

A Study on the Early Assamese Food habits of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa

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Abstract

Food habit of a society is determined by the geography it is bound by. The climate, flora and fauna, terrain and others contribute largely to determine the food intake of a community. Assam is one of the easternmost states of India bounded together by different indigenous communities with different cultures. Amalgamation of all has resulted in a unique kind of cuisine far different from the mainland India. The region saw the emergence of Aryanization from fourth century with the advent of its first dynastic line of kings. The following period saw influx of different cultural group from mainland India resulting in a mixed culture drawing inspiration from each and every element. Thus, it is important to understand and study the food-habits of early Assam and make a critical assessment.

Keywords- food, climate, terrain, communities, Aryanization

Introduction

Assam known as Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa in early times has been in the talk since the mythical era. Its earliest known traditional king was Mahiranga Danava¹. His capital was near the present city of Guwahati. However, his line of kings, Ghatakasura being the last of his line, was dethroned by Narakasura. According to *Kalika Purana* Naraka was born of mother

¹ Baruah, S.L, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, p. 78

earth Prithvi and Vishnu in its boar incarnation². Finally Naraka himself was dethroned by Krishna and Bhagadatta was made the next king in line. If Puranas are to be believed, it was Naraka who settled twice-born people in this country³. If this incident was considered as true then this period of legend saw the first settlement of Aryans in this part of the land. This episode is important because with the coming of Aryans the food habits might have witnessed a drastic change over time. Also, if we take a closer look across the dynastic history of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, one can witness that the Varman line of kings were very much under the influence of Gupta empire of the mainland India. In a bid to imitate the Guptas and their customs, Mahendrarvarman of Varman dynasty of early Assam made two *ashvamedha* sacrifices⁴. He was the first from early Assam who made a sacrifice to appease Vedic gods. Also, Sthithavarman was the first in their line to perform his coronation ceremony based on Vedic rites⁵. The influence of Aryanism in this part of the land is also proved by the innumerable land grants the kings made to Brahmanas from Varman, Salastambha and Pala dynasty. With the admixture of Aryan and non-Aryan population early Assam or Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa saw a change in their polity, culture, economy and religious belief especially their food-habits.

Food habits of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa

Rice has been the staple food of Assamese people since a very long time. The *bighas* of land cultivating rice across the countryside to this date proves that rice cultivation was very much important among the local people. Also, people use to domesticate cattle. Cattle as a form of wealth were considered to be an asset since the Vedic times. As a result, cattle products like

² Ibid, p. 78

³ Ibid, p. 79

⁴ Barpujari, H.K., *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, pp. 100- 105

⁵ Ibid, pp. 105-110

milk, curd, ghee and sweets made out of it were used in common household⁶. The abundant use of rice in food preparations also caused various other delicacies that were made out of it. The popular one to this day which is usually made during special occasions in Assamese household is *payasam*. Probably, it was made with honey and not sugar. Another universal habit of Assamese people is the chewing of areca nut and betel leaf which has been a practice among the Khasi tribe⁷. The use of betel nut is also mentioned in various epigraphs and literary sources including *Harshacharita*.

As there were not many salt brines the common people had to find alternative to it. This was found with the introduction of *Khar*. The barks and roots of plantain tree, especially banana tree contains alkaline properties⁸. This was used to make food salty and alkaline. This black liquid is mixed with different items, but most popularly with papaya, gourd and leafy vegetables⁹. The *Khar* is widely used in the Assamese cuisine to this day which also contains some medicinal properties also. It is believed that because of its alkaline nature the intake of *khar* with rice made gut healthy.

Another most popular dish is *kol posola*. It is made with the soft bark found inside the banana tree. Taken with main course meal, it is a favourite since decades. Reference to food-habits is also made in literary sources. *Yogini Tantra* a 16th century work discusses the land and culture of early Assam. It recommends the use of meat especially that of *hamsa* or duck, *paravata* or pigeons and *varaha* or wild boar¹⁰. However, upper class people were prohibited from eating fish having no scale or having the shape of a serpent¹¹.

⁶ Baruah, S.L, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, p. 155

⁷ Barpujari, H.K. op.cit

⁸ Saikia, Arani, Food-Habits in pre-colonial Assam, [http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v2\(6\)/Version-2/A02620105.pdf](http://www.ijhssi.org/papers/v2(6)/Version-2/A02620105.pdf) p.2

⁹ Ibid, p.2-3

¹⁰ Barpujari, H.K, op.cit

¹¹ Ibid, p. 228

The famous Chinese traveller Hiuen- Tsiang also visited Kamarupa. Before coming to Kamarupa he was staying at Nalanda University. Bhaskarvarman on hearing the news of the visit of the pilgrim asked Silabhadra, the head of the Nalanda University at the time to send the pilgrim to Kamarupa. However, to this Silabhadra declined. After a threatening letter by Bhaskarvarman to Silabhadra, he finally managed to persuade the decision in his favour. Hiuen-Tsiang thus visited Kamarupa during the reign of last Varman king, Bhaskarvarman of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. During his visit and staying till a month here, the pilgrim mentioned about this part of the land in his famous work, *Si-Yu-Ki*. Impressed with its wilderness, Hiuen-Tsiang mentioned that he saw abundant jackfruit and coconut trees in the region¹². Surprisingly enough, the author does not mention the use of areca-nut by the people of early Assam which was widely taken by the people of this part of the land.

Thus, it is clear that food-habits are indeed based on the geography of a land. Certain food items are known and taken only in Assam which is not taken elsewhere. This is purely based on the geography of the land. The best example being the *khar* and *kol posola*. Also, with the advent of Aryans, the local dishes saw few changes which resulted in new recipes. The most common foods a taken widely are discussed in various literary texts and epigraphs also.

¹² Beal, Samuel (trans.), *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, p.196