

KOLAKHAR: An ingredient of Axomiya food habits

Introduction:

Traditional knowledge system of India is very rich in general and Axom (Assam) in particular. The life style of the Axomiya (Assamese) people is so high and also it is attached with the traditional knowledge for which it became very strong in the eye of others. Axom is having a good example of unity in diversity in the society as it is a mingling point of various caste and tribal people from different racial stock like Mongoloid, Aryan, Austro-Asiatic etc. as well as various linguistic groups. Axom is also rich in flora and fauna. That is why the place is very beautiful and people of this region are also having a good traditional knowledge on natural environment. As M. J. Herskovits said in his book, *Man and His Works*, 'Environment makes the Culture' or 'Culture is the man made part of environment'. This statement of Herskovits is truly fit in the example of Axom and Axomiya people. Because the culture of Axomiya people have been formed on the basis of the surrounding environment only.

Banana tree and its uses:

Among the natural plants in Axom, banana trees are found everywhere. The banana tree is closely associated with human societies in the tropics, especially in Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Banana trees play an essential role in every aspect of daily life of the people of Axom, including festivals, weddings and other functions. Without the banana tree, the worship, sacrifices and various auspicious ceremonies of the Hindus of Assam seem impossible. Each and every part of the banana tree like stem, bark, leaves, fruits and even the flower. Culturally, banana trees are needed at every step of Assamese culture.

Other than banana as a fruit, it is also eat as kol-posala, fried or curry of the banana flower, kolpitha etc. The leaves of the banana is use as plate instead of metallic dish, the bark is use as chatia, koldona or making banquets, the decoration of rabhas and fences with banana trees and leaves.

Banana trees are essential food for elephants. In addition to leaves, elephants also eat parts of the trunk. The ground is made of palm trees and is a means of transportation for the villagers. There is also a long-standing practice of writing handwriting on banana leaves in childhood. Clothes, bags and other items made from banana fiber are attracting attention in the society today. Overall, without the banana tree, one cannot think of the customs, beliefs, etc. of the Axomiya society. The banana trees in the corner of the garden have always enhanced the beauty of a house in Axom.

Banana trees are also needed for Jagannath Naam, Dipanbita festivals, Durga Puja, Basant Puja etc. The banana tree is also used in Noai Tolani weddings as a symbol of fertility. A lush banana plant is presented as a symbol of the groom.

In addition to the fruits of the banana tree, the dried bark and its potatoes are burnt to make kalakhar, a kind of alkaline. People also do salt bathing, washing clothes and cleaning dishes. The dried bark of the banana is used to treat people, cattle, etc.

There are various types of banana trees found in the natural environment of Axom. These include Bhim or Athiya, Manohar, Vartamani, Banfal, Shalikithutia, Jahaji, Chenichampa, Keteky, Sonda, Amritsagar, Malbhog, Pura or Kachkal. The farmers of Axom have been cultivating these species of banana trees, using them as food and earning their living from their production. Planting banana trees can also be economically profitable. Dr. Hemanta Deba and Rabindranath Sarma wrote an article in the Axomiya Vishakosh, where they have mentioned about the Cultural use of banana tree.

Kolakhar:

Kolakhar is an ancient ingredient of Axomiya cooking which has equal importance as medicine as because of the alkaline level. Pushpanjalee Das Dutta quote from the book "*Feasts and Fasts: A History of Food in India*, that Assamese cuisine is the only regional Indian cuisine that has preserved the six tastes of ancient Hindu gastronomy. Alkalinity is what distinguishes Assamese cuisine from the rest of India." Puspanjalee Das Dutta is a geographer turned writer and blogger who loves exploring geographical implications behind culinary habits. She also wrote, "Khar is a liquid, dark brown in colour, with a strong astringent smell. It can be made in large batches and stored for several months, to be used throughout the year. It is believed that the month of Kartik and Ahin are the most suitable months to make khar. Although khar-making is serious business, the procedure itself is relatively simple. Khar is typically made from the ashes of banana peel. The banana, *Musa balbisiana*, is native to some parts of southeast Asia. In India, it is found in the northeastern states, and often in the wild. *Musa balbisiana* is a wild species, and an ancestor to modern bananas. Unlike regular bananas, *Musa balbisiana* is full of seeds which makes eating it a nuisance. However, it is one of the traditional *first foods* of Assam where it is called bhim kol/ aathiya kol, and fed to infants. As an introduction to solid foods, slices of ripe bhim kol are dried, powdered and then fed to babies along with water or milk. However, in making khar, only the peels of ripe bhim kol are used. The peels are sundried in batches and often kept in cool, airtight containers. Whenever the need for Khar arises, these dried peels are burnt to collect the ashes. The next step is to filter pure water through the ashes overnight. As the water filters through, it becomes dark brown and acquires an astringent aroma." In her blogs, she has given detailed descriptions about the process of making Kolakhar, taste and nutritious value including few recipes with the interview of few peoples from the society.

Academic Works on Kolakhar:

Prof. Dibakar C Deba and Dr. Nripendra Nath Talukdar, who did detailed study on Kolakhar in Gauhati University for which Axomiya people will always remember their efforts and

contribution. They have published a paper on ‘Chemical and spectroscopic investigation of *Kolakhar* and its commercial importance’. The brief of the paper was, “*Kolakhar*, a traditional food additive derived from banana plants and popular amongst the different communities in Assam, has been analyzed for its commercial importance. Chemical and spectroscopic investigation show that potassium, sodium, carbonate and chloride are the major constituents present in *kolakhar* along with a host of other trace elements. The analysis has been able to corroborate the traditionally known superior quality of *kolakhar* derived from *Musa balbisiana* Colla as compared to those derived from different varieties of *Musa acuminata* Colla and *Musa paradisiaca* Linn. *kolakhar* has been found to be an excellent renewable source of potassium carbonate for commercial exploitation.” In conclusion of the paper they have mentioned that, “*Kolakhar*, a traditionally known antacid and popular food additive amongst different communities in Assam, is quite rich in potassium carbonate, and therefore can be commercially exploited as a cheap and renewable natural source of potassium carbonate. Because of the presence of vanadium, *kolakhar* can have beneficial effect for heart patients.” This paper makes a revolutionary impact in the academics work of traditional Axomiya culinary tradition. Other than Prof. Deka and Dr. Talukdar, there are few works happened in the Institutional Biotech Hub, Pandu College and Advance Biotech Hub of J. N. College. Dr. Aniruddha Sarma, Dr. Manish Das and Dr. Tapan Dutta has published a paper on ‘Traditional alkaline food additives ‘*Kolakhar*’ extracted from banana rhizome with reference to *Musa balbisiana* from Assam, the state of India’ in the open access journal- International Journal of Bio-Pharma Research. Other than these two prominent works on *Kolakhar*, there are few laboratories like Assam Down Town University, Institute of Pharmacy, Jalpaiguri (West Bengal), University of Mumbai etc. have worked on the Chemical analysis and published papers which are easily available online.

Conclusion:

Kolakhar is an ingredient of Axomiya culinary which knowledge is having important value for which it became a component of Axomiya traditional knowledge system. After all the traditional Axomiya food is self dependant and at the same time it is proved in the laboratory that this may be remains forever as a food from the compositions it has. Each and every part of the banana tree is using by the people folk and it became part and parcel of the Axomiya culture. As like the cultural and medicinal value it has a scope for the markets too which may be possible to exports in future.

References:

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