Vivid and elaborate descriptions regarding different dishes of Assamese food in the Medieval period are found in the contemporary literary works and in the most popular aphoristic sayings, called 'Dākar Bachan'. The works such as 'Kumar-Haran', 'Kālika Puran' and 'Yogini Tantra' provide us with ample informations in this respect. As said above, the Assamese people generally takes food, four times a day. The food taken in the morning and at sunset are of the nature of refreshments and at noon and evening are the principal meals of the day. Fasting or food restrictions are observed during a period of penance, on or before the śrāddha ceremony of forefathers or of the religious preceptors and on other days, having any religious significance, such as the Amāvasyā, Purnimā, Ekādāsi, Āstami and Samkrānti. Dr. Choudhury points out that the non-Aryan tribes also observe food restrictions in most of these days. Dietary practice in Assam, from the earliest times, was more liberal unlike other parts of India. We find that during the period of Vaisnavite reform in the Medieval period, excepting certain taboos no rigid restriction was imposed on food. As to the factors which determine the dietary practice of a country, it is believed that the climatic condition and the nature of the inhabitants are the dominating factors. The predominance of the non-Aryan inhabitants and their inclusion in the Hindu-fold, may rightly be inferred as one of the strongest factors, for which, not only the caste system but also the dietary system had to be made more liberal in Assam. Wide prevalence of Tantrikism, both Śaiva and Śākta, probably contributed towards liberalisation in respect of food and drink. Such sects are still in existence with their practices in Assam.
the 'Yogini Tantra' is said that one should not give up non-vegetarian meal and the observance of celibacy (Brahmacharyya) is also not required in Kamarupa. The women-folk are addicted to betel-nut chewing. In Kamarupa, ducks, pigeons, tortoise and pigs are eatable; one who gives up these items of food, he is sure to suffer from many distresses. The same is said in one of the 'Darrang Rajvamsavalis'. In Assam, the Brahmins generally take fish and meat. Of course, there are restrictions to meat of certain kinds of animals and fishes. The Brahmin widows take vegetarian meals only with restriction to certain kinds of vegetables and during the period of their menstruation and on the occasion of 'Ambubachi' in the month of Asadh, when the earth is supposed to be unclean, they do not take food. Many of the people belonging to non-Aryan tribes, who had entered into the Hindu-fold already, observe restrictions in taking meat of animals and wine which are prohibited to the Hindus.

As regards serving of uncooked food amongst the Brahmans, Kayasthas, Kalitas, Keots and Koches, there is no restriction; any one of the above mentioned communities can serve it in the gathering of these people. But as regards cooked food, strict restrictions were observed in those days. Not to speak of food cooked and distributed by a man of other clan and community, even food served by a person of the same caste is sometimes refused. In a village, generally, men of good conduct and refined manners and initiated and approved by the religious head are selected for the purpose of cooking food in the social feasts and for distributing it to the people of the same community in the larger gatherings. These men are called 'Randhani' and 'Deuri-bilania' in Assamese. No body is allowed to
serve food during the state of uncleanness, such as at the death and birth of a person in the family. Persons who commit sin or offense in society are not allowed to distribute food and other victual. Food cooked and distributed by the religious heads and Brāhmaṇas are taken by their 'Sisyas' (disciples) and 'Yajamānas' (employees) respectively. In the families, the father and the mother do not take cooked food served by their unmarried matured daughters and daughters-in-law; in case of the latter, she is allowed to take charge of cooking after being initiated by their religious preceptor. Before entrusting her with the charge of cooking, she is given training to be refined and pure, both mentally and physically.

Among all sections of people, including Brāhmaṇas, unlike other parts of India, rice (or 'chāul', as it is called in Assamese) is the staple food in Assam. For the cooking purpose two varieties of 'chāuls' (rice), viz., 'Ukhuwa-chāul' (rice made from paddy boiled and dried in the sun before husking) and 'Arai-chāul' (rice made from paddy simply dried before husking), are used in Assam. The 'Ukhuwa-chāul' is preferred by the people who are engaged in hard physical labour and the 'Arai' variety is preferred by the Brāhmaṇas, Mahantas and those engaged in clerical works who are not much accustomed to physical labour. Besides, 'Arai-chāul' is considered pure and is selected for religious functions. The paddies can be classed into three varieties, viz., 'Sāli', the 'Lāhi' and the 'Āhu'. The 'Āhu' rice is considered impure to offer in religious functions as it is produced in an untimely season. Besides, this variety of rice is considered to be of inferior quality. The 'Sāli' variety serves best for making 'Ukhuwa-chāul' and the 'Lāhi' variety best serves for making 'Arai-chāul' as it is fine and smooth. The 'Jahā' paddy included in the 'Lāhi' variety, produces the finest rice with the sweet smell of it.
With their main meals at noon and in the evening the Assamese people used to take various curries, such as acrid, acid, slightly seasoned with alkali or curry prepared with fish or meat or green leaves and other vegetables fried in mustard oil. They also used to take vegetables and fish burnt in fire. Fish and meat are sometimes taken by roasting on a spit. Fish, vegetables, stalks, fruits, yaws etc. are regularly taken by frying in mustard oil. Curry prepared with different kinds of pulses, such as 'Mati' (Phaseolus radiatus), 'Magu' (Phaseolus mungo), 'Machur' and 'Kalai' were also taken in those days. The small variety of fishes and green leaves are taken by roasting in fire, wrapping them in a plantain leaf. Some of the tribes used to dry fish in the sun and preserve it to be taken in future when fish would be scarce. Acid curries and curries slightly seasoned with the alkali or 'Khār', as it is called in Assamese, are the favourite things of the Assamese people. The Hindus, including many of the Hinduised non-Aryans, as stated above, do not take all kinds of fish and animal meat. Fish, such as 'Sal', 'Singi', 'Garu', 'Mirikā' etc. and meat of animals and birds, such as cocks, pigs etc. are tabooed. The meat of ducks, pigeons, goats, castrated goats, tortoises, deers etc. are universally taken. The meat of the castrated goats is preferred as being the most palatable and that of the pigeon considered as good for health. According to Shihabuddin, "Cocks, waterfowl, geese, goats, castrated goats and game cocks are large, plentiful and delicious". Fried or boiled eggs of ducks or other birds are also taken along with the main meals. Taking of bitter vegetables and curries seasoned with 'Khār' (alkali), at least once in a fortnight, is considered good for health. What kind of dish is conducive to health has been described in the pithy sayings, called 'Dākar Bachan'. 
To increase the taste of their meals, the people used to take various sorts of condiments or sauce and pickles. The picked fruits and vegetables are usually called 'Echar'. Another favourite condiment or sauce used by the Assamese people is prepared from the tender shoots of bamboos, called 'Kharicha'. The tender shoots of the bamboos are cut into small pieces and if possible are pounded in a paddle for husking rice. Then they are kept in an earthen pot for few days until it becomes acid, when it is fit for use. This sauce, called 'Kharicha' is preserved for future use by drying in the sun. The former is called 'Paka-kharicha' and the latter is called 'Sukan-kharicha'. The tribal kings used to send 'Kharicha', among other presents, to the Ahom kings. Condiments or sauce are made from lime mango, chilly, Amara and many other acid and acrid fruits. Another very favourite condiment of the Assamese people is made from pounded mustard seeds mixed with salt and alkaline solution called 'Kahudi-kharali'. The boiled and burnt fruits and fish are sometimes squeezed into a lump and then mixed with salt, chilly and onion and taken with the main meals.

For the cooking of different varieties of curries and fry vegetables, fish etc. mustard oil, ghee and spices were used in those days. Mustard seeds were extensively cultivated in the country and oil was extracted from it by an indigenous method. About the cultivation of different spices in the state, we will further discuss below. The Assamese people used 'Jirā', 'Dhaniā', 'Adā', 'Jalakia', 'Tezpat', 'Piaj', 'Naharu', 'Mithi', 'Jani', 'Kaljira', 'Jālik' etc. as pices and their mention is found in the 'Yogini Tantra' and other literary works of the period. Salt was dear and precious. Gunabhiram says that extremely poor people could not have arranged it for
their daily use and they had to remain satisfied with the use of alkaline solution called 'Kharani' instead of salt.

The cooked rice is taken in three different ways, viz., 'Tapat-bhāt', that is the cooked rice fresh and in warm state, 'Karkarū-bhāt', cooked rice kept dry for future use and the 'Paitā-bhāt', cooked rice soaked in water and kept for future use. The last mentioned one is prepared in the summer season only which is taken with sauce, such as 'Kharali', burnt vegetables and fish mixed with salt and mustard oil and sily, instead of taking curry with it. The Assamese women of the period were expert in cuisine; the aphorisms called 'Bākar Bachan' and other literary works bear testimony to it. Ananta Kandali in his 'Kumar harana' gives a beautiful description of different dishes cooked by Chitralekha. The description runs thus: "After performing the works of the marriage ceremony, Chitralekha made arrangements for food. Whatever Chitralekha cooked, cooked with particular care and dexterity. She cooked about fifty varieties of curry with the admixture of various sweet things. She prepared 'Paramanna' and various cakes. She prepared a curry with 'Magu-māh' (Phaseolus mungo) and 'Machur' (lentil) mixed together, where she gave salt, sugar, molasses and ghee and spices, such as 'Āda', 'Jani', 'Jirā' and 'Marich'. Then she fried the meat of castrated goat giving spices. Another curry known as 'Talā' was cooked with the meat of the pigeon. She prepared another variety of curry with the meat of the tortoise giving there a variety of pulse called 'Barkalā'. Then she seasoned with asafoetida the curry prepared with the meat of the deer. A very delicious curry was prepared with the root of the plantain tree and the meat of the boar...... A variety of dish known as 'Ghanti' with the head of the fish called 'Barāli' was prepared and then with the
other portion of the fish she prepared a curry giving the pulse called 'Machur' (lentil). She cooked other varieties of curries, such as, with the fish, called 'Kach', vegetable called 'Baeh' and mustard seed, another with the fish called 'Sol' and the vegetable called, 'Nula' (radish), another with the meat of the bird 'Darik' and 'Bringel' and another with the fish called, 'Ari' and the green leaves called 'Fālanga'. The fishes called 'Ilih' and 'Kandhuli' were roasted on a spit. A curry was cooked with the green vegetable called 'Laphā' by giving a kind of lime called 'Jāmir' and a kind of citron called 'Soleng'. She prepared a soup of honey seasoned with ghee, which is (pleasing for its) highly fragrant smell, not to speak of taking. She prepared soups by mixing sugar in the juice of the 'Badari' (jujube) fruits and by mixing molasses with ripe tamarind fruits. Thus the cooker made ready about fifty varieties of curries.5

Besides their main meals at noon and in the evening, they make different kinds of cakes and confectioneries for refreshment in the morning and at sunset. The most commonly used food as refreshment or 'Jalāṅ' as it is called in Assam, are the soft rice and rice flour respectively known as 'Komal-chāul' and 'Pithāguri'. The 'Komal-chāul' is a kind of rice husked out from some definite varieties of paddy after being boiled and dried in the sun. It is generally taken with curd and molasses or with ripe banana after it is soaked in water to get soft. The 'Pithāguri' is made by pounding the soaked rice into flour; the flour is fried on a can or backed by placing upon fire on a bamboo platter; then it becomes ready for use. The 'Pithāguri' is taken with molasses and milk or banana or simply mixed with salt and mustard oil kneaded with water. From the 'Pithāguri', different varieties of cakes and other items of food are prepared, such as 'Pora-pithā',
'Ghila-pitha', 'Chunga-pitha', 'Kholachaparia-pitha', 'Sijla-pitha' etc.

In the public gatherings, in connection with ceremonial functions, in upper Assam, people are usually served with 'Komal-chaul' with curd and molasses but in lower Assam, as can be guessed from the records, there is no restriction in serving 'Chira' (pounded and parched rice) and 'Akhai' (parched paddy husk being removed) together with curd and molasses. In upper Assam, this last mentioned variety of tiffin is generally not served in the public gatherings, but can be served individually to the relatives and family members. The other varieties of food and tiffin are 'Sanda' (coarse pulverised parched rice), 'Muri' (rice inflated by parching), 'Akha-ilaru' (doughs of confection prepared from parched rice), 'Muri-Jaru' (doughs of confection prepared from parched inflated rice). In summer season the Assamese people used to take a variety of food as tiffin by cooking the rice-flour in water which is called 'Luthuri-pitha'. This 'Luthuri-pitha' is served with milk and molasses. This variety of food is usually given to the infants. The infants, while in the stage of sucking, are fed a kind of large banana, called 'Bhimkal', removing the seeds and then mixing it with milk and molasses. The doughs and the cakes are the most favourite tiffin of the children. Use of different kinds of sweets prepared from milk and other stuffs are also proved by our sources and other records. 'Paramanna' or 'Fayasa', a preparation of fine 'Arai-chaul', preferably of the 'Jaha' variety having sweet smell, boiled in milk with sugar, is a delicious food which is sometimes offered to the Gods in the religious functions. In those days, food-stuffs were perhaps largely produced in the state and people also could have consumed more amount of food-stuffs than to-day. In the 'Katha-Guru-Charit', describing about meals and other tiffins taken by an
officer, it is said, "An officer doing his morning prayer after bath
takes 'Chiri' with boiled milk and sugar and then attends his court. At
noon after taking his mid-day meal with different dishes, rests for a while.
Then attending his official business, takes 'Komal-chau' with curd, banana
and sugar. In the evening he takes his supper with various dishes and then
consulting his subordinates goes to sleep after taking banana and different
kinds of sweets and confectioneries, such as 'batcha', 'pheni', 'muchi',
'jelapi' etc. " 7 The Assamese people are very fond of taking fruits;
after their little rest at mid-day, they generally take fruits. Different
fruits are produced in different seasons. In the religious functions they
offer pulses with 'Arai-chau' and fruits to God. 'Mithai', that is, balls
of confection are also offered to God. According to Dr. B.K. Barua, the advent
of the Mohammedans introduced new dishes of food, such as 'Polao', 'Korma',
'Khichuri' etc. among the Assamese people. 8

After taking meal or tiffin, the people are habituated of chewing
betel-nuts with betel-leaves and lime. Some people, in addition to lime,
add tobacco also with it. As regards the practice of chewing betel-nuts, the
influence of non-Aryans upon the Aryans is recognised by many scholars.
Among the non-Aryans, the Khasis, who have a special liking for it and
whose process of chewing of betel-nuts is quite similar to that of the
Assamese people, is believed to have been exerting their influence upon the
Assamese people more in this respect. However, the practice of chewing
betel-nuts has been in practice in Assam from the early times. The abundance
of areca-nut and betel vine in Assam is proved both by epigraphy and
literature. The use of these articles, particularly by women, is proved by
'Yogini Tantra'. In fact, the practice of chewing betel nuts with a thin
coating of its shell and with betel-leaf and lime is found nowhere in India except in Assam. The 'Fathiyah-i-Ibriyah' states that the Assamese chew 'pān' in abundance with unripe 'supāri' even unshelled. The practice is even now common among the Assamese people and it has great bearing upon their social and national life. In those days, every Assamese man, when he was out of his house, had carried betel-nuts, betel-leaves, lime, tobacco etc in a piece of cloth called 'Hāchāti'.

Another common practice seen among the people is the tobacco smoking. Reference of tobacco smoking and cultivation of tobacco in Assam are available in our sources. People were so habituated with tobacco smoking that the soldiers in their camps in the battle field, were supplied with tobacco. The use of wine is also noticed; but it was not commonly used. Brahmāṇa, Kayastha, Kalita, Koch, Keot were not generally accustomed to drinking. It was commonly used by the tribes. Among some of the religious sects also, the use of wine was prevalent. 'Yogini Tantra' emphasises on worshipping the Goddess Kāmeswari with meat, wine and blood (sacrifice of animal). Hem Chandra Barua, the author of the pioneer Assamese lexicography 'Hemkos' bitterly attacks the leftist sect of 'Tantrikism' for their addiction to wine, in his satirical novelette, called 'Bāhire rang-chang Bhitare Kowā-bhāturi'. Among the Ahoms, wine was unavoidable in all their social and religious ceremonies and functions; but the Hinduised Ahoms gradually became more indifferent to the use of it. All those tribes who were accustomed to drinking, had their own indigenous process of making it out of rice and other herbs. This liquor is popularly called 'Lāo-pāni' or 'mad' (madya). There are some writers who want to say that the process of preparing distilled wine was not known in Assam.
two varieties of it, one is called 'mad' or 'lāo-pani' and the other is called 'phatika'. The 'mad' is a coarse variety and the distilled one is called 'phatika'.

W. Robinson says that "In Assam as in every part of India, chewing and smoking various vegetable substances, some of them highly intoxicated is a favourite luxury and here the people are more than usually addicted to such practices. Under this head opium is by far the most important article." The other notorious practice was the smoking of hemp. The tragedy lies in the fact that till recently, people used to consider it a pious deed if they could succeed in sumptuously feeding an opium eater or a hemp smoker. The practice of smoking or eating opium and its cultivation had been introduced in Assam at the initiative of the British people, in the last part of the Ahom rule, during the reign of king Gaurinath Singha.

There were different process of taking opium; by dissolving it in water or by inhaling the smoke of it or setting it on a smoking apparatus specially made for it. The poppy plant was called 'Āfling' or 'Āfu' and the opium was popularly called 'Kāni'. But the smoking of hemp or ganza or 'Bhāng' as popularly known, was in practice in Assam from the remote past. Besides inhaling its smoke, a special drink, called 'Ghōṭā', is prepared by mixing the powdered hemp, sugar, powdered Lavanga, Dārucini, Elāchi and Dhuturāguti (seeds of Dhutura) and then boiling them together in milk. On the occasion of the worship of God Siva on the Siva-chaturdasi-day, this drink 'Ghōṭā' and the ball of confection mixed with powdered hemp are offered and people also take them with great veneration. Another intoxicated drug made from the hemp is called 'Modaka' which is prepared from powdered...
hemp and other ingredients boiled in sugar. One can reasonably assume the influence of Saivism in the large scale popularity of hemp-smoking in Assam. It is needless to mention here that once Saivism had spread very widely both among the Aryan and non-Aryan inhabitants of the State.

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