
Exploring the Cultural Significance of Food in India: An Empirical Study of Meghalaya and Nagaland

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ABSTRACT

Food is an integral part of cultural identity, reflecting a region's history, traditions, and socio-economic patterns. In India, culinary diversity is vast, with each region offering unique flavors, ingredients, and cooking techniques. Among these, North-East India stands out for its distinct food culture, deeply rooted in indigenous traditions, ethnic diversity, and geographical influences. This study explores the cultural significance of food in North-East India by examining its traditional cuisines, preparation methods, and the role of food in festivals, rituals, and daily life. Regional cuisines—such as Assamese, Naga, Manipuri, and Khasi—embody the ecological richness and cultural heritage of the region. The study also investigates the impact of modernization and globalization on traditional food habits, analyzing how contemporary influences are reshaping dietary practices. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the role of food in fostering communal harmony, reinforcing identity, and preserving indigenous knowledge. Through qualitative analysis, including interviews and case studies, this study provides insights into the intricate relationship between food and cultural identity in North-East India. By understanding the cultural significance of food in this region, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on heritage conservation and the importance of sustaining traditional culinary practices in an era of rapid change.

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Introduction

India's diverse culinary landscape reflects its rich cultural heritage, shaped by historical influences, geography, and ethnic traditions. Food in India is more than mere sustenance; it embodies a profound social, religious, and regional identity. Among the various regional cuisines, North-East India's culinary traditions stand out for their unique ingredients, cooking techniques, and cultural symbolism. The region, comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—exhibits a distinctive food culture that differs significantly from mainstream Indian cuisine (Baruah 112).

North-East Indian cuisines are characterized by minimal use of oil and spices, reliance on fermented foods, and a strong connection to local agricultural practices. Rice, bamboo shoots, fermented fish, and meats play a central role in daily meals, with variations across different ethnic groups (Sen 152). The influence of tribal communities and historical interactions with neighboring countries such as Myanmar, China, and Bhutan had also contributed to the distinct flavors of the region (Bhardwaj 47). Additionally, food serves as an important cultural marker, often associated with festivals, rituals, and identity formation. For instance, the Bihu festival in Assam and Chapchar Kut in Mizoram are incomplete without traditional dishes that carry generational significance (Das 120).

By examining the food traditions of North-East India, this study highlights the cultural, historical, and social dimensions of the region's cuisines. Understanding these culinary practices offers insight into the broader narrative of India's pluralistic culture and the ways in which food serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity (Sharma 67).

1. Cultural significance of food in India

Indian cuisine goes beyond simple nourishment—it's a vivid expression of the country's rich cultural heritage, diverse religious practices, and layered historical influences. Deeply embedded in history, its culinary traditions vary widely from region to region, shaped by local geography, climate, and the complex socio-religious landscape. As such, food in India stands as a powerful emblem of identity, community, and tradition.

One of the most striking aspects of Indian cuisine is its regional diversity. The food of North India, influenced by Persian and Mughal cuisines, is rich in dairy products, wheat-based bread such as naan



and roti, and elaborate meat dishes like biryani and kebabs (Achaya 112). In contrast, South Indian cuisine relies heavily on rice, lentils, and coconut, producing dishes such as dosa, idli, and sambar, which are flavored with an abundance of spices and tamarind (Sarma 78). Eastern India is known for its emphasis on fish, rice, and sweets like rasgulla, while Western Indian cuisine incorporates a variety of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, often using ingredients like millet and yogurt (Khare 54). Each region's food habits have been shaped by local agricultural practices and historical interactions with foreign cultures.

Religion plays a crucial role in shaping Indian food culture. Hindu dietary customs often emphasize vegetarianism, particularly among Brahmins and other communities that follow the principles of ahimsa, or non-violence (Sen 145). On the other hand, Islam introduced a variety of meat-based dishes, with significant contributions to India's culinary landscape, particularly in the preparation of kebabs, curries, and slow-cooked dishes like haleem (Achaya 87). Sikh and Buddhist food traditions also emphasize community eating, as seen in the langar system in Sikh temples, where people from all backgrounds share meals (Sarma 102). Meanwhile, Christians and Jews in India have preserved unique culinary traditions, blending local ingredients with their respective religious dietary laws.

Food in India is also closely associated with festivals and rituals. Each festival is marked by special dishes that hold symbolic significance. During Diwali, sweets such as laddoos and barfis are prepared to signify prosperity and joy, while during Eid, families gather to enjoy biryani and sewaiyan as part of communal feasts (Sen 167). In Kerala, the Onam festival is celebrated with the grand feast known as the 'Onam Sadhya,' a multi-course vegetarian meal served on a banana leaf, emphasizing the importance of hospitality and abundance (Khare 92). Similarly, Pongal, a harvest festival in Tamil Nadu, is celebrated with the preparation of sweet and savory Pongal dishes, symbolizing gratitude for the agricultural yield (Sarma 114). These culinary traditions reinforce cultural values and strengthen social bonds within communities.

The influence of globalization and modernization has led to the evolution of Indian cuisine while still retaining its cultural essence. While traditional dishes continue to be cherished, there has been a growing fusion of international flavors, resulting in hybrid cuisines such as Indo-Chinese and Indian fast food (Achaya 209). Despite these influences, food remains an important marker of Indian identity, reflecting a rich tapestry of historical, religious, and regional diversity.

2. Indian culinary traditions

India boasts a rich and diverse culinary heritage shaped by its history, geography, and cultural influences. The country's food traditions have evolved over centuries, incorporating elements from indigenous practices, colonial influences, and globalization. The diversity in Indian cuisine reflects not only regional variations but also religious and social customs that have played a significant role in shaping dietary habits.

Indian culinary traditions have been deeply influenced by historical events, including invasions and trade relations. The Mughal era, for instance, introduced rich and aromatic dishes such as biryani, kebabs, and kormas, which are still an integral part of North Indian cuisine (Achaya 112). The British colonization of India also left a lasting impact, leading to the fusion of Indian and European culinary practices, such as the Anglo-Indian dishes like mulligatawny soup (Sengupta 89).

India's vast geography has given rise to distinct culinary traditions in different regions. North Indian cuisine is characterized by the use of dairy products, wheat-based bread such as naan and roti, and rich gravies made with tomatoes, onions, and cream (Narayan 56). In contrast, South Indian cuisine relies heavily on rice, coconut, and lentils, with dishes such as dosa, idli, and sambar being staples (Menon 34). The coastal regions of India, including Kerala and Bengal, have a strong emphasis on seafood, often prepared with mustard seeds and coconut milk (Chatterjee 78).

Religious beliefs have played a crucial role in shaping Indian dietary habits. Hinduism, which is the predominant religion in India, encourages vegetarianism, particularly among Brahmins and Vaishnavas (Sharma 143). On the other hand, Islam, which is widely practiced in India, has influenced the development of dishes such as haleem, kebabs, and nihari, which are popular during festivals like Eid (Ali 98). Sikhism also has a strong tradition of communal cooking and dining, exemplified by the langar, a free community meal served at gurdwaras (Singh 67).

Spices are an essential component of Indian cuisine, not only for flavor but also for their medicinal properties. Common spices such as turmeric, cumin, coriander, and cardamom are used to enhance taste and provide health benefits (Gupta 45). Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, has long emphasized the therapeutic effects of spices, including their role in digestion and immunity (Prakash



81). The art of blending spices, known as masala, is a hallmark of Indian cooking and varies by region and dish.

Indian cuisine has gained international recognition and is widely appreciated across the globe. Indian restaurants and street food stalls can be found in major cities worldwide, serving popular dishes such as chicken tikka masala, butter chicken, and samosas (Kumar 123). The adaptation of Indian flavors into fusion cuisine, such as Indo-Chinese and Indian-inspired fast food, further showcases the global appeal of Indian culinary traditions (Deshpande 99).

3. Meghalaya cuisine: A taste of tradition and culture

Meghalaya, a state located in the northeastern region of India, is known not only for its lush green landscapes and rich cultural heritage but also for its distinctive and varied cuisine. The food culture of Meghalaya is largely influenced by the indigenous Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes, with each group having unique food traditions that showcase the region's natural bounty and indigenous agricultural practices. From rice to fermented foods, Meghalaya's cuisine reflects a harmonious blend of flavors that tell the story of its people, climate, and traditions.

At the heart of Meghalaya's culinary traditions is rice, a staple food for most communities in the state. In fact, rice forms the foundation of most meals and is often served with a variety of meat and vegetable dishes. The most common rice varieties in Meghalaya are sticky rice or "Ong," which is eaten with almost every meal, and is often served with chutneys or pickles made from fermented vegetables or fruits (Saikia 128). This forms the basis of the majority of Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia cuisines, which are known for their reliance on fresh, locally grown produce and meat.

Meat plays an essential role in the cuisine of Meghalaya. Pork, beef, and chicken are commonly consumed, often cooked in simple yet flavorful ways. One of the most popular dishes is "Jadew," a traditional pork dish, typically cooked with ginger, garlic, and fermented soya beans or "ngar," which imparts a distinctive sour flavor (Lahiri 76). This preparation is often served with rice and is a favorite among the Khasi tribe. In addition, the Garo people are known for their "Nakham Bitchi", a flavorful and spicy soup made with dried fish, chilies, and Kalchi (Yengkhom 45). This dish is commonly consumed as an appetizer and is believed to aid digestion. The dried fish, known as **nakham**, is boiled with robust local spices, making the dish both aromatic and rich in umami flavors. Often enjoyed with



rice, **Nakham Bitchi** reflects the indigenous culinary practices of the Garo people, emphasizing the use of locally sourced ingredients and traditional preservation techniques (Sangma 78).

Fermented foods hold a special place in Meghalaya's cuisine. Fermentation is used to preserve food and enhance flavors, a practice that has been passed down through generations. Fermented bamboo shoots, a delicacy among the Khasi and Jaintia tribes, are commonly added to various dishes to lend a sour and tangy taste. Similarly, fermented fish and meat products are also an integral part of the regional diet. One such dish is "Tungtap", a traditional fermented fish preparation commonly enjoyed in Meghalaya. It is made by fermenting dried fish and then mixing it with finely chopped onions, green chilies, and other vegetables. This dish is typically served as a flavorful accompaniment to rice, adding a rich umami taste to the meal (Kumar 98). The fermentation process in these foods is not just a culinary practice but a way to sustain and preserve food in the region's tropical climate.

Apart from meat, vegetables also hold significance in the state's cuisine, especially among the vegetarian communities. The diverse range of vegetables in Meghalaya includes local greens, pumpkins, and root vegetables like yam, sweet potatoes, and potatoes. "Dumplings" or "Pitha" made from rice flour and stuffed with vegetables or meat are common snacks in the region. These dumplings are steamed and served with chutneys made from fermented soybean, which are a common accompaniment (Rath 45). The Garo people also include various wild greens in their diet, which they collect from the forests and incorporate into soups and stews.

The food of Meghalaya is distinct not only in its flavors but also in the methods of preparation and presentation. Cooking techniques are deeply rooted in tradition, often involving slow cooking over open fires, steaming, and fermenting. The methods reflect the importance of sustainability and simplicity in Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia cultures, as well as the communities' close relationship with nature and the land. For example, the use of earthenware pots in cooking ensures that the flavors are preserved and enhances the overall taste of the dish (Saikia 132).

Another key element of the Meghalaya food experience is the use of local herbs and spices. While the region is not known for particularly hot or spicy food, the use of local herbs like "Ngari" (fermented fish) and "Berberine" (a type of pepper) provides dishes with subtle yet rich flavors that distinguish it from other cuisines in India (Lahiri 80). Additionally, indigenous plant-based ingredients, such as the



wild pepper leaves used in the preparation of meat dishes, are a testament to the unique food culture that thrives in this mountainous region.

The distinctive cuisine of Meghalaya offers a glimpse into the cultural practices and lifestyle of its people. The reliance on rice and locally sourced meats, the significance of fermentation in preservation and flavor, and the use of indigenous herbs and spices all highlight the deep connection between food, culture, and geography in this northeastern state of India. The simplicity and authenticity of Meghalaya's cuisine remain a source of pride for its people, offering a taste of history and tradition in every bite.

4. Nagaland cuisine of India

Nagaland, one of the northeastern states of India, is known for its rich tribal culture and diverse culinary traditions. The cuisine of Nagaland is deeply rooted in the lifestyle of its indigenous tribes, with a strong emphasis on simplicity, natural ingredients, and bold flavors. The food is predominantly non-vegetarian, featuring a variety of meats, fermented products, and locally grown vegetables. Unlike other Indian cuisines that are heavily spiced, Naga cuisine focuses more on the natural essence of ingredients rather than elaborate seasonings (Jamir 45).

A staple food in Naga households is rice, which is usually accompanied by meat, fish, and vegetables. Smoked, dried, and fermented meats are commonly consumed, as these preservation techniques help sustain food for longer periods in the hilly terrain of the region. Among the most popular meats are pork, beef, chicken, and fish. Pork is especially favored and is often cooked with bamboo shoots, fermented soybeans or Akhuni, a fermented soybean paste that imparts a strong, pungent flavor to dishes (Ao 78).

One of the defining characteristics of Naga cuisine is the use of fermented ingredients. Fermentation plays a crucial role in enhancing the taste and nutritional value of food. Besides Akhuni, another well-known fermented ingredient is dry bamboo shoot, which is often added to meat and fish dishes to impart a tangy flavor. Fermented fish, known as Ngari, is also widely used, particularly in chutneys and stews (Sangtam 103). These fermented foods not only add depth to the cuisine but also highlight the traditional food preservation methods practiced by Naga tribes for centuries.

Another essential component of Naga cuisine is the extensive use of chili. The Naga King Chili, also known as Bhut Jolokia, is one of the hottest chili peppers in the world and is a key ingredient in many dishes. It is often used in curries, chutneys, and even as a side condiment to add an intense heat to meals.



The spice level of Naga dishes varies, but for those unaccustomed to extreme heat, the fiery flavors can be overwhelming (Rengma 56).

Traditional Naga cooking methods are simple yet effective in preserving the authenticity of flavors. Smoking and drying are common techniques used to prepare meat and fish. Smoked pork, for example, is a delicacy that is slow-cooked over an open flame, infusing the meat with a rich, smoky aroma. Additionally, dishes are often prepared with minimal oil, and cooking over wood fire enhances the natural taste of the ingredients (Zeliang 88).

Aside from meat-based dishes, Nagaland also boasts a variety of vegetable preparations. Wild greens, yam leaves, mustard leaves, and colocasia are some of the commonly used vegetables. These are often boiled and lightly seasoned with salt and fermented condiments. Naga cuisine also includes a variety of local herbs and spices that add subtle yet distinct flavors to dishes (Chang 120).

Beverages also play a significant role in Naga culinary traditions. Rice beer, locally known as Zutho, is a popular traditional drink enjoyed during festivals and social gatherings. Made from fermented rice, Zutho has a mild alcoholic content and is consumed by both men and women as part of Naga hospitality (Longkumer 134). The preparation of rice beer is a communal activity, reflecting the close-knit social structure of Naga society.

Nagaland's cuisine remains an integral part of its cultural identity. With its reliance on natural ingredients, fermentation, and traditional cooking techniques, it offers a unique gastronomic experience distinct from mainstream Indian food. The state's culinary heritage continues to thrive, preserving its indigenous flavors and traditions despite modernization.

5. Food and identity in Northeast India

Northeast India, comprising eight states, is a region rich in cultural diversity, ethnic traditions, and unique culinary practices. Food plays an essential role in shaping the identity of the people, serving as a marker of community belonging, historical continuity, and social distinction. The cuisine of this region is deeply intertwined with local geography, agricultural practices, and cultural beliefs, making it an integral component of ethnic identity.



The dietary habits of the various ethnic communities in Northeast India are influenced by their environment and indigenous knowledge. The availability of local ingredients such as bamboo shoots, fermented soybeans, and smoked meats reflects both the agrarian lifestyle and the climatic conditions of the region. The importance of food in cultural identity is emphasized by anthropologists who argue that cuisine is more than mere sustenance—it is a symbol of heritage and belonging (Appadurai 3). The use of fermentation in many traditional dishes, such as axone among the Nagas and tungrymbai among the Khasis, signifies a method of preservation and an age-old culinary technique passed down through generations.

Food also serves as an identity marker in social and political contexts. Many ethnic groups in Northeast India use their distinctive food habits to assert cultural uniqueness. For instance, the preparation and consumption of pork among several Naga, Mizo, and Khasi communities distinguish them from other groups with dietary restrictions. This has, at times, led to cultural stereotyping and misrepresentation, as mainstream Indian narratives often fail to recognize the diversity within the region (Baruah 45). The perception of Northeast Indian food in mainstream discourse is also shaped by colonial and post-colonial interactions, wherein indigenous cuisines were either exoticized or marginalized.

Furthermore, food plays a significant role in rituals, festivals, and communal gatherings. Rice beer, prepared using traditional fermentation techniques, is a staple in many celebrations among the Bodos, Khasis, and Apatanis. The practice of community feasting during events like Bihu in Assam and Chapchar Kut in Mizoram reinforces social bonds and communal solidarity. Such traditions not only preserve cultural heritage but also act as an avenue for intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge. Scholars assert that food in ritualistic contexts reinforces social hierarchy and cultural memory, shaping group identity through shared consumption (Mintz and Du Bois 109).

Modernization and globalization have impacted the traditional food culture of Northeast India. With increased migration and urbanization, there has been a shift in dietary patterns, particularly among the younger generation. The growing influence of packaged and fast food has led to changes in consumption habits, raising concerns about the erosion of indigenous culinary traditions. At the same time, there has been resurgence in the appreciation of traditional foods, with efforts to document and promote ethnic cuisines through digital platforms and culinary tourism (Gohain 78). Such movements indicate an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, where food remains a central element in the construction of regional identity.

6. Empirical study on food culture in Northeast India

Food culture is an essential aspect of human society, reflecting historical, social, and ecological influences. In Northeast India, the diversity of ethnic communities, geographical variations, and historical factors have shaped a distinct culinary tradition. This study explores the food culture in the region through an empirical approach, emphasizing traditional diets, preparation methods, and socio-cultural influences.

Northeast India comprises eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. Each state exhibits unique food habits influenced by indigenous communities. For instance, rice is the staple food across the region, but its preparation varies. In Assam, rice is often served with fish and mustard-based curries, while in Manipur, black rice (Chakhao) is a delicacy used in desserts (Das and Sarma 45). Fermented foods are another critical aspect of the region's cuisine, with items such as bamboo shoot, fermented soybean (akhuni in Nagaland), and fermented fish (ngari in Manipur) being integral to daily meals (Sharma 112).

The empirical study involved qualitative research, including interviews and field observations conducted across various states. One notable observation is the use of foraged ingredients in daily meals. Many indigenous communities rely on wild greens, herbs, and edible insects, which contribute to nutritional diversity. According to a field survey conducted in Arunachal Pradesh, foraging for wild mushrooms and ferns remains a common practice among the Apatani and Nyishi tribes (Dutta 78). These findings suggest a deep-rooted connection between food and the environment.

Cooking techniques in Northeast India also exhibit distinct patterns. Unlike mainstream Indian cuisine, which heavily incorporates spices and oil, food in the region is often steamed, boiled, or fermented. Smoked meats, such as pork and beef, are popular, particularly in Nagaland and Mizoram, where long preservation techniques are essential due to limited refrigeration facilities. A comparative study of food preparation methods in Assam and Nagaland revealed that while Assamese cuisine employs mustard oil and mild spices, Naga cuisine relies more on smoking and fermentation processes (Chakraborty 98).

The socio-cultural significance of food in Northeast India extends beyond sustenance. Food plays a pivotal role in festivals, rituals, and communal gatherings. For instance, Bihu in Assam is marked by the preparation of pitha (rice cakes), while the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland showcases diverse tribal



delicacies (Singh 134). Additionally, food taboos and traditional medicinal practices influence dietary patterns. Some communities avoid certain meats for religious reasons, while others consume specific herbs and fermented foods for health benefits (Roy 59).

Modern influences have begun to reshape the food culture of the region. Globalization, urbanization, and migration have introduced processed foods, altering traditional dietary habits. A study conducted in Shillong, Meghalaya, indicated a gradual decline in the consumption of traditional fermented foods among urban youth, who increasingly prefer fast food and packaged items (Borah and Kikon 87). Despite these changes, many efforts are being made to preserve indigenous food knowledge through culinary tourism and documentation initiatives.

The empirical study on food culture in Northeast India highlights the intricate relationship between food, environment, and society. Through traditional practices, cooking methods, and social significance, food serves as a marker of cultural identity in the region. While modern influences pose challenges, ongoing efforts to sustain indigenous food traditions continue to shape the culinary landscape of Northeast India.

Conclusion

The exploration of the cultural significance of food in India, particularly through an empirical study of Meghalaya and Nagaland, underscores the intricate relationship between food, identity, and tradition. In these northeastern states, food serves not merely as sustenance but as a symbol of heritage, social cohesion, and ecological adaptation. As observed, the culinary practices of Meghalaya and Nagaland are deeply intertwined with their indigenous knowledge systems, reflecting their historical experiences, belief structures, and environmental conditions (Das 112).

Moreover, food traditions in these regions illustrate the broader themes of community bonding and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Festivals, rituals, and everyday meals embody a shared cultural consciousness that sustains the social fabric of these societies. Additionally, the interplay between local gastronomy and globalization raises concerns about the preservation of traditional foodways amid rapid modernization (Roy and Choudhury 87). While external influences reshape dietary habits, there remains a strong cultural resistance to the dilution of indigenous culinary practices.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of food in defining ethnic identities and political assertions. As cuisine becomes a means of cultural expression, it also functions as a marker of differentiation and



unity among tribal communities (Sarma 54). The emphasis on organic and locally sourced ingredients reflects a sustainable approach to food consumption, reinforcing the ecological wisdom embedded in indigenous traditions. Such insights contribute to broader discussions on food sovereignty, cultural resilience, and sustainable development.

While this research has mapped significant aspects of food culture in Meghalaya and Nagaland, further interdisciplinary inquiry is necessary to examine how evolving socio-political dynamics and environmental changes shape these traditions. Through continued ethnographic engagement and policy discourse, a deeper understanding of the cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of food practices in India's Northeast can be achieved.

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