



The Intersection of Food and Culture: A Case Study of the Tipra Tribe

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Abstract: Food is an essential component of cultural identity, reflecting traditions, social structures, and historical influences. This study explores the intersection of food and culture within the Tipra (Tripuri) tribe of Tripura, India. It examines the role of food in social practices, rituals, and identity formation, while also addressing the impact of modernization and globalization. By analyzing traditional dishes, cooking methods, and food-related customs, this study highlights the deep-rooted relationship between food and the Tipra people's cultural heritage. The paper describes in detail about the role of food in preserving the culture of the Tipra community. As we know that the Tipra tribe is one of the largest ethnic groups of Tripura, having distinct feature of mongoloid origin. They speak kokborok language like the other tribes of Tripura which is a language of Tibeto-Burman family. Being the largest community in the state, the Tripuri tribe arrayed in almost all the districts such as Sepahijala, West Tripura, Unokoti, North Tripura, Dhalai, Khowai, Gomati, South Tripura, and in some other parts outside the Tripura.

Different scholars have different views about the origin of Tripura. According to Kailas Chandra Sinha the name of Tripura was derived from the Tipra word. (In Tripuri dialects "Tui" means water, Phra-pha God). And from Triphra the people have known as Tiphra¹. Another view is that, "Tripura is the land of the God Shiva who is also known as Tripurari or Tripuresha. The people who settled in the land of Tripuresha Shiva came to be known as Tripuri and the land as Tripura².

Keywords: Tipra Tribe, Maami, Guria, Mai Borok, Muiya, Gudok, Chakhwi, Food Culture, Traditional Cuisine, Cultural Identity.

1. Introduction: Food is a fundamental aspect of human life, serving not only as a source of nourishment but also as a medium for cultural expression and identity. Among indigenous communities like the Tipra tribe, traditional food practices are deeply linked to identity, beliefs, and local ecology. This paper investigates how the Tipra people's food habits reflect their traditions, religious customs, and adaptation to environmental changes. Kutum A., Sarmah R., and Hazarika D. (2007) revealed that ethnobotanical knowledge on forest resources is the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or a human society. Traditional knowledge basically related with the socio-cultural activities of a particular community that included health care, food security and natural resource management in rural communities etc. A total of 86 species belonging to 45 families' ethno botanically important plants were recorded in their study. Among the families recorded poaceae was the largest with altogether 11 species followed by euphorbiaceae and malvaceae with 5 species each and cluciaceae with 4 species. Involvement of fringe tribal people in the management of natural resources is essential for promoting all these natural resources and indigenous traditional knowledge's, that are used in food, building material, pollution control, medicines, maintaining natural balances, biodiversity conservation. Present study has enabled in understanding the Mishing people of this region socio-culturally and their relation with plants especially the uses of medicinal plants³. Choudhury R., et al. found that tribal people of Tripura are used to eat few parts of certain plants like bamboo shoots, roots, tuber, wild plantain flowers, stems, tender leaves and various others. They observed that all the edible parts are containing alkaloids and the methanolic extract are showing analgesic activity in

mice, where as edible parts of *Solanum torvum* Swartz showed almost at per analgesic activity in compare to standard drug Aspirin⁴. The literature review highlights distinct differences in nutritional status between tribal and rural areas of underdeveloped countries like India and economically advanced nations. In India`s rural and tribal regions, a significant portion of the diet is sourced from locally produced foods or forest products, as tribal communities are traditionally forest dwellers. These communities rely on indigenous knowledge to guide their dietary practices. Several factors shape their food habits:

- Local Conditions: Soil and climate determine the availability of food resources.
- Population Density: The number of people in an area influences food distribution and accessibility.
- Urban Contact: Interaction with urban areas introduces new dietary influences.
- Cultural Practices: Religious customs, including feasts, fasts, and food taboos, play a critical role in shaping dietary patterns.

Understanding these factors is essential for addressing nutritional challenges and improving food security in these communities.

1.1 Objectives

- To document traditional Tipra food and its significance in cultural practices
- To analyze the role of food in community bonding and rituals
- To understand the impact of modernization on Tipra food traditions

2. Methodology: A qualitative ethnographic approach was used, involving:

- Field Visits: Visits to Tipra households in rural and semi-urban areas of Tripura to observe daily food preparation and consumption practices.
- Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews with elders, community leaders, and women who are custodians of traditional culinary knowledge.
- Participant Observation: Participation in community feasts, festivals, and rituals to understand the social and cultural significance of food.
- Literature Review: Analysis of existing studies on Tipra history, culture, and food habits to provide a comprehensive background.
- Case Studies: In-depth case studies of specific households to document traditional recipes and cooking techniques.

3. The Tipra Tribe: An Overview

The Tipra tribe, also known as the Tripuri people, is the largest indigenous community in Tripura. They have a rich history, deeply rooted in their connection with nature and land. Traditionally, they practiced jhum (shifting) cultivation, which influenced their dietary pattern. Tripura tribe originated from greater Bodo tribe. And there is no room for controversy or ambiguity over it. Because number of reputed ethnographers namely N. Vasu (Social History of Kamrup), Capt. Pemberton (Jalpaiguri District Handbook), Hooker(Himalayan Journal), Beverly(Census Report), Dalton(Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal 1872), Hadgson (Miscellaneous Essays 1880), Gait(Census of India 1891), Grieson(Linguistic Survey,1903), Sunder(Survey and Settlement of Western Duars ,1895), Buchanon.F.Hermansand Anderson studied and discussed about it. According to them "The Bodos are known with different generic names at different places. And therefore the present ethnic groups have known as Cacharis, Dimasas, Koches, Rajbansis, Meches and Tripuras living in different regions though posses some variation of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic traits they all belong to one race-the Bodos⁵.Shyamacharan Tripura in his article "Itihaser Aloke `Tripura` Upadhidharider Atit o Bartoman" explained and explored interesting facts about Tripura and Debbarma. According to him, the number of scheduled tribes, i.e., 19 tribes is wrong. It should be 12 in number because Tripura, Noatia, Jamatia, Reang, Uchoi, Koloi, Rupini and Murasing can be included in Tripura/Iripuri/ lipra community. Because their linguistic. Cultural and historical background is more or less same. All of them came from `Borok` community⁶. Many scholars and foreign travellers had been written Tipra term as Troipur, Tipperah, Tipura and Tripura in different periods. Tipra term is also mentioned by K. D. Menon, IAS, State Editor of Tripura District Gazetteers, Chapter-I, General: Introduction, Origin of the name of the District, Page-1, published in 1975. Few lines of the gazetteers may be quoted: "A common belief is that the name Tripura has originated from Tripureswari' the presiding deity of the land. But this is not correct. The country had been known as Tripura even before the installation of the deity which took place at the time Maharaja Dhanya Manikya in the first half of the sixteenth century.

What is more probable is that the deity took the name of the land. Apart from this traditional view there is another opinion which states that Tripura has been coined from two Tripuri words tui and pra. In Tripuri tui means water and pra means near: It is believed that originally the land was known as Tuipra, meaning a land adjoining the waters. It is a fact that in days of yore the boundaries of Tripura extended up to the Bay of Bengal when its rulers held away from the Garo Hills to Arakan. It might be that the name appropriately derived its origin from its nearness to water: This Tuipra has subsequently been corrupted into Tipra and from Tipra to Tripura. It is relevant to note that even today the hill people pronounce the word as Tipra and not Tripura"⁷. Their food habits have evolved over centuries, shaped by their geographical location, natural resources, and interactions with neighbouring communities. Rice cultivation forms the backbone of their agricultural practices, supplemented by fishing, hunting, and foraging. The historical context also includes the impact of colonialism and the gradual encroachment of modernization, which have influenced traditional dietary practices.

Later on, Tipra Tribe, starting practice to plough cultivation also known as settled agriculture. Prior to the plough cultivation, Tipra tribe is mainly depends on primitive subsistence farming (Labor Intensive Farming).The plough cultivation was probably introduced in Tripura during 15th century A.D. when the plain land cultivators from adjoining districts of Bengal came to this State. The Jhumias coming in contacts with immigrants learnt the benefits of plough cultivation and became interested in owning land for cultivation. This was evident from a step taken by the then Maharaja of this State in 1913 T.E. (1930 A.D.) that he kept 28,490 hectares in Khowai Sub-Division called "Kalyanpur Reserve" for settlement of Jhumias. Subsequently the reserved areas for Jhumia settlement was increased substantially in 1941⁸.Originally, jhum cultivation of the Tipra community began to disintegrate from the latter part of the 19th century. There are various factors contributed to decline of Tipra tribe towards jhomming –

- Transfer of capital from Udaipur to Agartala which left vast areas of land for the plough cultivation of Tripuri tribe.
- Immigrants Bengali Muslims posed the Tipra tribe to begin plough cultivation.
- Department of Forest led them to adopt plough cultivation after the introduction of Forest Law.
- Government introduced various rehabilitation programmes to manage the jhum cultivation.

Now-a-days it seems that some of the people engaged in different economic activities to enhance their economy. Fish breeding, Rubber plantation, Horticulture, Pig farm and Poultry farm are various examples of economic activities. This type of economic activity gained popularity among them. Therefore, the activity of Jhomming is also continued along with the plough cultivation by the Tripuri tribe to a lesser extent.

3.1. Social and Religious Significance of Food

Food plays a central role in Tipra religious ceremonies, festivals, and social gatherings. Important festivals like Garia Puja, Ker Puja, Hangrai and Buisu (New Year festival) include the preparation of special dishes as offerings to deities. These festivals are not only religious events but also occasions for community bonding and cultural expression. The food habit of Tripuri tribe is similar to other tribe. They prepare various tasty dishes in a healthy and hygienic way. Some of the popular dishes of Tripuris are –Gudok, Awandru, Berma Bwtwi, Chakhwi, Chakhwtwi, Chakhwtwi Kwthang, Chatang, Deng, Mosodeng, Hang, Ik, Muitru, Hontali, Mwkhw, Peng, Rabra, Sok, Yohk and Yaksapik.Chuak (Rice Beer) is prepared by fermenting rice in water which was drunk in several occasions and ceremonies that came across⁹. Some unique traditional foods of Tipra are prepared during their traditional occasions and festivals. These are as follow:

Goria Puja: A festival dedicated to the deity Goria, where offerings of Awang and Awang Bangwi (special cake), fruits, and traditional dishes are made. Chuwak(wine), Bwtwk(rice beer) and Gora(a kind of rice beer use for public) are also prepared during Goriya Puja.The festival marks the beginning of the agricultural season.

Buisu: The Tipra New Year festival, celebrated with feasts, music, and dance. Special rice dishes, awang, awang-bangwi, awing-sokrang and meat preparations are central to the celebrations.

Hangrai: A major festival of the Tipra tribe, celebrated to mark the end of the harvest season. Special rice like Maami and Guriya is prepared and shared with family and community members. The festival is a time for giving thanks to the gods for a bountiful harvest. And on this day, the Tipra people honor and worship their ancestors by offering variety of traditional dishes. These offerings typically include rice-based preparations, meats (such as pork, mutton, eggs, chicken and fish), and fruits, symbolizing gratitude and

respect for their forebears. The ritual reflects the deep cultural connection between food, spirituality, and ancestral reverence in Tipra tradition, highlighting the role of cuisine in preserving their heritage and fostering community bonds.

Ker Puja: One of the national festivals of Tripura is celebrated not only by the royal family but also by the Tipra people in every village. This festival is dedicated to Ker Mwtai (Ker God), worshiped for the well-being of the village. The rituals are conducted by Ochai (Priest). In Tripuri community, the role of Ochai is very crucial in performing of various rituals and social activities. From religious ceremony to social ceremony in every where the role of Ochai is important. Without the presence of Ochai no ceremony can be performed in Tipra community even from birth ceremony to death ceremony of a person can be performed by Tipra Ochai¹⁰. On the day of Ker puja, villagers prepare various traditional dishes like wahan (pork), Puhan (mutton), tohan (chicken), gudok and indigenous hand-made alcohols such as chuwak, bwtwk and gora so on. The entire community gathers to share food and celebrate together. The food offerings are not just for the living but also for Ker Mwtai (Ker God), symbolizing gratitude and a plea for the village's prosperity and protection. The preparation and sharing of food are seen as sacred acts, integral to the spiritual and cultural fabric of the festival. A unique custom of Ker Puja is that no outsiders are allowed to enter the village during the festival. If someone accidentally enters, they must stay for the entire day and night and participate in the festivities, including the communal meals, highlighting the inclusive yet protective nature of the celebration.

4. Traditional Cuisine of the Tipra Tribe

The Tipra diet is primarily rice-based, accompanied by meats, fish, wild vegetables, and fermented foods. Their food is known for its simplicity, organic ingredients, and minimal use of oil and spices.

4.1 Staple Food Items

- **Mai (Rice):** The staple food, consumed in various forms such as steamed rice, rice cakes, and fermented rice beverages. Therefore, the Tipra people grow different types of rice such as Maisa, Maami, Guriya, Mai Borok etc. Guria Mairum (Maami) or Glutinous Rice is widely famous and is grown in Southeast and East Asia and the North Eastern Regions of South Asia i.e., North East India. Unlike other major South East Asian countries like Thailand, Laos or China; in Northeast Tripura too have its roots deeply intact with strong cultural values. Here in Tripura we call it Guria Mairum or Maami Mai coming from *Oryza sativa* (has two subspecies; Sticky, Short-grained japonica or sinica variety and long-grained indica rice variety) a variety of Glutinous rice. This rice in our culture is used as a traditional delicacy serving numerous varieties of dishes ranging from Awang Bangwi to Awang sokreng¹¹. The Tipra tribe has a deep-rooted agricultural tradition centred on jhum (shifting) cultivation, a practice that allows them to cultivate unique varieties of rice. These rice varieties are distinct in that they cannot be grown through settled agriculture, i.e., plough cultivation, making them exclusive to the Tipra tribe and their traditional farming methods. Maami and Mai Borok, in particular, are considered special rice varieties that hold immense cultural, spiritual, and social significance within the community. These rice varieties are not just staples but are deeply intertwined with the tribe's religious practices and rituals. According to tradition, the consumption of these rice varieties is strictly prohibited before the Mailuma Puja, a sacred ritual dedicated to Mailuma Mwtai, the Goddess of Wealth. After the harvest, every Tipra household offers the first yield of these rice varieties to Mailuma Mwtai as a gesture of gratitude, seeking her blessings for prosperity, abundance, and protection. This ritual underscores the Tipra tribe's reverence for their deities and their dependence on divine favour for agricultural success.

In addition to these jhum-cultivated rice varieties, the Tipra tribe also cultivates Guriya rice, which is grown in paddy fields through plough cultivation. Unlike Maami and Mai Borok, Guriya rice is not grown in jhum fields but is equally significant in the tribe's cultural and religious practices. Before consuming Guriya rice, the Tipra people also offer it to Mailuma Mwtai (God of wealth) and their ancestors, honouring their spiritual beliefs and maintaining a connection with their heritage. This practice of offering rice to deities and ancestors before consumption reflects the tribe's deep spiritual connection to their food, which is seen not just as sustenance but as a sacred gift from the divine and their forebears. The rituals surrounding these rice varieties highlight the Tipra tribe's holistic

worldview, where agriculture, spirituality, and community are deeply interconnected. These traditions also serve as a means of preserving their cultural identity and passing down ancestral knowledge to future generations, ensuring that the sacred relationship between the tribe, their land, and their deities remains intact.

The Tipra tribe cultivates various rice varieties, including Maisa, Maichikon, Mai Kwchak and Maikotor, for their regular consumption. They primarily prefer Mairum Awlla (atop rice) over boiled rice, as it aligns with their traditional food habits. Additionally, they extract Maifan (rice foam) during the boiling process and give it to children due to its health and energy benefits. On special occasions and festivals such as Gorai, Boisu, and Haagrai, they use specific rice varieties like Maami, Guria, and Maiborok, which hold cultural significance and are reserved for these traditional celebrations. This distinction between daily consumption and festive use highlights the deep-rooted connection between food and their cultural practices.

- **Muiya (bamboo shoot):** Used in curries and pickles, bamboo shoot is a delicacy in Tipra cuisine. It is harvested from the forests and adds a unique flavour to dishes. Bamboo shoots are also fermented to create Muiya kwan, a key ingredient in many traditional recipes such as Chatang Mui, Chakhatwi, Mui hontalwi, Gudok and Awandrow. Muiya is a staple ingredient in Tipra cuisine, incorporated into various traditional dishes. It is naturally available in most seasons except January and February. However, to ensure the availability year-round, the Tipra people dry the bamboo shoots in sunlight and preserve them for future use. This preservation method allows them to enjoy its distinct flavour even during the months when fresh bamboo shoots are not accessible.
- **Berma (Fermented fish):** Berma is a traditional fermented and dried fish product that holds significant cultural and culinary importance for the Tipra community. The process of making Berma involves fermenting small fish, typically puthi (a local variety of fish), and then sun-drying it to preserve it for extended periods. This preservation method not only enhances the fish's flavour but also makes it a versatile ingredient in many traditional dishes. Berma is a key component in several iconic Tipra recipes, such as Gudok, Berem Bwtwi, Chakhwi, Chatang, Awandru, Mosdeng etc.

The fermentation process gives Berma a strong, pungent aroma and a rich umami flavor, which adds depth and complexity to the dishes. It is not only a staple in daily meals but also a symbol of cultural identity for the Tipra people, reflecting their resourcefulness in food preservation and their deep connection to local ingredients. Berma's unique taste and versatility make it an indispensable part of Tipra cuisine.

- **Muihan (Meat):** The Tripura Tribe Community, an indigenous group primarily found in the northeastern regions of India, has a deep-rooted culinary tradition centered on meat, particularly pork. Meat, referred to as `Muihan`, is a favorite and integral part of their diet, often taking center stage in their daily meals and cultural celebrations. Pork, in particular, holds a special place in their cuisine and is a must-have during various occasions and rituals, such as Hangrai, Boisu, Goriya and Hojagiri, where chicken or pork is considered essential. Many households in the community raise pigs, reflecting the importance of pork in their lifestyle. Popular pork-based dishes among the Tipra Tribe include `Wak Mosdeng` and `Wak Bubuk Chakwi`, which are cherished for their unique flavors. In addition to pork, the community also consumes other meats like chicken, mutton, deer, squirrel, and various birds, showcasing their diverse palate.

Meat is often enjoyed alongside wine, which is a common beverage in the community. The Tipra Tribe has various methods of preparing meat, including eating it cooked, burnt, or dried, depending on availability and preference. This versatility highlights their adaptability and resourcefulness in food preparation. `Mosdeng`, a traditional pork dish of the Tipra community, is renowned for its rich flavours and cultural significance. Prepared with finely chopped pork, onions, garlic, chillies, and a blend of indigenous spices, it offers a unique taste that has gained popularity beyond the Tipra people. Its simplicity, combined with bold flavours, has made it a favourite among various communities, reflecting the broader appeal of Tipra cuisine.

Overall, meat, especially pork, is not just a dietary staple for the Tripura Tribe but also a symbol of their cultural identity, rituals, and traditional knowledge. It plays a vital role in their daily life, celebrations, and even their approach to health and well-being.

- **Akran (Dry fish):** Dry fish, locally known as Akran, holds a significant place in the culinary traditions of the Tipra community. It is a fundamental ingredient in their daily meals, often added to various dishes to enhance flavor. The widespread use of Akran in Tipra cuisine highlights its cultural and nutritional importance, as it serves as a primary source of protein and essential nutrients. The consumption of Akran is not just a dietary choice but also carries cultural and ritualistic significance. During the Boisu festival, for instance, `puma or luita` fish with elangchai (a kind of vegetable), `Kwkha`, is traditionally consumed as part of the community's customs. The average consumption of Akran per person ranges from 5 to 15 grams per meal, with many individuals incorporating it into one to three meals daily.

One of the most popular Tipra dishes, Gudok is also made from Akran, further showcasing its versatility in their cuisine. Despite economic differences within the community, dry fish remains a staple, as it is affordable and widely accessible. Those with better financial means may have a more diverse diet, but Akran continues to be a preferred and cherished food item among all sections of society. The enduring popularity of Akran reflects not only its nutritional benefits but also its deep-rooted presence in Tipra culture. Whether as part of daily meals or festive occasions, dry fish remains an integral element of the community's food heritage.

4.2 Subsidiary Food Items

- **Aah(Fish):** The Tipra people include fish in their diet, although it is not as highly preferred as pork. In modern times, they primarily prepare fish as curry, which is a common method of consumption. However, they still honor traditional practices, such as burning fish, a technique favored by their ancestors, and occasionally consume it this way. Additionally, some Tipra people eat fish after drying it or boiling it with vegetables, a dish known as `Berembwtwi`. When fish is plentiful, they preserve a portion by drying it, ensuring it can be stored and consumed later. This reflects their resourcefulness and respect for both traditional and contemporary culinary practices.
- **Toktwi(Egg):** The Tipra community does not have a strong preference for eggs, consuming them only once or twice a week. Children tend to like eggs more than adults, with `Rugwi` (boiled) eggs being given to them due to their mild taste. Some youths consume eggs raw for their nutritional benefits, but generally, eggs are eaten as curry, with most people having one egg per meal. However, some individuals eat two eggs at a time, while those with financial constraints consume only half an egg per meal. Local hen eggs are preferred over poultry eggs, as the community believes that poultry eggs are unhealthy and can carry diseases. Traditional methods of cooking eggs in the Tipra community include:
 - I. **Bamboo Roasting:** A bamboo culm is cut into two pieces, and raw eggs are placed inside before being roasted in burning coal. Once the process is complete, the eggs are ready to be served.
 - II. **Turmeric Leaf Boiling:** Another method involves wrapping broken eggs in turmeric leaves, which are then tied securely and placed in burning coal. The turmeric leaves enhance the aroma of the eggs. After some time, the eggs are fully boiled and ready for consumption.

These traditional techniques reflect the community's unique and natural approach to food preparation.

- **Mwkhwitwng(Vegetables):** The Tipra tribe consumes a variety of vegetables, including thabolong(forest potato), kosoi (kidney bean), Muiya (bamboo shoot), radish, phantok (brinjal),

orai,(forest leaves), ganga bosok, thalik mikhumu (bananashoot), samsata, and maitu , among others. These vegetables, sourced from both forests and cultivation, are essential to their diet and reflect their traditional reliance on natural resources.

- **Bwthai (fruit):** The Tipra tribe eats different types of `bwthai` (fruits) based on seasonal availability.
Summer: The community consumes fruits like thaichuk(mango), thaipung(jackfruit), thailik(banana), watermelon, litchi, jamuk(blackberry), cucumber, Thwntwrwi(tamarind), thaipolok, thaichrem, Khwchang etc.
Winter: They prefer oranges, cherries, amlai(Indian gooseberry), boira,boro(plum)etc. Their diet is heavily influenced by the availability of food in forests and markets.
- **Thok (Oil):** The Tipra Community traditionally uses minimal oil in their cooking, favouring boiled dishes. They often boil vegetables and add fish or dry fish to improve the taste. Historically, they used sesame oil obtained from their jhum cultivation. In recent times, they have begun incorporating a small amount of oil into recipes like curries and other dishes.

4.3 Use of Narcotics in the Tipra Community

- **Alcohol consumption:** Alcohol plays an integral role in the social and cultural practices of the Tripura tribe. Their primary alcoholic beverage is `Chuwak or Kolo Brandi`, a homemade rice wine that is prepared by women. Every woman in the community is skilled in making this wine, which is used during personal and communal ceremonies, including Boisu, Goriya, Hangrai, Kalai panda (wedding) and other festivals. A unique marriage ritual in the tribe involves the bride and groom offering wine to their parents as a token of respect and honour. The preparation of rice wine is entirely homemade, and they do not purchase alcohol from outside sources.
- **Drinking Culture (Chuwak):** The drinking habit is widespread across all members of the Tipra tribe. However, they strictly consume homemade wine rather than buying from the market. Since women primarily prepare the wine, it is always available within their households. Apart from its role in religious ceremonies, wine is also offered as a sign of hospitality to respected guests and elders.
- **Smoking and Chewing Tobacco (Biri tei Duma):** Smoking is equally prevalent among both men and women. The tribe traditionally uses two types of hookahs (Duma Dapa), which are crafted from large bamboo plants. In addition to hookahs, many community members also smoke bidi (hand-rolled tobacco cigarettes). Another common habit is chewing pan (betel leaf) and supari (betel nut), which they either purchase from the market or gather from the forest. These practices are deeply embedded in their culture and often accompany social interactions.

5. Plant Utilization as Medicine as well as Food in the Tipra Community

The Tipra community heavily relies on traditional herbal medicine for treating various illnesses. Their remedies include ingredients derived from: (a) leaves of medicinal plants, (b) Extracts from insects and insect droppings and (c) Climbers and tree-based plant medicines. There are various types of medicinal plants, such as fenkachu, samsota, muimasing, thaipholok,swtwi etc, are used for treating different diseases and for food in the Tipra community. Dr. K. Deb Barma, in his book `Tribal Folk Medicine of Tripura` mentioned the uses of various medicinal plants. Therapeutical uses of muimasing: Juice of the leaves is given with a little salt in jaundice, but seeds and leaves ground into a paste , wormed and applied over the mamma has the effect of the checking the secretion of milk, and poultice made with the seeds reduce swelling¹². This muimasing plant is not only used as medicinal plant but also as food in the Tipra community.

5.1. Role of Traditional Healers (Ochai)

Instead of seeking treatment from government hospitals, the tribe places immense trust in local village doctors, known as Ochai. These traditional healers hold a special position in the community due to their knowledge of medicinal plants.

- When financially unstable, patients compensate Ochai with homemade wine instead of money.

- If they are unable to pay in cash, they may offer raw rice (Maichwlam) or vegetables (Mui Kwthwng) as a form of payment.
- Ochai often visit the patients at home, providing more accessible healthcare than government doctors.

The Tipra community possesses a basic understanding of plant-based medicine and uses various plants to treat diseases.

6. Food in Various Stages of Life Cycle among the Tripura Tribe

The Tipra community does not have rigid distinctions for specific foods based on life stages. Instead, their diet is largely based on available natural resources, primarily sourced from forests. However, certain foods are traditionally associated with specific phases of life due to their perceived health benefits and nutritional value. The following section outlines the dietary patterns followed at different stages of life within the Tipra community.

6.1. Childhood and Adolescence

During childhood and adolescence, specific foods are considered essential for growth and development:

- **By-products of Mai (Steamed Rice):** Steamed rice by-products are highly nutritious and commonly consumed during childhood and adolescence. It is believed to contribute to good health and physical development.
- **Grinding Food:** This practice is popular among the Tipra community, particularly for infants and young children. Sometimes, mothers pre-chew food before feeding it to their children to make it easier to digest. Grinding food is considered highly nutritious and essential for early childhood development.

6.2. Pregnancy and Postpartum Nutrition

Pregnancy and postpartum periods are crucial stages where women require additional nutrition. The Tipra tribe follows certain food traditions during these phases:

- **Grinding Food for Pregnant Women:** Pregnant women are often provided with grinding food, as it is believed to enhance breast milk production, benefiting both the mother and the newborn.
- **Thalik (Bananas):** Pregnant women consume large quantities of bananas, considering them a rich source of energy. This fruit is believed to provide the necessary strength for childbirth and recovery.
- **Tohan Pengma (Boiled Chicken):** Tohan Pengma is a staple food for pregnant women, except for children under the age of six. It is preferred due to its high protein content, which helps in ensuring a healthy pregnancy and childbirth.
- **General Nutrition:** Expecting mothers are encouraged to consume a variety of nutrient-rich foods, including milk, fish, meat, eggs, pulses, dry fish, and mushrooms. These are considered essential for maternal health and fetal development.
- **Koyaphal (Papaya):** It is highly favoured among pregnant women and adolescents. It is widely consumed due to its perceived health benefits during pregnancy.

6.3. Dietary Preferences for Children

Children in the Tipra community are often given specific foods that are easy to digest and provide essential nutrients:

- **Rukjak Manwi(Boiledfoods):** Boiled foods such as Toktwi Rukjak (boiled eggs), pulses, and Alu Rukjak (Boiled potatoes) are commonly fed to children. These foods are chosen for their high nutritional value and digestibility.
- **Pengjak:** A special food made primarily for children. Meat (without oil) is placed inside a bamboo culm, sealed, and then cooked over burning coal until it boils. After cooking, the child's parents grind the meat in their mouths before feeding it to the child.
- **Hangjak:** A well-known baby food among the Tipra tribe. Meat is cut into small pieces, ensuring that no oil is present. The meat pieces are then placed on bamboo sticks and roasted over an open flame. Once cooked, parents grind the meat before feeding it to their child.

6.4. Food during Christening of a Child

In the Tipra community, the christening of a newborn child is a significant event, marked by special food customs. If the newborn is male, a cock is sacrificed, cleaned, and boiled whole. For female children, the same process is followed, but a hen is used instead. Alongside the meat, rice is also prepared. The food is considered sacred and reserved for the newborn, meaning no one else can consume it beforehand. The mother and child are seated on a newly decorated bed, and all the cooked food is placed before them. A dish containing paddy and cotton is also present for visitors, who bless the child using these items. Monetary offerings may also be given as blessings. The ceremony is accompanied by local wine, which is served along with pork or any other available meat for guests.

6.5. Food during Death Rituals

When someone dies in the community, a unique food custom is observed. Until the funeral takes place, no one in the village consumes any food, as it is believed that eating before the burial may allow the soul of the deceased to enter their bodies. If the deceased lived far from the village, the funeral might take one or two days to arrange, and during this period, only water is consumed. However, during memorial ceremonies held in honour of the deceased, villagers consume meat, fish, and wine. A strict prohibition exists against consuming Berema, a type of fermented fish, as it is believed that eating it during the memorial event would make the body impure.

6.6. Food Restrictions in the Tripura Community

Although the Tipra community does not have general food restrictions, there are specific foods like Bolongni Dalok (Wild Vegetables), Bolongni Mui Bahan (Wild meat), Andaroso (Pineapple), Jami (Lemon) that are avoided during certain life stages, such as childhood and pregnancy. These restrictions are observed due to cultural beliefs and health considerations.

7. Process and Preparation of Food and Cultural Identity

Food is not just a means of sustenance for the Tipra tribe; it is a symbol of their heritage and communal harmony. Cooking and eating are collective activities, strengthening family and social bonds. Women play a crucial role in passing down recipes and culinary techniques. The Tipra tribe has a unique way of preparing food, which is different from other tribes. In the past, they lived near their Jhum fields, growing different crops and vegetables for their daily meals. Since Tripura has 19 different tribal communities, each group has its own cooking style. They mostly collect fruits and vegetables from forests and cook using simple methods. Instead of using a lot of oil and spices, they prefer boiling, steaming, or roasting their food. They sometimes cook in bamboo or wrap food in turmeric leaves before cooking. They also use special ingredients like chakhwtwi or Alkoli water to make traditional dishes like Mui Chakkwi; they often burn meat before eating it. Even today, many people from the Tipra tribe still follow these traditional cooking methods. Here are some important traditional food recipes from Tipra community discussed below:

I. Gudak: Gudak is a simple and common dish made with vegetables and rotten fish. First, all vegetables except greenchilli are cut and washed. They are then placed in a cooking pot along with rotten fish, salt, and water. Some vegetables should remain above the water level before covering the pot with a lid. The mixture is then cooked over a flame. Once done, the remaining soup is drained into a separate bowl, and the cooked ingredients are mashed and mixed back with the soup. Once well combined, the dish is ready to serve.

II. Mosdeng: Mosdeng is a roasted and mashed dish. Green chilli and rotten fish are roasted properly, and then transferred to a wooden bowl. Salt is added for taste, and the ingredients are mashed together. Finally, chopped onion is mixed in, and the dish is ready to eat.

III. Awandru: Awandru requires more water than vegetables. It starts by boiling water with salt and chopped green chilli. Once it starts boiling, vegetables and rotten fish are added, and the pot is covered for about 30 minutes. When fully cooked, grinded rice paste is added and stirred well to prevent sticking. Finally, crushed garlic is added, and the dish is cooked for another 2-3 minutes before turning off the flame. The dish is now ready.

IV. Chakwi: Chakwi is prepared using a combination of wet green chilli, rotten fish or pork, bamboo shoots, jackfruit seeds, lemon leaves, soda water, and grinded rice paste. The cooking process is similar to other dishes, where the ingredients are cooked together and mixed well to bring out the flavours.

V. Chatang: This dish follows a similar process as Chakhwi but with some variations. The water quantity is reduced to one-third of the vegetables. The ingredients are the same, but grinded rice paste and lemon leaves are omitted. The key difference is that the soup is dried up before removing the dish from the flame.

VI. Chakhwtwi: It is prepared using a combination of soda water, green chilli, dry fish (luita or Aahsuri), ginger, and vegetables like brinjal. The cooking process is similar to other dishes, where the ingredients are cooked together and mixed well to bring out the flavours. Finally, crushed garlic is added before turning off the flame.

VII. Maidul: It is a simple dish made by mixing hot rice with a bit of salt. The rice is mashed and pressed tightly by hand to form a round shape. If the rice sticks to the hands, a small amount of water is used to moisten them. The shaped rice is then placed on burning charcoal. It is turned occasionally until the surface hardens and develops a reddish-yellow colour. Once evenly cooked, it is ready to serve.

VIII. Egwi or Ik: Egwi involves cooking fish or chicken with onions, chilli, salt, and turmeric powder, all wrapped in turmeric leaves. The ingredients are prepared by washing and cutting the fish, chilli, and onions. They are then placed on a turmeric leaf, seasoned with turmeric powder and salt, and wrapped tightly. The bundle is placed on burning charcoal for 15-20 minutes. After cooking, it is removed and ready to eat.

IX. Awang Bwthai: This dish involves soaking sticky rice for a few hours, washing it thoroughly, and then mixing it with chopped onion, ginger, and salt. The mixture is carefully placed into cone-shaped leaves, which are tightly secured with rope. These leaf-wrapped packets are then boiled in water for about 50 to 60 minutes. Once fully cooked, they are taken out and served with Kwkha or Sabzi (combination of dry fish and vegetable).

X. Chuwak Bwtwk: For this preparation, rice is first washed, cooked, and spread out to cool. A fermenting agent is mixed into the cooled rice, and the mixture is tightly packed into a pot. The pot is sealed with banana leaves and tied securely with rope. It is then stored in a warm, dry place for over a week to allow the flavours to develop and sweeten. After fermentation, the pot is opened, and water is added to soak the rice for about 20-30 minutes before it is ready to be served.

XI. Batima: One of the important foods in the Tipra Community. Batima is a plant that grows primarily in hilly and forested areas, often found on slopes. It produces seeds that are used as food, though they are not consumed directly due to their poisonous nature, which can cause itching. The seeds are circular in shape with tiny knots. To make them edible, the seeds are dug up, peeled, and cut into pieces. They are then washed with a sodium or soda-based liquid to reduce their toxicity. After washing, the seeds are husked using a wooden tool, which makes them sticky. The husked seeds are shaped into a bread-like form (awang) and dried for several days. Even after processing, some itchiness may remain, but the seeds are still used as food.

The Tipra people consume Batima in various ways, such as cutting the dried seed flesh into small pieces, pickling it, or mixing it with other vegetables, husked rice, alkaline liquids, salt, or by frying it. This plant is an important part of their diet, despite the need for careful preparation to make it safe for consumption. The process highlights the community's knowledge of traditional food preparation methods and their ability to utilize local resources effectively.

These methods highlight the use of simple, natural ingredients and traditional cooking techniques, emphasizing the cultural significance of food preparation in this community. The processes reflect a deep connection to nature and traditional practices, using readily available resources like turmeric leaves and charcoal for cooking.

8. Impact of Modernization on Tipra Food Culture

- **Shift in Dietary Habits:** Modernization has introduced processed and fast foods, leading to a gradual shift away from traditional diets among younger generations. Traditional ingredients and cooking methods are being replaced by convenience foods, which are often less nutritious.
- **Loss of Traditional Knowledge:** As younger members of the Tipra community adopt modern lifestyles, there is a risk of losing traditional culinary knowledge and practices. Elders who hold this knowledge may not pass it down, leading to a decline in the preparation of traditional dishes.
- **Commercialization of Traditional Foods:** Some traditional foods, like Wahan Mosdeng, Bangwi, and Gudok, have gained popularity and are being commercialized. While this increases their visibility, it may also lead to alterations in recipes and preparation methods to suit mass production.
- **Health Concerns:** The introduction of modern, high-calorie, and low-nutrient foods has led to health issues such as obesity and diabetes within the community. Traditional foods, which are often healthier and more balanced, are being consumed less frequently.
- **Cultural Erosion:** The adoption of modern foods and lifestyles can lead to a dilution of cultural identity, as traditional food practices are an integral part of the Tipra heritage.

9. Recommendations

- **Preservation of Traditional Knowledge:** Document and preserve traditional recipes and cooking methods through written records, videos, and community workshops. Encourage elders to teach younger generations about traditional food practices.
- **Promotion of Traditional Foods:** Promote traditional dishes like Wahan Mosdeng, Bangwi, and Gudok through cultural festivals, food fairs, and culinary tourism. Highlight the health benefits and cultural significance of these foods to attract a wider audience.
- **Integration with Modern Nutrition:** Integrate traditional foods into modern dietary guidelines to emphasize their nutritional value. Develop educational programs that teach the importance of a balanced diet incorporating traditional and modern foods.
- **Sustainable Practices:** Encourage sustainable harvesting and farming practices to ensure the availability of traditional ingredients. Support local farmers and producers who grow and supply traditional ingredients.
- **Community Engagement:** Foster community engagement through cooking classes, traditional food competitions, and cultural exchange programs. Create platforms for sharing traditional food knowledge within and outside the Tipra community.
- **Health and Wellness Programs:** Implement health and wellness programs that promote the consumption of traditional foods as part of a healthy lifestyle. Address health concerns by educating the community about the benefits of traditional diets over processed foods.
- **Policy Support:** Advocate for policies that support the preservation and promotion of traditional food cultures. Seek government and NGO support for initiatives aimed at sustaining traditional culinary practices.

10. Conclusion

The traditional food habits of the Tipra tribe are a vital part of their cultural heritage, offering insights into their history, environment, and social values. Preserving these culinary traditions is essential not only for maintaining cultural identity but also for promoting sustainable and healthy dietary practices. This study underscores the importance of safeguarding indigenous food systems as a means of preserving global cultural diversity.

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