CHAPTER TWO
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FOOD IN ASSAMESE CULTURE

Street food is an emerging commodity in contemporary Assam. In the earlier decades, towns in Assam, including the largest one Guwahati, were peopled mainly by the Assamese speaking Hindus and Muslims whose food habits were no different from the rural folk. Home was not merely the place for cooking food but was also the venue for eating. In the rural areas, it was only occasionally that an Assamese villager would partake tea and snacks when he visited the weekly markets or the towns in connection with work in courts and offices. However, progressive urbanization and growth of industries since about the 1950s have led to the transformation of small towns with essentially homogenous population, through migration from other parts of the country, which in turn has aided the emergence of ready-to-eat street food sector.

It would be appropriate to discuss in some detail the traditional Assamese food and food habits in order to understand how street food represents a new development in the context of the overall culture of food and eating habits in Assam.
GENERAL OUTLINE OF ASSAMESE FOOD

The Assamese speaking people are mainly concentrated in the Brahmaputra valley. Their mainstay is agriculture. As rice is the staple food, paddy cultivation occupies the paramount place. There are mainly two varieties of paddy cultivated, namely, the *ahu* (summer paddy) and the *sali* (winter paddy). Among these two varieties, cultivation of *sali* paddy gets more importance. It is because the Assamese community prefer to eat rice prepared from *sali* paddy. *Ahu* is a coarse variety of paddy whereas *sali* is soft and most of the traditional light meals and snacks are prepared from the *sali* rice.

Traditionally, Assamese food is divided into three principal categories, namely - *sattik* (conducive to goodness), *rajasik* (conducive to passion) and *tamasik* (conducive to darkness and sloth). However, *tamasik* food is not common to the general people and is eaten only by the *Tantric* (Cantlie 1984:185). The *Tantrics* are believed to eat raw flesh and raw blood of animals sacrificed to propitiate the demons and deities. The *rajasik* food is common to the Assamese people which broadly means the eating of a non-vegetarian diet. The Assamese, irrespective of caste and creed, usually take their meal along with meat, fish, egg, etc. It is the pristine rule in the Assamese society that a guest should be entertained with rice and fish, meat or egg. The *sattik* food restricts the eating of fish, meat and egg. It is also tabooed to eat certain pulses (*masur* and *mati*), onion, garlic, etc., for

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1The Brahmaputra valley is an alluvial plain, 725 kms. long and about 80 kms. broad on the average and consists of an area of 56,339 sq. kms.

2Tantricism is a form of Hinduism which evolved around the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati. It is associated with magic and witchcraft, animal sacrifices and occult practices.
a person who is allowed to eat only the sattik food. This is because according to the Assamese tradition these food are also included in the list of rajasik food. Generally, the higher caste widows and some bhakats (devotees) take this type of food in their day-to-day life.

**Meals**

The Assamese meals are mainly rice based. An average Assamese person eats two meals a day, once at noon and the other at night. However, the wage earners and the agriculturists take rice three times a day: in the morning, at late noon and at night. The children take rice at any time when they feel hungry, particularly in the rural areas.

*Bhat* (boiled rice) is cooked in the pakghar or randhani ghar (kitchen). In every kitchen, especially in the rural areas, there are two hearths. The one on the left is used for cooking rice while the one on the right, which is comparatively smaller, is used to cook vegetables and curry. Boiled rice is cooked twice daily, once at noon and then at night. It is invariably eaten along with one or two cooked items which form the daily meals of an Assamese. One item is prepared from pulse such as mung, masur, arhar, boot or mati and the other is prepared from vegetables. Tea, snacks and light meals, termed as jalpan, are prepared in the juhal (tea room) and are taken in the early morning and again in the afternoon. It is never prepared in the kitchen so as to avoid contact with the cooking vessels used for boiling rice. It is because cooking and eating of rice are surrounded by ritual prohibition.

Though the Assamese people are basically cultivators, collecting forms another source of food supply for the rural Assamese. In addition,
seasonal vegetables are grown in the kitchen garden which is a typical part of an Assamese household compound. It is said that in the olden days, before the eating of pulses became popular, Assamese people ate only vegetables and leafy vegetables with boiled rice. Today, it is usual to eat pulses along with another item prepared out of vegetables, which are either fried or made into a curry to which fish may be added.

Fish is relished by almost all the Assamese people. It is eaten in different forms by baking, boiling, drying, frying, smoking and as an ingredient in different types of *anja* (curry) like *tenga* (sour), *jola* (pungent), *khar* (alkaline), etc. It is to be noted that spicy and oily food are not generally preferred by the Assamese people. Fishing is a common activity in rural Assam. During the *sali* cultivation (water is essential for *sali* paddy), the cultivator generally catches fish from the agricultural field. In the environment of Assam, different kinds of small fishes are found wherever water accumulates for a certain period. Fish is collected for household consumption with the help of different fishing implements. Fish is also caught in the neighbouring pools, ponds, rivers, etc. During the beginning of winter season, it is a common sight in all the villages of Assam to fish individually or in groups with different fishing implements. Significantly, though the Brahmans and higher caste people of India are debarred from eating fish and meat, it is not a taboo for the higher caste people of Assam including the Brahmans. For the purpose of household consumption, fishing is not restricted to any caste and community in Assam. But fish selling is restricted according to the caste rule and allowed to only a few castes, like the Kaibartas, whose traditional occupation is fish catching and fish selling. While fish is the most favourite food of the Assamese, it is
never considered a snack to be eaten apart from the regular meals. Moreover, raw fish can be carried from place to place, but it can never be transported in a cooked form outside the house and is eaten only within the confines of the household. This is because it may cause ritual pollution or chuwa. Thus it is not visible even as a snack in the traditional hat (weekly bazaar).

Besides fish, meat is also eaten by the Assamese people. It is not, however, eaten as frequently and widely as fish. Pigeon, duck, and goat meat are the types of meat commonly consumed. It is to be noted that in the traditional Hindu society eating of fowl is a taboo. However, nowadays, Assamese Hindus widely partake the meat of fowl in the urban areas.

The foregoing discussion provides a general picture of the Assamese meals of day-to-day life only. During festive occasions, the list of food taken with rice is more varied and elaborate. Generally, the festive food is a non-vegetarian one, except during a few rituals where such food is taboo.

**Snacks and light meals**

In addition to the meals, eating of light meals and snacks are also common in Assamese society. The equivalent term for a light meal in Assamese language is jalpan. Tea, which is a part of Assamese culture, is generally taken with home made snacks, light meals or biscuits obtained from market. Some of the popular light meals are described below.

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1In Assamese Hindu culture, cooking implies subjecting a food to heating process which makes it restrictive. Soaking of food in water also makes certain food pervious to chuwa (ritual contamination). The degree of chuwa depends upon several factors - for instance the presence or absence of the outer cover of grains, fruits or vegetables. If boiled or soaked with the protective covering, the chuwa is less. Secondly, addition of oil and salt to the boiled food makes it more chuwa. However, sweet things (sugar, honey and
(a) **Cira** (flat rice) : It is prepared from *bara, joha, malbhog* and a few other varieties of fine paddy. The paddy is soaked for three to four hours, then strained and roasted in a dry pan. While it is still warm, the paddy is pounded to flatten it and the husk removed. *Cira* is a cooked *jalpan* and hence *chuwa*.

(b) **Akhoi** (parched rice) : Parched rice is prepared from a few varieties of fine paddy like *bara, malbhog, joha*, etc. The paddy is cooked in a pan filled with sand over a very hot fire till the grains burst and swell out like flowers. It is then sieved to separate the grains. This type of food is considered as uncooked and thus can be eaten by all.

(c) **Komal chaul** (softened rice) : It is prepared from fine varieties of paddy by boiling it over a very hot fire and then dried under the sun. After it is dried, it is pounded and the husk removed by winnowing. This parboiled rice is soaked in cold water till soft and then strained and eaten with milk or *doi* (curd) and *gur* (jaggery). Softened rice is an uncooked food and hence not *chuwa*.

(d) **Kecha pithaguri** (uncooked rice flour) : It is prepared from a fine variety of rice which is soaked in cold water for a few hours. After straining, it is pounded to a fine powder. It is eaten with warm milk and jaggery along with banana. It is also used as a base for different kinds of *pitha* (rice cake).

jaggery) and food prepared from milk and milk products are free from ritual pollution. For details about ritual contamination in Assamese food, see Cantlie 1984.
Kecha pithaguri is an uncooked food. However, when roasted it can be preserved for a longer period and is considered as a cooked food.

(e) Chunga chaul (rice cooked in the cylindrical section of green bamboo): Bara rice or a fine variety of rice is stuffed in a section of green bamboo. Then sufficient water is added to it and the mouth of the cylinder is closed with banana leaf. It is then ready to be cooked over burning embers.

There are a number of snack items prepared by the Assamese. These are both sweet and salted, some of which are described below.

(a) Ghila pitha (circular rice cake): It is prepared from bara or any other variety of rice. The uncooked rice powder is kneaded with water, jaggery or salt and made into small balls which are flattened and fried in ghee or oil. It is classed as cooked snack.

(b) Til pitha (rice cake with sesame): Uncooked rice flour is spread evenly on a hot griddle. After the sides are slightly raised, a stuffing of sesame and jaggery is placed in the middle and the rice cake is rolled. This rice cake can be made with coconut stuffing also. It is a cooked snack.

(c) Tekeli mukhat diya pitha (steamed rice cake): This cake is prepared from a fine variety of rice which is powdered and mixed with a little water and jaggery. It is then shaped into balls, flattened and is steamed over a tekeli (clay pot) of boiling water till cooked. A cake similar to this, called the bhapa pitha, is made by the immigrant Muslim community and
commonly eaten by the Bihari and Muslim rickshaw and *thela* (pushcart) pullers in Guwahati.

(d) *Chunga pitha* (cake prepared in the cylindrical section of green bamboo): This cake is prepared from the same mixture as above but cooked in a section of green bamboo over burning embers. This cake can be carried from one place to another and eaten by splitting the bamboo.

(e) *Boot pitha* (a sweet of Bengal gram): *Boot pitha* is made by parching Bengal gram and mixing it with jaggery. At first, jaggery is heated and after it melts and cools, the parched grams are added and shaped into small rounded pieces.

(f) *Narikal laru* (coconut balls): The coconut is grated with the help of a *rukani* (grater) and mixed with sugar. It is then fried on a dry pan till cooked. When still warm, it is made into small balls. Coconut balls are uncooked snack because sugar is an exception to the rule of chuwa.

All the above mentioned light meals and snacks take a considerable time to prepare. But once prepared it can be stored over a period of time and most of them can be carried from place to place and even eaten outside of home. All these qualities make these light meals and snacks potential street food. Sweet cakes like *tekeli mukhat diya pitha* and *boot pitha* have already entered the market particularly in the rural weekly markets.

During the two *Bihus*, Assamese food could be seen at its best. *Bohag Bihu* which ushers in the new year (mid-April), is the beginning of the
Hindu calendar year, while *Magh Bihu* (mid-January) indicates the completion of agricultural cycle and gathering of harvest. *Bohag Bihu*, the springtime *Bihu*, is also known as the *Rongali Bihu* or the festival of cheers, while *Magh Bihu* is called the *Bhogali Bihu* or the festival that one enjoys with sumptuous food. During these occasions friends and relatives are visited and entertained with a wide variety of food and snacks.

Besides the day-to-day and festive food of the Assamese, there is a ritual offering termed as *prasad* consisting of two varieties of pulses - *boot* and *mogu mah*, banana, coconut, betel nut and leaves, rice, *poka mithoi* (sweet ball prepared with uncooked rice flour and jaggery) and *payas* (rice cooked in sweetened milk).

**RITUAL RULES OF COOKING AND EATING**

In the Assamese Hindu social context, cooking and eating of cooked food involves rules of ritual purity and pollution. Cantlie (1984:205) has given two factors which govern the rules connected with the acceptance of food. First, the position of a man's caste in the hierarchy, and secondly, his degree of initiation within the Vaishnava sect. Normally, food prepared by an equal or someone superior in the caste hierarchy can make the food edible. Otherwise, it is treated as *chuwa*, made due to the touch of a low caste Hindu or a Muslim. Similarly, a whole raw fruit is not *chuwa* but once it is cut into sections it is open to ritual contamination. This makes it

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*The Vaishnava movement in Assam, spread by the saint-poet Sankardeva (1449-1569 AD), shaped the religio-cultural and social life of the Assamese. Vaishnavism which he preached was a progressive and reformist movement against the excess of Hindu ritualism. Vaishnavism owes allegiance to Lord Krishna who is considered the Supreme being.*
difficult for a higher caste Assamese or those initiated into the Vaishnava sect to partake of these food.

Under these circumstances, cooking and eating from out-of-home sources pose difficulties. People who have to travel long distance from rural areas for work in courts and offices in the towns and cities find these restrictions difficult to follow. In the olden days, when bullock carts were used for long distance travel, people used to carry such food which can be eaten over a period of time and which is also not ritually polluting. Komal chaul, hurum (a kind of puffed rice), banana, curd, Bengal gram, etc., formed the main food items.

The practice of eating cooked food on the streets was never a part of Assamese culture. However, vending of cooked food by the poharis (women vendors) had taken place in the weekly markets. These vendors were usually the lower caste women who used to sell uncooked fish, clothing items, implements of handloom, etc., and along with these items, also used to sell boot pitha. Another snack, the tekeli mukhat diya pitha was sold in some rural markets of Assam. Today, none of these are found to be sold by Assamese vendors in the street food market of Guwahati.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that Assamese food encompasses a rich variety many of which have portability and durability. But despite having a wide range of food, the culture of street food could never emerge in the traditional rural society. Food in the Assamese ethos was something generally eaten in the context of one's home or in the house of a person with equal or higher caste status. The concept of eating out, in the road or from roadside eateries, could not develop because mobility of Assamese people was mostly limited to short distance visits to relatives,
friends or nearby market places. So, the scope of eating food outside home rarely arose. In case of long distance travel, only such food were carried which were ritually pure and could not acquire impurity even during travel.