



# Folk and traditional beliefs and practices associated with foods and food habits of ethnic communities of Manipur

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## ABSTRACT

Food habits determine the mental and physical health of a community. It also reflects the nature of social and geopolitical aspects of the community as regards to their assertion as socio-politically and socio-culturally established community. The inter-connectivity of the traditional food habits of the ethnic communities and their cultural practices, wherein the one supplements the other, is specifically brought into focus in this study. The choice of certain foods for rites and ritual processes determine the relationship of local communities to their natural surroundings, whereby certain food items and their uses had become integral to their socio-cultural life. The study, while interacting on the lifestyle and food habits of local communities, focuses on the cultural elements embodied in their oral tradition, folk beliefs and traditional practices which form the core of the numerous rites and ritual worships that the communities observe during their annual and periodic ritualistic ceremonies and festivals. This paper looks at existing structure of traditional practices on foods and food habits of ethnic tribes that are embedded within their society, and despite the occurrence of novel coronavirus pandemic, these practices are integral to their lives and withstands the crisis.

**Key words:** Manipur, local communities, food habits, folk beliefs, traditional practices.

## Introduction

The novel coronavirus pandemic is crippling life in so many different ways. Every aspect of life – social, economic, political and even cultural – has practically come to a standstill with little activity happening in limited space. Economy in both urban and rural areas have largely collapsed, with marginalized sections of society greatly impacted by the subsequent lockdown which has restricted movement of all types and affected businesses. As in other parts of the globe, people in Manipur have felt the impact of the crisis. Small time businesses and traders have been immensely affected by the lockdown. There is crisis on availability of foodstuffs and other relief materials, and also in availing of basic health care.

Local population living in the rural areas and more specifically in the uplands of Manipur have felt the impact of the crisis exceedingly as they are restricted in movement and face difficulty in obtaining or purchasing essential items required in everyday life. Yet, in the midst of the crisis, life goes on and local people adhere to their traditional roots in the best way possible. Tribes in the uplands resort to local production of homegrown vegetables, sedentary and non-sedentary cultivation in hill slopes, and procurement of minor forest produces from nearby forests to feed

their families. At the same time, observation of traditional practices and ritual worships require to be followed according to their society's norms. Limited as the resources are, life goes on and traditions are being kept alive by the reasoning that crisis or not, people have to carry forward the norms and practices of society that keeps alive a society.

### Manipur at a glance

Manipur has a large percentage of scheduled tribe population being 34.4%. However, there is a distinct division in the demographic pattern between the valley and the hill districts. The scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population account for only around 5% and 3% respectively out of the total population in the valley, whereas, the same accounts for about 90% and 1% respectively for the hill districts.

As per the 2001 Census, Manipur had a population of 23, 88,634 persons<sup>1</sup>. The sex ratio of the population was 978 (rural: 969, urban: 1,009). Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes accounted for 60,037 and 7, 41,141 persons respectively. Population density was 97 people per square kilometer. Main and marginal workers accounted for about 44.79% of the population as per the 2001 census. Further, 46.06% of the main and marginal workers are cultivators.

But as per details from Census 2011, Manipur has population of 28.56 Lakhs, an increase from figure of 23.89 Lakh in 2001 census. Total population of Manipur as per latest census data is 2,855,794 of which male and female are 1,438,586 and 1,417,208 respectively. In 2001, total population was 23,88,634 in which males were 1,161,952 while females were 1,131,944. The total population growth in this decade was 24.50 percent while in previous decade it was 30.02 percent. The population of Manipur forms 0.24 percent of India in 2011. In 2001, the figure was 0.22 percent.

Two thirds of the total population is concentrated in the valley and one third in the hills which are sparsely populated. Ethnic groups inhabiting in Manipur are the Meitei, the Meitei Pangan (Manipuri Muslims), Chakpa (scheduled caste) and scheduled tribes such as the Aimol, Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui (Raungmei), Kacha Naga (Zemei, Liangmai), Koirao (Thangal), Koireng, Kom, Lamgang, Maomei, Maram, Maring, Mizo, Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Purum, Ralte, Simte, Sukte, Tangkhul, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou, Tarao, Kharam and Poumai.

Each of the tribes has a distinct identity of language, culture and way of life. Each of the tribes are identified by their distinctive dress and costume, and every tribe observes a number of annual and periodic ritualistic festivals highlighted with numerous forms of folk songs, dances and music, and these in their totality present a unique cultural mosaic that readily stands out from the mainland Indian culture.

### Traditional Foods of the Chakpa

Young children of Andro village relish two particular types of *shingju*<sup>2</sup>. These are Koujeng shingju and Nga shingju. 'Koujeng' is local name for grasshopper and 'Nga' is local name for fish. In the first type, the children catch grasshoppers with fish nets in paddy fields after harvest of the paddy crop. As soon as the grasshoppers are caught, the children tear off the head of the grasshoppers. When a sufficient amount of grasshoppers are caught, these are then eaten fresh with pinch of salt and chili. Similarly as this, young children catch Ngakha fish (*Puntius* sp.) from the brooks or marsh with the fishing gear Long-up. When sufficient fish are caught, they are eaten fresh along with salt, chili and Heibi leaves.

Andro villagers relish chutney prepared with Shamba seed pods. Fresh and green Shamba seed pods are finely chopped into pieces and are boiled in water. These are then mixed with salt, chili, fried fermented fish Ngari<sup>3</sup>, and carefully mashed with hand till the ingredients had been truly mixed as required. To add taste, fox nuts are added to the preparation. Another variety of curry is Morok-thongba. 'Morok' is local name for chili. The main ingredient is pounded chili mixed with a pinch of salt and ginger, and if desired, some fish and potato. Andro villagers usually add small fish Ngakha or Ngakijou (*Lepidocephalus berdmorei*) to add taste.

### Traditional foods of the tribes

#### Tarao tribe

The Tarao tribe attaches much value to their traditional food habits and food acquiring practices. They get their food chiefly from two sources. Firstly, as products from shifting cultivation and secondly, as minor forest produce.

They collect a large variety of seasonally available edible roots, leaves, fruits, tubers and mushroom from the forests for their daily diet throughout the year. They also grow vegetables like beans, colocasia, pumpkin, cucumber, Ash-gourd, etc. for local consumption. On the whole, rice is accepted not only as the staple food but as a status in comparison to corn, yam and other tubers.

The Tarao relish eating rice cooked by the steaming method. This involves a method of cooking rice by the hot steam from boiling water which is contained in a pot placed beneath a vessel in which the rice is kept. The rice is washed thoroughly before placing in the vessel. No water is contained in the vessel; it has a small hole at the bottom to allow the steam to pass through.

### **Kharam tribe**

Like the other ethnic groups in Manipur, rice is the staple food of the Kharam tribe. Meat is their delicacy. They brew country liquor and it constitutes a part of their socio-cultural life. This is particularly reflected in the observation of the several rites and rituals during the periodic and the annual ritualistic festivals, ceremonies and other social occasions.

The preparation of country brew for consumption in the festivals is an elaborate affair for the village community, so much so as offering of good quality drink is a sign of the dedication and whole heartedness on the part of the hosts in the process of the ritual observation, and it would have bearing on the future prospects of the householder, *vis-a-vis* with the blessings of the local governing deities. An offence by way of offering poor quality brew can incur the wrath of the deities, as for instance, the production of a poor harvest that year. They follow elaborate procedures in the preparation of food and drinks especially for the rituals. This is in conformity with the custom of the tribe.

### **Preparation of Yu, the country drink**

The traditional *Yu* is the fermented drink common among the ethnic tribes in the State. Distillation is a later process. The drink is prepared by fermenting rice, millet or Job's Tear<sup>4</sup>. Normally, fermentation is done with rice. The process of fermentation is time consuming and needs extra care. Paddy is husked in wooden mortar with pestle, with special care that the husk is not removed completely. Thereafter, the rice is collected and cooked to a desired limit. The cooked rice is transferred to an earthen vessel, that the Kharam call as *Yubel*, which is then covered tightly with layers of plantain leaves. The pot is now kept near the hearth for steady heating about a week for proper fermentation. The best drinks are from those pots fermented for longer periods.

### **Traditional use of the Yu**

In ritual worship, *yu* is first offered to the deities. For the Kharam, **Pathein** is the Supreme Being. They also worship local governing deity known as **Khobiek**. Ritual offerings are performed to appease the evil spirits, so that they do not bring disaster or ill-tidings for the village community. Usually, such offerings of *yu* is done by the *Yupanba*, who is a member of the village council designated for all matters related with selection, arrangement and offering or use of the traditional drinks during their periodic and annual ritualistic festivals, ceremonies and other important social occasions.

When offering of *yu* to the gods Pathein and Khobiek, the person shall offer it to the right side with the right hand. While offering *yu* to the evil spirits, the offering is done with the left hand towards the left side. The drinks can then be consumed by the villagers after the act of this ritual.

The first serve of *yu* is done following certain rituals and formalities. The Katar (village council) members would gather at the Chief's house and there they will sit in a circle either at the porch or the courtyard, with a *yubel* of *yu* placed in the middle. Several bamboo pipes are placed in the *yubel*, with different markings to identify the drinking pipes. The pipe for the Chief is marked with coloured thread to distinguish it from the rest.

When the village council had assembled, the ritual of offering *yu* to the right side for the Supreme Being and to the left side for the evil spirits is performed. The *Khokalakpa* (village chief) initiates the ritual with a symbolic sip from the *yubel* using his drinking pipe. After him, the others would follow in turn in their hierarchy in the Katar, such as the *Lupkalakpa* (group administrator), *Yukapakapa* (the administrator of wine), *Pakhatkalakpa* (the administrator of married persons), and *Naingailakpa* (the administrator of youth). The *Changroi* (one who assists the council members) serves the elders, by pouring in water continuously to fill the *yubel* and in helping with

arrangement of the drinking pipes. When the council elders had completed their turns, the other villagers can then commence drinking from the other *yubels*. The festivity then begins in earnest.

### Custom of partaking meat in ritual worship

Pig is the common animal sacrificed in ritual functions. They also prefer meat of the cow, buffalo and rarely Mithun<sup>5</sup>, duck and hen. Body parts of the cock and the pig are read for tale-tell signs in ritual worships. Offering animal sacrifice is a costly affair for the Kharam. Normally, they rear poultry, pig and buffalo for the purpose of such ritual worship and customary ceremony as processes in the life cycle of an individual or individuals.

For the locals of Kharam Pallen village, rituals and sacrifices are commonly performed at the sacred grove Laamtol Bathel located in the heart of the village. This site is believed to be associated with the legendary Meitei king, Meidingu Khagemba who ruled Manipur in the 17th century A.D. The king is said to have worshipped the deity Pakhangba at the Laamtol site. There is a flat stone slab at the site where animal sacrifices take place during their ritual worships.

Pigs sacrificed at the Laamtol are examined by the village chief or an elder to read the spleen for any possible signs for the following year. The viscera of the pig are distributed among the village council elders. The choicest part of the pig, for example a good thigh, is gifted to the Chief. The other three legs, the nose and the ears of the pig are given to the other members of the council according to their hierarchy.

The rest meat of the pig, or other animals or fowls offered for such rituals, is cooked at the Chief's house. When the meat is ready, the council elders sit around the *yubel* and they commence ritual feasting with eating the meat so prepared and accompanied by drinking *yu* served in bamboo tubes.

The *Changroi* distributes the cooked meat served on plantain leaves. Like that of the system of sipping *yu* from the *yubel*, the meat is first served to the *Khokalakpa*, and then to the other council elders according to their respective positions in the council.

When the distribution of meat among the council elders is complete, the *Changroi* addresses the Chief 'pu' and awaits a signal from him. When the *Khokalakpa* gives a nod, the *Changroi* pours water into the *yubel*. This act signals the formal permission from the Chief to proceed ahead with the ritual process of the occasion. This process of asking permission and getting consent is repeated to all the eight council elders present there. By getting the consent, it is understood that they all had received their share of the meat.

The meat is ready to be taken only after the Chief give signals to do so, with a brief address to the deities, praying for the welfare of the village and good health for all in the village. The prayer is offered to the god Pathein.

Interestingly, when the *Khokalakpa* had taken a little of the meat, he gives the rest to the *Pakhatkalakpa*, saying the meat is well prepared. The *Pakhatkalakpa*, on his part, takes a little of the meat, and gives the rest to the *Naingailakpa*, who again gives his share to the *Mepu* (in-charge of meat). The *Lupkalakpa* gives his share of the meat to the *Hitang* (the taster of wine/meat prepared for community activities), who in turn gives it to the *Naingailakpa*. Similarly, the *Yukapakapa* gives his share of the meat to the *Naipang*, who in turn gives it to the *Sepu* (in-charge of community fund).

This custom of sharing of meat among the council elders is symbolical of their position in their tribal society, as respected persons concerned for the good of their people. They will share the meat among the families in the village. The act also defines the hierarchy position of the Katar members who are the highest administrative body in the village social structure.

In the ritual festival of *Saratha kahoi*, a buffalo is sacrificed and the four legs of the animal are given to the first four elders in the village council, namely, the *Khokalakpa*, *Lupkalakpa*, *Yukapakaba* and the *Pakhatkalakpa* following their social order. They are the privileged persons in the village administrative setup, and therefore the choicest parts of the animal are offered to them. The remaining parts of the buffalo is cut up into several pieces and distributed equally among the families in the village. It is the duty of the *Mepu* to see that every family gets a share of the meat. If it is to be cooked together, such meat is distributed in plantain leaves folded into a cone shape. Like in the other social occasions, the festivity is marked by consuming of country brew throughout the day. As usual, such gatherings are done at the village chief's place.

During the installation of a new village chief, the four legs of the animal sacrificed are given to the first four council elders, while the rest four members are given some fleshy parts of the animal. This custom is known as 'Sakei kajoi', literally meaning 'follower of the legs'. It also indicates the social order in which the village administration is structured.

### **Beliefs associated with food habits of Tarao tribe**

The food habits of the Tarao tribe are influenced by traditional belief system and customs. According to a popular Tarao belief, pregnant women are discouraged from plucking fruits or vegetables that are grown on the roof of the house. It is believed that if they eat these fruits or vegetables, they may remain barren. Interestingly enough, it is believed that if pregnant women eat mud, the child born will be healthy. Bitter fruits and food stuff are not eaten by the pregnant women, for the Taraos believe that if they do so, the child born will be of selfish nature in its later life. They also believe that bitter food stuff influence in obstruction of milk flow in lactating mothers. The innermost stem of the banana plant is given to lactating mothers as it is believed that it helps in the milk flow of the mother. Lactating mothers avoid spicy food for about five months. They are encouraged to eat *Yenbum*, a local plant believed to be good for blood circulation.

According to another popular belief, once a very lazy girl by the name of Trimjur ran into the forest to avoid work, and she disappeared. It was believed that she was transformed into an elephant. The Katrimsha clan, to whom the girl belonged, thus treated the elephant as human and they refrained from killing or eating the meat of the elephant.

### **Beliefs associated with food habits of Kharam tribe**

There are folk beliefs associated with the offering of animal, and consumption of the sacrificed meat is to seek welfare of the individual family or of the village community as a whole. As for instance, in ritual worship of the local governing deity to thwart off impending disaster or an epidemic, usually a dog is sacrificed to appease the deity. On such occasion, the cooked meat of the dog is consumed at the *panthong* or the village entrance gate. It is believed that since the sacrifice is made to appease the deity to ward off disaster, consumption of dog meat inside the village could bring in misfortune to the village community.

The members of the Jaiche and the Saiphu clans believe that if they kill or eat the meat of the hornbill, or cut the banyan tree on which the bird roosts, they will become blind and would have toothaches, too.

The Kharams believe that the soul of the animals sacrificed in ritual worships continue to live after their death. For this reason, animals are sacrificed on the occasion of a person's death. The meat is consumed by all who attend the death ritual. A lot of food stuff is also buried along with the corpse. Food is kept aside for a week for the deceased person. This is in consonance with the belief that the soul of the deceased person lives on with his family after his death. He continues to live on, and the animals sacrificed shall keep him company in his other world.

### **Taboo associated with food habits of Kharam tribe**

Taboo is a social phenomenon and a part of life in the tribal society. The Kharams, too, observe several taboo associated with their food habits. Some of the clans in the Kharam social family observe taboo strictly *vis-a-vis* the consumption of certain food items. It is taboo for the women to kill any wild four-legged animal.

The Saichal clan does not eat the white pumpkin. Neither do they eat the meat of the tiger or of any animal belonging to the cat species. It is taboo to eat the meat of these cat families since they are considered to be their friends.

It is taboo for the Raangla clan to cut, eat or remove gourd plants and its fruits since they believe this plant are associated with the Goddess of paddy. It is also taboo for the clan to eat the meat of wild pigeons. For the Jaiche and the Saiphu clans, it is also taboo to slay or eat the meat of the hornbill, *Raangkeh*. Hornbills are considered to be their friends.

The Marem and the Seilon clans on the other hand abstain from killing snakes or to eat its meat. They consider the snake as their god. It is also taboo for the Marem clan to kill or eat the meat of the wild pigeon.

## Ritual association in food habit

The Kharam perform a number of rites and rituals on different occasions, such as to herald the coming of the agricultural season or the first beating of the village drum or the death of an individual, etc. A few of the rites and rituals are described here with particular reference to their food habit.

**Khong-in ringtieng:** The Katar group observe the *Khong-in ringtieng* ritual to sanctify the village drums before they are used in the coming seasonal year. A pig is offered to the village deity. The village priest, or the Kathem, performs the ritual sacrifice by uttering the prayer -

“*Khobekpa tuibekpa songtaak kalamwaal,  
Khothol tuithol kho malai tui malai  
Kakho inhil katui inhil  
Kapu chingchao napom asukpa  
Nasok nakor, kinkho kalo a  
Kinpum rahut, kintaak rahut peyei  
Wok khathei inta in songli aka  
Minna bule aan le thei ser taret,  
theipui khat le choi in ta ....*” {Shangkham, 1994}

[Free English translation ...]

The god of the village, the water, the land and their surroundings,  
The god that brings happiness,  
The god of the low and the high mountains;  
I, your servant, offer to you a pig on behalf of the villagers,  
Cooked food and the pork,  
With seven ordinary and a big bamboo cup of *yu*;  
Protect us from the diseases and sickness.

In the ritual process, a pig is slain and cooked. Rice is also cooked. The prepared food is offered to the deity, invoking its pleasure. The drums are sanctified by the act, and they can now be used in the ritual festivals and other social occasions. The food is then feasted upon by the members of the Katar group. No leftover are taken home as it is considered to be inauspicious. The day of the ritual sacrifice is observed as *genna*<sup>6</sup> and none in the village are allowed to go out of the village and even to go to the fields to work. No woman is allowed even to weave cloth on this day.

**Chemchoiteng:** This ritual is performed at the sacred Laamtol Bathel site by a Kathem of the Saichal clan. A pig is sacrificed on the occasion. The ritual is observed to cleanse the knives, dao and other metallic objects of use in their agricultural activity.

The tail, leg and mouth of the pig are offered to the evil spirits to appease them. The remaining parts of the pig are cut up into several pieces and a piece is given to each of the villagers. The head and viscera are cooked and eaten by the village elders. Some pieces of the cooked food are also offered to the evil spirits. The day is observed as *genna*.

**Kaangrai mindai doi:** The ritual is performed on the occasion of burning of *jhum* fields. The Seilon kathem performs the ritual. A brown coloured dog is sacrificed at the village *panthong* on the occasion. The neck of the dog is split and the blood is let flow to the ground as a sign of offering to the gods. The nose, ear, tail, leg, intestines, etc. are offered to the deities to appease them so that they do not harm the village folks. The rest of the meat is cooked and eaten with rice at the spot. No leftover are taken home since it is inauspicious to them. The day is observed as *genna*. Making of cloth is prohibited on this day.

**Sathaar kalai:** The ritual is observed to seek the blessings of the goddess of paddy on the eve of harvest season. A householder whose paddy is ripe for harvest performs the ritual. He goes to the field, cut some paddy and brings them home. The paddy is husked and cooked. He hangs out three ears of the paddy on the threshold. Then he performs sign reading by strangulating a cock, to learn whether he would have a good harvest that season or not.

The cock is cooked. The householder prepares a bundle of rice and cooked liver of the cock and keeps the bundle near the kitchen hearth. This is in offering to the local governing deity, and a prayer to protect the granary till the new paddy is stored. The cooked meat is then eaten by the family. The village elders are invited to partake food and drinks.

**Saram katha:** This ritual involves the offering of pieces of the sacrificial animal, such as a pig, to the evil spirits to seek welfare of the individual family. Usually the pig is killed with a sharp bamboo stick prepare for the ritual sacrifice. The body parts like the nose, ear, face and leg of the pig are offered to the spirits at a particular spot chosen outside the house for the rite. The rest of the pig is cut up into several pieces and are distributed to persons attending the rite, such as, the pig's right forelimb is given to the Kathem who performs the rite. The left forelimb is given to the eldest Maaksa while the dorsal part is given to the rest of the other maakas. The hind part is kept for the family. The Kathem offers *yu* contained in three bamboo tubes to the spirits while making the ritual offering. The general prayer is an appeal to the spirits to accept the offerings, and to free the family members from sickness and other impediments. There is feasting of the meat and drinking of *yu* after the ritual worship.

**Saratha Kakoi:** The Kharams celebrate the ritualistic festival *Saratha Kakoi* during the month of March to seek the blessings of the goddess of paddy, Sapi, for a good harvest in the ensuing agricultural season. The main ritual is performed at the residence of the Khokalakpa where an animal is sacrificed to appease the goddess.

A pig measuring five *wais*<sup>7</sup> is sacrificed on the occasion. Those who can afford may sacrifice a buffalo, or rarely, a mithun. Mithuns are costly and so hardly affordable. The legs of the pig are washed and the animal is tied at the courtyard of the village chief. The Khokalakpa prays to the goddess, pouring *yu* to the ground three times each time he makes a prayer. Then the pig is slain with a sharp bamboo stick. Its spleen is taken out and examined to read signs that would foretell the fortune of the villagers in that seasonal year.

The head and viscera are cooked and eaten by the Kataar elders, while the rest of the meat is distributed to all the households in the village. The partaking of the meat of the sacrificial animal is symbolical of the general participation of the entire village in the ritual worship. The ritual worship is rounded up with drinks. Genna is observed on that day.

**Inhong sadel:** This ritual is associated with the feast of merit for the construction of a special type of house owned by privileged persons in the village. The ritual worship is usually performed by the Lapi and Lapu groups. A pig, a red cock and two eggs are the ingredients of the worship. The pig is slain and its spleen is examined to read signs. The cock is strangulated and its dying legs are observed to read signs. The two eggs are also observed to read signs. The eggs are buried and unearthened on the following day to observe signs. If the yolk of the eggs are black it is taken as a bad sign.

The meat of the pig and the cock sacrificed on the occasion are cooked and eaten by the persons attending the ritual worship. During the construction of the house, at least three buffaloes and three pigs are killed and the entire village is feasted for five continuous days. Drinks are served to the villagers throughout that period. This is done for the good future of the family whose house is being constructed. The villagers spend the ritual period singing and feasting. At the completion of this feast of merit, the householder is considered as a person of status in their tribal society.

### **The transition in society**

The Kharam tribe has experienced changes in their tribal society during the past few decades, as is true of the other ethnic tribes in the State. With the acceptance of an alien religion and belief system, the majority of the Kharam population has shied away from the traditional life.

The most visible example of this transitional influence is seen in the manner in which believers indulge in the ritual worships, more particularly in the manner in which they consume food and drinks on the occasions. For instance, the majority of the believers are by religion and practice non-drinkers. But, in actual practice, during the ritual worships the family members and the others who attend the worship are supposed to consume the traditional drink as part of the ritual process. In some cases, it was observed that villagers had developed a habit of refraining from eating pork by virtue of their new faith. They, particularly women, were observed eating meat of duck in place of eating pork.

Other than this, the influence of the modern ways of living and the inroad of food from outside has also made their mark in the Kharam ways of eating and food habits. As for example, tribal villagers normally do not have a

taste for cooking their food using oil, spices, etc. nor eating foodstuff such as pulses, onion, etc. It was observed in Kharam Pallen that villagers had developed a liking for foodstuff brought in from outside. Food items like onion, garlic, pulses, egg, etc. and the use of cooking oil, which generally tribes refrained from using in traditional cooking, are beginning to be part of their everyday food preparation.

The common food consumed by the Kharam at Kharam Pallen village are food items like rice, colocasia, parkia, banana, maize, beans, ginger, leafy items such as the green leaves of Sitaphol (passion fruit), Laibakngou (*Artemisia nilagarica*), etc.

### **The significance of customary practices**

In the fast changing modern society, it is a small wonder that the Kharams still adhere to their traditional life and the ways of living habits. Despite the influences of a new religion and thinking process, much of the elements of traditional life in the Kharam society still exist in their original form and aesthetic.

The belief system associated with the ritual worship is intertwined with the choice of food. For instance, the belief in the sign reading for future outcome in the coming seasonal year is closely associated with the choice of particular animal chosen for the sacrificial worship. The common sacrificial offerings are the cock and the pig. Their meat are consumed during the ritual process as part of the process of the worship, as a way of partaking food offered to the gods. The legs of the dying cock or the spleen of the pig are studied to read tell-tale signs that would foretell either the fortune or the misfortune of the village community or an individual family in the village.

The country drink, *yu*, is a common feature of any ritual process in the Kharam tribal society. Prepared either from pounded or fermented rice, it assumes a significant item of the entire process, without which a celebration is considered not complete. The *yu* is offered to the gods and the evil spirits to appease them in order to ward off diseases, sickness and misfortunes. The sharing of *yu* among the villagers is the medium through which they participate in the collective feeling of oneness in their society. In the tribal society where drinks like tea, coffee, etc. are not traditional pastime, the *yu* is the single prominent drink that the householder offers to visitors and guests attending the ritual worships and other social occasions.

### **Interpreting Indigenous Foods As Nutritive Intake supplemented by their Medicinal Value**

The consumption of indigenous foods traditionally used by ethnic communities in Manipur has high nutritive and medicinal value both by the content of protein and minerals, and by their medicinal properties. Much of the plant based foods consumed by ethnic people in Manipur have high nutritive value and many of these are traditionally consumed for their medicinal value as a form of intake of medicine obtained from nature. The ethnic communities in Manipur, settled both in the plains and in the hill areas, have good knowledge of plants and their various parts for their nutritive value as well as for their medicinal value. Some common plants like Nongmangkha, Peruk, Sitaphol, Shing, Tuningkhok, etc. are consumed as food by the locals in treating common ailments like cold and cough, stone case, weakness, intestinal disorder, etc. The plants and their parts are either boiled, steamed, or taken orally for treating minor ailments, often eaten as side dishes like vegetable paste, green salad added with fermented fish, or mashed vegetable added with boiled potato and fermented fish.

The consumption of raw ginger and ginger paste in ritual worship is significant in the sense that consumption of ginger is interpreted as intaking a life giving food. Consumption of ginger is believed to provide energy and vigour to life. Chicken liver and ginger paste mix is a favourite food in the ritual worships. Other than this, pieces of raw ginger are placed in the mouth and chewed while climbing up steep hill slopes. According to the Kharam villagers, this gives raw energy and strength while climbing the steep hill sides, carrying heavy loads on their backs.

On the other hand, the consumption of simple food also interprets their economic status. Home reared meat and home prepared drinks are the best options for the villagers who cannot afford lavish food for the ritual worships and other social occasions. Since money is hard to come by, villagers rear cock, pig and buffalo in anticipation of future social occasions vis-a-vis the ritual worships associated with the life cycle. Mithun is a privileged sacrificial animal and only the wealthy villagers can afford them. A person who owns mithun or offers a mithun in ritual worship is regarded as a wealthy person in their tribal society.

### **Ethnological aspects of gastronomy and rites and rituals of the Tribe**

The Tarao food habit is very much influenced by both locally produced crops and the availability of imported food items. Their food habit is also influenced by traditional belief system and customs. They collect a wide variety of seasonally available edible roots, leaves, fruits, tubers, and mushroom from the wild for their daily diet through the year. They grow vegetables like beans, colocasia, pumpkin, cucumber, Ash-gourd, gourd, sweet potato, taro, etc. for consumption. Normally, the food items change according to the seasonal supply of crops and vegetables. Their staple food is rice and this may be substituted occasionally by roots, tubers and greens. During the monsoon and the lean seasons, preserved food items like pumpkin, taro and corn form their major diet.

Sacrifice of either animal or bird, and followed by a religious feast, are the common feature in their festivals. In the religious feasting and the other social occasions such as marriage and death ceremony, the Tarao cook rice by the steaming method, a traditional way of cooking rice by the tribe.

According to a popular Tarao belief, pregnant women are discouraged from plucking fruits or vegetables that are grown on the terrace roof of the house. It is believed that if they eat these fruits or vegetables, they may remain barren. Interestingly enough, it is believed if pregnant women eat mud, the child born will be healthy. Bitter fruits and food stuff are not eaten by the pregnant women, for the Taraos believe that if they do so, the child born will be of selfish nature in its later life. They also believe that bitter food stuff influence in the obstruction in the milk flow of the lactating mother. The inner-most stem of the banana plant is given to lactating mothers for it is believed that it helps in the milk flow of the mother. Lactating mothers avoid spicy food for about five months. They are encouraged to eat *Yenbum*, a local plant believed to be good for blood circulation.

According to another popular belief, once a very lazy girl by the name of Trimjur ran into the forest to avoid work, and she disappeared. It was believed that she was transformed into an elephant. The Katrimsha clan, to whom the girl belonged, thus treated the elephant as human and they refrained from killing or eating the meat of the elephant.

In yet another belief, there was a girl from the Tlangsha clan who went into the forest holding a needle and white yarn in her hands. She disappeared inside the forest and it was believed she was transformed into a bear, since the bear has white fur on its breast. The Tlangsha women do not eat bear meat on this belief. The Taraos are also discouraged from taking the meat of the monkey.

### **Traditional Food Pattern**

Study of the Tarao dietary reveals that they are inclined to non-vegetarian dietary pattern. However, they rely on less spicy diets. Rather, simple boiling free from oil, steaming and baking are the important medium of food preparation among the Taraos. In fact, the Tarao relish eating rice cooked by the steaming method. This involves a method of cooking rice by hot steam from boiling water which is contained in a pot placed beneath a vessel in which the rice is kept. The rice is washed thoroughly before placing in the vessel. No water is contained in the vessel. It has a small hole at the bottom to allow the steam to pass through. Rice cooked in this method is highly nutritious and tasty. This method of cooking rice by steaming is also practised by the Chakpa people of Andro and Phayeng villages.

Traditionally, the tribe gets their foodstuff from two sources, firstly, as products from slash and burn farming, and shifting cultivation, and secondly, as minor forest produce. In modern times, the tribe avail pulses, edible oil, salt and other food items from the market. For the average villagers, rice forms the main diet and so there is an emphasis to store enough rice to last through the year for the family. In Tarao Laimanai village, crops are cultivated in the jhum fields on land owned by the village community. In the other Tarao villages where there is very little or no arable land of their own, rice is collected through different means such as payment for manual labour in other people's paddy fields during the plantation and harvest seasons, and purchase of the commodity with money earned from small-time businesses and trade. In cases where adequate rice is not available for the family to last through the year, substitute food is obtained in the form of corn and yam. It has been observed that the rural poor in the interior areas of the State consume yam as their main diet when rice is not available. The Tarao consume vegetable, cereal and meat as their supplementary diet.

Tarao villagers, who live in the uplands, such as in Tarao Laimanai village, depend primarily on the forest resources for their livelihood and sustenance. They practice jhumming on the uplands overlooking the village. The jhum cycle at present in the Tarao Laimanai area is between 6-7 years to a maximum of around 14 years. Villagers

living in recently established villages in the foothills, like Leisokching, Heikakmuul and Khuringmuul, lack access to forest resources and they have largely to depend on wage labour to earn their livelihood.

Poverty or the lack of resources is a reason for less consumption of meat of fowl, pig and other animals in most of the Taro villages. Few people such as the local village administrators do have access to choice of food to some extent. But there is a belief among the members of the Taro village authority that consuming the meat of the animals killed by other animals would bring misfortune to their village.

The Taros attach much value to their traditional food habits and food acquiring practices. They do not have the habit of taking milk. Apparently, however, there is no restriction or taboo for it. On the whole, rice is accepted not only as the staple food but as a status in comparison to corn, yam and other tubers. Further, the vast majority of people are not aware of the types of foodstuffs required to meet the dietary requirements for the different age groups. Custom, habit and appetite determine the selection of their food. Faulty diets, however, lead to ill health and disease. Good health can be made possible by good eating habits.

Children are fed with mashed cooked rice added with water or sometimes with banana to give a nourishing food. Egg normally is not given to the young children as it could give stomach ache or gastritis problems. In the day time, feeding is done three times. At late nights, only two meals are provided. Meat such as that of deer (*Satchan*), wild boar (*Lamoak*), Mithun (*Sandang*) and chicken are given to the children. For the old persons, simple boiled food (*Champhut* in Manipuri) and country brew (*Khaachii*) form the main diet. The latter is taken in place of tea or other modern drinks.

The Taro traditional knowledge on the use of particular plant or animal parts as medicine by consumption as food is quite interesting. For instance, they consume the new leaves of the Pomegranate plant for treating diarrhoea, or they consume boiled or baked Passion fruit leaves for treating cough and high blood pressure. They also drink a liquid preparation by boiling Passion fruit leaves for the same purpose. The Taro consume the bile of animals for treating fever. For toothache, the bud of *Hakungnaii* is made into paste and is placed on the injured area of the gum. In kidney stone case, the boiled liquid of *Hakungnaii* is consumed.

### **Anthropological approach in food study**

Activities in most tribal societies centre on the problem of finding food. The current nutritional status of the tribes is far from satisfactory and reflects inadequacies in the availability of food in economic, and sometimes physical access to the food that is available in knowledge of the best ways to use the available resources and in health practices that affect the biological use of the food that are consumed.

The study of food in anthropology began during the nineteenth century. Anthropologists usually aim at identifying and suggesting solutions to problems of inadequate growth and food insecurity and sustainability in human population. Maintenance of good nutrition implies adequate intake of food, sufficient in quantity and of good quality, which supplies the body with all nutrients needed for growth, maintenance and physical activities (Murthy, 1988). Jelliffe (1966) has suggested that environmental influence, especially nutrition, are of greater importance than genetic background or other biological factors.

### **Conclusion**

Food habits vary from one cultural group to the other, and in its own evolution sets up a complex pattern of standardized behaviour. As the social, economic and demographic factors play a vital role in the variations in consumption of foods and nutrients, it is necessary to verify the factors associated with the variations in pattern and nutrient adequacies.

Nayga (1994) in his study analysed the socio-economics and demographic factors and urbanization, region, race, ethnicity, sex, employment status, food stamp participation, household size, weight, height, age and income. He found that several of these factors significantly affect the consumption of certain nutrients.

Faulty dietary habits and food taboos coupled with religious foods, ceremonial foods, avoidance to some food with preference to a particular food, may restrict the intake of a variety of food and ultimately may be the causes of deficiency diffuses with different clinical signs.

The occurrence of crisis in life, such as the current novel coronavirus pandemic, comes and goes whereas traditions survive by the very reason that locals adhere to the norms and practices in society that are handed down generation after generation, from father to son and beyond. For ethnic tribes living in the uplands of Manipur, the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in the State had largely impacted their lives, whereas, even in the ongoing ethnic community crisis, they need to observe the rituals in life cycle so as to keep their society alive.

### Footnotes

1. In 2011 Census, population in Manipur was nearly 2.8 million.
2. Preparation of vegetable mix, added with fermented fish, salt and chili. *Shingju* is prepared in various choices, according to availability of raw vegetable in particular seasons.
3. Ngari is salted fermented fish prepared locally from small fish like Phabounga (*Puntius stoliczanus*).
4. Vernacular: *Chaning*.
5. Vernacular: *Shandung*
6. Genna is social restriction within the village system for a certain period of time to avoid contact with outsiders.
7. *Wai* is a measurement of the hand to measure size of body of piglet or adult pig. This measurement is done as process of issuing penalty to a person committing offence in the village.

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