

A Historical Study of Traditional Alcoholic Drinks Among the Various Tribal Communities of Assam.

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ABSTRACT

Food has always been a big deal in ethnic cultures. Assam is a state in north-eastern India that is diverse and rich in culture. It is a region where many different tribes coexist. Each tribe maintained its indigenous ethnicity in addition to its eating practices. The tradition of preparing alcoholic beverages is considered to be essential to certain tribal rituals. This study mostly focused on the following tribes: Ahom, Bodo, Deori, Missing, Rabhas, Karbis, Dimasa, and SonowalKacharis. The way that alcohol is used and how it is prepared, as well as the names of these traditional drinks are vary from tribe to tribe. The observation and descriptive approaches are used in this work to explore the drinking cultures of these Assamese tribes. The human mind's curiosity about regional beverages never goes away with time. Drinking traditional beverages and experimenting with them not only offers a specific honour to cultural heritage but also enhances flavour.

Key Words: *Tribes, liquor, culture, traditions.*

1 Introduction:

Alcoholic beverages plays an important role in the tradition and culture among the tribes of India. The word *Somras*(which is mentioned in most of the Vedic texts)signifies the existence of the alcoholic drink in the Vedic time and it was used in all of the ceremonies of the Vedic period. In the north-eastern region of India, rice beer consumption and its

preparation is a popular practice among ethnic communities. It is an integral component in the socio-cultural life of the tribal people. Assam, one of the seven North-Eastern States of India is well-known for its diverse culture and tradition. The tribes that inhabited here practices so many rituals and the alcoholic beverage plays an important role in those rituals. The preparation and consumption of traditional alcoholic beverages emerged mainly due to climatic conditions. The climate of Assam is typically 'Tropical Monsoon Rainforest Climate', with high levels of humidity and heavy rainfall. Due to this people of Assam love to enjoy the alcoholic drinks in the rainy days. It is also used as a tonic to refresh bodily sensations. It has been a source of relaxation, and intoxication to generate a positive mood and get relief from stress for the hardworking ethnic groups. These drinks gave instant relief from diseases. Rice beer is believed to work against insomnia, headache, inflammation of body parts, diarrhoea and urinary problems, expelling worms and as a treatment against cholera. These drinks are also used as a stress booster and used to forget the hassle of life and body pain too. The preparation of the rice beer is taken as part of their tradition and transferred from generation to generation. The elderly women of a family teach the young generation (mainly, mothers-in-laws to their daughters-in-law) how to prepare the traditional drink as the duty assigned to the women to hold their traditional beliefs and practices.

2 **Objectives of the Study:-**

1. To study the alcoholic drinks among the various tribal communities of Assam.
2. To investigate and analyse the rituals and culture related to the traditional alcoholic beverages of the tribal communities

3 **Methodology**

The study follows both historical and analytical. Both primary and secondary sources are going to consult in the preparation of this particular topic. The primary sources are relevant periodicals and appropriate journals. Secondary sources include published books and journals. Relevant websites and browsers are consulted in the preparation of this topic.

4 Discussion :

Assam is famous for its rich culture and diversity and has a large, insatiable appetite when it comes to its delicious food. It is the home to a lot of local drinks among the various tribes of Assam. Here we are going to discuss the traditional drinks among the various tribes of Assam. Here we are going to discuss the traditional drinks among the various tribes of Assam.

4.1 Ahoms:

The Tai Ahoms of Assam belong to the Indo-Mongoloid racial group. They came to Assam in the 12th century by crossing the river Irawati and ruled here for almost 600 years. They also brought some of the traditional practices from their ancestral land and make these popular in Assam. The traditional alcoholic drink of Ahoms is Xajpani or Laopani which is the most popular drink in Assam. This drink is used on auspicious occasions like marriage, and death ceremonies. The foreign travelers who visited Assam in different periods did mention the traditional practices of Ahoms. The Tai Ahoms of Assam belong to the Indo-Mongoloid racial group. They came to Assam in the 12th century by crossing the river Irawati and ruled here for almost 600 years. They also brought some of the traditional practices from their ancestral land and make these popular in Assam. The traditional alcoholic drink of Ahoms is Xajpani or Laopani which is the most popular drink in Assam. This drink is used on auspicious occasions like marriage, and death ceremonies. The foreign travellers who visited Assam in different periods did mention the traditional practices of Ahoms and they found that the consumption of alcoholic drinks is the main basis of their tradition. Shihabuddin Talish who visited Assam in the medieval period did mention the food habits of the Ahom and also indicated that alcoholic drink plays an integral part in their hospitality as they offer this to any guest with extreme honour. In 1908, P.R. Gordon observed, "Pigs and fowls abound in the Deodhai villages. Ahoms who have not Hinduised, sometimes even those who have become the disciples of Vaishnavite gossains, eat pork, and fowls, and drink rice beer and rice spirit, much to the scandal of their sanctimonious Assamese Hindu neighbours, who regard them with horror. So, this is an age-old practice of Ahoms and possesses an integral part of their tradition.

4.2 Bodos:

In population, Bodos are the largest tribe in Assam. They are enriched with their own magnificent culture and heritage. In the cultural field of the Bodos, their traditional alcoholic beverages occupy a significant place. In the Bodo language, their alcoholic drinks are called 'Jou' or 'Jumai'. It is the favourite alcoholic drink of the Bodo community and has many nutritive values as well as taste.

Preparation of Jumai- Basically it is a rice beer of Bodos. The starter culture which is used to prepare Jumai is locally known as Angkur. To prepare jumai, plants and some tree leaves are dried for around a month. For this process, the Bodo people collect some wild plants, banana leaves, pineapple leaves, and some parts of sugarcane and smash them with rice and water. Then it is converted into some balls and kept for drying. After getting dried for a month it can be used to prepare the beer. After the balls get dried, the main process of preparing Jumai starts. To make Jumai adequate quantity of rice is cooked. After it becomes cold, the rice is mixed with the balls and kept in three earthen pots which are call as- *Darkha, Maldang, and Jonga*. And after almost 3/4 days it becomes drinkable.

So the preparation of Jumai as well as hosting it to guests is a significant ritual of the Bodo community and has contributed a lot towards their culture.

4.3 Deoris:

The Deori tribe is one of the major ethnic tribes of Assam, India. They are mostly found in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Dhemaji, Sivasagar, Darrang of Assam and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. The Deori tribe belongs to the great Tibeto-Mongolian race belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. The traditional alcoholic drink of the *Deorisis Sujen*. It is also known as Mod- Ptha. It is prepared by mixing rice powder with different powdered plant parts and an amount of previously made old Mod-Pitha is added to it which acts as an inoculant. Cooked rice is mixed with powdered Mod pitha and spread on a bamboo mat and covered with banana leaves overnight. The next day the mixture is poured into a sterilized earthen pot(Koloh) and the mouth of the pot is wrapped tightly with banana leaves and kept for fermentation for 3-4 days in summer and 1 week in winter. Sujen is filtered for consumption after adding water in to it. The Deoris of Assam claimed to carry

this from their ancestors. The Sujen plays an important role in their traditional practices. The Sujen is offered in the rituals like marriage, death and birth ceremony of the Deoris and too offers to their guests in their visits to a Deori people home.

4.4 Miching:-

One of the most important indigenous tribes of Assam is the Missing community. With their rituals, customs, and culture they occupy an important place in the cultural field of Assam. Missing people are said to have inhabited the eastern Himalayan region in Tibet in the hoary past and migrated from the Siang region of present Arunachal Pradesh to the present Assam State.

The traditional alcoholic beverage of Missing is known as 'Apong', fermented from rice, is more than a drink; has been an integral part of the social, cultural and religious life of the Missing people. It is produced by fermenting cooked rice with locally prepared starter cakes called E'pob, which in turn is prepared from the mixture of rice flour and plant ingredients. There are two types of Apong- NogaApong and PorApong. This is consumed in social and day-to-day life, the most preferred occasion being after a hard day's work. Besides, Apong is used in all cultural and religious occasions like Midang(traditional marriage), Ui(rituals), TaniSiko(death ceremony), and festivals(Po: rag, Ali a: ye li'gang, Dobur etc).

4.4.1 Cultural History of Apong:-

The myth and origin of the Adi and Missing people are closely associated with the origin of starter cakes(E pob) and their uses for producing the alcoholic beverage Apong. The A: bang(Missings oral history) narrates the legend of a beautiful fairy – MitiOmum, daughter of PedongNa:ne(mother of millions) in Mitimijo(the land of fragrance). One day her breast milk spilt all over the land and several plants sprouted and grew abundantly wherever the milk spilt. The spilt breast milk of MitiOmum was also collected by EngoTakarKarmuMudeng, wife of AboTani. EngoTakar stored the breast milk in a container but the milk remained unchanged for many days. Eager to see what happens to the breast milk, EngoTakar collected some plants like Rukji, Bungkiripuk, Rikom and Taje-jetui and Taje-jepo. The plants were pounded into a powder mass and with the addition of water made

into cakes and named E'pop. After drying, the cakes were ground to a fine powder and then mixed with the breast milk of MitiOmum. On the third day, the breast milk-E'pob mixture started producing a sweet fragrance. When the fragrance spread into the surrounding environment, all creatures, spirits (good and evil) and people from the region came to see the fragrant product of fermentation of the breast milk. This alcoholic product has been named Apong; when tested it was found to be sweet and pleasant. Since then, the Adi and Mising people knew that E'pob brings about the fermentation of cooked rice to produce Apong hence, consider E'pob indispensable for the production of Apong .

4.5 Rabhas:-

Another important tribe of Assam the Rabhas also use rice beer extensively in their social system. There are several drinks among the Rabhas- *ChokotDasbru*, *ChokoMari*(For Social use), *Loy Sabna*(For personal use) *MakhamSitha*(Beer prepared from Bora rice) etc. To prepare their drinks there is a mixture call as- *Bakhar*, in the Rabha language. Roots, pineapple, leaves, jackfruit leaves, leaves of sugarcane, banana leaves, chilly etc are used by the Rabhas in the preparation of *Bakhar*. These materials are dried, mixed, and converted into a cake which is used to prepare their beverages.

Besides the above drinks, The Rabhas also use another type of drink called *Sinsinia*. This drink is preserved for around 10 years and is used as a medicine as well. The way of making *Sinsinia* is different. This drink is prepared from Bora rice. Half-baked Bora rice is mixed with *Bakhor* and kept in a bamboo pot. The pot is covered with hay and banana leaves. After around two months when the rice gets fermented, the drink is segregated and the drink is kept in another pot. This drink is very strong and is normally prepared during the winter.

4.6 Karbis:-

The Karbis are one of the major hill tribes of North-East India, concentrated mainly in the hilly region of Assam – KarbiAnglong and North Cachar Hills. Their home-brewed alcoholic beverage is called *HorAlank*. *HorAlank* is rice beer produced by fermentation of cooked rice with a locally prepared yeast culture called *Thap*, while alcohol distilled from

Horlank is called HorArak. Horlank is traditionally used during Adam Asar(traditional marriage) and She karkli(worship). Arak is used in all social occasions including death ceremonies and it is also offered to guests as a mark of respect. However, both forms of beverages are consumed as a refreshing drinks.

4.7 Dimasas:

The Dimasa people (also called Dimasa-Kachari) are a group of people inhabiting the NC hills of Assam and Nagaland in north-east India. Their home-made alcoholic drink is Judima. Judima is a traditional rice beer/ wine prepared by Dimasa tribe especially the women of the DimaHasao district of Assam. The consumption of rice beer/ wine brewed from different tribal communities of Assam including Dimasa. The making of Judima wine has become an integral part of their cultural and social life for generations. Recently, it got a GI tag. So, it signifies the importance of this traditional drink as lately it got recognition from the government.

4.8 SonowalKacharis:

The SonowalKacharis are one of the indigenous ethnic groups of the north-east part of India. They are a sub-group of Kacharis in Assam and are also found in other states of north-east India. The Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts of Assam are inhabited by the SonowalKacharis. The traditional alcoholic beverage prepared by SonowalKacharis is called Mod (consumed undistilled). This fermented beverage is prepared using rice as the substrate. This is also known as Rohi . For preparing Rohi half cooked rice is allowed to cool and produced Saolpitha is added to it and mixed properly. The mixture is then kept in an earthen pot covered with banana leaves for 3-4 days for fermentation. Finally, the Rohi is extracted from the fermented mass. It means the process of the preparation of traditional drinks is almost the same as other tribes of Assam. Rohi is a part of their tradition and it is offered to their deity and also used in auspicious occasions like marriage, death ceremonies and religious rites.

5 Conclusion:

So, we can conclude that Assam is rich for its rich culture and diversity and has a large, insatiable appetite when it comes to its delicious food. And in this regards, consumption and use of traditional rice beers in socio-cultural and religious activities among different ethnic communities of Assam are age-old practices. Most of the tribal communities –Ahom, Bodo, Miching, Rabha, Karbi, Dimasa and Sonowal-Kachari etc has their unique process to prepare traditional beverages. But the common things among them is that most of the tribes in Assam prepare their traditional drinks from rice and make beer cakes for the preparation of the drinks and kept the beer in earthen pots. As they used basically natural products like herbs, wild plants, roots etc. Therefore, apart from the socio-religious, cultural relevance the traditional drinks belonging to the tribal communities are believed to have significant nutritive and health benefits as well.

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