Article: Food Culture and Identity in Northeast India: Prospects for Social Science Research

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**Abstract**

The paper is an analysis of the research being done on food culture and dietary practices in Northeast India. It identifies the research gap, points out the lack of scholarship on food as a politico-cultural item and also points out the scope for future research on food culture and identity in Northeast India. This paper is divided into three sections: Firstly, it explores the existing studies on dietary practices in Northeast India in order to identify the research gap; Secondly, it highlights the close linkages between the dietary ideals of Northeasterners and the region from which they come; and Thirdly, it studies the centrality of dietary practices of the Northeasterners in defining their basic rights of living to the larger issues of citizenship.

*Key words: Citizenship, Discrimination, Emotion, Food culture, Northeast India*

**Introduction**

The utility of food goes beyond mere sustenance. It is in itself a marker of identity in lieu of the close linkage between consumption patterns and culture. This holds true in the context of a regionally and culturally diverse society like the Indian society. Though, food is ‘the symbolic medium par excellence’, there are diverse cultural meanings and discourses on food practices and preferences in all human societies (Lupton, 2007, p. 317). ‘Food consumption habits are not simply tied to biological needs but serve to mark boundaries between social classes, geographic regions, nations, cultures, genders, life-cycle stages, religions and occupations, to distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, seasons and times of day’ (ibid.). The culinary practices, eating behaviours, notions of food and determinants of taste are often socially tailored. Food can also be a powerful symbolic resource for the expression of patterns of social differentiation (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997).
The article is a critical overview of the existing research conducted on food, culture and dietary practices in Northeast India. With an aim to identify the research gap, the research points out the dearth of study on food as a politico-cultural item while also highlighting the scope of research on food culture and identity in Northeast India. The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section explores the existing studies on dietary practices in region. The second part of the paper highlights the close linkages between the dietary ideals of Northeasterners and the region to which they belong. The third section focus on the centrality of dietary practices of the Northeasterners in defining their basic rights of living to the larger issues of citizenship.

The first section of the paper made use of secondary literatures mostly. The second section of the paper is based on the project, ‘Food culture and identity: A cross-cultural study of dietary practices of students in university hostels of Hyderabad’ conducted in 2014-2015. The study is an attempt to understand the gastronomical experiences of students in university hostels of Hyderabad. Three universities in Hyderabad have been chosen for conducting purposive sampling: Hyderabad Central University, English and Foreign Language University and Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University. These universities were chosen because it accommodates students from different states across the country, belonging to different religious background, class, caste, creed, tradition, etc. There were 278 respondents who responded to the scheduled open-ended questionnaire based on purposive sampling or non-probability sampling technique. The third section is based on a survey that was conducted for another project, ‘Archiving Marginalities in North East India’, in 2016. The data presented in this paper is based on the response of 95 respondents chosen via snowball sampling method, who responded to the scheduled open-ended questionnaire on the problems of the Northeast populace outside Northeast region, taking the case of New Delhi.

Research on Dietary Practices: Identifying the Research Gap

The American Anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz (1996) made an interesting observation on the writings of anthropologists studying different communities all over the world. In Mintz’s opinion, food and eating have not received enough attention as anthropological subjects. For instance, B. Malinowski studied the Trobriand Islanders and discussed about yam cultivation, feasting, magic and chiefhood. But the discussion on food was more in terms of what food did for the
social order. Many anthropological studies on food have a tendency to study food as a part of the social order or as a means to an end, viz. for its instrumental value. This approach is replicated by many researchers of and on Northeast Indian food.

Though studies on food and eating have received negligible attention, food has always played an important role in shaping the historiography of the region. For example, rice is the most popular staple food in the eight states of Northeast India. The history of the region records of a recurring ‘bamboo famine’ in Mizoram, in 1882 and 1959 respectively (Pachuau & Schendel, 2016). The famine was caused by rodents feeding on the bamboo flowers, multiplying rapidly; and upon finishing the bamboo flowers they would then prey on agricultural crops and village granaries. The famine changed the political landscape of Mizoram. The inability of the Assam government to give adequate and timely response marked the beginning of a political revolt in the region. In 1961, the voluntary organisation coordinating the relief work (Mizo National Famine Front) transformed into a political party, the Mizo National Front (MNF) (ibid., p. 302).

Another rice-centred movement was the second Nupilan movement or women’s agitation in 1904 in Manipur. It was caused by the export of rice from Manipur by Marwari monopolists with the support of British rulers, resulting in a famine-like situation for the local people. While the original demands of these women were confined to the banning of rice export, later their demands also included changes in the Darbar and the administrative set up (Yambem, 1976, p. 331).

There is scope for comparative studies too. Take the case of ‘feasting’ as a socio-cultural and religious activity. In the pre-colonial period, spiritual and social activities did not have a fine dividing line. Worship of gods involved sacrificing, cooking and eating, and sometimes abstinence from food in the form of fasting prayers. The ‘Feast of Merit’ was performed among the Chakesang Nagas after the harvesting season, between November and January (Tinyi, 2020). There would be competition among the feast-givers to outdo each other in terms of their generosity as ‘honour’ and ‘respect’ was conferred on them. There was also the informal practice of labeling ‘shame’ to a wealthy couple for not performing the feast of merit. The ultimate goal was to enhance one’s status within the community. The Mizos also have Thangchhuah Feast somewhat similar to the ‘feast of merit’, yet different in terms of its religious goals and purpose. The title of Thangchhuah is a revered and honorable title holding tickets not just in the present life but in the afterlife as well. To attain the title of Thangchhuah, a man has to perform six stages of sacrificial feasts. An able hunter could attain this title.
without performing the sacrificial feasts (Ram Lama Thangchhuah) but he would have to kill the following prescribed animals and birds: elephant, bear, wild bison, demote deer, wild boar, king cobra, eagle and lemur. He has to perform a ritual (Ai ceremony) to appease the spirit of the animals and birds killed and request them to escort him to pialral, the abode of the dead, a place similar to the concept of heaven in Christianity, devoid of pain, hard labour or toil and suffering (Malsawmdawngliana, 2012). A feast for the whole village was mandatory to complete the ritual.

In examples like these, we find that food, though often taken for granted because of its image as an everyday activity, plays a crucial role in holding the society together by mending and maintaining bonds. During 2008 to 2010, I conducted fieldwork in two Kuki villages, Motbung and Tujang Vaichong, and an urban town, Kangpokpi. I noticed that pigs play a fundamental role in their customary life. Every Kuki village has a customary court, also called Khosung Inpi Thutanna, even in areas that are not under chieftainship system. It is a traditional law enforcing body which has as its constitution the traditional customary laws that are unwritten, retained and transmitted orally. The redressive mechanism or punishment for breach of law or non-conformity to the norms of the society was the killing of a pig, followed by a meal hosted by the guilty party in honour of the victim’s party. The custom is still relevant today among the various Kuki group of people to adjudicate cases like bloodshed, feud, land dispute, divorce due to adultery, etc.

When I visited Motbung village in the year 2009, the customary court, locally known as Motbung Village Authority, comprises of the following organisational positions who assists the village Chief: Chairman, Secretary, Joint-secretary, Accountant, Custom in-charge, two members in-charge of forest (forest land regulation and distribution), four members in-charge of defense, and Information Secretary or Lhangsam. For the proceeding to take place, the victim’s party has to write a letter to the Chief through the authority members. They also have to pay court fee of rupees fifty. The members of the village authority listened to both plaintiff and respondents and witnesses who were present at the time the incident occurred. The guilty party being decided, this is followed by negotiation on the fine or penalty to be paid by the party who loses the case. Usually, as a peace treaty, after the cases are decided, there is a tea-party consisting of members of the village authority and the litigating parties. This is a change influenced by Christianity from the traditional practice of drinking local wine made of rice.
called Zu. Penalty is stringent and heavy in cases that involved bloodshed or adultery, where the highest is paid in terms of a pig, along with a sum of money, the amount of which depends on the severity of the crime committed. Bloodshed is classified into two types: Bil Tan Deh Keh (injury in the ear and the forehead) and Thi-kiso (murder) (Sithou, 2011). The slaughter of the pig and the ensuing feast are not without their symbolic and ritualistic meanings. Firstly, the pig is necessary to perform tol-theh or ground-cleaning. The blood of a pig, or a mithun in the past, has to be shed in order to cleanse the ground or the village because an injury or a murder has been committed. Secondly, the pig is necessary to perform kosa, meaning purification of the house and prayers for the bereaved family in order to prevent similar calamity from befalling the house thenceforth. After the dead body is taken out of the house, it is customary for the family of the deceased to feed the guests who had come to condole or to participate in the funeral. Gifting the bereaved family with a pig, would compensate them from these customarily necessary expenses.

Similarly, among the Kuzhamivi Nagas of Nagaland, customary food transactions play an important role in the construction and maintenance of kin relations. Kin-like relationship could also be started with non-kin members through food exchange (Sakhrie, 2016). Ningol Chakkouba is an occasion in the Meitei community of Manipur in which married daughters and sisters are invited to their parental house for a feast. Therefore, food or feasting or shared eating is used as a medium for forging and maintaining relations. ‘Stories about food are not solely about sharing and feasting – such accounts are also fundamentally tied to social practices that reinforce hierarchies and order in society’ (Kikon, 2015, p. 332). The existing studies and research in the context of Northeast India study food for its instrumental value, as ‘...instrumental for the study of other things; like cementing loyalties, reminding people who they were in relation to others, fortifying them for their tasks, and linking them to their gods… It is not the food or its preparation that was of interest, so much as what, socially speaking, the food and eating could be used for’ (Mintz, 1996, p. 4).

**Food and Emotion: Memory and the Taste of Home Food**

Roland Barthes (2008), in the paper ‘Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,’ writes about the feeling of nostalgia for one’s food when one is outside one’s own country or state of origin. This is very relevant to the experience of Northeasterners staying outside their home state. McDuie-Ravii
writes that the experience of the Northeast migrants in Delhi is a good example of how food or the memories of ‘home food’ frequently accompanies people in their travels outside their own regions. He makes the following crucial points on the subject (McDuie-Ra, 2012, pp. 153-156):

a) North easterners cannot get by in Delhi without access to food found in the region, particularly in their own home state. Their food varies from those of the mainstream Indian society. Northeast food, especially from the tribal areas is far closer to food found to the east, in Burma, and to the north, in China (Yunnan).

b) There are several restaurants serving Northeast food in Delhi. To this point I would like to add, the existence of ‘migrant neighbourhood’ in localities like Kotla, Motibagh, Munirka, Vijay Nagar and Kisan Garh, etc. In Kisan Garh especially, there are many shops, owned by the North easterners themselves, selling food, clothing, etc. that would cater to their palette and needs.

Deborah Lupton (2005), going by the social constructionist perspective, argues that phenomena that are understood to be biological like hunger, taste and food preferences are the products of the socio-cultural environment in which we are born. Thus, while humans enter the world with the need to eat to survive, from the moment of birth the ways in which individuals interact with other people and with cultural artefacts shape their responses to food. What is interesting from the findings of my survey was the gastronomical experiences of students in Hyderabad who hail from one of the eight states of the Northeast of India. The findings gave very interesting insights on the following points:

1) Religious and regional background played an important role in determining the dietary ideals of a person from Northeast India;
2) Food can act as both a means of communication and as a marker of differences between different cultural groups of students in the University;
3) Food is a socially constructed category rather than merely a biological activity, and therefore, there is a close relationship between food, culture and identity.

Based on the findings, the dietary ideals of the majority of the Northeasters, with the exception of the conservative Vaishnavite Hindu communities in Assam and Manipur (who observe food taboos according to their religious beliefs), were highly influenced by non-vegetarian diet. The majority of the Northeasters
were hunters and gatherers during pre-colonial and early part of the colonial period. They were intermittently at war either with their neighbouring tribes or with the colonial government, and were often persuaded to shift their geo-political locations due to raids and feuds from time to time. It was not conducive for them to engage in sedentary form of cultivation and at the most they could practice shifting cultivation. Non-vegetarian diet was not only more conveniently available to them as a source of sustenance, but over time it also played a very important part in their culture, customs and tradition. The massive conversion to Christianity in the 19th century also ensured the continuation of this gastronomical preference as Christianity did not prohibit non-vegetarianism. The plains of Assam and the valley area of Manipur were already highly influenced by Hinduism and so the Christian proselytisation mission in these regions were not as effective (Sitlhou, 2017). In Manipur, vegetarianism was introduced into the local culture due to the conversion to Vaishnavism (Hinduism) in the later part of the 17th century by a Bengali scholar and Brahmin priest Shantidas Goshai. This inniated a change in the dietary habit of the Meiteis as their traditional religion Sanamahi did not have strict principles regarding food habits. Interestingly, the Meitei Bahmon’s (Manipuri Brahmin) abstinence from meat in most cases does not include the intake of fish (Singh, 1963, pp. 68-70).

For Robin Fox (2002), the notion of nutrition is a myth and our taste has never been governed merely by only the taste-bud. The practice of ‘eating’ displays code of messages about selves and status, role and religion, race and nation. Ethnic identifications in food have not disappeared and a relative conservatism of food habits persists in all countries. Putting them all together, respondents from Hyderabad Central University, English Foreign Language University and Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University wanted the inclusion of pork, beef, chicken, eggs, fish, mutton, potatoes (fried without spice), sea-food, boiled vegetables and fried curries with less oil and spice in their hostel menu. Interestingly, many of them included the local (South Indian) food items like dosa, sambhar, payasam, biryani, chutney, etc. in their dietary ideals. This is an interesting case in which there is communication between two cultures via food habit as meanings are shared through non-verbal means.

There were a lot of hostellers from the Northeast region in all the three universities who were dissatisfied with the hostel food. The core reasons for their discontentment were the longing for cuisines, gastronomy of their home state or simply food cooked in their homes, all of which determine or define their food
ideals. The term ‘home food’ can have two different meanings: food cooked by one’s immediate kin or personal cook at home, or, food items prepared and available in the home state or region to which one is affiliated. For a 21-year-old post-graduate student from Hyderabad Central University who belongs to a Hindu family in Hyderabad, no food is comparable to the food cooked by one’s own mother. Home depicts a sense of security and an irreplaceable emotional bond. Even students hailing from the same state (Andhra or Telangana) such as Guntur, Vijayawada, Kakinada, Warrangal, Khammam, etc. responded that they still missed home food, though hostels provide similar but not the same type of food. Firstly, they were dissatisfied with the quality of hostel food in the mess. The common complaints were: an overdose of spices or oils, overcooked food or undercooked food, untrained cooking staffs in the kitchens of hostels, unhygienic food preparation and storage, repetition of same food items, etc. Secondly, it is not exactly technical proficiency or expertise in cooking that qualifies as good food but also the emotional attachment or rapport between the one who prepares it and the one consuming it. Therefore, food that one eats brings back memories of either a home or homeland.

Within the campus spaces, students get the opportunity to partake in such food through the associations that organise programmes on occasions like freshers’ meet, farewell parties, Advent Christmas, Chakkouba, Northeast Food Fest, Northeast Cultural Nite and some state level festivals. Through these programmes, students preserve their ties to a homeland and participate in traditional customs and rituals of consumption. These occasions provide them opportunities to come together to enliven their sense of belongingness to a particular region, culture or religion. The traditional or regional foods prepared are necessarily cultural badges as they are regional or religious specific. The menu in the Northeast Food Fest in Hyderabad Central University includes Naga-style pork with akhuni (fermented soyabean), Mizo sawhchiar (chicken with rice), Manipuri singju (salad) and aeronba (with bamboo shoots and fermented fish or ngari), Tripuri dish Aakranmosodeng (dry fish and mashed chillies), Khasi Khlehnei-lieh (vegetable salads) with perilla seeds and plain boiled vegetables (a favourite in all the states of Northeast India). Students from other cultures and regions are invited to partake in the food consumption as a mark of friendship and exposure to one’s culture.

In Hyderabad Central University, another example of cross-cultural encounter is during the campus fest Sukoon, in which beef biryanis are sold every year in order
to assert Dalit food rights since the year 2006. Students from different states of Northeast India have endorsed and supported the stall set up by the Ambedkar Students Association. In May 2011, some Dalit and Muslim students tried to organise a ‘beef festival’ in the campus of English Foreign Language University in Hyderabad. They also wanted to include beef as a regular food item in the hostel menu (Das, 2015, p. 106). Though the project ended abruptly due to opposition from Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthen Parishad (ABVP), the students’ wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the prospect of the inclusion of a non-vegetarian diet was well-received by the Northeastern students. This provides a ground for politico-cultural solidarity on the basis of a shared food habit. As Arjun Appadurai (1981) writes, food has the ability of acting as the medium and message of social conflict, while also enabling the communication between human beings. Food is therefore a marker of identity for the different groups of people, as identities and belongingness are re-enforced and constructed through food. Thus, the university campus provides spaces not only for homogenisation of cultural influence but also the confluence of food habits and diet.

Northeastern students studying in Hyderabad Central University receive food/delicacies from home either through the mail or brought by friends or family members on visits. The types of food can be divided into three categories: dry meat, fermented fish, bamboo shoot, pickled fruits or vegetables, etc. (chilly pickle is popular); and sweets, cakes (made of sticky rice); and other local produce, not found in Hyderabad, that mark religious occasions or cultural festivals. Though these foods might produce feelings of revulsion to some, for others, the same smell invokes feeling of comfort or remembrance of home, especially in unfamiliar surroundings (Kikon, 2015). There are some foods that produce immediate local knowledge and trigger the sensory aspects of food. ‘This linkage may take place at a subconscious or unconscious level, at which certain tastes and smells of food may evoke emotional responses derived from previous experiences without that connection being consciously recognised’ (Lupton, 2007, p. 321).

**Food and the Question of Citizenship**

In the final section, I would like to deal with the centrality of dietary practices and ideals in defining the complicated relationship between Northeasterners and the host communities in metropolitan cities. The quotidian consumption practices are important venues for understanding the development of prejudice and stereotypes
against certain social groups. In popular normative perception, we tend to associate certain identities with certain types of food habits (Das, 2015). For the transnational Hindu, India is equated with Hindu land. Caste system in India is considered as a defining characteristic of Indian society. The purity and pollution theory in the Hindu caste system prescribes rules of eating and cooking food (Saunders, 2007). For example, Manusmriti prescribes that menstruating women should stay away from the Brahmin while he is having food (Das, 2015, p. 106). Therefore, food – both as an unquestionable need for survival and as a ‘taboo’ – determines our perceptions of ‘normal/ abnormal’; ‘cruel/ non-cruel’; ‘violent/ non-violent’; and ‘pure/ polluted’ (ibid.).

In this context, I will discuss the discrimination faced by Northeasterners in metropolitan cities, especially on matters ranging from basic rights of living to larger issues of citizenship. I will substantiate my discussion with findings from a survey that was conducted in 2016. Many respondents agreed that they were subjected to discrimination and humiliation when it comes to their accommodation in Delhi. They are denied houses by house owners as they are deemed unfit for the prescribed life style and food practices. Their food practices, especially meat cooking such as pork and beef, often lead to conflict and end in humiliation by the house owner and neighbours. Babu P. Ramesh, in a project conducted by the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, interviewed 402 respondents during June to December, 2010 in four localities with a large concentration of Northeast migrants – Kotla, Motibagh, Munirka and Vijay Nagar. Out of the 402 respondents interviewed, there was only one who did not stay in a rented accommodation. The majority of respondents cited discriminatory practices related to rented accommodation.

Getting a room/flat on rent is the most difficult task for migrants from Northeast. A good chunk of the local landlords do not even consider Northeasterners as potential clients to rent out their room/flats – as they look down on Northeast people citing differences in culture. ‘They have loose morals’; ‘They eat pigs and dogs’; ‘Their presence will pollute our children’, etc. are the justification given by many of the local room/flat owning people (as reported by some of the respondents). Some of the respondents got the rented accommodation only after ensuring that they will cook and eat only vegetarian food in their rooms. A very few also shared instances of eating ‘smuggled’ non-vegetarian food in their rooms, without the knowledge of their landlords (Ramesh, 2012, p. 18). However, there are a few cases in which landlords prefer Northeast migrants as tenants as
they pay their rent regularly without a fuss and they could also charge them with higher rents compared to others. They, therefore, contribute in maintaining the host’s political economy.

The book *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas (1966) talks about the rejection of certain kinds of animals as an explanation of the Hebrew dietary laws which were regulated by fear of defilement and hygiene. Pork is considered to be an unclean animal. As Hindus are taught not to eat beef since the cow is considered to be a sacred animal, Muslims are restricted from eating pork which is considered to be a defiled animal by the Holy Quran. Marvin Harris writes, ‘By 1000 A.D., all Hindus were forbidden to eat beef. Ahimsa, the Hindu belief in the unity of all life, was the spiritual justification for this restriction. But it is difficult to ascertain exactly when this change occurred’ (Harris, 1978, p. 202). Therefore, the inclusion of beef and pork in their diet, a sacrilege to the Hindus and Muslims, demotes some communities in Northeast India to a remote position in the national social and culinary order and imagination. Dolly Kikon made an interesting analysis on this and she writes, ‘if one roughly maps the trajectory of modernity on dominant food and dietary habits, particularly the promotion of a national cuisine of India via cookbooks, a singular version of Indian modernity appears, reflecting a singular version of Indian history – which, in turn, dictates the dietary imagination. The food practices of dominant groups are presented as the national cuisine while relegating others to the margins or erasing them altogether’ (Kikon, 2015, p. 321). There is the tendency of attributing notions of remoteness and backwardness towards tribal societies from Northeast India in contrast to the rest of India. ‘Here, the visible manifestations like dietary cultures, along with race, religion and history, are used to reiterate tradition and remoteness’ (ibid.).

In a study conducted by Nongbri and Shimreiwung (2017), it was found that though food is a source of tension between Northeast tenants and their landlords, culture of reciprocity and food sharing exists between Northeasterners and their colleagues from ‘mainland India’ in the office precinct. Sharing of food among co-workers is a mutual process and a majority of them share the food they pack to work, while also accepting food from their colleagues. ‘The workplace as a site that brings together heterogenous social groups, fostering camaraderie and conviviality across caste’ and social boundaries are apparent (Baviskar, 2019, p. 366).
Beginning from the colonial times, the state had the power to advance changes in food habits. Travelling back in time, in the 1940s, under the colonial missionary, non-drinking became popularly accepted as the outstanding mark of a Christian. Candidates to be baptised have to pass an examination on knowledge of Christian doctrine and furnish evidence that they had not participated in any ‘heathen ritual’ nor drank any rice beer for three months (Eaton, 1984, p. 13). ‘Because of these conflicts between Naga culture and the norm upheld by the Baptist missionaries, many converts appeared to do a good deal of wavering and wobbling in terms of religious allegiance’ (ibid, p. 15). Mills wrote:

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\text{And one finds many men who have changed their faith as often as seven or eight times, or even more. A man will become a (nominal) Christian and be baptised. Then his soul yearns for ‘madhu’ (rice beer) and, since anyone who touches alcohol is expelled from the Baptist community, he often goes the whole hog and joins the non-Christians again. Later he may change his mind, give up his ‘madhu’ and heathen practices and be readmitted to the Baptist Church } \text{ (as documented in Eaton, 1984, p. 15).}
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Similarly, in the present day, the Indian government under the Ministry of Home Affairs had constituted a Committee in 2014, chaired by Shri M.P. Bezbaruah, retired IAS and member of the North Eastern Council, to look into the various concerns of the citizens hailing from the Northeastern states who are living in different parts of the country and to suggest suitable remedial measures, including legal measures which could be taken up by the Government (Sitlhou & Punathil, 2017). On the subject of food and eating habits of the Northeasterners, the Committee stated,

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\text{It was submitted before the committee that many landlords also consider the people from the Northeast as difficult tenants because of their food habits and resent pungent smell that Northeast cooking has due to the use of fermented seasonings like bamboo shoots and soya beans.}
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The attempt by the state to moderate the relationship between Northeasterners and mainland India fails to understand the integral role that food habits play in Northeast culture, history and identity. Mention may also be made here of the controversial booklet by the Delhi police in 2005. It was conveniently titled,
Security Tips for Northeast Students/Visitors in Delhi, laying down the Dos and Don’ts that people hailing from Northeast India should adhere to. Northeast migrants were advised to avoid using bamboo shoot and akhuni (fermented soya bean). If they were to cook it, they should do so without creating ruckus in neighborhood. As Dolly Kikon (2015) rightly said, such official directives reiterate how the state plays a significant role in legitimising or prohibiting certain foods that particular social groups in contemporary India consume. The argument is that certain food and smell ought to be eliminated from the public space by claims of functional necessity. The problem is that the understanding of the dietary practices of the Northeasterners is often predicated upon their dissimilarity to Indian cuisines – particularly the absence of oil and masala, which indicates a lack of refinement, technique and sophistication. However, food and people’s histories are intertwined. To shame or humiliate the dietary practices of a particular social group is to also shame and humiliate their history (ibid.).

The right to choice of food was a subject that was highly debated in the Bombay High Court’s judgement in Shaikh Zahid Mukthar vs. State of Maharashtra (2017). Though the judgement was meant to challenge Section 5D of the Maharashtra Animal Preservation Act, 1976, it was also significant to the cause of the Northeasterners. The points that were put forward were: Firstly, the state has no business interfering in a person’s choice of food. Secondly, the only exceptions to this general principal are cases where a compelling public interest exists, such as matters of health and safety (Parthasarathy, 2017, p. 44). Therefore, everyday consumption practices are important locations where notions of citizenship, belonging and democratic spaces are constantly being challenged and redefined in powerful ways (Kikon, 2015).

Conclusion

Though often considered an insignificant subject of study and not given the importance it deserves, a study of gastronomical practices, dietary customs and practices would tell us much about the ‘Northeastern self’, the community, identity, intercommunity dynamics and relationships, as also the role of food in producing social meanings. There is a need to study not only the instrumental value of dietary practices but also their intrinsic value, as a means to an end. Lastly, there is a truth in what Fox says, that there is a greater homogenisation of food habits today and ‘…the world is an exciting state of mixing and mingling and transferring of tastes’ (Fox, 2002, p. 21). Therefore, there is a greater scope to
study food culture of the people from Northeast India today than there was ever before.

Notes:

i The survey was done via a project, *Food culture and identity: A cross-cultural study of dietary practices of students in university hostels of Hyderabad*, under UGC-SAP, with the department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, 2014-2015. My informants gave the following information among other questions: a) religious background; b) food ideals and food culture at home and their home state; c) the level of their receptivity, adjustment and tolerance to the food served in the hostel, which is often similar to the local Hyderabad cuisine; d) and most importantly, the alternative ways by which they negotiate the changes of food and differences within the means available to them.

ii It is a type of non-probability sampling technique.

iii As the three selected hostels are geographically located in South India, food served in their respective hostel mess are mostly South Indian food items. The hostels of most of the institutions allied to the Government of India are also particularly sensitive to the overall religious sentiments of diverse religious groups in the country. Pork and beef are a sacrilege to a Muslim and a Hindu, and are therefore not served in the hostel mess, whereas common staple food like rice or roti are made mandatory in the menu.

iv 85 in EFLU, 90 in HCU and 103 in JNTU respectively.

v The Kukis of Manipur have a similar practice known as *Sa-Ai ritual* in which the hunter has to kill a tiger, an eagle, a wild bear, a squirrel and a jungle cock or partridge (Sitlhou, 2018, p. 6).

vi The third field area Kangpokpi is an urban town. The Customary court is governed by elected members of the Kangpokpi Urban Town Committee. It is under Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council Administration.

vii Chakesang Nagas is the union of Chokri, Khezha and Sangtam community and Kuzhami is derived from the word ‘Khezha’.

viii Duncan McDue-Ra’s article ‘North-East’ Map of Delhi and the book *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* are the result of an ethnographic study of migrants from Northeast India to Delhi from 2010 to 2011.

ix I think this is a common phenomenon because through all of my student life, I had stayed in different hostels for 14 years and I was warden in two ladies’ hostels in the University of Hyderabad for another 2 years. There has never been a hostel with the perfect food menu, i.e., a menu that satisfies every hosteller’s palate.

x The data used in this paper was derived from the project titled *Archiving Marginalities in North East India*, which was funded by UGC-UPE. Phase-II, University of Hyderabad and was jointly undertaken by Department of Sociology and Centre for Regional Studies. Though the project begun in the year 2015 and ended in 2017, the data used in this paper was collected in the year 2016.

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