

# Some Aspects of the Food Habits of Bodos

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## Abstract

The food habits of Bodos are arguably rich and multifaceted which can be seen in their day-to-day socio-cultural life. They have rich cultural traditions of delicacies, recipes and cooking styles that flourished through generations handed down from their great-grandmothers. The present paper attempts to provide a short overview of food habits that still exist among rural Bodos.

**Keywords:** Bodo, Rice, *Jou*.

## Introduction:

Bodo cuisine is wide-ranging and has its own flavour and taste. A distinctive Bodo cuisine comprises meat, fish, and vegetables. They generally eat the meat of pig, chicken, cock, duck, pigeon, goat, deer, wild lizard, water tortoise, mongoose, squirrel, rat, civet, hare and all other wild birds except the crow and vulture. However, unlike other tribal's of the Northeast, they are averse to the meat of dogs, cats, monkeys, elephants, bears, tigers, snakes etc. Furthermore, a significant majority of them do not eat the meat of cows or oxen. However, they conspicuously eat all kinds of fish, including shellfish.

## Food Habits:

Rice is the staple food, and in fact, food simply means rice and curry. In other words, unless they have had a stomach full of rice, they do not feel they have consumed anything at all. Rice is eaten in the morning, midday and evening with curry. Apart from being the staple food of the community, rice is used for making various kinds of traditional cakes like - *Pita* (It is a round cake made out of pounded rice. The pounded rice is kneaded with water, filled with a mixture of *sibing*, i.e., sesame seeds and sugar/molasses and steamed in a hot boiling jar of water); *Shitao* (It is a rolled cake made out of pounded sticky rice. The pounded rice is puffed with a mixture of sesame seeds and sugar/molasses and baked in a heated cauldron); *Laru* (It is a round cake made out of pounded rice. The pounded rice is appropriately kneaded with water, filled with a mixture of *sibing*, i.e., sesame seeds and sugar/molasses, and fried in hot oil).

In the earlier days, the rural folks mostly ate two meals a day, i.e., lunch and dinner, and the gap period between the two was intervened by tea or *jou* (rice beer). During the agricultural season, the farmers have a light meal in the morning, and tea or rice beer in the evening. In the off-season, they simply have breakfast consisting of tea with some kind of eatable items prepared by the woman folks with the available materials.

**Vegetables:**

Among the green leafy vegetables, we come across common items like *lafa* (*Malva Verticillata* L.; Chinese mallow), *maita* (*Hibiscus sabdariffa* L.), *maitabangal* (*Hibiscus cannabinus* L.), *lai* (lettuce) and host of vegetables found in the forest. The most common are *olodor* (*Amorphophallus sylvaticus*), *sibru* (*Lasia spinosa* Thwaites), *tarai* (*Alpina allughas* Rose), *raidwng* (*Calamus latifolius* Roxb), *taso* (*Colocasia esculenta*), *burithokhon* (*Costusspeciosus*), *tasobibar* (*Colocasia esculenta* flower), *tasoating* (*Colocasia esculenta* root aerial), *dingkia* (*Pteris ensiformis*), *barsika* (*Adhatodavasica* Nees), *taika* (*garcinia morella*) etc. However, an interesting fact is that people are accustomed to using a variety of edible wild plants and leaves as food items for their curry. The fruit vegetables include pumpkin, cucumber, gourd, papaya, green banana, tomato, *jingka* (*luffaacutangula* [L] Roxb.), *fwrla* (*luffa cylindrica* L) etc., and a variety of beans. Vegetables of roots and valve species are radish, potato, carrot, yam, bamboo shoots, tapioca etc.

**Jou (Rice Beer):**

Besides, the favourite beverage *Jouor Jumai* (rice beer) is brewed from rice mixed with some ingredients called *emao*. It is milky white, being comparatively harmless it is consumed liberally in their private houses, during festivities and so on. Having great precedence in the Bodo society and culture, the rice beer is offered as an oblation to the deities during the rituals. The marriage ceremony is also invariably accompanied by the consumption of rice beer. In other words, no function can be held without rice beer. In the remote past, people customarily welcomed their guests by offering a full cup of *jou*. The rice beer, because of its medicinal value, is used to treat some diseases like bowel disorders, cholera, and a host of other ailments. Rice beer prepared from *maibra* rice (sticky rice) is the most prized drink among the masses. It can be preserved for several months, and the taste becomes as sweet as honey.

In this connection, it is noteworthy to recount some of the expert reviews on rice beer consumption among the Bodos. Dalton holds the opinion that on festive occasions, though they consume liberally, the people never habitually grow intemperate (Mosahary 1986:77). Similarly, Hodgson (1847:189) asserts that though the Bodos consume rice beer liberally in honour of the gods at high festivals of their religion categorically could not be branded with the name drunkard. Robinson (1975:294) also refers to liberal consumption as nothing more than a bacchanalian feast.

**Cooking Style:**

Similarly, Bodos are intensely aware of the fact that the delicacy of the dish does not count on the items cooked nor the kind and number of ingredients added to it but depends on the process of how the items are cooked. A Bodo proverbial saying illuminates this view:

*Songnwrwngyabwla, wngkriajagwnshorlaoshortao.*

*Songnwrwng bwla, esheaonwjagwngwthao.*

**Translation:**

If you do not know the art of cooking, even the best items will simply be watery. However, if you know the art of cooking even the simplest items will be tasty (Mosahary 1986:74).

The saying suggests that even simple items would make a delicious curry if it is properly cooked if not, it would be flavourless. In the former days, Bodo women were reportedly credited with the skill and expertise of cooking rice and curry in eighteen different ways, a legacy which has been handed down by the great-grandmothers. This fact is embellished by a Bodo saying which goes thus:

*Ataro kauri wngkam;*  
*Atarobijiwngkri.*

**Translation:**

Eighteen varieties of curry;  
Eighteen varieties of rice (Narzi 1966:196).

The above saying suggests that in the olden times, the Bodo women were reportedly very skilful in the art of cooking. According to B. Narzi, some of these recipes are - *dwilaolao*(curry with plenty of soup); *bidwijobjob*(curry with little soup); *bidwistebsteb*(curry with lesser soup); *yao dobnai* (wet fry); *ru dobnai* (half boil); *yaoshremnai*(dry fry, hard fry); *menai*(steaming in hot ashes); *soanai*(burning) etc., (Mosahary 1986:73).

Another popular seasonal cuisine, that is extremely delicious that we come across is that of newly harvested black gram (*sobai*), cooked with chicken meat enriched with green leaves of coriander, onion and garlic perfectly in Bodo style. The curry makes a splendid combination with scented rice (*jwsa*). An old Bodo saying testifies to the intensity of the taste of this curry in the following lines: *Kibuaophongtamjwblabwsikara* meaning ‘notrising up inspiteof three kicks administered on buttock’ (Mosahary 1986:74). In other words, the folk saying indicates that a Bodo person will never stop eating this dish even if three powerful kicks are administered to his buttock whatsoever. Furthermore, this curry is so famous among the rural folks that the term *Sobai jwng dao jwng* (black gram cooked with chicken), to mean that one had no curry. For instance, if X enquires what curry Y has eaten, the latter refers to this particular curry to indicate that he had no curry at all. The curry *Ondlakarwi* is also worth mentioning. It is a gravy dish made of pounded rice, and chicken and seasoned with local soda. In the olden days, the *Ondlakarwi* dish was usually served at the traditional wedding ceremony (*Hatasuni Kurnai*). After the wedding was solemnised, the bride was entrusted with the task of cooking meals for guests, i.e., rice and curry for the guests, but as a cultural norm, the curry was usually cooked without oil, turmeric, and other spices compared to the normal style of cooking wherein it is seen cooked with necessary ingredients.

Another essential delicacy is *Nafam*, locally prepared by pounding dry fish with ingredients like pumpkin and cucumber leaves, arum stems and finely fermented in a bamboo tube. This delicacy when cooked in Bodo style serves as chutney during meals. Silkworms called *emphou*, which they rear on castor leaves to procure cocoons also serve as a delicious dish. However, their greatest delicacy is pork, and a Bodo village usually swarms with pigs in almost every possible stage of growth, most often exposed for sale at weekly markets (Narzary 2018:28).

Bodos are fond of mushrooms. They usually obtain from the fields, decayed paddy straw. Young bambooshoots, which they fetch from bamboo gardens are consumed seasonally. In the remote past, Bodo folks used mustard oil sparingly, and alkaline salt (Indigenous soda made out of ash) for cooking.



Also, we come across the custom of chewing areca nuts and betel leaves with a little bit of lime, irrespective of sex and age. The areca nuts and leaves hold a distinctive significance in the social life of the Bodos as no marriage, festival, rituals, or other social functions can be held without these items. As social etiquette, serving of areca nuts and leaves to the guests constitutes an essential part and parcel of the traditional Bodo culture.

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, it can be stated that the food habits of Bodos are full of cultural traditions. It is a mix of seasonal and occasional recipes. The Bodo cuisine as seen in the above light though not sophisticated is delicious and nutritious ensuring enough supply of basic elements of a balanced diet.

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