is prepared sometimes the pieces are fried and made as fritters that gives a crispier taste. It is also prepared as a curry and the rice powder is added in the gravy with other vegetables such as potato, pumpkin, to form a thick consistency. The gravy is served with rice in the meals and functions such as feast, marriages other events as well. And the chicken fritters are served with local brew *suje* as snack items which give a mouth watering taste.

Chucha pitika hukoti: Is an inseparable ingredient or item from the culinary structure of the Deori tribe, *Chuchapitika* or *hukoti* is fermented fish mashed item, it is consumed basically in the farming season, small river fishes are caught and collected mostly by the women folk in the village and then sun-dried or smoked with an intention of preservation. One should know that fish are not available throughout the year so the fermented fish can be eaten as a substitute for fresh fish during lean days. It has got a strong earthy and fishy taste which hits you straight with a strong whiff and is strong and power packed of

umami and earthy at the same time. For the preparation of *Chu-Cha*, medium and small fish species are commonly used. These fish are washed and sun-dried or smoked to let the moisture out for 2-3 days without salting. Later on, the sun-dried fish /smoked fish are ground in a wooden grinder and made to a homogenous consistency. Later on, the ground/pounded fish is used and mixed with either fresh or dry stems of colocasia. The grinding continues until the mixture becomes a coarse paste. During the process, herbs, wild leaves, ginger garlic etc., are also added for additional flavor and textures. Once the mixing is ready the ground fish reaches its desired consistency, the mixture is then transferred into bamboo tubes and left for preserving over smoking above the fire place, and allowing it to ferment naturally in the process. The longer it is preserved, the stronger the taste and flavours develop. It also gets a smoky coat from the long exposure to smoke. Commonly eaten with rice as a side dish/ chutney or with traditional brew *suje*. It's an inevitable and a distinct item among the Deori households. Also, traditionally believed to cure a variety of ailment, and used as an ethno medicine too.

Suje: Every community has got an ethnic food item as an addendum to their cuisine list. A local brew or local drink plays a major identity mark of any community specially the tribal belts of North East India. Brew locally known as *suje* or *mod* (liquor) in their dialect is an important item of the Deoris. *Suje* is offered to all the people guests (be it insider or outsiders) by the Deoris. It is a rice beer with a strong spirited taste like the cider; it is made by the women folk of the community by preserving rice in water and then it is mixed with medicinal plants herbs and the spirit water is strained in a locally made big flat strainer made of bamboo as it is made for large number of folks. *Suje* is offered to their local deities *kundimama*^{viii} out of honour in the very onset of any religious functions or ceremonies. In ceremonial gatherings the first bowl of *suje* is offered to the eldest of the village *Chari Deori*^{ix} as a sign of respect, and the elderly would pray to their lords chanting in local dialects and sprinkle a little bit of the rice spirit on the ground just near to the bowl placed as a holy gesture of first releasing the rice spirit to mother earth and he would take a sip of it then after the drink can be distributed amongst the others. *Suje*^x is served in *Bisu* festival mainly, the folks eat drink and makes merry in the festival. There are also some other items which fulfills the Deori cuisine such as: *merkuji jubura* (broken rice curry), *miduji jubura*, *ujungon niyom* (curry of bamboo shoot). They use *mikkochi*, (*dhekia*, a typical fern), *dijju* (leaves of urium), *betgash* (cane shoot), *banhgash* (bamboo shoot), *tagodiya* (leaf of sweet potato) etc.

Conclusion:

Food is a lens to analyze society order, historical changes, power and politics etc. Food represents especially a cultural act; this means that the way we understand and we relate to food, practices food is always related to our identity, in the deepest manner. Food after all is one of the most basic human needs and the specific foods that are eaten and the ways they are produce, processed and consumed say much about the culture of a group. Food habits and consumption as a lens helps in magnifying the effects of culture on the subjective creation and shares a reflection of one's self and frames an identity. On an individual level we grow up eating the food of our cultures. It becomes a part of who each of us is today. On a larger scale, food is an important part of culture. Traditional cuisine is passed down from one generation to the next. It also operates as an expression of cultural identity (Goody: 1982). Cooking traditional food is a way of preserving one's culture and food plays as a major symbol of pride and ethnicity in introducing the identity further.

However with the sway of time, the food taste does not remain exactly the same, but what stays same though is the extent to which each country or community's unique cuisine can reflect its unique history,

lifestyle, values and beliefs and rich diversity in food preparation throughout the world. And in the global platform with rapid developments it is easier to access cuisines from different cultures around the world. Today the culture of traditions appears to be endangered, threatened by a world that desperately seeks to obliterate the past (Fischler: 1980). And Gastronomic culture is one such where people with the flow of newness are very much letting themselves escape into a culture of fusion where with the unavailability of time the migrant people do not get sufficient requisite ingredients in the immediate surroundings and hence they are forgetting their gastronomic culture or developing a new taste with the readily available food items. And on the other hand people of new generation are found seemingly developing likings or cravings for the western food culture or fast food rather than their taste for own local food habits (Stano: 2015).

Identity is an outcome, a condition created largely through heritage which may or may not be conveyed through rituals as the vehicle of transmission (Christine and Karin: 2011). And food is one such vital part of cultural heritage. We should embrace our heritage through our culture's food but we should also try to become more informed about other' cultures cuisine. It is important to remember that each dish has a special place in the culture to which it belongs and is special to those who prepare it. Food is a portal into culture, and it should be treated as such (Dates: 2009). Despite tremendous challenges the Deoris have been able to maintain their age-old traditions, religious beliefs, practices and also their gastronomic cultural heritage intact amidst various socio-political trials and tribulations through the centuries (Deori: 2007). From the above historical observation it is found that the Deoris are completely independent race they possess all sort of required factors like language, religion, culture, cuisine etc., to become an independent race since time immemorial past. The Deori culture is facing danger from the clutches of globalization and striving hard to flourish. Such endangered culture so sprung -up by the nature thousand years past now deserve preservation and propagation by the government itself from being extinct.

Notes:

ⁱ Jimochanya means the Deori tribe introduces themselves; the children of sun and moon.

ⁱⁱ Purush prakriti means the local deities of the community; specially Lord of the lords Shiva and goddess parvati.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gayan means the clans of the Deori community.

^{iv} Aahu and saali are the types of rice found in all the seasons.

^v Kaath Alu is the fried yams, which basically acts as snacks or side dish.

^{vi} The festival of the Deoris which they celebrate in the month of Magh (January) i.e., the magiyo bisu and the other is celebrated in the month of Bohaag (April) known as the bohagiyo bisu or ibaaku bisu.

^{vii} Na-bhaat is an event where the Deori farmers/folks shifts crops to their home the first shift of crops were offered to their local deities and once the shifting of the crop is finished the folks would arrange a feast with the arrival of the new crops to their place the rice would be made from the new crops along with other meaty delights and the village people would have feast together.

^{viii} Kundimama is the most worshipped deity of the Deoris, kundi means lord Shiva and mama means goddess Parvati.

^{ix} Chari Deori are the most honoured people; a set of four priests who do the necessary work of the holy shrines of the Deoris are given the utmost honour and regards in their community.

^x Suje is the local drink/ brew of the community.

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