



Food, Culture And Identity Politics Of The Borok People Of Tripura

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the food, culture and identity politics of the Borok people of Tripura. Food is integral to the cultural identity and social fabric of societies, and the Borok people of Tripura, an indigenous community, exemplify this connection. The cuisine of the Borok, particularly dishes like *Chakhwi*, *Godok*, and *Wahan Mosodeng*, etc. is not only a reflection of food habits but also a significant part of their cultural and social identity. Food, along with the process of food production, is intertwined with the Borok people's history, ecology, and customs, particularly their traditional method of shifting cultivation, *huk*, which shapes not only their livelihood but also their cultural expression.

Historically, the Borok people faced demographic changes after the 1949 merger of Tripura with India, which led to a region's ethnic as a minority community. This demographic shift fueled a political awakening among the Borok, particularly in the 1960s, when they began to assert their cultural and political rights through the formation of the Tripura Upajati Yuba Samity (TUJS). The slogan "*Muya Chanai... Chakhwi Chanai*," symbolized the unification of indigenous people around their food practices particularly in the struggle for autonomy, language recognition, and cultural preservation.

As a result of political efforts, Kokborok was recognized as a state language in 1979, and the formation of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) in 1985 marked a significant achievement in the Borok people's quest for self-determination. The ongoing political, cultural, and social influence of food highlights the power of food practices in identity assertion and social cohesion within the Borok community of Tripura.

This paper explores the intersection of food, culture, and identity among the Borok people, examining how food practices, such as the preparation and consumption of several dishes play a vital role in the preservation of cultural identity and political mobilization. It also highlights how food, in its ritualistic, social, and political contexts, is central to understanding the Borok people's resistance and survival in the face of demographic and cultural transformations.

Keywords: Food, Culture, Identity Politics, Borok, Tripura

In all civilizations and societies food occupies a vital position. The collection or production of food is closely interlinked with the surrounding ecological environment. In fact civilization and society are conditioned by ecological environment- be it food, clothing, housing, food collection or production etc. Geographical factors such topography and climate also determines the food habits of the particular area or region. It is an admitted fact that before the emergence of agriculture irrespective of civilizations and societies- human survived by hunting, gathering, and fishing. In Greenland, the Inuit people's traditional food includes various species of fish, wildfowl, seal, whale, caribou, muskox, and hare, as well as certain plant food whereas in South Africa among the Sam Bushman the men hunt zebra, giraffe, antelope, porcupine, wild hare, lion, fish, insects, tortoise, flying ants, snakes and women collect fruit, berries, tubers, insects and ostrich eggs.

Food and food habits are also interwoven with culture and identity. It will not be wrong to say that people are identified by what they eat and the ways of the eating are clearly reflected in their cultural identity. This is true for the various indigenous ethnic people inhabiting the entire North East India. People are identified by the food they eat and the attire they put on. In spite of globalization, the cultural roots and bonds are still deep rooted in North East India among the indigenous peoples. A Khasi wherever he/she

may be will still long for Jadoh (rice and meat cooked together), tungumbai (fermented Soyabean) and tungtap (fermented dry fish), for the Nagas Bastenga (fermented bamboo shoots) Akhuni (fermented soya bean), Mizos Vawksa Rep (smoked pork), Manipuri Iromba (prepared with fermented dry fish, potatoes, green vegetables and chilies). Borok people of Tripura, chakhwi (alkali cooked with pork/ vegetables, chilies etc), godok (prepared with fermented dry fish, green vegetables and chilies), wahan mosodeng (boiled pork meat mixed with roasted chilies etc). There are other indicator of food apart from culture and identity i.e. farsightedness. The statement has been made keeping in view of the Borok utterance which is commonly heard, that is, 'let's consume/eat whatever we have today because no one knows what is in store for tomorrow', which clearly shows shortsightedness.

It is not only food but the process of food production is also play an important role in the cultural and identity formation. In the life and history of the Borok people, every aspect of their life is intimately interwoven with 'huk' (shifting cultivation). The 'huk' cultivation is not only for economically self sufficient but makes them socially proud. It helps to conserve the culture which has been handed down from generation to generation by way of folk tales and songs, etc. in fact the song, dance, calculation of time and period, religious rites etc. all centered on the 'huk' cultivation. Their joys and sorrows are also interwoven in it. The young boys and girls select their life partner from the 'huk' cultivation. Thus, huk or shifting cultivation has been a channel for cultural identity and social bonds among the Borok people of Tripura.

Most of indigenous people in the North East India widely use ash filtered water (Alkali) for a variety of reasons, as is true in case of the Boroks. However the most common use of alkali is in the preparation of cuisine. The Kokborok speaking people viz. Tipras, Riangs, Jamatias, Noatias, Uchais, Koloï called 'Chakhwtwi', Kukis called 'Changal' Lushais(Mizo), 'Chingal', Chakmas, 'Haro Pani', to the Mog 'Chakhraw', Garos, called 'kharichi', to the Manipuri's 'Utti' and Karbi phelo or pholo.

The most important item of cuisine of the Borok i.e., Chakhwi is to be prepared from the filtered ash water. It is so central that it is not only confined to cuisine but culturally, socially as well as ritually. The preparation of the Chakhwtwi (alkali) or ash water is not so complex but rather time taking. It is also pertinent to mention here that not all ashes are used in the preparation of 'Chakhwtwi' or alkali. The most preferred ashes being from the 'athia thalik blai tei buphang' (a kind of banana leaves and dry trunk), or of 'siping buphang' (dry stem of sesame), or 'haruwa buphang' (dry stem of mustard plant). The preparation of the Chakhwtwi (Alkali) is done by women. 'Chakhwtwi' obtained in this method compensated the absence of 'som' i.e. salt in the early days of the Borok society.



Pic: Ash collected in the Chakhwi-khok



Pic: Showing collection of Chakhwtwi or Alkali

Once the ashes are prepared it is collected and put inside the 'Chakhwi-khok' ('Chakhwi' meaning 'alkali', 'Khok' meaning 'container') i.e. literally meaning the container where alkali is prepared. The 'Chakhwi-khok', a special kind of traditional basket which is made of thinly sliced woven bamboo which is porous. The shape of the 'Chakhwi-khok' is conical (radius= 23cm height=30 approx) having a bamboo made handle towards its base. It is hanged inverted. After the ashes are put in the 'Chakhwi-khok', clean water is poured which flows through the ashes and is collected at the bottom with a container. As the size of the 'Chakhwi-khok' is small and times and again water is poured until the required filtered Chakhwtwi (alkali) is collected. The filtered ash-water i.e. 'Chakhwtwi', so collected is decanted and is used for 'Chakhwi' or alkali. This entire process of preparing of 'Chakhwtwi' or alkali water is called 'Chakhwi tolmani'.

In any public gathering such as community feast, marriage etc, the absence of 'Chakhwi' is beyond imagination. When 'Chakhwi' is served in public gathering such as community feast, marriage etc, it has to be served invariably before any other curry as it is called 'mui okra' ('mui' meaning 'curry' and 'okra' meaning first/eldest), literary meaning that it must be served first. There are instances, I have heard from the elders in the community that by mistake 'Chakhwi' was not served first to a person and that particular person out of insult/anger and taking it as an offence refused to take part in the feast. At the same time while serving it one has to be careful that it is always served on the right side of the plate to who is being served. If anyone by

mistake or unknowingly serve the 'Chakhwi' on the left side of the plate that it is being served, the one who served is considered as not properly trained by mother at young age, meaning indiscipline child or one who does not know social custom.

After the harvest is over, each of the families in the village prepare to have new rice. Before the new rice is consumed, it is cooked and mixed with 'Chakhwi' curry and taken in the handmade 'Mai koke' (the rice take the shape of the warped hand) and it is kept at the entry of the doorstep. At the same time all agricultural implements such as 'Damra' (knife mostly used in shifting cultivation), Rwsam (made of wood where paddy/rice is pounded) and 'Romo' (made of wood with which paddy/rice is pounded) etc. are also given the 'Mai koke'. Some of the 'Mai koke' are put in the courtyard. Thus, in the first harvested consumption of rice cannot be done without 'Chakhwi'.

In the ritual of the Khua Kar Mani, especially when children falls sick or ill. The illness may be due to various ailments and during such period if the child losses appetite. In order to get rid of the loss of appetite 'Khua Kar' rituals is to be conducted by the 'Ochai' (indigenous traditional priest & medicine man of the community). During this rituals 'Chakhwi Muitru' (dish made of 'Chakhwi' or alkali) is prepared with snails, banana stem etc. Without 'Chakhwi Muitru' this ritual cannot be solemnized. After the preparation of the dish, the 'Ochai' takes the 'Chakhwi Muitru' at the 'Lampira' (where the single road get bifurcated in to two) or junction of the two road and rituals are performed there and the 'Chakhwi Muitru' is left there. This dish so prepared for the rituals is not consumed. Sufficient care 'Kwthar' (in terms of cleanliness and sanctity) has to be taken in the preparation of this dish, as the spirit needs to be satisfied so that child gets rid of the sickness and has normal appetite. Otherwise this dish is not prepared for the home consumption.

In another ritual of Swkal Mwtai, this is conducted to appease the spirit of the 'Swkal' or witches. The Borok people as indicated earlier believed in both benevolent and malevolent spirits. The 'Swkal' or witch spirit is one the malevolent spirits. When any one gets sick, the 'Ochai' (indigenous traditional priest & medicine man of the community) will perform 'Sema' or will find out the causes of the sickness. In his finding if it happens to be 'Swkal' or witch spirit causing the sickness, the 'Swkal mwtai' is to be performed by the 'Ochai'. The 'Swkal mwtai' or witch spirit is associated with women and the Ochai will pronounced, 'bwrwi rok nango' meaning that the cause of the disease is displeasure of Swkal or witch spirit. During such rituals, the 'Ochai' first prepare 'Chakhwtwi' or alkali in the house of the sick person. This ritual has to be performed only at night and that too in the jungle/forest. After the preparation of 'Chakhwtwi' is over the 'Ochai' goes to perform the rituals in the jungles at night and in order to appease the 'Swkal' or witch spirit usually black fowl, tortoise (in early day), rice flour are offered. After the rituals are over in the jungle the 'Ochai' comes to the house of the sick person and sprinkle 'Chakhwtwi' (already prepared before the ritual) all over the house of the sick person and later pour 'Chakhwtwi' in the courtyard. Thus, 'Chakhwtwi' is used to ward off evil spirit.

Apart from preparing various types of cuisine as mentioned above, 'chakhwtwi' or alkali' is also widely used for washing of clothes and bathing. In the olden days when there was no soap or detergent powder, 'chakhwtwi' or alkali' is the only source for washing of clothes and bathing. The most widely use made of 'Chakhwtwi' or alkali' by the Borok women folk was for washing of hair. There is also a common 'kokbork' terminology used by the Borok women folk called, 'khorok sukha' literally meaning 'washing of head or hair' which signifies the day when the menstrual period is over. It is common site to see even now among the Borok women that they will carry 'chakhwtwi' or alkali' in a pot and go to take bath in the common bathing place such as village river or pond/ water tank where it will be shared among women for washing of hairs. As a young child, when I was growing up in the village, used to seeing my mother carrying 'chakhwtwi or alkali' in a pot and washing her hair in our pond/water tank adjacent to our house.

Chakhwtwi or alkali' is also used as medicine by the 'Ochai' or traditional healer. The 'Ochai' or traditional healer will chant mantras taking the 'Chakhwtwi or alkali' water in a container and the medicine made out of it will be called 'Chakhwtwi pora'. Such prepared 'Chakhwtwi pora' will be given to anyone suffering from stomach ailments.

In order to understand food, culture and identity among the Borok people of Tripura it is also imperative to know about the historical past. Tripura was an independent princely state ruled by the indigenous Borok rulers. Tripura merged with the Indian union on 15th October 1949. The merger of Tripura with the Indian Union abruptly brought about three significant changes- end of monarchy, beginning of democracy and large scale refugee influx from East Pakistan and later from Bangladesh. The strong impact of partition, independence of India followed by communal riots on Tripura was exerted through the influx of refugees. The influx continued over a long period of time and ultimately outnumbering the indigenous (tribal) Borok people of the state. The situation can be gauged as within the period of about 24 years i.e. 15th August 1947 to 24th March 1971, there were 6,09,998 refugees officially settled in the state. However, these excluded those refugees settled in Tripura without being registered (registration of refugees was discontinued for the period 1958-1963) and those who did not avail rehabilitation facilities from the Government. The refugees at present constitute the main business group and play a vital role in the economy and political affairs of the state. It is pertinent to mention here that in 1955 Sri G. B. Pant, the then Home Minister in the union Govt. of India, expressed the opinion that the pressure of population had already reached a saturation point in Tripura and it would not be advisable to allow further absorption of additional people in such a tiny state. But the opinion of the then Union Home Minister was not taken into consideration and refugees settlement continued. As per

the Census of India 2011, the indigenous tribal people constitute only 31.8% of the total population of Tripura.

According to Prof. Mahadev Chakravarti, the waves of immigration, particularly since the partition of the country, had not simply disturbed but totally altered the ethnic structure of Tripura's demographic map and there are reasons for resentment among the tribal youth (L.S.Gassah, 1992 p. 232). The indigenous Borok people unexpectedly found that they have become minority in one's own ancestral land. The feeling of being minority and insecurity compelled the indigenous Borok people to realize that protection and preservation of identity, rights, land, language and culture required immediate attention. It was against this background that the intellectual among the Borok people mooted for calling a conference at Kainta Kobra Para, West Tripura on 10th – 11th June 1967. It was in this historic conference that an indigenous tribal political party was formed- Tripura Upjati Juba Samity (TUJS). After the formation of the political party, 11 point charters of demands were chalked out. The major demands being restoration of tribal land from the hands of the non-tribal which were transferred illegally, formation of Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (under 5th Schedule later 6th Schedule) and introduction of Kokborok language in Roman script as a medium of instructions in educational institutions as well as recognize Kokborok language as a state language.

As the indigenous tribal people were reduced to minority in their own land due to heavy influx of refugee migrants as already indicated above, during the 1960's the indigenous tribal peoples identity assertion and awakening was given a clarion call through 'Chakhwi' (alkali) and 'muya' (tender bamboo shoots). The formation of Tripura Upajati Yuba Samiti (TUJS) was the beginning of a new chapter in the political history of Tripura as far as indigenous peoples are concerned. Wherein the slogan of the first indigenous regional political party i.e. Tripura Upajati Yuva Samity (TUJS) was 'muya chanai.....chakhwi chanai.....slogan (meaning those people who eat bamboo shoots and alkali prepared food unite). It was through 'chakhwi' that a clarion call was given by the leaders to assert and unite all the indigenous people of Tripura. Thus 'chakhwi' came to be associated with the identity and self assertion of the indigenous tribal community from the 1960s. It is against this background that 'Chakhwi' as a cuisine began to be promoted as political agendas by the indigenous regional political party of Tripura. This not the first time that food and food practices were used to simultaneously promote obligations and allegiance while also creating social boundaries, according to class, gender, or ethnic divisions. These practices also are in existence even during the ancient period.

The result of promoting 'Chakhwi' for identity and self assertion of the indigenous tribal community by the Tripura Upajati Yuva Samity (TUJS) did have a long term impact in the electoral politics as well as socio economics of Tripura. In the election of the Tripura Legislative Assembly in 1977 out of 60 seats, the left front won in 56 seats and the TUJS in 4 seats. It was because of the constant efforts of the TUJS that their demands began to be fulfilled one by one. In 1979, Kokborok the indigenous language spoken by majority of the people was recognized as one of the state language of Tripura. Thereafter, Kokborok as a medium of instruction was introduced in the primary level later to secondary and college level. The full flagged Department of Kokborok was opened in 2015 under Tripura University (A Central University) for imparting Post Graduate degree in Kokborok language. In 2018 in the Department of Kokborok, a Ph.D (Doctorate of Philosophy) program was started.

The constant demand and struggle of the TUJS again bore fruits in the formation of the Autonomous District Council under the VII Schedule was established by an Act 1979 and the elected members were sworn in 18th January 1982. The VI Schedule of the Indian Constitution was introduced with effect from 1st April 1985 (49th Amendment) and led to the creation of the "Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC)". The election of the TTAADC under the VI Schedule was held on 30th June 1985 and the elected members were sworn in on 19th July 1985. To be more precise the TTAADC was created under the VI Schedule of the Indian Constitution in order to combine tribal development with tribal autonomy. Out of the total area of 10,478.78 sq. Km. of Tripura, the area under TTAADC comprises of 7,132.56 sq. Km.

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