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Study of Culinary Food Items Used by the Schedule Caste Peoples of Manipur

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of culinary food items as medicines by the Schedule Caste Peoples of Manipur. Traditional knowledge and practices in food preparation and preservation often incorporate medicinal properties that have been passed down through generations. The Schedule caste peoples put several norms for eating food items accordingly to the season and its consequences. Most of the food items (72%) were wild and the parts used for food as medicinal properties were above-ground (83%). Mixed mode of preparation is the most common way of preparation and common ailments constitute the major ailments treated. This research aims to document these practices, identify the specific food items used, and understand their perceived health benefits. The findings highlight the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge on preparation and preservation of culinary food items and promoting the use of culinary foods in natural remedies in contemporary health practices.

Keywords: Culinary food, medicines, traditional knowledge, preserving indigenous knowledge

Introduction

The culinary practices of different communities offer a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, reflecting historical, social, and environmental influences. In Manipur, a North-Eastern state of India, the Schedule Caste (SC) communities exhibit a unique and diverse culinary tradition that is deeply intertwined with their cultural identity. This study aims to explore the culinary food items used by the Schedule Caste peoples of Manipur, highlighting their traditional knowledge, dietary habits, and the socio-cultural significance of their food practices.

Manipur, known for its vibrant culture and ethnic diversity, is home to various indigenous communities, including the Schedule Castes. These communities have developed distinct culinary practices that have been passed down through generations. Their food items, often sourced from locally available ingredients, reflect a deep connection with the environment and a profound understanding of local biodiversity. Traditional SC cuisine in Manipur encompasses a wide range of dishes, from simple, everyday meals to elaborate festive foods, each carrying its own cultural and nutritional importance.

The study of these culinary traditions is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it helps preserve the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge of the SC communities in Manipur. As globalization and modernization influence dietary habits worldwide, there is a risk of losing these unique culinary practices. Documenting and understanding them can aid in

their preservation and promote cultural pride among the younger generations.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of regional cuisines in India. While much attention has been given to the more widely known cuisines of India, the culinary practices of marginalized communities often remain underrepresented. By shedding light on the food items used by the Schedule Caste peoples of Manipur, this research enriches the existing literature on Indian gastronomy and provides a more inclusive perspective.

In the context of kitchen affairs, Indian society generally sees women managing family food activities, which require significant daily investment in time, energy, and expertise (Ellena and Nongkynrih, 2017). In Manipuri culture, culinary knowledge is traditionally passed from mother to daughter. Historically, in patriarchal families, men were often discouraged from entering the kitchen to avoid being perceived as less virile (Taillie, 2016). However, in Manipur, men traditionally take on the primary cooking role during grand feasts and ceremonial occasions, where women are not permitted to cook for large gatherings. This cultural practice suggests potential differences in culinary and medicinal knowledge between men and women. Given these cultural nuances, this investigation seeks to explore the factors contributing to gender differences in culinary and medicinal omen in every household (Cerrato *et al.* 2018; Joseph and Voeks, 2021).knowledge. The study will consider various attributes, including age, marital status, education, and

financial status. While food preparation and serving are predominantly women's tasks, certain dishes are exclusively prepared by women in every household (Cerrato *et al.* 2018; Joseph and Voeks, 2021).

Urbanization is gradually reshaping Manipuri society, particularly in urban areas where new and exotic foods are being integrated into indigenous sociocultural trends (Pandey *et al.* 2020). In both urban and rural settings, women, especially younger girls, now have more opportunities to assert their individuality through economic and social activities (Lyon *et al.* 2011). In Meetei society, young single women tend to know less about medicinal food properties than married women, but knowledge increases with age and motherhood. However, the driving factors behind these differences remain unclear, as no comprehensive data have been collected on this topic in Manipuri societies.

Research has shown that gendered knowledge about plants and kitchen foods as medicines can vary significantly depending on sociocultural and demographic factors (da Costa *et al.* 2021). Yet, the boundaries between these domains, such as kitchen food as medicine in relation to gender, education level, work, and marital status, are often blurred and not well-defined in Meetei society. It remains unclear how gender specifically influences these differences.

Examining the dietary habits of the SC communities in Manipur offers insights into their nutritional status and health. Traditional diets, often based on seasonal and locally available ingredients, can provide valuable lessons in sustainable and healthy eating practices. Understanding these dietary patterns can inform nutritional interventions and policies aimed at improving the health and well-being of these communities.

The culinary food items used by the Schedule Caste peoples of Manipur are not merely sustenance but are deeply embedded in their cultural fabric. This study seeks to document and analyze these culinary traditions, emphasizing their cultural, nutritional, and social significance. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, promote a more inclusive understanding of Indian cuisine, and support the health and well-being of the SC communities in Manipur.

Background

Manipur, a state in North-eastern India, is known for its rich cultural heritage and diverse ethnic communities. The Schedule Caste peoples of Manipur have their own traditional knowledge and culture especially in the realm of food and medicine. The concept of preparation and preservation of food items and also used in remedies for common ailments is deeply rooted in the daily lives of these peoples. These practices not only reflect the cultural significance of food but also highlight an alternative approach to health and wellness of the SC peoples.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

- i). To identify the food items used as culinary medicines by the schedule Caste peoples of Manipur.
- ii). To document the traditional knowledge associated with this Community.
- iii). To understand the perceived health benefits of food items used by Schedule Caste peoples.

Methodology

Selection of Participants

The study was conducted in six SC villages in Manipur. Twenty households from each village were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included households with at least one elder member who possessed knowledge of traditional knowledge on culinary food items used as medicines. Some traditional health care practitioners are also selected for collecting primary information regarding the use of culinary food items in treatment of body ailments.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and participation in cooking practices. The interviews focused on identifying the specific food items used, the ailments they are used to treat, and the preparation and preservation methods.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes related to the use of food as medicine. Quantitative data on the frequency of use and types of ailments treated were also recorded.

Results and Discussion

Traditional knowledge and practices related to the use of culinary food items as medicine among the Scheduled Caste (SC) communities in Manipur are deeply intertwined with their daily lives and cultural heritage. Here is an in-depth look at these practices:

Medicinal Ingredients of Food Items and Their Uses

- **Turmeric (Yaingang) (*Curcuma longa*):** Known for its anti-inflammatory and antiseptic properties. It is used to treat wounds, respiratory issues, and digestive problems.
- **Ginger (Sing) (*Zingiber officinale*):** Used to alleviate nausea, digestive issues, and inflammation. It is also a common remedy for colds and sore throats.
- **Garlic (Chanam) (*Allium sativum*):** Recognized for its antibacterial and antiviral properties. It is used to boost the immune system, lower blood pressure, and treat infections.
- **Holy Basil (Tulasi) (*Ocimum sanctum*):** Used for its adaptogenic properties, helping to reduce stress and enhance the immune response. It is also used to treat respiratory disorders.
- **Mint (Nungsi Hidak) (*Mentha spp.*):** Employed to relieve digestive issues, headaches, and respiratory problems.
- **Coriander (Phadigom) (*Coriandrum sativum*):** Used for its digestive benefits and to treat urinary tract infections.
- **Fenugreek (Methi) (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*):** Known for its ability to control blood sugar levels and enhance milk production in lactating mothers.
- **Tejpatta (*Cinnamomum tamala*):** Used in treatment of Cold, Cough, toothache, Liver problem, urinary problem and gall bladder problem.
- **Cranberry Hibiscus (Sougri Angangba) (*Hibiscus acetosella*):** Used for curing in oxidative stress and boost body's defense system.
- **Centella (Peruk) (*Centella asiatica*):** Used as blood purifier, prevention from irritation and inflammation of throat and wound healing.
- **Cumin (Zeera) (*Cuminum cyminum*):** Used in treatment of Stone cases in kidney and urinal tract. Also used for its good aroma.

- **Water Hemp (*Eupatorium birmanicum* DC.):** Used for treatment of Gastro-enteritis and also used in ritualistic purposes.
- **Banana Blossom (Laphu Tharo) (*Musa paradisiaca* Linn.):** Used for treatment of diabetes, anemia, menstrual problems and weight loss. It is also used for improving lactation, reducing free radical activity and anti-ageing.
- **Galangal (Kanghoo) (*Alpinia galangal*):** Used to treat breathing diseases, abnormal menstruation, diarrhea and stomach cramp. Also used as aromatic stimulant, carminative and condiment.
- **Star Fruit (Heiningjom) (*Averrhoa carambola*):** Helps in stronger immune system, improves heart health, lowers blood pressure.
- **Indian Gooseberry (Hekru) (*Phyllanthus emblica*):** Used for treatment of diarrhea, eye inflammation, cough, dull hair etc.
- **Spiny Amaranth (Chengkruk) (*Amaranthus spinosus* L.):** It strengthens bones, muscles and helps growth, hair fall, eye sight. It is a powerful antioxidant that helps brain function, boost immunity and digestion.
- **Black Rice (Chakhao) (*Oryza sativa* L.):** It is anti-diabetes, anti-aging, anti-cancer and lowers the risk of obesity.
- **False Coriander (U Maroi) (*Eryngium foetidum*):** Used in treatment of Ulcer, nerve problem, muscle pain, high B.P., Hypertension, Fever, diarrhea, constipation, burns, worms etc.
- **Java Plum (Jamun) (*Syzygium cumini*):** Used to control diabetes, weight loss, skin care, boost hemoglobin, antioxidant, controls heart disease.
- **Tara (Pullei) (*Alpinia allughas*):** Controls gout, cure inflammation, hypertension, bacterial and helminthes infection.
- **Wild Cucumber (Lam Thabi) (*Melothria maderaspatana* L.):** Used to cure Jaundice.
- **Batesch (Heikha) (*Prunus persica* L.):** Used to cure urinary problems.
- **Ash Gourd (Torbot) (*Benincasa hispida* Thunb.):** Used to cured from animal bites and diabetes.
- **Nagal Camphor (Langthrei) (*Blumea balsamifera* D.):** Used in treatment of burning sensation of stomach and also used in ritualistic purposes.
- **Black Turmeric (Yaimu) (*Curcuma caesia* Roxb.):** Used in treatment of Vomiting of blood, Menstrual Cycle problem.
- **Papaya (Awathabi) (*Carica papaya* L.):** Used for treatment of ulcer and skin.
- **Tamarind (Mange) (*Tamarindus indicus* L.):** Used for curing Bee bite, stone cases etc.
- **Red Sugarcane (Chungang) (*Saccharum blanda* Benth.):** Used for curing Jaundice.
- **Siris (Yanglee) (*Albizia myriophylla* Benth.):** Used for curing Dog bite and in production of local wine.
- **Indian Sorrel (Ching Yensil) (*Oxalis corniculata*):** Used in treatment of Arthritis/Rheumatism.
- **Citrus lemon (Champra) (*Citrus aurantium* L.):** Used for curing loose gum, common cold, scurvy, kidney stone, digestion and skin.
- **Cucumber (Thabi) (*Cucumis sativus*):** Reduces swelling and speed up healing. Also used for burns, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, wound healing etc.
- **Winter Leek (Maroi Napakpi) (*Allium hookeri* Thawait Enum):** It is a good food addition for reducing

blood Cholesterol levels, a good tonic to digestive system and circulatory system.

- **Dunduko Saag (Maroi Nakuppi) (*Allium odorum* Linn.):** Used in treatment of urinary disorder especially in scanty urination and in treatment of scalp and hair growth.
- **Lemon (Champra) (*Citrus aurantium*):** Used for treatment of Stone cases in kidney and urinary tract, indigestion, skin diseases etc.
- **Bitter Gourt (Karot akhabi) (*Momordica charantia* Linn.):** Used for curing from diabetes, Cancer and many infectious diseases.
- **Long Pepper (Uchi thi) (*Piper longum* Linn.):** Known for its effective used in treatment of respiratory problems like bronchitis, asthma etc. It is also used for treatment of constipation, gonorrhoea, paralysis of tongue, diarrhea, cholera etc.
- **Passion Fruit (Sitaphal) (*Passiflora edulis* Sims.):** Used for treatment of asthma, bronchitis and whooping cough.
- **Tree Bean (Yongchak) (*Parkia roxburghii*):** Seeds are used in treatment of stomach disorder, pile and regulate Liver functions. Leaves used to treat skin diseases and ulcer.

Traditional Medicinal Dishes

- **Kangsoi:** A vegetable stew made with seasonal greens, tomatoes, ginger, and fermented fish (ngari). It is consumed for its digestive benefits and to boost the immune system.
- **Eromba:** A spicy mashed vegetable dish mixed with fermented fish, often containing turmeric and garlic. It is believed to have anti-inflammatory and immune-boosting properties.
- **Chamthong:** A simple vegetable soup often made with ginger, garlic, and medicinal herbs, consumed to alleviate colds and improve digestion.
- **Nga Atoiba Thongba:** A fish curry made with medicinal herbs and spices like turmeric and garlic, known for its nutritional and medicinal benefits.

Specific Uses and Applications

- **Fermented Fish (Ngari):** Used as a probiotic to improve gut health and digestion.
- **Bamboo Shoots:** Known for their anti-inflammatory properties and used to treat respiratory problems and digestive issues.
- **Black Rice (Chakhao):** Rich in antioxidants and used to improve cardiovascular health and reduce inflammation.

Home Remedies and Practices

- **Ginger Tea:** Made by boiling ginger with water and sometimes adding honey and lemon. It is a common remedy for colds, sore throats, and digestive problems.
- **Turmeric Milk:** A mixture of turmeric and warm milk, often consumed to boost immunity and treat colds and coughs.
- **Garlic and Honey:** A combination used to treat infections and boost overall health.
- **Herbal Infusions:** Infusions made from holy basil, mint, and other herbs to treat various ailments such as respiratory issues and digestive problems.

Cultural and Social Context

- **Transmission of Knowledge:** Medicinal culinary practices are passed down through generations, often

through oral tradition and hands-on involvement in cooking and healing practices.

- **Integration with Daily Life:** Medicinal foods are not viewed separately from regular diet but are integrated into daily meals to maintain health and prevent diseases.
- **Community Healing:** Knowledge is often shared within the community, and communal meals are a way to ensure that everyone benefits from these medicinal practices.

Preservation and Challenges

- **Modernization and Loss of Knowledge:** As modern medicine and dietary habits spread, there is a risk of losing these traditional practices.
- **Documentation and Education:** Efforts are being made to document these traditional practices and educate younger generations about their importance.
- **Sustainable Practices:** Ensuring that the cultivation and use of medicinal plants and ingredients are sustainable to preserve these traditions for future generations.

The traditional knowledge and practices of using culinary food items as medicine among the Scheduled Caste Communities in Manipur are a testament to their deep understanding of the natural world and its healing properties. Preserving and promoting these practices is essential for maintaining cultural heritage and enhancing community health and well-being.

Perceived Health Benefits

The villagers expressed a high level of trust in these traditional remedies, citing their effectiveness and lack of side effects compared to modern medicines. The use of natural ingredients was also linked to a holistic approach to health, emphasizing prevention and overall well-being.

Conclusion

The study underscores the significance of traditional culinary medicines in the daily lives of the Schedule Caste peoples of Manipur. The use of common food items as immediate remedies for minor ailments reflects a deep understanding of the medicinal properties of natural ingredients. Preserving and promoting this indigenous knowledge can contribute to broader health practices and offer sustainable alternatives to conventional medicine.

Recommendations

- Documentation and Preservation:** Efforts should be made to document and preserve traditional knowledge related to culinary medicines.
- Education and Awareness:** Educational programs should be implemented to raise awareness about the benefits of traditional remedies.
- Integration with Modern Medicine:** Collaboration between traditional practitioners and modern healthcare providers can enhance healthcare outcomes.
- Further Research:** Additional studies are needed to scientifically validate the medicinal properties of these food items.

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