CHAPTER IV

FOOD

Every society simple or complex, urban or rural, industrially advanced or backward, has food habits of its own. The availability of different food items depends to a large extent on the surrounding economy, people depend on what they produce from nature for their survival. In food producing economy, on the other hand people utilise the natural resources to produce foods of all kinds. The food habits of a community have a direct bearing on the health and physique of the individuals. These are of course liable to change due to external contact and introduction of new crops, supply of unfamiliar foods from other regions during famines and scarcity conditions.

The Pnars ordinarily takes two meals a day one in the early morning and the other in the evening, but labourers and other who have to work hard in the open take a mid-day meal as well, consisting of cold boiled rice wrapped in a leaf (Ka ja-song) some dry fish or some curry with it or just a small piece of meat.¹

¹. Interview with Henry Mannar age 35 Khahnar.
They are fond of all kinds of meat especially pork and beef, although some owing to Hindu influence abstain from eating beef. The Pnars do not eat the flesh of dogs. Some of the older Pnars do not take milk, butter or ghee as articles of food like the Mongolians. Before fowls or animals are killed for food, prayers must be said, and rice sprinkled on the body of the animal.

The staple food is rice and dried fish, when rice is scarce they satisfy their hunger with boiled potatoes, Phan Garo etc. The Pnars eat the flesh of all wild animals, even the field rats and black monkey (U Shrih). They are fond of tadpoles. They do not life ordinary frogs (jakoid) but hairy caterpillars are eaten\(^2\).

The food is adjusted according to the nature of work. The Pnar society as a whole consists of mainly of agriculturists. The nature of the work itself suggests that they must have a good amount of manual strength. Usually cooked rice prepared in the morning is packed in a vessel or wrapped inside a leaf and taken to the field. This packed food serve as their midday meal. At times however rice is prepared in the field. After a few hours of work in the fields they start for home. By the time they reach home they are ready for another meal. The last meal is taken early in the evening.

\(^2\) Ibid
But there are non-working days too. Since Pnars is a Christian community, Sunday is observed as a day of rest and worship. There are also some Christian festivals or holidays. Sometimes the people also take rest from their labour at will. On such days the midday meal, normally heavy is not necessary and families make up the loss by drinking tea and other light food.

A high altitude rice which is more nutritious and digestible than that obtained from the plains is taken with meat curry, prepared from pork, beef, chicken, fish either fresh or dried, vegetables and eggs.

Tea is taken with food prepared from either rice fried or powdered rice. Some of the utensils used are Larnai products made of Larnai clay (Larnai is one of the Pnar villages). They make cooking pots, dishes and articles for brewing and distillation. Side by side with these earthen utensils the people also use others made of brass bell metals or aluminium.

The Pnars have vessels for storing and fetching water of which there are two common shapes known as the male shaped vessels and the female shaped vessels, then

4. Narrated by the people of Puriang.
the vessel for cooking rice, the dishes and two types of big spoons – the ordinary shape for curry and the spoon for rice shaped like a spade. With the special taste which the people possess for decorating their houses, the arrangement of these golden coloured vessels on the kitchen shelves presents a very beautiful sight. There are also machine made articles. Thus while the above two types still stand to tell the tale of their past, the once proud position dominated by them is now shared by aluminium, enamel and ceramic goods.

A food which must not be forgotten is the inner portion of the bark of the sago palm tree, Ka tlaí, which grows wild in the forest and attains a large size. The tree is felled and the outer bark is removed, the soft inner part is cut into slices, dried in the sun, pounded in a mortar and then passed through a fine bamboo sieve. A reddish flour is obtained of sweet taste, which is boiled with rice. This flour is said to make good cakes and puddings.

Different kinds of cakes known as putharo, pujer, pu syep, pudoh, pumaloi etc. are prepared from rice which is ground powder.

5. Ibid.
For preparing putharo the rice-paste is first pressed into a mould (an earthen dish) and then baked. Pujer is made of finely powdered rice and taken on important occasions such as wedding and name giving ceremonies. For making syep the thoroughly pounded rice is wrapped in a piece of cloth and then boiled. Pumaloí is a sort of idli which is commonly taken by the south Indians. Pudoh is nothing but a well baked pork patty.

During the winter periods of the year, maize (Riewhaden) is an important alternative food. It is coarsely grounded and boiled in water before consuming.

A leafy vegetable (Tyrso) which grows from October to January is taken regularly during the season. They also eat vegetables (leafy) such as Ujarain, U jajew and also the banana flower (syar kait). They eat the inner part of the banana plant stem (U nud kait) and the soft portion of the bamboo shoot (U lungsiej). Another vegetable (piscot) is consumed in the absence of potatoes. A local variety of spinach meet the requirements of leafy vegetables to a large extent. Almost every family grows such vegetables in their homestead. All kinds of vegetables including leafy vegetables are prepared by boiling in water and these are mixed with meat for curry.

6. Ibid.
The Pnars do not eat those animals such as dog, tiger which have some legendary affiliation to them. They relish the flesh of green frogs (Ka Jakiah), caterpillars (U Niang Phlang), field rats and a kind of monkey (U shrih) etc. are eaten. Dried fish (Ktung) is a relishable dish along with rice. The dried fish is also simply roasted over fire and consumed. Different types of gourd locally known as Jatira, Jangew, Jathew etc. are eaten mixed with meat or alone.

The infants are fattened by giving banana mixed with hot water and starch from boiled rice.

The usual method of cooking in the interior villages is by boiling and the boiled food stuffs are taken with salt and chillies. Now they begin to use oil, fat, spices etc.

The practice of carrying food (boiled rice, dried fish, salt and chilly) is common when travelling over a long distance. The custom of taking tea with milk is not common. There is a belief that consumption of milk by them will lead to deprivation of the calf from mother's Milk.

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7. Ibid
8. Interview with Sr. Catherine Susngi, Nongbah.
The old were in the habit of drinking considerable quantities of rice beer which were of two kinds (1) Ka iad hiar (2) Ka iad um. Both of these are prepared from rice. Sometimes the beverages were made from millet, mixing with root of a plant called U Khaniang.  

The liquor is made by boiling rice or millet which is fermented by mixing with yeast. In tradition liquor is an indispensable item for any socio-religious performance.

In the past some herbs such as mint leaves were taken as a reliever of stomach trouble. People correctly think the present day ailments are due to spices, oil etc.

During pregnancy and after delivery no special restriction on food was imposed on the woman. On the other hand care was taken to provide her any kind of food she desired to take, because they believe that if the mother is deprived of such desired articles of food, then the baby would secrete more saliva from the mouth.

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10. Ibid
All the members of the family irrespective of sex and age eat sitting together near the cooking place. Meals are served in plates and eaten with washed hands.

A special dish known as Jadoh is served on some special occasions. It is prepared with rice and pig's blood or chicken's blood. Rice is washed and mixed with pig's blood. Then some quantity of mustard oil along with the fat from the pig is put in a frying pot. When the fat and oil are mixed together some quantity of garlic, onion, ginger and black pepper are put into the pot and fried. Then a measured quantity of water is added. As the liquid begins to simmer, the rice mixed with blood is poured into the vessel and boiled until cooked. For preparing with blood of chicken the same procedure is followed but some extra quantity of mustard oil is put in the vessel in lieu of pig's fat.  

Another delicious dish Dohkhleh is prepared from pig's brain. The brain of the pig is taken out, cleaned properly boiled in water and allowed to cool. It is then cut into small pieces. At the time of serving, the pieces are mixed with onions, ginger, chillies and salt according to taste.

11. Ibid
A condiment named Turumbai is prepared from the seeds of the bean. The beans are kept in water for four days. Then the water is removed and the beans are ground along with onion, ginger, pepper, coriander seeds and cinnamon until the whole thing forms into a paste.

There is another preparation known as Tupthap. The Pnars burn or fry a few dry fish. Grind them well with onions, ginger, chillies and salt. They say that they can eat a huge plate of rice with only tupthap.

The Pnars have made changes in their food habits because of their education, contact with people especially foreign missionaries\textsuperscript{12}.

In the past firewood was the only fuel for cooking. But now in many developed, rich and educated houses they use kerosene or even cooking gas. They have learned also to have a better and balanced diet. In every sphere, time and education place the people on the road to social progress.

\textsuperscript{12}: Opinion raised by Siang Pohthmi M.A. age 40
Lamin M.E. School.
DRINK

The Pnars are in the habit of regularly drinking considerable quantities either of a spirit, distilled from rice or millet or of rice-beer, which is of two kinds (1) Ka'iad hiar (2) Ka'iad um\textsuperscript{13}. Both of them are made from rice and in some places, from millet and the root of a plant called U Khawiang. Ka'iad hiar is made by boiling the rice or millet. It is then taken out and spread over a mat and when it cools, fragments of the yeast (khawiang) are sprinkled over it. After this it is placed in a basket, which is put in a wooden bowl. The basket is covered tightly with a cloth so as to be airtight and it is allowed to remain in this condition for a couple of days, during which time the liquor has oozed out into the wooden bowl.\textsuperscript{14} To make Ka'iad um the material, the rice or millet from which the Ka'iad hiar was brewed, is made use of. It is placed in a large earthen pot and allowed to remain there for about five days to ferment, after which the liquor is strained off. Ka'iad hiar\textsuperscript{15} is said to be stronger than Ka'iad um\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{13} Gurdon P.R.T. The Khasis 1975 p. 52
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid
\textsuperscript{15} Rice-spirit
\textsuperscript{16} Rice-beer
The former is used frequently by distillers of country spirit for mixing with the wort so as to set up fermentation. The people of the high plateaux generally prefer rice spirit and the wars of the southern slopes of the Jaintia Hills customarily partake of it also. The Khasis invariably drink rice-beer, but the Pnars prefer rice-spirit. Rice-beer is a necessary article for practically all Khasi and Pnar religious ceremonies of importance, it being the custom for the officiating priest to pour out libations of liquor from a hollow gourd (U klong) to the gods on these occasions.

According to some Khasi traditions the Khasis in ancient times used not to drink spirits, but confined themselves to rice-beer. It is only in the last couple of generations that the habit of drinking spirits has crept in. According to the accounts of the village people at Puriang and other places the use of spirits is on the increase. There can be no doubt however, that at the present time a very large amount of spirit is manufactured and consumed in the district. The spirit is distilled both for home consumption and for sale in some villages like Kuth, Puriang, Mawmang and many others. There are several distilling centres at Jowai from where spirit is carried for sale to various parts of the state.

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17. Interview with Bah Pyrthul M.A, age 40.
18. Ibid.
I am not in a position to state with any degree of accuracy what is the amount of spirit manufactured or consumed in a year, but it is very considerable. There are over 1530 stills in the district. Therefore it may be roughly calculated what is the consumption annually. Practically the whole of the spirit is consumed within the district. The liquor which is manufactured is far stronger than the spirit in the plains. Experts say that the Pnar spirit contains 60 to 80 per cent proof spirit.\textsuperscript{19} The usual price is also cheap. It varies from five to seven rupees. A Pnar in the villages of the interior can get drunk just for three rupees. He works hard during the day and in the evening he has a nice drink to cheer up his mind and to gather up energy for the next day.

Drunkenness prevails on every market day at Jowai and other large hats. Also on occasions when there are gatherings of the people for various purposes. This cheap but strong spirit is demoralizing the people, and some restrictions of its use would be welcomed by many. Some religious leaders like Rev Silvanus Sngi are doing their utmost to control this bad habit. In certain churches abstention from liquor is made a condition for membership\textsuperscript{20}.

\textsuperscript{19} Gurdon P.R.T. The Khasis 1975ed, p. 54
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
But liquor is a source of constant temptation. If all make an united effort I feel this great evil can be overcome gradually.

The government of Meghalaya has taken the following measures to regulate the sale and consumtion of liquor in the state.

1. All advertisements promoting the sale of liquor is banned by the Meghalaya Intoxicating liquor (prohibition of publication of Advertisement) Act 1976.
2. The Meghalay Government servants conduct Rules 1975 have been amended to debar Government servants from drinking liquor while on duty.
3. Consumption of liquor in Hotels, Bar and clubs is restricted to separate room. No drinking is permitted in the public lounge.
4. Use of rice for distilling liquor is banned by the Meghalaya Rice (prohibition of use of rice for distillation of liquor) order 1974.
5. Sale of liquor to professional drivers and children under 18 years is banned.
6. Liquor Bars near the educational and religious institutions have been closed and opening of the same near these institutions is banned.
The Government of Meghalaya has placed advertisements all over the town stating that consumption of liquor is injurious to health and detrimental to family well-being and happiness.