

February 28, 2024

What Eating Reminds You Of

By: Rituparna Patgiri

When foods become metaphors for human relationships, stories about eating reflect memories of bonding, care, and solidarity.

Growing up as the daughter of a single mother, the anthropologist Dolly Kikon spent a lot of time with her neighbours. When she missed her mother, it was one of them, Auntie Senti – also a single woman – whose cooking and food that would comfort her.

Throughout her life, from Nagaland to Delhi to Melbourne and California, Kikon – who is from the Lotha Naga tribe – carried these memories of food. “I always draw from the community spirit of sharing, and surround my life with Naga herbs and food. I love them and I hope they love me too,” she writes in *Food Journeys: Stories from the Heart*, which she has coedited.

The essays collected in the volume focus on the lesser-told stories of food from India's North East. The region's cuisine is flavourful and heterogeneous. Assam's *bhoot jolokia* and Nagaland's *naga morich* chillis are now part the Indian spicescape. Axone and bamboo shoot are widely available across the country. Dishes like *maasor tenga*, *jadoh*, smoked pork are enjoyed by many.

But there is much more. Through pork, chicken, rice, millet, rice beer, and other delights, the volume's authors trace how these comfort foods shape their lives and become metaphors for human relationships. In the process, they shed light on traditional knowledge, community histories, gender relations, stereotypes, memory, and changing socio-economic relationships.

|| Food represents some of the most powerful memories of bonding, care, and solidarity.

For the authors, food represents some of the most powerful memories of bonding, care, and solidarity. Kikon's fellow editor, Joel Rodrigues, food remembered the time he spent with his mother in the kitchen. (A Goan researcher, Rodrigues became familiar with North Eastern cuisines after he joined a university in Guwahati.) Food also recalled violence: his father would use her cooking as an excuse to lash out at his wife. Rodrigues' own words bring this out very poignantly: “Until I left my childhood home, I did not realise that I had subconsciously acquired years' worth of mental notes on cooking, by watching my mother do it. Due to the domestic violence my mother endured at the hands of my father, with her cooking as an excuse, I was simultaneously forced to cook for others.”

The shared connection between the editors over food and memory is shared by other authors in the volume and is at the core of the book. Every time Ronid Akhu Chingangbam eats tinned fish, he is taken back to the memories of his grandmother making it. In his indigenous cuisine, fish has specific meanings: "In Assam and Bangladesh, if a Manipuri family feeds you Ilisha fish, you are being welcome in the grandest way," he writes. For Him Kumar Ghimire, consuming millets is part of the cultural identity of his Nepali community (and for several tribes who make alcoholic beverages like *tongba* and *chhang* from millet), and its cultivation is seen as important to the preservation of their heritage.

At a time when millets are promoted heavily by the government, it is worth noting how communities in the North East have already been cultivating and consuming them for centuries. Ghimire recalls how growing different kinds of millets was part of a generational knowledge in his family, passed down as traditional knowledge from his grandmother to his father and uncle.

|| Techi Nimi writes how people's perceptions of Arunachalee food shaped her feelings of disdain and disgust towards her own cuisine.

However, the relationship between food and memory is not linear. Identity, economic activity and migration, all bring in complications with different facets like nostalgia, shame and newness involved. Janice Pariat explores her positionality as a migrant in Delhi. She misses her home food, but at the same time likes eating other kinds of food as well. A city like Delhi allows her to do so as its foodscape is diverse and vibrant. Her essay, diving into the migration from North East India, is also a reflection of Delhi's encounter with economic liberalisation – the availability of a variety of food items from Chinese to Nirula's to Mughlai and fast food chains like

McDonald's and Pizza Hut.

The story of food is also a story of people's perceptions, and beliefs. Despite the recent visibility of food from North East India in the public sphere and media, there is still significant ignorance. The book captures the prejudices of outsiders to the North East, which produce common stereotypes associated with food from the region. Very often, local foods, particularly those of tribal communities, is seen as *ganda* (dirty) (Kikon 2020) and excluded from spaces like university hostels (Patgiri 2022). They are not seen as 'normal' foods.

However, prejudices exist even within the region, particularly when it comes to tribal food. Sangeeta Tete's draws on her personal experiences of reactions to food that Adivasis in Assam's tea plantations eat. When people get to know that she eats snails, there is shock and disgust. Tete's focus on Adivasi food is important for opening up the region's cuisine beyond those that have received mainstream attention. These include caste Hindu Assamese food dishes like *masor tenga* and *haah kumura*, but little from indigenous or Adivasi food repertoires.

Essays such as Tete's explore shame and embarrassment associated with foods. Techii Nimi writes how people's perceptions of Arunachali food shaped her feelings of disdain and disgust towards her own cuisine. 'I embodied the shame associated with tribal cuisine to the point that, despite being a college student on a budget and who could have saved money by packing her own lunch, I chose to instead buy 'normal' food, that everyone else would approve of, from the college canteen' (pp. 51). Nimi's essay connects food with memory which can be emotionally painful. It's not just Nimi, but many others, particularly migrants, who start seeing their own food as 'stinky' and 'dirty'. In that context, Kikon proposes that "fermented food offers us an innovative lens to engage with pressing political and social concerns today."

At a time when the Indian state has assumed the role of a saviour in North East India, it has become pertinent to develop community responsibilities to nurture connections with land and natural resources. And food is at the core of this.

As ingredients and recipes from the North East become known beyond their original homes, several foods condemned in the past have now been commercialised, to the point they now stand in for an exotic and indigenous cuisine. Rice beer, for instance, is marketed nationally and internationally as an organic drink from the region. But we learn from Neivikhotso Chaya's essay that it was a "drink sold by the desperate, for the desperate." Rice beer was associated with people of lower social standing. Even buying rice to make beer was looked down upon. Chaya recalls her mother, who sold rice beer for a living, had to deal with drunk men and neighbours accusing them of creating nuisances.

Similarly, *wahan mosodeng*, a pork-based dish has become a representative of the Jamatia community of Tripura and the region. We are far away from the days when pork was considered to be impure by the Jamatias. As Hamari Jamatia reminds us how "The desirability of a particular food has a habit of changing over time. Many factors such as cultural acceptance, disposable income, availability and economic viability determine food preferences."

Even so, questions of ritual purity and pollution take centre stage. Chingangbam's essay mentions that one could not cook meat in Meitei kitchens in the past. This is because most forms of meat – including chicken and pork – are perceived as impure by many upper-caste Hindus (the Meiteis in this case). This is also the case in Assam, where there are taboos against [cooking pork in upper-caste kitchens](#). These issues, central to food in the Indian context but often overlooked in the North East, are brought to the fore in this collection.

In their introduction, Kikon and Rodrigues write that "We thought that this book could tell stories, personal as well as communitarian." At a time when the Indian state has assumed the role of a saviour in North East India, it has become pertinent to develop community responsibilities to nurture connections with land and natural resources. Food is at the core of this. Eating food from the region as part of one's desire to try out the exotic will not break the stereotypes associated with it. Instead, there is a need to recognise its socio-cultural and politico-economic manifestations in everyday life. *Food Journeys* is a much-needed exercise that goes beyond the commonsensical understanding of the North East.

References:

Kikon, Dolly. (2020). Dirty Food: Racism And Casteism In India. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 45(2): 278-297. *Taylor and Francis*.

Patgiri, Rituparna. (2023). Community Building and Exclusion: The Role of Food in University Hostels in New Delhi. *Society*. 59(6): 714-722. Springer Nature.