



## INDIGENOUS CULINARY PRACTICES OF SELECTED TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF ASSAM

**Nidhaan Kaur Oberoi**

U.G. Student

Department of Home Science

Handique Girls' College, Guwahati-01, Assam

**Dr. Jitumoni Neog**

Assistant Professor

Department of Home Science

Handique Girls' College, Guwahati-01, Assam

### ABSTARCT

*The Indigenous Knowledge System is a framework of oral and written knowledge, creation, practices, and beliefs that are developed by the Tribes and Indigenous Peoples by interacting and experiencing their habitat. Indigenous knowledge has evolved over millennia, continues to develop, and is surrounded by understanding based on the evidence acquired through direct contact with the territory and long-term experiences, as well as extensive examination, knowledge gained, and skills which is passed down across generations. The present study emphasizes the contributions of tribal communities in Assam, especially their role in culinary traditions. The study examines how these knowledge systems, deeply embedded in the practices of communities such as the Tai-Ahom, Deori, Karbi, and Sonowal Kachari, embody principles of sustainability, resource efficiency, and cultural resilience. This study analyzes how the cultural traditions of indigenous communities are closely linked to their surroundings, belief systems, and traditional knowledge. It also highlights that these practices illustrate scientifically valid and ecologically sound strategies that have been developed through long-term observation and community experimentation. The present study is based on primary and secondary data.*

**Key Words :** *Indigenous Knowledge System, Tai-Ahom, Deori, Karbi, Sonowal Kachari,*

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is a complex framework of understanding that our ancestral communities have developed over many generations through their interactions with the environment. It encompasses a body of empirical knowledge and philosophies regarding the interactions of living beings with one another and their surroundings, which have been culturally transmitted through generations of long-term residents of a specific region. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is built on integrated and environment-conscious approaches, offering valuable perceptions for addressing modern challenges related to sustainable development. It represents a systematic transmission of knowledge, rooted in ancient traditions and practices that are extremely significant. IKS includes many knowledge traditions, such as Ayurveda (traditional medicine), yoga, Vastu shastra (architecture), agricultural methods, water management systems, and philosophical principles. These systems emphasize harmony with nature, resource conservation, and solutions driven by community engagement. The guiding principle of IKS is



"**Lokasamgraha**" (the well-being of all), which closely aligns with the ethos of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Tai-Ahom community, which is one of Assam's major ethnic groups, exhibits a distinctive range of traditional customs which is adapted according to sustainable agriculture. Among the Tai-Ahom practices, they exhibit extensive knowledge of pest control, preservation techniques, and field sanitation. The Deori community has deep-rooted farming traditions, harnessing various Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITK) practices, which are mainly aimed at managing pests and diseases in crops and livestock. The Karbi community creates a traditional grain storage method called Sok Ankro, which consists of a cylindrical bamboo structure. At the bottom, layers of dhari (woven bamboo mat) and banana leaves are placed. After grains are stored, a layer of dried neem leaves is added on top, and it is sealed with banana leaves and a bamboo lid. This helps in adequate ventilation and protects the grains from pests.

The culinary traditions of these communities are closely intertwined with their habitat, faith, and folk knowledge. Among the various tribes in Assam, the Sonowal Kachari people are notable for their special bond with nature, particularly seen in their dietary practices and traditional dishes. Their culinary heritage, grounded in sustainable methods and indigenous knowledge, boasts a wealth of nutritional value, cultural meaning, and health benefits.

The objective of the present study is to understand the Indigenous Knowledge practiced by the Tai Ahom, Karbi, Sonowal Kachari, and Deori tribes in food. The present study also aims to find how the Indigenous Knowledge practiced by the tribes offers practical and sustainable solutions for achieving the SDGs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology of research for the present study involves the study and analysis of the culinary practices of the indigenous communities of Assam. Both primary and secondary data are used. Primary data is collected from the respondents belonging to the tribes of Tai-Ahom, Deori, Sonowal Kachari, and Karbi. The interview method is used for the collection of the data. For secondary data, the researcher utilized journals, books, articles, research papers, and internet browsing. The data were collected through a well-designed questionnaire and distributed among the different communities of Assam. A total of 80 respondents were randomly selected (i.e., 20 respondents from each tribe) from the four selected tribes of Assam. The data were analyzed using frequency and percentage.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

By analyzing the data through frequency and percentage, the researcher identifies key demographic, socio-economic, and cultural patterns among the four indigenous communities of Assam: Tai-Ahom, Sonowal Kachari, Karbi, and Deori. The researcher also highlights the Indigenous Knowledge practiced by the Tai Ahom, Karbi, Sonowal Kachari, and Deori tribes in food. The food patterns of the Tai-Ahom, Sonowal Kachari, Karbi, and Deori



tribes of Assam represent a rich blend of diversity that is rooted in their traditions and habitat. The central staple for all four tribes is rice, which symbolizes life, prosperity, and identity, and is an important ingredient in their religious rites and festivals. Rice beer, which is known by various names, such as Rohi and Hor Alank, is served as both a traditional beverage and a sacred offering. The Tai-Ahom and Sonowal Kachari communities prefer pork, duck, red ant eggs, and preserved fish, while the Karbi tribe enjoys a wide variety of foods, silkworms, and varied dry fish dishes like Sukati. The Deori tribe focuses on pork and fish, along with unique fermented dishes. The process of preparing meals also varies, including steaming, bamboo roasting, smoking, and fermenting techniques, which reflect the local resources. The diets are also influenced by the seasonal changes, comprising unique ingredients like fermented rice in summer or smoked meats in winter, highlighting their dynamic relationship with nature and cultural continuity.

The festive food traditions of the tribes highlight their cultural identities and ecological awareness (Table 1). Rice and rice beer are the chief ingredients in all celebrations. In Tai-Ahom festivals like Na Dam and Me-Dam-Me-Phi, dishes such as pork and dried fish are offered to honor ancestors and the spiritual world. The Sonowal Kachari community prepares rice-based snacks like ghila pitha and boga pitha for rituals like Ai Sakam and Sarag Deu Puja, which include ingredients such as jaggery and bananas, representing spiritual essence. The festivals of the Karbi tribe, such as Dehal Kachirdom, in which dishes prepared from newly harvested rice and vegetables, reflecting their association with seasonal produce. The Deori tribe prepares feasts during Makan Chiban by proposing chickens, rice, and locally sourced foods, which display food's sanctity in worship and community bonding. Festival foods for all these tribes serve as offerings, asserting community ties, and expressing gratitude for nature's reward. The preparation and sharing of meals during gatherings underline shared values and cultural preservation.

**Table 1: Food during festivals among the tribes**

| SL NO. | PARTICULAR S          | TAI-AHOM | SONOWAL KACHARI | KARBI | DEORI |
|--------|-----------------------|----------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| 2.     | Food During Festivals |          |                 |       |       |



|   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Festival-specific foods                               | <p><b>Occasion:</b> Me-Dam-Me-Phi<br/><b>Food:</b> dried fish, pork, and rice beer,</p>                 | <p><b>Festival:</b> Ai Sakam<br/><b>Month:</b> April-May<br/><b>Food:</b> Milk, Jaggery, Sali Rice, Fried Rice Powder (<b>Karai Guri</b>), Black Gram (<b>Mati Kalai</b>)</p>   | <p><b>Occasion:</b> Dehal Katsirdom<br/><b>Food:</b> flowers, fruits, Hor, goats, and fowls or pigeons<br/><b>Occasion:</b> Ankimi Kitso<br/><b>Food:</b> hor, new rice, and vegetables</p> | <p><b>Occasion:</b> Makan Chiban<br/><b>Food:</b> Seven chickens are sacrificed before the deity, and a feast is arranged with the sacrificed meat<br/><b>Ritual:</b> Rajkebang<br/><b>Food:</b> Chicken, ducks, rice, beer, pots</p> |
| Foods consumed during community gatherings and feasts | <p>pork, duck, fish (dried or fresh), Fermented foods like dried fish (hukoti), Nam-lao (rice beer)</p> | <p><b>Festival:</b> lakhimi sabah<br/><b>Month:</b> September-October (Ahin and Kati)<br/><b>Food:</b> pulses (but and magu), banana, sugarcane, coconut<br/>ritual: sarag deu puja<br/><b>Month:</b> January<br/><b>Food:</b> sacrificed duck, 100 peppers, and the peel of a banana</p> | <p>Hor (rice beer)<br/><b>Festival:</b> Hen-up-ahi ke-en<br/><b>Food:</b> bamboo shoots and the meat</p>  | <p><b>Festival:</b> Barbiya<br/><b>Food:</b> fish, pork, rice, beer (Suje), rice, vegetables, betel leaves, and nuts</p>  |



|   |  |   |  |  |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| Cultural significance of festival foods | Pork and rice, along with fish, are served as it is a traditional offering believed to appease the deceased ancestors. | Festival foods reflect a strong connection to nature, religious beliefs, and social traditions. | Cultural importance, reflecting their agricultural practices, religious beliefs, and social customs, food is linked. | Foods are often tied to rituals, offerings, and the celebration of agricultural cycles, reinforcing their identity and traditions. |
|---|--|---|--|--|

**CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the culinary practices of the different tribes in Assam. It shows that their food systems hold valuable ancestral knowledge. These systems promote responsible resource management and community connections. The study also emphasizes how indigenous knowledge supports sustainable living. Traditional food practices showcase seasonal changes, biodiversity, and efficient use of resources. Despite modern influences, these communities are still practicing their cultural traditions. By continuing these traditions, we highlight the importance of cultural sovereignty and the need to protect our intangible cultural heritage. These practices are vital today as they offer insights for extensive public health, sustainable food systems, and development that respects indigenous cultures. The study recommends the recognition and documentation of traditional knowledge to help create fair and sustainable futures. We can preserve and strengthen the rich heritage of Assam's tribal culture for future generations by supporting the research of ITK and engaging with these communities.

**Bibliography**

- Das, B., Deka, N. and Bhagabati, A. 2022, Reflection of nature in the material culture of the Karbi tribe: A case from Kamrup Metro district, Assam, India. *The geographical Journal of Nepal*, 15:63-78.
- Phukon, J., 2024, Herbal plants used by the Deori Tribe of Assam: An ethnobotanical study. *Journal of Chemical Health Risks*, 14(6): 1897-1900.
- Sonowal, R., 2023, Traditional Rice beer fermentation technology of the sonowal kachari tribe of Assam, India. *Antrocom Journal of Anthropology*, 19(1): 606-611.
- Sultana, R. Muhammad, N. and AKM, Z., 2018, Role of indigenous knowledge in sustainable development. *International Journal of Development Research*, 8(2): 18902-18905.