CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The term “food” has various connotations. According to the online version of *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, food refers to “(any) material consisting essentially of protein, carbohydrate, and fat used in the body of an organism to sustain growth, repair, and vital processes and to furnish energy; also: such food together with supplementary substances (as minerals, vitamins, and condiments)”.

However, food also includes such other non-solid substances like water, milk, liquor and other alcoholic drinks, together with intake of gaseous substances like smoking, as well as chewing of tobacco, betel-nut and leaf etc. In essence, food means different items in different cultures.

The consumption of food, like other biologically supportive activities, is an aspect of cultural behaviour. In no society do people eat everything, everywhere, with everyone, and in all situations. Most cultures have a recognizable cuisine: a specific set of cooking traditions, preferences and practices. Almost every form of life, whether plant or animal, is used as food for nutritive or ritual purposes by one or more human societies at some time in the past or present. The choice of food is a cultural decision. People do not accept all possible substances as edible but make choices. Culture defines how possible nutrition is coded into acceptable food (Levi-Strauss 1966). Ecological, biological, and economic conditions affect our choice of food too but it is the cultural
understanding and categorisation that structures food as edible or inedible and as part of the world. The consumption of food is governed by rules and usages which cut across each other at different levels of symbolization. These symbolizations define the social contexts and groupings within which food is consumed and prohibits or taboos the consumption of others.

Food, therefore, is one of the most visible and important symbol of identity and difference, uniting the members of a community and segregating them from other communities. This inclusion and exclusion can be observed not only in what they eat or what they are known to eat, but also how they eat, how they prepare and serve their food, and what happens after food is taken. If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed both within and outside a community. The decoded message is about hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries (Douglas 1997).

Consequently, in all cultures, a close look at what and how people eat takes one directly to the core issue of identity or who they are. The more their eating habits and practices are understood, the more clear their political, religious, economic, and social systems become. It ultimately helps in understanding them as people, seeing why they make many of the food choices they make and why they do not make other choices. The study of identity and difference inherent in food can, therefore, be a means of understanding the underlying social relations in any culture and its quiescent philosophy.
PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD

Food has emerged only recently from the peripheries of academic inquiry to take a more central position within the discipline of anthropology. As early as the 1900s, anthropological writings briefly mentioned food within the context of a culture’s diet which tended to border more on lists rather than analysis. From 1950s to the early 1970s anthropology of food moved towards a biological orientation with nutritive studies becoming popular. On the other hand, there were those anthropologists who were interested in tracing the origins of particular foods like rice. In 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists began to move towards conceptualizing food as a symbolic substance that was embedded and invested with meaning. Current studies on food emphasize the cultural and social aspects of food, rather than its nutritive qualities.

Some Anthropological Classics

While early anthropologists mentioned food because of its central role in many cultures, a few wrote pointed pieces on foodways, most notably Audrey Richards (1932, 1939), Raymond Firth (1934), and Meyer Fortes and S. L. Fortes (1936). Most of these early studies on food and culture were outgrowths of the traditional ethnographic method and were both labour and time intensive.

Richards’ *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* examines the cultural aspects of food and eating among the Southern Bantu, taking as its starting point the bold statement “nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex”. When it was first published in 1932, with a preface by her mentor Bronislaw Malinowski, it laid the
groundwork for a sociological theory of nutrition. This ethnography is one of the earliest and most influential anthropological accounts of food and diet, looking at how food and its consumption satisfy an entire system of needs through institutional and social processes. It had a twofold interest. It is, as Malinowski says in a highly laudatory preface, the first systematic study of the subject in anthropological literature; and it is an originally conceived and at the same time instructive example of the application of the conception of "function" to the study of the part played by certain biological needs of man in knitting together and determining the form and relations of economic and social units in a given society. In 1939, she did a survey on the diet of the Bemba (Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia); this ethnography describes the living conditions of the Bemba of North Eastern Rhodesia, with special reference to the effects of migrant labour on the social and economic life of a mainly agricultural society.

Raymond Firth's piece titled 'The Sociological Study of the Native Diet' which appeared in Africa [Vol. 7(4): 401-14] in 1934 was the first methodological attempt made on the study of food. He laid out a scheme of research on four aspects: consideration of natural resources available, study of extractive methods for obtaining food, preparation of food for consumption, and the consumption of food. This was more on the lines of a nutritive study, rather than a cultural one. However, Firth's later analysis of food as symbol among the Tikopia (1973) focuses more on the logical and systematic patterning of symbolic analogies and reversals than on actual diet.

One other of the earliest work on food appeared in 1936, in Africa. This was an ethnographic description on the place of food in the domestic economy of the Tale of
the Sudanese zone by Meyer Fortes and S. L. Fortes. Herein, they focused on the relation of the household and the “units of food production” to the various food activities. Food is a major practical issue in Tale social life. It is also a fundamental constituent of innumerable social situations not directly connected with nutrition, for instance, sacrifices to ancestral spirits or funeral ceremonies (Fortes and Fortes 1936: 237-76).


Food, Structure and Meaning

Levi-Strauss (1966, 1968, 1970) made one of the most fruitful analyses of the structure of food, which has induced several other anthropologists to pursue their analytical works along the lines shown by him. He sought to understand food as a cultural system, which recognized that taste was culturally shaped and socially controlled. His approach treated food as analogous to language, and examined the ways in which its meanings
could be grasped from an understanding of symbols and metaphors associated with food. His tri-polar gastronomic model (the raw, the cooked, and the rotten) was a classic structuralist statement in which he saw basic structures represented by two polarities: nature/culture and elaborated/unelaborated, and this constituted the study of the borderline between nature and culture and of the “progressive” and “regressive” movement across this border.

Roland Barthes (1997: 20-27) employed a linguistic analogy in the understanding of food, searching for a code or grammar. Unlike Levi-Strauss who made generalizations from myths of tribal people but failed to analyse the foodways of advanced societies, Barthes related concepts like capitalism and imperialism to his analysis of food. Douglas (1997: 36-54), influenced by both Levi-Strauss and Barthes, showed how an ordinary, everyday meal revealed much about the cultural beliefs surrounding food as well as a social and metaphysical logic that underlies these beliefs.

The problem of the Levi-Straussian triangle was that it focussed mainly on the progressive “civilizing” movement from nature to culture; whereas it was the regressive “fall” back on nature which constituted the moral dilemma of the modern eater. This point has been elaborated by Makela and Arppe (2005) while studying “living foods” diet on foodists and dieticians. Levi-Strauss’ culinary triangle has been re-looked at by Clark (2004: 19-31) too; he studied punk cuisine and saw it as a way of favouring the less anarchist food over the commodified products — the “raw” or “rotten” over the “cooked”.

Jack Goody (1982) also criticizes the Levi-Straussian approach for its emphasis
on culture, and for failing to consider social relations and individual differences; he
takes issue with Douglas for neglecting internal social differentiation as well as external
socio-cultural influences, historical factors and material elements. Goody acknowledges
the importance of culture, but he argues that a study of food and eating must involve
political economy at the micro-level, such as the household, through to the macro-level,
such as states and their formation and structure.

Even though Levi-Strauss’ culinary triangle seems to be culture-specific and the
movements between the poles not universal, the symbolic and semiotic nature of food
cannot be doubted. Like any language, food has rules of exclusion, signifying opposites
(such as savoury/sweet), rules of association for how individual dishes and menus
should be assembled, and rituals of use. Food not only acts as an indicator of a society’s
beliefs and idioms, but if properly decoded can tell much about the latent norms and
values of a society.

Food, Identity, and Difference

In a community’s search for identity, food acquires an essential role. For instance,
traditional breads, farmhouse cheeses and local wines in France, Spain or Italy, village-
made couscous in Algeria or Morocco, or pampas meat in Argentina (Muchnik et al.
2005) all acquire an essential role. At times, particular foods, at the level of the
community acquire a new dimension and it becomes an integral part of their life.
Medina (2001) confirms that among the Basque diaspora in Barcelona, “wine is not just
wine” but an integral part of the socialization process.
Food and food practices reflect and shape gender identity, roles, and relationships in a family as well as at the community levels. Provisioning and food preparation still remain largely the work of women, who are responsible not only for feeding the family but also doing so in a manner which accords with the preferences of its members, remains within budgetary constraints and is as healthy as possible. "Entitlement" to food differs between men and women, as pointed out by Caplan (1997:3), in terms of the type of food, alcohol as well as the quantity itself. Again, "real men" are thought to need meat, particularly red meat while women were much more likely to be vegetarians. Some conclude that men adopt unhealthy behaviours and beliefs in order to demonstrate their masculinity (Moynihan 1998, Courtenay 2000, Watson 2000). However, most of these studies on food and gender have been done by women on women respondents. On the other hand, a study on male carpenters, drivers and engineers in Oslo revealed that there was no homogeneous pattern in male food choices, rather social class played a role in the selection or rejection of food (Roos and Wandel 2005:169-80).

Food is linked to class, status and ethnicity as well. Even a simple meal at the table shows a social structure. This point has been proved by Cantarero and Stacconi (2001) while discussing the sitting position of child diners in Juan de Lanuza, a rehabilitation centre. In Peru, modern perceptions of class, ethnicity, and social identity dictate whether the guinea pig is a delicacy or an unpalatable indigenous food item (deFrance 2006: 3-34). Many societies categorize food into "our" and "their" food. The Inuit of Canadian Arctic (Searles 2002: 55-78) as well as Punjabi women in Glasgow
(Bradby 1997:213-33) make such differences in food to express cultural differences as well as personal and collective identity.

Food, thus, is seen to be a marker of difference as well as identity. Though national, ethnic and religious distinctions are often marked in culinary patterns or details, the same has not received due attention.

**Food, Change and Continuity**

Harris (1985, 1992), taking a materialist view, tries to see how the cow became "sacred" in India. He points out that in the *Rig Veda*, the slaughter and sacrifice of cattle were central religious performances and that during the Rig Vedic times, the consumption of the cow was widely prevalent. He argues that with a rapidly rising population made possible by the spread of agriculture using the ox-drawn plough, cattle slaughter could no longer be sustained. However, such a link is tenuous and the role of culture in the selection or rejection of food items cannot be bypassed. Douglas (1966), Beardsworth *et al.* (1992), and Curtis *et al.* (2001) point to a huge range of potentially edible items which are ignored in every culture for cultural reasons.

Dietary patterns have undergone many changes due to market economy. Mintz (1985) was one of the first anthropologists to examine the change in eating habits due to economic development. He describes the history of sugar consumption in England, the Netherlands and the United States. He links its popularity with the increase in sugar supply in Europe via sugarcane plantations in the New World.
According to a study by Bradby (1997: 213-33) among Glaswegian Punjabi women, the first changes in food habits at the family level occur in the “least” important meal, the breakfast. The interviewed Punjabi women said they ate “Scottish/ English food” for breakfast, and “Punjabi food” for lunch, dinner and celebrations. In recent times, changes in the diet have arisen due to increasing health consciousness, hectic and demanding work schedules and rising tendencies to eat outside. A few scholars have touched on the above topics. Beardsworth and Bryman (1999: 289-300, 2004: 313-27) in their study among young adults in Britain found that red meat consumption was on the decline due to perceived health reasons. Murcott (1997: 32-49) addresses the frequent complaints about the demise of the meal in Britain. Williams (1997:151-71), while studying the increase in eating outside the home, found that many people on holiday deliberately sought out food that was “nostalgic”, while Martens and Warde (1997) suggest that there were significant conceptual links between eating in a restaurant and private notions of hospitality.

Migration, contrary to general opinion, affected food rituals less in its form and content and actually reinforced its traditional operation. This was seen among the Igbo diaspora community in Belgium where the “kola nut” rite is still followed in its traditional form. The “kola nut” is a symbol of social interaction and presented in marriage ceremonies and social gatherings by men to men in accordance of social status and never to women. In contrast, in Nigeria Igbo women now are challenging male authority and male privilege in carrying out this rite (Duru 2005: 201-19). Migration also seems to integrate two different cultures as seen among the Glaswegian women of
Punjabi origin who adopted both the allopathic discourse and the age-old ayurvedic system handed down from their elders, in their diet (Bradby 1997: 213-33).

From the literature cited in this section it is obvious that anthropology of food is a promising but much less explored field of research, especially in India. There is hardly any data, leave alone analysis, on production, distribution and consumption of food in various societies we deal with. Nor has there been any full-length empirical and analytical work on the role of food in bringing solidarity within a community and drawing the boundaries with other communities. Again, the research on food among Garos is minimalistic as seen in the following.

**Literature on Garo Food**

Scholars of Garo culture have treated food almost exclusively from an economic perspective, that is, as a basic need (Playfair [1909]1975, Burling [1963]1997, Sangma 1981), and as a material resource that is a key component of a subsistence mode of production adapted to the ecosystems (Majumdar 1980).

One of the foremost mentions about Garo food items is made by Alan Playfair in his monograph *The Garos* first published in 1909, wherein he talks about different strategies of food getting. Subsequent works give a list of food items consumed by the Garos (Burling [1963]1997, Sangma 1981). Robbins Burling, on the basis of fieldwork conducted from 1954 to 1956 in Rengsanggri, describes the Rongram weekly market in West Garo Hills District, Meghalaya. Among food items, Garos are seen buying dry fish from the dealers and selling rice beer, snacks like boiled sweet potatoes or manioc,
uncooked beef and less frequently uncooked pork (1997a: 277). D. N. Majumdar, while studying the Garos of Matchakolgiri of West Garo Hills District, Meghalaya, makes a list of jobs connected to food and gender. Cooking, fetching water and preparing rice beer are women’s job while fishing and hunting are men’s job (1980: 85). These works have merely listed types of food consumed and activities connected to food.

In 2007 Ellen Bal makes a very interesting comment in her study on social boundaries and ethnic categorization of the Garos of Bangladesh. She talks about how Bengalis still think of Garos as “frog eaters”, i.e., being people of a very primitive stage. Erik de Maaker gives details of the meals involved in a traditional funerary practice, its various ramifications in connection with food and exchange between families (2006: 34, 112-14).

However, all these works on Garos lack a systematic and analytical study on food as the central pawn.

**ORIENTING THE PRESENT STUDY**

The study on food and foodways is a vast and unending field. In this study, instead of making an exploratory work on food itself, an attempt is made to specifically study the relation between food, identity and difference, both within the Garo community and in relation to neighbouring communities.
The present foray into Garo food, therefore, has certain objectives, which are as follows:

1. To study the production, distribution and consumption of food among Garos,
2. To study food as a marker of Garo identity vis-à-vis non-Garo communities.
3. To study food as a medium of differentiation within the Garo community, chiefly along gender differences, and
4. To study change and continuity in Garo food, and how gender boundaries within Garos and ethnic boundaries between Garos and non-Garos are negotiated.

In order to achieve the above objectives, some research questions are framed. They are:

- What and how are the foods selected, offered and eaten? What foods are preferred and what are avoided and why?
- What food and food practices are termed as “Garo food” or “non-Garo food” and why?
- What are the processes of food production, distribution and consumption among Garos? How do traditional knowledge, customs, rituals, ideas and beliefs influence these processes?
- How does food differentiate men and women in Garo society?
- How do foods act as a binding or segregating force?
- Has the introduction of new food into Garo culture through market economy and globalization challenged their identity or blurred their boundaries with non-Garos?
GOING ABOUT THE PROBLEM

Why Garos?

The present study on “Food, Identity, and Difference” could have been deliberated in any culture and in any geographical location. Why did I select the Garos living in particular areas? Besides being a part of the Garo tribal world, which I expected would help me in collection of data in the Garo language, I had a few observations which prompted me towards selection of this community for empirical study. Firstly, food occupies a very important part in Garo daily discourse. After preliminary greetings, the first question invariably is, “Have you eaten?”, or if visiting, “What have you cooked?” Secondly, Garos are a matrilineal group of people. Therefore it is interesting to find out if gender plays a role in Garo cuisine. Thirdly, Garos universally talk of “Garo food”. Even in the city of Shillong where I presently reside, a local market has sprung up in the vicinity of Polo market under the name of “Garo market”. This in itself is a novelty, for nowhere in the city there exists any market called Khasi market, Assamese market or Nepali market. This “Garo market” is temporary, where farmers from Garo villages of West Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya, come and sell their vegetables on a daily basis. These vegetables generally consist of Garo pumpkin, green coconut, green papaya, Garo arum and other seasonal vegetables like sorrel leaves, mekha¹, mecheng², crabs and cockle shells.

Playfair ([1909]1975:1), in his very first introductory page in The Garos, divides Garos into those inhabiting the Garo Hills District and those inhabiting the other

¹ Jute leaves.
² A wild leaf that is commonly relished by the Garos.
districts in the low lying plains area. The Garos inhabiting the once Garo Hills District (now in Meghalaya, India) have been much studied (Nakane 1967, Burling [1963]1997, Majumdar 1980, de Maaker 2006) whereas there exists hardly any known literature about the Garos living in the plains areas. I, therefore, planned to study those inhabiting the low lying plains areas, namely Assam state (India) and across the political divide, Bangladesh.

Moreover, the study on identity and difference would be more meaningful if Garos are studied in such situations where they live within a greater non-Garo culture as those in Assam and Bangladesh, and where they live alongside and with substantial non-Garo people.

Two Hypotheses

Besides the objectives laid out earlier, this study has two hypotheses.

1. Spatial distance between two Garo groups plays little role in the formation of separate concepts of food.

While talking of food, in common parlance, Garos frequently refer to the term “Garo Food”. “Today I had Garo Food”, is a common utterance by Garos. What constitutes such a food, and do they really have a concrete entity called “Garo Food”? Is this an entity that is intact despite the geographical distance and the political divide?
2. The non-beef and non-pork environments in Assam and Bangladesh respectively impact on Garo food preferences in the two locations.

Garo food preferences in the two locations.

Garo food preferences in the two locations.

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Garos eat both beef (cow-meat) and pork (swine-meat). In Assam, Garos live in a predominantly Assamese Hindu non-beef environment. In Bangladesh, they live with the dominant Bengali Muslims who observe taboo on pork consumption. I, therefore, wanted to find out whether these specific social environments would have any impact on Garo choice of food.

Methodology

Village Selection: There are over a thousand villages each in Assam and Bangladesh where Garos live. To overcome the dilemma in village selection, I approached two organizations working at the grassroots level, viz., the All Assam Garo Union (AAGU), a voluntary organization of Garos of Assam, and the Indigenous Peoples Development Services (IPDS), an NGO working in Bangladesh. The former gave me figures of 1400 Garo villages in Assam and the latter gave figures of over 1000 Garo villages in Bangladesh.

The disquieting figure came down drastically because I had three over-riding considerations for village selection, which are as follows:

- One of the oldest Garo villages,
- One of the largest Garo villages in terms of population, and
- One with substantial non-Garo populations as well.
The AAGU had, in the year 2005, undertaken an independent population census of Garo villages in Assam and therefore Levingstone Kongkal Sangma, the President of AAGU, gave me two names — Gohalkona and Nishangram, two of the oldest, largest and best known villages in Assam. Gohalkona is a village in Kamrup District, whereas Nishangram is in Goalpara District. I chose the former in spite of its relative communication and transport inaccessibility (during the days of my fieldwork 2006-2008), because it had an 80: 20 equation in terms of Garo: non-Garo populations, while the latter had only a couple of non-Garo families living in the village.

In Bangladesh, Askipara was the first Garo village, after a few Bengali villages, I set my foot in, when I crossed over the border at Nakugaon International Check Post in Haluaghat Upazila from Dalu in Garo Hills, Meghalaya. From written records checked previously (Rahman 2006) I knew Haluaghat Thana was one of the most densely Garo-populated areas. From field visits and personal information collected from the area on my first visit to Bangladesh, I realized Askipara village had the largest Garo population in Haluaghat Thana with a 50: 50 equation of Garo: non-Garo people.

**Data Collection:** When it came to data collection on food, it was rather complex and difficult. Many times, it was hard to make the respondent comprehend the question, and since at times it would be answered jokingly it was difficult to gauze the correctness or authenticity of the answer given. Again, on many occasions, the questions put were answered with a shy smile “Naa masiaba”, meaning “You know the answer”. It was a
rather unfair statement for in reality my “native world”\(^3\) was totally different from theirs. This, I realise, is one of the greatest drawbacks of being a researcher of the “same” culture.

I started my first few days in the village with household survey of the village, through which preliminary data on socio-economic background of each household was collected. The data collected included age, sex, marital status, clan affiliation, religion, educational qualification, occupation (both primary and secondary) and income. Moreover data on property owned — communal and individual (land and livestock) — was also collected. This helped me later in checking the socio-economic background of the people, but more than that, this helped me in familiarising myself with the village and its people and in identifying the individuals for in-depth interviews to follow.

Initially, and in many situations, I did not use any structured interview schedule for data collection on food. However, I followed an interview guide which had a wide-ranging set of questions covering methods and types of food acquirement, places from where acquired and socio-cultural reasons attached, consumption and distribution activities, different cooking techniques and politics of the kitchen, food dynamics within and across groups — Garos and non-Garos, and also new food and foodways. However, for data collection on some aspects, a semi-structured schedule prepared in the field itself was used. For instance, while collecting data on gender roles in food acquisition activities, whenever I carried along the interview guide, and inquired, “What

\(^{3}\) I was born in the city of Guwahati in the state of Assam (India), and lived with Assamese neighbours and played with Assamese friends. I was a Garo by birth, but I lived and grew amidst non-Garos.
jobs in a jhum\textsuperscript{4} field do you do?" I would get what I thought were “vague” answers like “I do everything”. A second question to qualify “everything”, would give a still vaguer answer like “We all do everything”. Therefore, I prepared a schedule covering different activities inclusive of clearing jungles, cutting down trees, setting fire to dried undergrowths, hoeing, sowing of seeds, weeding, harvesting, carrying the crops, chasing birds away etc. I used this interview schedule to understand the roles expected of a man and a woman.

In fact, this was the second most problematic situation I faced (the first being that they assumed I knew the answer to all queries). Garos are very general in their descriptions or answers. Many times, I had to prod for a precise answer, and at times it would take a long time (of prodding) to get a clear answer. When I asked informants regarding recognizable tastes, the answers I received was either a “toa” or “toja”, meaning “tasty” or “not tasty”. However, my consistent prodding bore fruit when I received answers like “sour”, “sweet”, “salty”, “bitter”, “burningness” etc.

Interviews were informal or conversational type to begin with, which were followed by more formal interviews covering some objectives of my study. The focus of the research for ideal rules on patterns of eating, for example, was on what is eaten for typical meals, on typical days, for special events, or about food preferences and avoidances. Many times, when the informant would continue to speak even after the question was answered, I preferred not to interrupt but rather to listen to what he or she had to say, and in what way he connected his discourse or his memory to the question.

\textsuperscript{4} Shifting/Slash-and-burn plots.
In fact, some of the most useful insights emerged from casual conversations in an unstructured situation rather than from a pre-structured question.

Another tool which I used in ample measure was group discussions. In fact, as I was to realize later, my prodding (for a distinct answer) would not have been required, if I had put a question to a group. Most of the animated group discussions took place in the waltim, the bonfire, in the courtyard during winter months, around which men and women sit after their evening meal. In fact, some of the participants were so much taken up with the group discussions that in Gohalkona, almost all my evenings were taken up with such. Some of the past strategies adopted for hunting were chalked out (narrated) around the bonfire, since it was not a strategy used often. Again, it was also an opportunity to study the latent norms existent in Garo society, for example, who sat where around the bonfire, who sat with whom, who sat away from whom, what was the most common greeting etc.

In fact, observation was one of the tools I liberally used. I was also a participant observer of sorts. For instance, while collecting data on wild food, I accompanied Sikme and her friends; I accompanied and helped Tuelthyma in gathering tapioca and sorrel leaves from her slash-and-burn plot. Many of my interviews were also conducted in the kitchen while the woman of the house was preparing food.

I collected innumerable case studies, some in full narration, and others as jottings. These were cases pertaining to everyday situations as well as out-of-the ordinary situations. However, the everyday situations helped project the everyday life of
the Garos regarding food. In all, there were 76 cases I noted, some of which find space in this thesis, in the form of quotations and anecdotes.

As anticipated, I had a wide-ranging group of informants covering men and women, young and old. However, they were mostly adult women, who not only had a richer repertoire of knowledge related to food but actually engaged themselves more in activities related to food than their male counterparts. But since the present study also sought to explore the gender dimension of food among Garos interviews were also taken of males, who were invariably the nokgipa (head of household). Again, men were the ones who could give information regarding hunting, some aspects of slash-and-burn, wet paddy and cash crop cultivation.

Since the data collected are wide-ranging and the informants for specific data were not the same, the number of informants was many and varied from subject to subject. For instance, for data on fishing, I enquired from 5 men and 21 women in Gohalkona, and 15 women and 2 men in Bangladesh; for data on wild food collection, 3 men and 14 women in Gohalkona and 11 women in Bangladesh were interviewed; for data on shifting cultivation, 13 women and 6 men were interviewed; and for data on traditional classification of food, a total of 40 individuals, both men and women, were approached in both the villages.

One of my key informants in Gohalkona was Joboni Raja Marak (also referred to as Henoma), who was a mine of knowledge, helped by introducing me to many respondents and making the interviews easier. Many times, she corroborated or negated some of the responses given by other respondents. In Askipara, Molina Chisim was one
of my most helpful and smiling key informants. She would scold or cajole in Bangla and Habeng when answers were not forthcoming from informants especially from the men.

My guides were more than mere interpreters. Since I had a working knowledge of the language even with its dialectical variations, I understood and could follow every conversation. However my field guides helped me contextualise the answers whenever an informant would refer to some incident in the past, or to some individual in the village.

One of the mechanical devices I had with me and which in the first few days of field work I always carried with me was a tape recorder. However because informants tended to clam up and give standard answers I stopped using it. Again, almost always I kept my notebook hidden, and mentally jotted the points as the interview-cum-conversation flowed. Just like the tape recorder, every time I took out a pen or a notebook, the natural flow of the conversation halted. I had also with me a measuring tape and sketching materials which I used often to sketch some of the material cultural artefacts.

Since my analysis was not based on quantitative data, I did not use any statistical tools.

In theorizing and shaping the arguments of my thesis, I generously used secondary data in the form of available literature — books, papers, articles in magazines, INFLIBNET, the web consortium of university libraries in India etc.

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5 The dialect spoken in Askipara is Habeng, very similar to Ambeng dialect of Garo Hills, Meghalaya. However, Habeng is a pidgin of Ambeng and Bangla.
Testing Hypotheses: In qualitative research testing of hypotheses is rather difficult. In order to test my two hypotheses I designed a set of questions.

For hypothesis 1, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. Is the concept of “Garo” food opposed to “non-Garo” food? If the answer is yes, then
2. Are the markers of difference same or different?
3. Are there any festivals related to food?

The answers were sought to be corroborated by classifying food into core, secondary, periphery and marginal, studying the concept of “Garo” food vis-a-vis “non-Garo food”, the markers of difference between the two, and festivals related to food.

For hypothesis 2, the question posed was whether beef-eating by Garos in Assam or pork eating in Bangladesh is influenced by the social environment of the Garos. The answer would be substantiated by a list of food items consumed, list of comfort-inducing food items, and list of preferred food items.

If the answers to the above questions posed were in the affirmative the hypothesis would be taken as validated. If the answers were negative the hypothesis would be taken as disproved.
OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter includes statement of the problem, brief review of relevant literature, objectives of the study, methods used in data collection etc. The second chapter deals with a brief outline of Garos and the villages studied. The third chapter studies different food acquisition methods among Garos. Food is seen to be generally acquired through hunting, fishing, collection, shifting cultivation and permanent cultivation. Therefore different strategies involved are discussed. The role of the market is also described in the chapter.

Chapter IV deals with different food practices. It looks at how Garos traditionally classify food and the difference between “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” foods. It also looks into the question of prestige food. The processing, preparation and serving of food are described and analysed here. The last part of the chapter deals with regular and ceremonial meals: the former stresses on daily meal cycles, and the latter on festive foods.

Food, identity, and difference, the crux of the thesis, is discussed in the fifth chapter. Certain questions like how and in what manner food assumes an ethnic identity, the importance of Garo food, the reasons behind listing certain food items as comfort food etc. are answered here. The section on food and gender stresses on the subtle differences in food procuring activities and in male-female responses as to why they eat what they eat. How age and different life cycle stages also affect food cuisine is also examined. The final section in this chapter deals with gastro-politics and rules of commensality in Garo society in Assam and Bangladesh.
The sixth chapter discusses new food and food habits among Garos, change from subsistence to cash crops and reasons for entry and resistance to new foods. One vital question engaged in this chapter is whether the boundaries within Garos and ethnic boundaries with non-Garos have been re-drawn. The last chapter highlights the conclusions of the thesis.