

# Preserving Culinary Heritage: A Study of Indigenous Food Habits and Dietary Knowledge in the Traditional Society of the Tagin Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

Food and dietary habits are general aspects that are followed by all of mankind. Humans have followed their sets of food and dietary habits to fulfill the basic needs of life. So do the indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh. The knowledge of traditional food and dietary practices is one of the major aspects of traditional economic practices of the tribal communities which are rooted in their cultural identity. This knowledge is essential for preserving the culinary heritage of any tribal community. Furthermore, Arunachal Pradesh, the 24<sup>th</sup> state of India, has many tribal communities. Specifically, the Tagin, one of major tribes of the state, has been following its own sets of traditional food and dietary habits since time immemorial, with unique terminologies associated with them. Initially, the traditional diet of this tribe was mainly based on forest resources that are nutritious and beneficial for health. However, with exposure to modernity, some alterations to these practices have evolved, subsequently affecting their lives. Therefore, this paper will discuss the sources of traditional foods, dietary habits and also examine the impact of modernity on traditional food, dietary habits and the lives of the Tagin people.

**Keywords:** Indigenous people, Tagin tribe, traditional food habits, dietary knowledge, unique terminologies, forest resources, Arunachal Pradesh.

## Introduction

The word “Indigenous” etymologically refers to the natives, belonging naturally to the soil. It has been broadly defined as, “Those whose ancestors were the original inhabitants of the lands later colonised or settled by others”. (Pati and Dash, 2023, p.45). In other terms indigenous people refers to people living in countries which have a population composed of differing ethnic or racial groups who were descendants of the earliest populations living in the area and who do not as a group control the national government of the countries within which they live. (Kumari and Yirang, 2021, p.218). There are approximately 350 million indigenous people across 70 countries, including India. (Pati and Dash, 2023).

Arunachal Pradesh, located in northeastern India, is also home to a significant population of indigenous communities. It is a classic tribal state, being home to 26 major tribes and more than 110 sub-tribes. (Nobin and et.al.,2010,p.3) The state covers a geographical area of 83,743 sq. meters (Pandey, 1997, p.1). It is situated in the northeastern most corner of India and has a long strategic international boundaries with

China (Tibet) to the north and northwest (1030km), Myanmar to the east (440km) and Bhutan to the west (160km). The state borders Assam and Nagaland in south and southeast. (Sharma, 2008, p.1). The state is a mountainous state with beautiful green valleys and numerous rivers flowing down from the highlands. The major rivers of the state are Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Tirap and Lohit. The region is known for its rich flora, including dense forests, vibrant orchids, medicinal plants and bamboo. The dense forest also supports a variety of wildlife, such as Tiger, Hornbill, Butterflies etc. (Pandey, 1997).

As it is already stated, the state is predominantly inhabited by tribal communities. These communities are broadly divided into three main groups based on religion: The first group includes tribes such as the Nyishi, Apatani, Galo, Adi, Tagin and Mishmi, who follow traditional belief systems commonly described as shamanism or animism, in which shamans perform rituals and spiritual ceremonies. The second group consists of Buddhist tribes, including the Monpa, Sherdukpen, Singpho, Khampti, Memba and Khamba. The third group follows animism, the belief that spirits inhabit natural elements; this group includes tribes such as the Nocte, Wancho and Tangsa (Thakur, 2016).

Additionally, among these tribes, the Tagin is one of the prominent tribes in the state. They mainly inhabit in the Upper Subansiri district and Mechuka sub-division of West Siang district of the state. The Tagin area covering roughly about 15,000 sq. meters. (Neba, 2019, p.46). The total population of the Tagin in the state is 62,931 as per the census of 2011. The Tagin is considered that they are descendent of the father Abo-Thanyi (Kodak, 2018, p.30). The Tagin who mainly inhabited in the Upper Subansiri district is bounded by China (Tibet) in the north, West Siang district in the east, Lower Subansiri and Kurung Kumey districts in the west, confluence of Sinik (Subansiri) and Sigen rivers in the south-west, and Sinyum river in south-east. (Riddi,2006, p.3).

“Human wants are unlimited” as Adam Smith, the father of Economics says, “A man basically, needs three important things, for minimum survival. They are: Food, Dress and Shelter” (Pati, 2023). Likewise, the food habits and dietary knowledge are the essential aspects of the Tagin community. Food refers to the prerequisite substances that provide nourishment to the body, necessary for growth, energy and overall health and nutrition has been defined as food at work in the body. (Pati and Dash, 2023). Food and dietary habits refer to the types of food that people usually eat. They are the essential aspects of culture, health status, socio-economic and education. Specifically, dietary habits mean an individual’s food preferences. In this context, the traditional society of the Tagin tribe holds extensive traditional knowledge regarding food and dietary habits which is developed through active interaction with their environment, passed down through generations. This knowledge encompasses distinct practices related to food sources, preparation and consumption, which are closely linked to their appreciation of local biodiversity.

However, increased exposure to modernity and its associated influences pose threats to this knowledge. There is a significant need to preserve these practices. Consequently, this study aims to document these practices of the Tagin tribe.

## Objective

1. To study various sources of traditional food and dietary habits in the traditional society of the Tagin tribe.
2. To study the significance of traditional food habits and dietary habits.
3. To explore the effects of modernity on traditional food, dietary habits and the lives of the Tagins.

### Methodology and area of the study

The study focuses on the Tagin community in the Upper Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh. The present study is part of my ongoing doctoral research at Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar. The data for the study are derived from both primary and secondary sources. For primary data, interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions with a random sampling method, where elderly individuals with expertise in traditional food and dietary knowledge were randomly selected. For secondary sources, available books and articles were used as references.

### Results and Discussion

The culinary traditions of tribal communities refer to the customary methods by which tribal people cook, prepare and consume their meals. The traditional diet upon which tribals of Arunachal Pradesh survived for millennia was based on a wide range of nutrient-rich foods obtained from the local environment, including cultivation, hunting and trapping of animals, fish and birds and seasonal roots, stems, tubers, wild berries and so on, (Rinya, 297), which are also followed by the Tagin people.

However, the basic diet, consisting mainly of cereals, millets, vegetables and meat is much the same everywhere (Elwin, 2006). Apart from other supplementary activities, agriculture is the main occupation of the Tagin community. The Tagin practices Slash and burn method of agriculture known as shifting cultivation or *Jhum*, which is locally known as *Rengho* (Neba, 2019)

The current study discovered that Tagins obtain their food from a diverse range of sources, which can be broadly categorized into the following groups and some of these foods and their sources are illustrated in the Plate No.1.

#### Rice based product including:

i. *Achin*- It is prepared by moderately boiling rice (*Ambin*).

ii. *Amchi*- It is prepared from soft paddy which need to be husked and then pounded until flattened in a container made of wood locally called *Chengpar* and *Chengnyi*.

iii. *Sebak achin*- It is prepared by mixing a larger amount of water with rice, which is then cooked at a moderate temperature.

iv. *Etv*- Rice is poured with water and left to soften, then pounded to turn into powder.

v. *Amgik*- It is a dish where rice is cooked with liquid, mixed with salt and chilli, similar to a local version of khichdi.

vi. *Achin uw mengio sunam*- It is a dish cooked by mixing rice with leafy vegetables.

#### Animal-based foods:

The Tagin people consume the meat of animals like *Erik* (pig), *Ikki* (dog), *Yabin* (goat), *Porok* (hen), *Svh* (cattle), *Svby* (Mithun or *Bos frontalis*), *Ngoyi* (fish), *Svdum* (deer), *Srvv* (boar or wild pig), *Svca* (fox), *Setum* (bear), *Svbi* (monkey), *Kobu* (wild rat), *takar* (a variety of leopard), *Svniu* (leopard), *Kiokam* (eagle) etc. Among these, the first six are domesticated and the rest are wild animals. However, dogs are eaten only rarely by some people. There is one technique of hunting wild animals i.e, *Kirok joknam* which means a community hunting of wild animals by releasing hunting dogs into the jungle to chase them out. The Tagins have unique fishing techniques. For instance, in *Sebok panama*, they redirect the water flow from one side to another, using the local medicinal plant (*Tamu*) to poison the fish, making it easier to

catch them. And another fishing technique involves using a bamboo rod and node where bait is attached to the nodes to catch fish. This is a common technique.

#### **Insects-based foods:**

Tagins also eat insects like Taari (*a kind of sting bug*) *Tasum* (prawn), *Taching* (woodworm) and *Tangi* from *Anyi* (colocasia). These varieties are edible only after boiling or roasting. However, some people eat them in their raw form.

#### **Bamboo shoots-based foods:**

Young shoots of bamboo are mostly prepared for a variety of bamboo shoot products.

1. *Ipum*- young shoots of bamboo are cut into slices and kept in a container with mixed water and left for a few days until fermented.
2. *ipey*- young shoots of bamboo are kept in container without cutting into pieces and left to ferment.
3. *Ikung*- young shoots of bamboo are cut into small pieces and kept in a bamboo-made container for fermentation.
4. *Yuph*- young shoots of bamboo are cut into pieces and fermented for days. When fermentation is done, it's then kept in the sunlight for drying.
5. *Iba*- young shoots of bamboo with their cover are roasted and then, the cover is peeled off and finally, they are boiled to eat.

#### **Food beverages:**

Traditional Tagin local beers are mostly made from *Ambin* (rice) and *Poi* (millet) such as

1. *Nyakrin*- This local beer is made from *Ambin* (rice). The procedure includes cooking the rice, allowing it to cool, then mixing it with *Epup* (yeast) and storing it in a container for several days to ferment. It is ultimately consumed with boiled water.
2. *Poonia*- It has the strongest alcoholic favour.
3. *Poosa*- It has the second most intense alcoholic taste.
4. *Pookia*- It is released after the last one and has a taste similar to water. Typically, people do not consume it, but it is often given to children.

#### **Root-based food:**

Traditional root vegetables are those that grow underground. The Tagin people also consider these foods as staple in their diet apart from rice. They are rich in carbohydrate and beneficial for health. These include *Koreya* (sweet potato). Both the bulb and the leaves of this root vegetable are edible. *Angi* (colocasia), Tagins cultivate different varieties of root vegetables each with different names such as *Heli*, *Nyerak*, *Bange angi* etc which also vary in colour and size.

#### **Local vegetable varieties:**

Traditional Tagin people eat a range of leafy vegetables such as *paka raya* (*Diplazium esculentum*). *Taapin* (*Clerodendrum glandulosum*), *Hoyik* (*Pouzolzia hirta*), *Honyir* (*Zanthoxylum rhetsa*). *Horee* (*Solanum americanum*), which has a slightly greenish-red colour and strong aroma that adds flavor to dishes. *Maarsha* (*Acmella oleracea*), Its flower and leaves are edible. They also eat non-leafy vegetables like

*Papok* (flower of banana tree), *Pere*(bean). Typically, these vegetables are prepared by boiling, steaming or roasting. Many of these vegetables grow naturally, while others are cultivated.

### Consumption of fruits:

The traditional Tagin community incorporates a variety of wild fruits into their diets. There consist of *Cinjin yarin* (wild edible berry), *Kopak* (banana), *Svchar* (*Phoebe cooperiana*), *Taktor* (tomato like wild edible fruit), *Tayor* (a small bunch of fruit from a tree which is bitter in taste), *Dai- Dasa* (*Melastoma melabathricum*), *Silum* (*Canarium strictum*), *Mvccu* (cucumber), *Bapak* (sugarcane). The majority of these fruits have a sweet flavor, while some exhibit bitter, sour or watery taste.

### Traditional spices consumption:

The Tagin people utilize a variety of vegetables as spices, including *Taaki* (ginger), *Taalap* (*Allium chinense*), *Honyir* (*Zanthoxylum rhetsa*), *Jalok* (chilli), *Tanam* (sesame seeds) etc. They create dishes such as salad or chutney with these vegetables and also combine them with boiled vegetables to enhance the flavor. In addition to the designated types of food and dishes, the Tagin people, particularly those residing in villages, consume other items such as *Taachi* (derived from a fern tree), *Piak* (fermented soyabean), *Tami miyik*, a mixture of sugar, millet and *poonia* (a tasteless local beer in a slightly solid form) and *Tanam namdung* (black sesame seeds) pounded in a local stone grinder known as *Lwngpe* and *Lwngcho*. They also eat boiled *Topu* (maize), *Tapv* (pumpkin) and *Pupv* (egg). Besides these dishes, a distinctive element of their dietary habits is the consumption of tobacco, which is obtain from a plant locally known as *duh*. This tobacco is prepared using the dried leaves of the *duh* plant (*Nicotiana tabacum*), which are placed in a traditional smoking apparatus or device called *Tungdung*<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, all the traditional dishes discussed above play a crucial role in various aspects of the Tagin people's lives. The cooking methods such as steaming, boiling, roasting and fermenting are vital for preserving their culinary heritage. Their diet includes a variety of leafy and non-leafy vegetables, animal-based food and wild fruits that are rich in essential nutrients like vitamins A, B, C etc., carbohydrate, protein, minerals, iron, Calcium, Potassium Phosphorus, etc. They consume foods according to the seasons viz; *Dvra* (winter), *Modw* (spring), *Dvrw* (summer) and *Jedw* (autmn) reflecting their traditional ecological knowledge and understanding of healthy eating.

Culturally and religiously, there is a high demand for animal-based dishes like boiled meat, *Uyi* (blood of animals) and *Dingkio* (roasted or smoked meat). They have special regard for *Svbu* (Mithun or *Bos frontalis*). In addition to meat, various rice products including *Etv* (the powder of rice) holds great importance during the Tagin religious festival, *Si-Donyi*, which has recently been renamed *Si-Donyi Hilo*, as well as during other events like *Nyida* (marriage ceremonies) and community gatherings.

Thus, the traditional Tagin community has long upheld its traditional dietary practices. However, in recent times, the impact of modernity has increased, influencing both these practices and the Tagin people's lives. It has caused a change in eating habits, particularly among the younger generation, who are increasingly leaning towards fast-food and processed foods, often neglecting traditional cooking methods and ingredients. This has also led to a rise in the popularity of a new cooking style, such as frying foods in excessive oil (Mondal, 2020).

The advent of modernity has introduced a wide range of new vegetables, and spices, including cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, carrots, cinnamon, black pepper and fenugreek etc<sup>2</sup>. as well as the inclusion of various new dishes such as Chinese cuisine, spicy Korean ramen, chicken chilli and dairy products like

cheese and butter. These changes also alter lifestyles and intensify activities such as deforestation, mining, transportation, industrialization, and plastic usage, all of which impact the climatic conditions. Consequently, a wide range of diseases are now experienced that were less common in the past<sup>3</sup>.



**PLATE-1.** These are the illustrations of some foods and their sources. **A.** *Honyir* (*Zanthoxylum rhetsa*), **B.** *Horee* (*Solanum americanum*), **C.** *Hoyik* (*Pouzolzia hirta*) **D.** *Pakya-ray* (*Diplazium esculentum*), **E.** *Tami miyik* **F.** *Amgik* **G.** *Ipum* **H.** *Ipey* **I.** *Ikung* **J.** *Yuph* **K.** *Tami mimik* **L.** *poi*(millet).

### Conclusion

The ethnic food of the Tagin is diverse and reflects their cultural practices. These foods mostly depend on forest and conventional cooking practices, including steaming, roasting, boiling, fermenting and smoking, have shaped their culinary heritage. The consumption of various vegetables, especially the high demand for meat-based food, reflects that the Tagin society is mostly non-vegetarian. Significantly, this wide range

of traditional food and dietary has been followed seasonally and especially during special occasions. And despite the impact of modernity, traditional practices are still observed. However, traditional knowledge and practices are fading, particularly among younger generations. Therefore, there is a critical need to preserve it in any way possible. This work seeks to address that necessity.

## References

### List of Scheduled Interviews

1. Extracted from the interview with Mrs Yapa Rai, aged about 63 years, a permanent resident of Kuporijo Village under Gusar Administrative Circle, Upper Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on January 20, 2025, at 10:20 am.
2. Extracted from the interview with Mrs Toke Bagbi, aged about 55 years, a permanent resident of Bagbi Village under Taliha Administrative Circle, Upper Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on January 21, 2025, at 2:30 pm.
3. Extracted from the interview with Mrs Yadik Dobin, aged about 65 years, a permanent resident of Lingdam Village under Giba Administrative Circle, Upper Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh, held a scheduled interview on January 23, 2025, at 3:00 pm.

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