

Edible Fruit Vegetables and Bodo Culture

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ABSTRACT

The Bodo tribe, one of the major indigenous ethnic groups of Assam has distinct cultural identity in their own. They are rich in their cultural heritage. They are also having a unique kind of food habits in their own way. The food items are mostly collected from the forest. Rice is their staple food item and in addition to it, they substitute different kind of vegetable and non-vegetable items. The fruit vegetables are also one of the important traditional food items preferred by the Bodo tribe of Baksa district in Assam, India. Documentation and popularization of the edible Fruit vegetables is the primary objective of this paper.

Key Words- *Fruit vegetables, Bodo tribe, traditional, food items .*

Introduction

The paper is an attempt to look at the culture of the Bodo people with reference to fruit vegetables used by them. The Bodo is a tribal community of Assam inhabiting the state 'since time immemorial'. It is the largest populated tribal group in the state and belongs to Indo-Mongoloid stock. Their population records more than 15 lakh as per the Census, 2011. The concentration of their population is high in the districts like Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, Odalguri though their settlements in KarbiAnglong, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Golaghat districts constitute a sizable portion of total population therein. The Bodo population is also recorded even in Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, West-Bengal, Nepal and Bangladesh.

The Bodos have their distinct cultural, language and religious identity. The richness of the treasure of culture manifests in all aspects of life. The women are considered the cultural mirror

of the society for the pattern of dress they weave and wear. The design, motifs, colour pattern, and the way of wearing distinguish them from other tribes in the region and thus reflect the identity of the community. They speak Bodo language which is one of the eight major divisions of Tibeto-Burman group as suggested by G.A.Grierson in *Linguistic Survey of India*. The Bodo people follow indigenous faiths and practices which in recent years have been designated as *Bathou religion*.

Rice is the staple food of the Bodos which they supplement with vegetable and non-vegetable items. “Vegetables are classified according to which part of the plant is eaten. Some vegetables fit into more than one category when several parts of the plant are edible.”¹ But in this study we have focused on fruit vegetables.

The Bodo people obtain their food items from two sources, cultivation and collection. In recent years they grow vegetables in their home gardens and cultivate foodgrain crops in fields. But in the past vegetables and fish were entirely foraged and animals hunted for meat except a few vegetables which they grew in their gardens. The Bodo people are mainly inhabitants of villages nearby the forests and hilly areas and hence nature is the primary source of many of their food items. Obviously, most of the vegetables and non-vegetable food items were obtained from the nature itself during early period which still continue in contemporary time to a large extent.

These vegetables are collected from the forests mainly by womenfolk. The men folk also do not stay away from it. They also obtain fruit vegetables and support the women folk in collection of food items as and when they find time. Women folk form into groups and set out for collecting vegetables at afternoon. Collection of vegetables is almost a calendared activity in their daily routine known as *MwigongKhanai* (plucking vegetables). They, in this activity, pluck especially leafy vegetables. Obviously, collection of vegetables is a group activity. Generally it is done collectively which later they distribute among themselves. Some time they collect individually too, even if they go in a group.

Study Area

The area of study is confined only to the Baksa district of Assam. The district is one of the districts of Assam newly created in 2003 as per the provisions of historic Bodoland Accord,

¹ http://www.vegetables.co.nz/vegetable_know_how/classifications.asp

2003. The total area of Baksa district is approximately 2,400 Km² situated in the northern part of National Highway No.31 which runs from east to west. The total population of this district is about 8.6 lakhs as per census, 2011.

The paper enumerates fruit vegetables consumed in Baksa district of Assam. However, Bodos live in different districts of the state. Their habitats are near to forests and share similar geo-climatic conditions. Naturally, these fruit vegetables are also available in all Bodo habitats in Assam.

The objective of the paper is two-fold. The first one is to document traditional fruit vegetables used by the Bodos and the second one is to situate them in the cultural life of the people with reference to both material and non-material aspects.

Material and Methods

Different round of field work in various places of Baksa district was carried out by the researcher. The Observation method and Case study method were applied to collect the data. These methods are regarded as primary source of data collection. Different books, research journals, magazine, published and unpublished documents were also engaged. The electronic devices like Digital Camera, Mobile Cell were also used for Photography, Audio and Video recording.

Both male and female within the range of 40 years of age and above were selected for sample population. Besides, available litterateurs were consulted. Moreover, scholars and persons with wide knowledge on it were also interacted to identify the collected specimens. Validity of gathered information was established after consulting the chief informants. Unstructured interview schedule was employed as the tool of data collection. The collected fruit vegetables were identified with Botanical name and their family name with the help of indexes.

Fruit Vegetables of Bodo People

The fruit vegetables constitute an important ingredient of food intake among the Bodos. A total of 11 species of fruit vegetables belonging to 6 families have been reported as consumed by the Bodo people in Baksa district of Assam. The taste of fruit vegetables differs. *Khunthainara* vegetable tastes bitter and *Khamrenga*, *Thaigir*, *Thaikhafisa* fruit vegetables taste sour. While the tastes of *Khumbra*, *Mwithru*, *Jwgwnar*, *Lao*, *Bahol*, *Khangkhillor*, *Fanthao* fruit vegetables are normal.

The fruit vegetables are prepared either as a single item or in combination with other items and taken with rice which is the staple food. Normally, these vegetables are cooked with non-vegetarian items such as meat and fish. But some vegetables like *Khamrenga*, *Khangkhilor*, *Khunthainara* and *Fanthao* taste more delicious when roasted. In addition, some fruit vegetables like *Khamrenga*, *Khangkhilor*, *Khunthainara* and *Fanthao* are also fried. In other words, fruit vegetables are taken cooked, roasted and fried.

It is to be mentioned that the Bodos consume different parts of a plant/shrub which are of twelve types². Fruit vegetable is one of these 12 types of parts taken as vegetables. We have presented those fruit vegetables which are consumed by the Bodos from generation to generation, meaning traditional fruit vegetables. Moreover, the vegetables are called fruit vegetables according to the classification of the Bodos based on their perception.

In table 1 a list of fruit vegetables consumed by the Bodo people is presented. The vegetables are classified on the basis of the family which they belong to. For general understanding both local name and botanical name are also given.

Table 1: List of *Fruit* vegetables

Sl. No.	Botanical Name	Family Name	Vernacular Name in Bodo	Available season
1.	<i>Averrhoacarambola</i>	Oxalidaceae	Khamrenga	April-September/whole season
2.	<i>Benincasahispida</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Khumbra	July- April
3.	<i>Carica papaya</i>	Caricaceae	Mwithru	All over the season
4.	<i>Cucurbitamoschata</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Jwgwnar	All over the season
5.	<i>Dilleniaindica (L.)</i>	Dellineaceae	Thaigir	July- March
6.	<i>Garciniamangostana</i>	Guttiferae	Thaikhafisa	February-August
7.	<i>Lagemariasiceraria</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Lao	September- May
8.	<i>Luffa cylindrical</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Bahol	March-September
9.	<i>Momordicadioica</i>	Cucurbitaceae	Khangkhilor	March- August
10.	<i>Solanamindicum (L)</i>	Solanaceae	Khunthainara	February- August
11.	<i>Solanummelongena</i>	Solanaceae	Fanthao	November- April/whole season

It is to be mentioned that the fruit vegetables consumed by the Bodos are not exclusive to them. These items are also consumed by many other communities in Assam who live in similar geo-climatic conditions as the Bodos. The study presents fruit vegetables in the context of the Bodos as they have their culture distinct from other Assamese communities. As Bodos have a distinct culture, the presumption is that fruit vegetables have distinct place in consistent with

²Bulbs (*Bedor*), Flowers (*Bibar*), Fruits (*Phithai*), Fungi (*Mwikhum*), Leaves (*Bilai*), , Roots (*Rwda*) , Seeds (*Begor*), both Leaves with Stems (*Bilairwthara*), Tendrils of plant (*Thara*), Tubers (*Dulurbedor*), Whole plant (*GaswiBifang*) and Young shoots (*Bijou/Bithorai*) are edible parts of vegetables. The names in the brackets are Bodo names.

their cultural norms. The taboos, medicinal use, cooking procedure, consumption pattern, etc.- all are interwoven into the totality of Bodo culture.

Identification Processes

The fruit vegetables have different stages of growth. These fruits have their own suitable stages to eat. The various growth stages of the fruits are identified through some characteristics. The *Khamrenga* (Carambola) fruit, during the early stage, seems green and becomes yellow after ripe. The *Khumbra* (White Gourd) is green to look in the early stage and becomes whiter when it is fully grown. The fully grown *Khumbra* has acidic taste. The *Mwithru* (Papaya) becomes light green to dark green when it grows from early stage to full grown stage and becomes yellow during when ripe. The *Jwgwnar* (Pumpkin) is dark green during early stage and becomes yellow when it is fully grown and ripe. The *Thaigir* (Elephant-apple) fruit is green at early stage and when it is fully grown and ripe it takes light yellow colour. *Thaikhafisa* (a kind of acidic fruit) fruit changes from green to yellow from early stage to maturity stage. *Lao* (Bottle gourd) and *BaholorFwrla* (Club gourd) are light green in tender stage and become dark green and tight after fully matured. But, now a day different varieties bottle gourds are found. *Khangkhilor* (spine gourd) and *Khunthainara* (a kind of bitter fruit) become dark green when matured and yellow when ripe. The *Fanthaos* (brinjal) is known to be fully matured when it becomes hard.

It is to be mentioned here that *Khumbra*, *Jwgwnar*, *Lao*, *Bahol* or *Fwrla* and *Khangkhilors* grow in creepers. It is come to know that earlier, these fruit vegetables were collected from the neighbouring jungle or forest; these vegetables have wild varieties.

But, in due course of time, they have started growing these vegetables within their housing boundary. The *Khumbra*, *Jwgwnar*, *Lao*, *Bahol* or *Fwrla* are allowed to climb on the house roof. On the other hand, the fruits like *Khamrenga*, *Mwithru*, *Thaigir* and *Thaikhafisa* are collected from trees. These fruit vegetables are basically planted within their housing boundary. The two fruit vegetables like *Khunthainara* and *Fanthaos* grow in small plants. They do not cultivate the *Khunthainara* vegetable. Rather, germinates itself in their surroundings and the fruits are collected if they desire to eat. The *Fanthaos* is cultivated in their vegetable garden.

Preparation

The Bodo people have their tradition of preparing their food items. They know how to prepare the vegetables to make more delicious. Their preparation system is a mix of traditional knowledge and technique. This knowledge and technique is transmitted informally through observation, participation in preparation and learning. The informal system of learning the

preparation of food items still continue in the community. The preparation processes of fruit vegetable items by the Bodo people are discussed below:

- 1. Khamrenga (Carambola) :-** The fruit is an interesting traditional fruit vegetable taken by the Bodo people in Assam. It is eaten from its early stage and the ripe fruits are also taken uncooked. It is sour to taste and is basically prepared with fish as curry. Sometime, it is also roasted and mixed with chili and salt to prepare a type of pickle. The pickle is a type of appetiser.
- 2. Khumbra (White Gourd) :-** The fruit is one of the traditional fruit vegetables preferred by them. It is domestically planted in their own home. It is prepared with fish or meat as curry. This kind of fruit is eaten from its early stage. They basically prefer boiled dish, sometime adding some amount of alkaline. The fully grown *Khumbra* fruit tastes more delicious with chicken or pork. The fully grown/ripe fruit called *KhumbraBwrai* is preserved on the platform of the granary and it is consumed during the summer season.
- 3. Mwithru (Papaya):-** *Mwithru*, the Papaya is a home-grown fruit vegetable. It is available all over the season. This fruit is eaten from the early stage to fully grown stage as curry. They mostly cook it with fish adding alkaline. The peel of this fruit is not removed if it is prepared with alkaline. This fruit, after ripe, is eaten as refreshment food item without cooking.
- 4. Jwgwnar (Pumpkin):-** Pumpkin is an important fruit vegetable of the Bodo community. Pumpkin is the common English name of the locally known *Jwgwnar* fruit. This fruit is rarely eaten in its early stage. Rather, it is eaten after it is matured. This fruit, after maturity is preserved for a long time by simply storing on any platform. They prepare it with fish, chicken and pork as curry. Sometime, they also prepare it as delicious curry with snail. The *Jwgwnar Labra* (pumpkin curry looking like paste) is supplemented with rice beer during the time of different group works like agricultural works.
- 5. Thaigir (Elephant-apple):-** *Thaigir*, the elephant-apple is an important vegetable of the Bodo tribe. It is sour to taste but becomes less sour after ripe. The fleshy calyxes are cooked with fish as curry. It is mixed with *Onlaingkri* (rice powder) and a delicious dish is prepared, known as *OnlaGwkhwi* (sour rice powder curry). This fruit is eaten from the early stage till it matures. But, after maturity they basically prefer to eat as refreshment food item without cooking.

6. **Thaikhafisa (a kind of sour fruit):-** This fruit of *Garciniamangostana* is one of the important fruit vegetable items of the Bodo tribe. It is sour to taste. The dried slices are only used as edible food item. It is cooked with fish. Moreover, it is mixed with other curry items to give acidic taste and flavour.
7. **Lao (bottle gourd):-** Bottle gourd or *Lao* in local language, is a home-grown vegetable preferred by the Bodo tribes. This fruit in its early stage is cooked or boiled with fish, chicken or pork and sometimes added to other dishes. It, in the matured stage, is prepared or cooked as curry adding some amount of alkaline.
8. **Bahol (Club gourd):-** The club gourd is a common fruit vegetable. The Bodos mostly prefer it with fish. Both in its early and matured stages, it is cooked as curry. Bahol is of two types, scented and ordinary. The scented one, known as *JwsaBaholis* more delicious to taste with sweet scent. Its fragrance is as like as the fragrant paddy (*Joha*) rice.
9. **Khangkhilor (spine gourd) :-** Spine gourdis a home grown fruit vegetable preferred by them. They consume this fruit vegetable from its early stage. But, it is not eaten when it is fully ripe. It is normally cooked with fish, though it is sometimes cooked by adding alkaline. This fruit vegetable is also eaten as roasted and fried item.
10. **Khunthainara (A kind of bitter fruit):-** *Khunthainara* is bitter to taste. They consume this fruit vegetable from its early stage; it is not consumed when fully ripe. It is cooked with fish adding some amount of alkaline and is supplemented to rice. They mostly use it as the roasted item to eat with rice in their meal.
11. **Fanthao (brinjal) :-** Brinjal is also an important fruit vegetable of the Bodo tribe. It is eaten during its early stage but not when it is fully grown. It is prepared as fried item. Some of them also cook it as curry with fish and pork. It tastes more delicious, if it is prepared as roasted item locally called *FanthaoBathwn*.

Medicinal Value of some fruit vegetables

The fruit vegetables are not only used to supplement the staple food rice, but also as medicines. Some of the medicinal uses of these fruit vegetables are listed below:

1. **Khamrenga :-** This fruit is used as a cure for cold and jaundice. Normally a person suffering from cold takes this fruit either roasted or boiled along with the meal. The Bodo people consider this fruit as an important medicine to cure jaundice. The fruit is wrapped in a banana leaf and placed over slow fire for roasting. When the fruit is roasted the

burnt parts of the leaf are removed to clean it. With this roast salt, roasted chilli and garlic are added to make a mixture which is called *Menai*. For curing jaundice *menai* is considered to be very effective.

2. **Mwithru** :-This fruit vegetable forms an item of the meal. But it is normally used as medicine to cure stomach problems like constipation or other minor stomach pains. The fruit is cooked adding some amount of alkaline in it. As a curry it is taken with the meal to cure stomach problems. The Bodos also consider this fruit very useful for lactating mother. The mother of a new born baby normally consumes curry regularly made of this fruit for adequate breast milk.
3. **Thaikhafisa** :-*Thaikhafisa* is sliced into pieces and sun-dried before preservation. The curry prepared with this vegetable is taken with the meal when one suffers from cold. The slices are added to fish and cooked by further adding chilli and ginger. The curry so prepared is taken with normal meal to get relief from cold. Interestingly this fruit is also used by the Bodos during summer season to cool the body. Two or three pieces of dried slices are soaked into a glass of water for two/three hours and the water is taken to cool the body.

Vegetable fruits in Bodo Folklore

“The Bodos have a rich tradition of folk literature which has not been fully explored, preserved and brought to light. They have their rich store of folk tales, legends, songs, proverbs, riddles and charms which have been handed down from generation to generation.”³ In addition to other materials, the Fruit vegetables are also used as imagery in Folk literature of the Bodos especially in Folk songs. The fruits **Lao** (*Lagemariasiceraria*) and **Fanthao** (*Solanum melongena*) are used in pastoral song. It is sung during the time of washing cows in *Bwisagu*:

“*Lao zaPhanthaoza*
Bocorbocorerhanzahanza.”⁴
Eat bottle gourd and eat brinjal, and grow bigger year by year.

Thaigir (*elephant-apple*) is used in Bodo Folk literature to compare the Philosophy of *Bathou* (the primitive religion of the Bodos):

“*Thaigirnikhongakhongba*
Sijounisiriasiriba

³Boro, A. *Folk Literature of the Bodos*, 2014 pp. 35

⁴ Brahma, MM (collect.). *Folksongs of the Bodos*, 1960 pp.45

*Sifungnigudungagungba
BathouniBandwabandwba
Borobwrainiraoafongba*⁵

The calyx of Elephant-apple fruit is five/ the thorn lines of *euphorbia splendens* (crown of thorns) plant are five/ the holes of Flute are five/ the bindings of Bathou are five/ the sayings of Bodo old man are five.

Thaigir (Elephant-apple) is used as imagery in the folk song of the Bodos. The face of the bride is compared with the shape of this fruit:

*“Nongnithaigirphithaibaidilathimluthimmokhanga,
Okhamophlamnaibadikhonseplam
Mophlamnanoi mini khoirekhalnanoi”*⁶

(Your face is round/ like the shapeless Elephant-apple fruit/But the smile is there like/ the spark of lightening.)

Khumbra (White gourd) is used in song to compare the husband of his ex-girlfriend :

*“Ukhumbecanikhumbraguphur,
O agoi cat bacibaci
Endabacibaciphicayzonaya
Zongbadinohaluabuhur.”*⁷

(There is the white White-gourd/ on the house roof/ oh dear, the youth you have married/ after a hundred choices/ is a block-head.)

Cultural Significance

All fruits that are used as vegetable food items do not have religious significance. Rather, some of these items have cultural significance. Only the fruits which are edible as refreshment food items are used for religious purposes. The two fruit vegetables i.e. **Lao** (*Lagemariasiceraria*) and **Fanthao** (*Solanummelongena*) have a cultural significance in Bodo society. These fruits are used to wash the cattle during the time of *Bwisagu* known as BohagBihu in Assamese. These fruits are sliced into small pieces, made into garlands and put around the neck of cattle. The pieces are also thrown on the body of cattle while washing. Some of these are brought in the house and thrown on the house roof. They believe that it helps to protect them from the evils in the days to come.

⁵ Brahma, K. *BoroniHarimu*, 1993 pp.9-10

⁶ Brahma, MM (collect.). *Folksongs of the Bodos*, 1960 pp. 25

⁷ *Ibid.*,p.35

The cylax of *Thaigir* (*elephant-apple*) is used to substitute earthen lamp in paddy fields and at home during the day of *Katrigasa* i.e. Kati bihu. The general observation reveals that a number of lamps are needed on that day. In the mean time, this fruit is also available during this season and the shape of cylax is also suitable to put oil. It substitutes the earthen lamps without any cost and it is easily accessible.

Taboos

Taboos, i.e various types of restrictions are characteristics of tribal societies. Generally movement and food taboos are observed to ward off evil effects and make the result of the rituals effective. The Bodos also observe food taboos and the fruit vegetables fall within the domain of taboos.**Khamrenga:-** A woman after delivery is not allowed to consume this fruit for three to four months. This is precaution to quicken the process of healing of labour time related wounds.

1. **Khumra:-**This fruit is also not taken by women after delivery. A person having fungal infection is also debarred from its consumption. In case of the woman it delays the process of healing while for the fungal infected person it causes more irritation and itching.

2. **Jwgnar:-** The lactating mothers are not allowed to eat this fruit. They believe that the baby will suffer from stomach disorder by the mother's consumption of this fruit vegetable. The persons who suffer from fever are also not allowed to take it.

3. **Lao :-** This fruit vegetable is not taken during the month of Bohag (April), the month in Assamese local calendar. From the point of view of general observation it can be revealed that during this season that fruit starts alkalized due to rain and then it does not taste delicious.

4. **Fanthao :-**This fruit vegetable is not taken after the *Bwisagui*.e. April month. It is used to bath the cattle during this month and since then its consumption is tabooed. The general observation of the researcher is that season the fruit becomes alkalized and insect infected due to rains.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that the Bodo people prefer different kinds of fruit vegetable as food items in their day-to-day dishes. The above tabulated list shows that the fruit vegetables are also an important part of traditional food items prevailing among the Bodo community. The Bodo people are the inhabitant of nearby the forests/jungles and small hills as their primitive feature. Hence, they are closely affiliated to the Nature. The Nature is their primary source of livelihood. Most of their food items are collected from the Nature. The mentioned fruit vegetables are significant to the Bodos since, these vegetables are easily accessible in the nearby

surroundings or forests. But, in due course of time, these items are becoming rare to find easily. It is due to the result of deforestation. Therefore, the Bodo peoples have started to cultivate and transplant the fruit vegetables within the boundaries or surroundings. These items are also sold in the markets in the present days. In the past time, they preferred mostly the boiled food items and they used *Khardwi* (alkaline) instead of oil and spice to prepare the food. It is applied as it helps to melt the vegetable items immediately. In the present days, there is myriad change in their food habits due to the various reasons like cultural assimilation, economic improvement, education factor and so on. It is an urgent need to carry out in depth scientific research whether there is any effect in the change of their traditional food habits.

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