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CONTINUATION OF TRADITIONAL FOOD PRACTICES AMONG THE TENGAPONIA DEORIS OF ASSAM AND ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Introduction

Every human group has some uniqueness with regard to its food habit. Food habits attract anthropologist as a subject of study because they are a form of repetitive social behavior, with (often unconscious) cultural dispositions and communications concerning food handling everyday (Khare, 1994:1). The study of food habits of a particular community provides a unique opportunity to look into their customs and trace their social and economic history. It may have the potentiality of becoming the most vivid and vibrant forms of cultural documentation of a society (Barua and Boruah, 2009:307). There are various studies on food habits (Savitri and Bhalla, 2007:17, Singh *et al.*, 2007:45, Mao and Odyuo, 2007:25 etc.).

Food habits are slow and difficult to change because food has important psychological association with the family and the community (Oniang'o *et al.*, 2003:231). Food is an important part of religious observance and spiritual ritual for many faiths including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The role of food in cultural practices and religious beliefs is complex and varies among individuals and communities.

Understanding the role of food in cultural and religious practice is an important part of showing respect and responding to the needs of people from a range of religious communities. With this fact in the present paper an attempt has been made to bring out the traditional food practices in different socio-religious ceremonies by the Tengaponia Deoris inhabited in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

The empirical data presented in this paper has been generated through field investigation in two homogeneous Tengaponia Deori villages namely Modhupur Deori Village in Assam and No.1 Mohadevpur village in Arunachal Pradesh. Standard anthropological tools have been used to collect the relevant data.

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The Deoris: The Deori is a Scheduled Tribe inhabiting the plains of Assam. They were considered as the priestly section and one of the major subdivisions of the Chutiya, a mongoloid community of Assam.

According to Borkakoti (1968), the word "Deori" is taken from Sanskrit word 'Deva grihika' and it means the people who perform the task of worshipping God in the temple. In the Chutiya language 'De' means honourable and '-o ri' means men folk. During the Chutiya reign the learned, honourable elderly persons were given the responsibility of looking after all matters related to the temples and rituals. They were the Priestly clans and gradually their number increased and thus became a distinct class as 'Deori' (Saikia, 1976).

The Deoris have now acquainted self identifying features and they identify themselves as only 'Deori' and not as Deori Chutiya. There are four great territorial groups or *khels* among the Deoris, mainly: 1) Dibongiya 2) Tengaponia 3) Borganya and 4) Patorgonya. Each of these divisions is again divided into a number of exogamous clans called *Bansha*. Each group has certain distinct features which help them to maintain its own identity.

The present study is mainly confined to the Tengaponia Deoris.

Food Habit: The staple food of the people is rice. They take different varieties of locally available vegetables with rice. The wild roots and shoots as well as the flesh food (viz.; pork, chicken, fish, and egg etc.) are their usual delicacies. They always drink the individually prepared rice beer (*suje*). They like to drink *suje* instead of tea.

Most of the meat comes from domestic animals such as pig, fowl etc. Dried fish (*hukoti*) is a favourite constituent item in their daily menu. Egg is either purchased from the market or generated at home from the domesticated birds (chicken).

They get vegetables from agricultural products and a good number of families also possess kitchen garden. They use the yields of kitchen garden for domestic consumption. The vegetables both agricultural and kitchen garden include papaya, pumpkin, yam, different types of beans, pea, potatoes, tomatoes, lady's finger, cucumber, reddish, chilli, bitter gourd and different variety of leafy vegetables etc. Besides in most of the houses there are fruit trees and bamboo grooves. They also collect edible wild leaves and shoots from their surroundings. But, sometimes, when there is acute need, they purchase vegetables from the nearest market. Purchase of vegetables from the market is however, very rare, mainly because of economic ground. They are very fond of food like bamboo shoot, tree bean and fermented fish that they considered very special items.

The people generally take two major meals a day, which may be termed as breakfast and dinner. In their morning meal, people generally take rice with vegetables. They take *hukoti* (dry fish) regularly. Sometimes they also

take meat and egg with rice. The people take their dinner early and finish it by around 8PM and retire to the bed as early as possible. The menu for the dinner is not much differing from the morning meal.

Consumption of milk and tea are very rare among them. In their vegetable curry or other delicacies, they use the locally available mustard oil, onion, ginger and garlic.

Food during religious functions

The Tengaponia Deoris are the worshiper of *Bolia Baba* son of lord Shiva and there is a worshiping place (*than ghar*) in the name of *Sri Sri Bolia Baba* in each village. In every year the people offer three major pujas (*bor puja*) in this *than ghar*. One is in the month of January (*Magh*), one in the month of April (*Bohag*) and another in the month of July (*Haon*). However all these *pujas* are performed on Wednesday of the first week of those particular months. Besides these major than pujas, they also perform *N purukhia hokam* and *horog puja* yearly in village level in the campus of the *than ghar*. The Tengaponia Deoris also perform some family level religious rituals such as *ghor deor puja*, *lakhimi* and *hanti puja*.

Unlike other communities the Tengaponia Deoris never worship with flower. They worship only with *suje*, meat and blood of sacrifice lives. According to them curd (*dodhi*), milk (*dugdha*), ghee (*gritha*) and honey (*modhu*) etc are not pure things. So they do not use these items in their religious functions. They worship only with their agricultural products like mustard oil, locally available black colour pulse (*matimah*), rice, banana, sugar cane etc.

They have their own priest to perform their religious functions. Sacrifice of animals and fowls has got an important role in every religious function. But there is a binding of colour selection of animals and fowls for sacrifice. Generally white colour and red colour are very important for them. The meat of the sacrifice animals and fowls along with *suje* are used as a food offered to the deity. The different food items used in their different religious functions are as follows:

Bor puja of Mahg and Bohag Bihu: It celebrates in the month of first Wednesday of the *Magh* (January) and *Bohag* (April) *Bihu* festival. On that day the family head with other members go to village *than ghar* (worshiping place) to lightening the lamp in the morning. Then each family offer some animals like goat and fowls like cock, duck, pigeon etc. to the god *Bolia Baba* and on behalf of that particular family these are sacrificed by the priest. After completing the *puja*, the assembled persons enjoy a feast along with the priests with meat of the sacrificed animals and fowls with *suje*.

In the evening the owner of each household offers cooked food to their ancestors. The family head takes some rice cakes (*pithas*) on a banana leaf

(*kalpat*) and then he goes to one corner of his homestead land. There he lights the lamp and on one side he keeps the *pithas* which are specially made in festival time and then prays to their ancestors.

Haon Na bhat Bor Puja: It is performed on the first Wednesday in the month of July (*Haon*). Before consuming their new agricultural products they first offer all of their agricultural items in the name of god. They believe that this sort of function will help to increase their next cultivation without any harm. In this *puja* they offer the food items such as: guard (*pani kumura*), cucumber (*tionh*), water melon (*siral*), arum (*kosu dang*), bamboo sooth (*bah gaj*), banana (*kol*), sugar cane (*kuhiar*), jack fruit (*kothal*) etc. along with *suje*, rice and one cock.

In general all of the villagers collectively offer one goat and four red cocks and one drake (*amroli haan*). In this function there is an important food item namely *mama pupu* which is prepared by mixing with arum leaves (*kosu dang*), ginger (*ada*), bamboo sooth (*bah gaj*) and new rice.

N^o purukhia hokam: In every year in the month of November (*Aghun*) and the first week of Wednesday they perform this *puja* in the campus of *than ghar* for well being of their families. They perform this *puja* collectively. The main items required for this *puja* are rice, one guard (*pani kumura*), reddish (*mula*), leafy vegetables (*lai hak*), three or four pig, black colour local pulse (*mati mah*) and fish curry with tomato flavoured. They prepare one special curry known as *doko hak* which is made from the boneless meat of pig and guard (*pani kumura*). The votaries (*bhokot*) taking this curry with *suje* expressed their good wishes to the villagers in the name of god. In this function they use to take only boiled food items.

Horog puja: In every year in the month of June (*Ahar*) the people celebrate *Horog Puja* in the campus of *than ghar*. In this *puja* they worship lord *Indra* just to get rid of from natural calamities. The main food items are one big sized pig. Every household is to bring one cock. There is also need some other items collectively such as: one bundle of *sewa dia pitha* (steamed rice cakes), 1 kg *korai* (fried rice), 32 nos. of *angulia pitha* (thumb like structured rice cakes), 5 egg of hen, 33 nos. of *khaukeng* (boil rice cakes), *mesangi* leaves 5 kg. (a kind of wild tree).

After completing this *puja* each household get one bamboo ceiling as household chair and where the blood of sacrifice pig and cock is given. They keep it in their store room as *Lakhimi* (as wealth).

Ghor deor puja: It is an annual family level religious function (*hokam*). Importance of this *hokam* is more than other annual family level functions. It is performed for the well being of all family members. They perform it on Wednesday in the month of September (*Aahin*). To carry out this *hokam*, a few items are necessary. These are a fully white colour duck (without any

black wings), a bunch of *chenny* banana, rice powder, parched paddy, tulsi leaves and earthen lamp (*saki –banti*).

After completing the *puja*, they cook an item which is prepared by the blood and meat of duck with rice powder and parched paddy. This item is called *paji sag*. After cooking all the family members with the priest eat this special *paji sag* with *suje*.

Lakhimi: In the month of February (*Phagun*) just after harvesting of their agricultural products, they perform this *lakhimi* ritual in their family level. For this ritual one white cock and one red cock is required. In this ritual also they prepare one *paji* (curry) by mixing the rice powder and the meat of cock. All of them take it with *suje*.

Hanti Puja (worship for mental peace): They believe that inter caste marriage, killing cow, insect in *hukoti* and meat are some kinds of sins. To get rid of from sins they use to perform *hanti puja* (worship for mental peace). For this *puja* nine cocks are required but there should be two red colour and one white colour cock. If the sin is considered to be a very great one then the accused person should be penalised with the meat of pig, goat and duck along with *suje*. In this *puja* they also prepare rice cakes.

Food during birth ritual, marriage ceremony, death ritual and in festival

In all these rituals and occasions the food items are same. They take meat of pig and cock with rice in these occasions. They are very much fond of meat of pig and *suje* (rice beer) and on every occasion or ritual they take it as main item. However, depending on the economic condition, the number of food items and quantity may vary. The usual items include rice, vegetables, fish, meat of pig and cock, *hukoti* (dry fish), *tupe* (a kind of sauce made of ground mustard seeds mix with salt), *suje* (rice beer), *mati mah hak* (black colour pulse), *masor petu khaji* (the fish entrails), etc.

However in case of birth ritual (at the time of removal of the naval cord) they prepare two soups one is from chicken meat and another is from arum with black paper and these soups are given to taste to the new born baby by mother along with *suje* and then she eats. They believe that this arum soup acts as relief of stomach pain and burning of mother (*makor pat puroni*). In case of death ritual also they prepare a special item which is known as *bikha hak* (liver of pig and *mesangi*). The importance of this curry (*bikha hak*) is that all the invited votaries (*bhakats*) give blessing to the particular family by taking this *bikha hak* with *suje*. Similarly in case of marriage also they prepare a special curry known as *ada bhaji* which is prepared by frying ginger only and the votaries give blessing to both bride and groom family by taking this *ada bhaji* with *suje*.

The Tengaponia Deoris have a custom to give *dalipachi* (presented food) both in case of marriage ceremony and in death ritual by the married daughters. In case of marriage this *dalipachi* is given by groom's family and in death ritual it is given by the married daughters. The number of *dalipachi* depends on the number of married daughters.

The items contained in a *dalipachi* are rice, betel nut, mustard oil, chillies, turmeric powder, salt, black pepper, ginger, spices (masala), smoked fish having scales, *hukoti*, leaves of arum plant, *suje* and a cock. In case of death ceremony there is no need of cock in the *dalipachi*. It is symbol of respect towards the mother as she brought up her daughter up to the marriage. In case of death ceremony it is also the same respect towards parents. In case of death ceremony the items of the *dalipachi* are mixed with the items of the feast for all. But in case of marriage ceremony the items of *dalipachi* are divided into two equal parts. One part is cooked with the feast items while the other part is enjoyed by mother with her friends.

In festival time they make different rice cakes, *handoh* (coarse powder of parched rice), *sira* (parched rice pounded) etc.

The mouth refreshers and narcotic substances

The people, irrespective of age and sex have the habit of using betel nut (*tamul pan*) as an important mouth refreshing item. Most of the people any time chew a piece of betel-nut. It is also invariably offered to the guests and visitors as a mark of affectionate hospitality. In any case of social injustice happens then deori people use to offer betel nut as a fine instead of money. They also use betel nut to invite people for their socio religious functions. It has so greatness that if any person is given a specific duty in a social function by *tamul pan* he is bound to do that duty otherwise he/she cannot keep the *tamul pan* at home. The people feel that intake of betel-nut refreshes both the mouth and the mind.

Habitat of smoking *bidi* (tobacco rolled in leaf) among the males is also very common. From younger to older people, all use to smoke heavily. But, the smoking habit is absent among the females.

Both male and female fond of alcoholic drinks (rice beer) and they drink regularly. They believe that without *suje* there is no respect in a family. It is also invariably offered to the guests and visitors as a mark of affectionate hospitality. There is a saying that the water of the mighty Brahmaputra can be dried but the rice beer of the deoris never ever ending.

Process of food preparation

The process of food preparation and cooking of different items also been found, by and large, to be culture bound and these vary from society to

society. The people under study mostly use wood as a fuel for cooking. There are only few families, use LPG for cooking. In each household there is a hearth (*thipai*) and above this there is a bamboo platform known as *ghisong*.

In case of social functions like marriage ceremony and death ritual, family members are not capable to see all works; therefore they distribute their works among the neighbors. Their duties are like this *sokusua* (who do cooking), *sakoni* (who strain wine), *pasoni* (who cut the vegetables), *tamulati* (who cut the betel nuts), *mankhatia* (who cut meat) etc. in various names which they will get according to their work. Moreover, on that special day, the villagers also bring some rice, vegetables, pulse, rice beer etc. This custom is called *dali dia* in their society. On that day all family members pray and *bhakats* (votary) give them blessings and they offer rice beer and *khaji* (a kind of chicken dish) to the *bhakats*.

The people use different aluminium pots with large mouth such as *ketli*, *soria*, *sas pan* etc. They also use steel utensils for the cooking and serving. Wooden as well as steel/ aluminium ladle are used. They use steel and bell metal dishes, bowls, cups etc.

The process of preparation of the food items which are very much fond of by these people are as follows:

Hukoti (dry fish): It is prepared from dry fish (*hukan mas*) and leaves of arum plant (*pani kosu*). At first they wash the fishes (any kind of fish) in clean water and let it to be dried for two days on a bamboo net which is hanged from just below the main bamboo platform (*ghisong*). After that they grind these dry fishes along with the leaves of arum plant in *dheki* (a pedal for pounding rice). The mixture is then kept in a few bamboo pipes and the mouth of these bamboo pipes are corked by a *kopat* (a kind of leaf) to make it airtight. Then these pipes are kept on the bamboo net for one month and then in the *ghisong* for future consumption. As they required take a few portion from the bamboo pipe and again keep it in the *ghisong*.

Suje (rice beer): It is made from any kind of rice (*lahi* or *bora*). At first the women prepare a few spice cakes (*modor pitha*) used for making the fermented rice beer (*suje*). For this purpose, the women collect different wild leaves from their forest and then grind these leaves with rice in *dheki* (a pedal for pounding rice). Then they make some cakes with this mixture and keep it dry in the bamboo platform above the hearth for two days. After that the required amount of rice is boiled in a big iron pan (*kerahi*) and then this boiled rice are spread in a big bamboo plat (*dola*) to keep cold. Then mix the locally prepared spice cakes with these boil rice. While mixing the spice cakes they also mix a few spice cakes which are made earlier than the new ones to become quick fermentation. In summer two days they keep this way and then kept it in the earthen pots and it become ready to drink in 10-15 days. But in winter

they have to cover this mixture with banana leaves (*kolpat*) to be warm and it become ready to drink after one month.

Matimah hak (pulse): At first measured amount of lentil is washed and cleaned. It is then boiled in measured amount of water in an iron pan. Then they mix required amount of baking powder which is prepared by burning the dried leaves and stalks of *matimah* plant. After boiling, the pan is taken out from above the hearth.

A frying pan is then placed on the fire and when it becomes hot, the required amount of mustard oil and pig meat fats is poured in it. When the oil is properly hot, the required amount of chopped onion and chilli are poured there to get it fried. Then salt and turmeric powder is added there as required. The boil lentil is then poured in the pan and allowed to boil again. Sometimes, vegetables like papaya (*amita*), potato (*alu*), elephant food (*outenga*) etc. are also added in the preparation of *mati mah hak*.

Tupe (sauce): A kind of sauce made of ground mustard seeds mix with salt. Sometime they also mix *bengena* (boil brinjal) and *bhekuri tita* (a kind of round brinjal with thorn) to make it more tasteful.

Gahori mankho hak (pig curry): At first the pig is burnt in fire and the entrails of the pig are removed. Then the pig is cut into pieces and kept aside. They never wash the meat before cooking. A frying pan is then placed on the fire and when it becomes hot, the required amount of mustard oil is poured in it. Then add the required amount of chilli, onion, garlic, ginger (locally available), potato in the pan and it is mixed thoroughly with the meat with the help of a ladle. Then, required amount of salt and turmeric powder are added and the pan is covered with a lid. At a regular interval stirring is done with the help of a ladle for three to four times, till it is cooked well. Sometimes in case of feast they mix cabbage and pulse (*mosur dal*) to become more gravy in the pig curry. They mix locally available leaves as spices.

Murgi mangso hak (chicken curry): The process of preparation of the chicken curry is same as with the pig curry.

Mas hak (fish curry): It is prepared by any kind of fish. At first fresh fish is cut into pieces and then wash only one time. In an aluminium pot they keep these cut pieces of fish and mix salt and turmeric powder. A frying pan is then placed on the fire and when it becomes hot, the required amount of mustard oil is poured in it. When the oil is properly hot, the cut pieces of fish are simply fried and keep it aside. Then in the remaining hot oil of the pan, required amount of chopped onion, potato, tomato and chilli are poured to get it fried. Then salt and turmeric powder is added there as required. Measured quantities of lentil (*mosur dal*) are also added there and stir all the mixture with a ladle for few minutes. Then the fried pieces of fish are added

there and pour required amount of water to boil till everything becomes soft to the desired extent.

Instead of tomato they sometime use elephant food (*outenga*) to make more sour. Sometimes, they also add the edible leaves there to have a unique taste in the curry.

Khaji (vegetable): Any kind fried vegetable is known as *khaji*. They generally prepare a *khaji* with the leafy vegetables (*lai sag*), potato (*alu*) and the heads of fishes (*masor mur*).

At first, the leafy vegetables, and potatoes are cut into pieces of the required size and then washed properly before cooking. Then in an iron pan, required amount of oil is added. When the oil is properly hot, the required amount of chopped onion and chilli are poured there to get it fried. Then salt and turmeric powder is added there as required. Then the heads of fishes and cut pieces of vegetables are added there and cover it with a cover and keep it in hearth having fire. Occasional stirring with the help of a ladle is also done till the vegetables and the heads of fishes complete fried and softened.

They also prepare a *khaji* with the entrails of fishes. This is known as *masor petu khaji*. To prepare this item they first come out all the entrails of fishes in an aluminium vessels having narrow mouth with a cover or lid on it. Then required amount of green chilli, cut pieces of tomato, onion, salts and turmeric powder are mixed with it. Then the aluminium vessel is kept in hearth having fire. Occasional stirring with the help of a ladle is necessary to have the entire entrails uniformly boiled and softened.

Bhat (rice): Boiling of rice in water is prevalent in all the cultural groups. The people under investigation have been found to cook rice in aluminium vessels having narrow mouth with a cover or lid on it. Some of them also use saucepan. But during the preparation of food for a feast, the big iron pans (*kerahis*) are used to cook rice. For preparation of rice, at first the water is boiled and then the measured amount of rice (washed and cleaned before hand) is put there. The boiling continues till the rice is so softened and during the period, occasional stirring with the help of a ladle is necessary to have the entire rice uniformly boiled and softened. However, it has been observed that the amount of water put in the container is measured in such a way that when the rice is properly boiled there does not remain any extra water to be strained.

Food storing and preservation

Deori people live in pile dwelling houses. They store the annual agricultural product in one store room of the main house. Besides, paddy, some other crops, such as mustard seeds, black coloured local variety of pulse (*matimah*) pumpkin (*rangalau*), guard (*kumura*) etc. are also stored. The seeds

(paddy) to be used in the next year are stored in rice bags. The paddies which are used for daily consumption are kept in a big bamboo and cane made basket (*duli*) in the store room.

For preservation, the hearth (*thipai*) plays the most important role. The food items preserved for the future consumption are placed on a bamboo platform (*ghisong*) above the hearth. In this platform they generally keep the things in the bamboo pipes which is corked by a leaf (like banana leaf) to air tight. The items which are kept in these bamboo pipes are dry fish (*hukoti*), local tobacco leaves (*dhopat*), dry chilli (*hukan jolokia*), black paper (*jaluk*), seeds of bitter gourd, seeds of different crops etc. They keep turmeric (*haldhi*) and spice cakes used for making fermented rice beer (*modor pitha*) for future use in earthen pots and the mouth of these pots are corked by *kopat* (a kind one leaf). These pots are also kept on the bamboo platform. Besides, these they also keep brinjal, lady's finger, kidney bean and corn as open on the bamboo platform for future use in the agricultural fields. Even the meat of animals killed in a hunting expedition or brought from market is not immediately consumed; a portion is smoked over the family hearth and preserved on the platform above the hearth for future consumption.

They also keep the excess uncooked pieces of fish for future consumption by slight heating the pieces in the hearth fire and then the pieces are smoked over the family hearth for future consumption.

They store the bamboo shoots (*banh gaj*) in plastic jar and bottle by filling water in it for future consumption and keep it as air tight. They store rice beer (*suje*) in big sized earthen pots. And these special kind of earthen pots of Deoris are made in Majuli (an island in Assam).

The other items such as powder milk, tea, sugar, turmeric powder, mustard oil, rice etc. are kept in the air tight plastic jars.

Conclusion

According to the Deoris religion is faith and the main principles of religion are devotion and feelings. Their religion is real religion and so there is no change from tradition to present and also to future.

From the present investigation it has come to know that the Deori people still maintain their traditional food items in their different socio-religious ceremonies. Most of the foods used for religious functions are from their own domestic production as they use to cultivate all seasonal agricultural products. They still continue to maintain their relation with forest products.

Over the years the Deoris have retained the heritage of their culture and tradition. In other words, the Deoris have sustained their tribal identification against the onslaughts of the modern day influences.

Since the last quarter of 19th century the Deoris started mobilizing their resources to revitalize their traditional culture and language in order to establish their group identity and heritage in the multi ethnic setting of different tribes/castes in Assam. The efforts got further impetus by the formation of different associations. Some of the important associations in this regard are: Sodou Asom Deori Chatrahantha, Deori Sahitya Sobha, Deori Pujari Sanmillan, Sodou Deori Mahila Samiti, All India Deori Student Association (I.D.S.A.), Deori Janajati Mancha, Deori Sayatya Hahita Dabi Samiti (Deori Autonomous Demand Committee) etc.

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