

# Food As An Identity For Ethnic Nepalese Of Sikkim And Adjoining Area

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**Abstract:** All animals require adequate nutrition to survive. Their consumption is guided by instinct. In the case of human beings intake of nutrients is guided by the cultural factors. Each culture has its own way of defining what food is and what non-food is, what is nutrient and what is non-nutrient. The food and nutrition appears very simple phenomenon in our life, but for anthropologists it is a cultural phenomenon. In every human society, food is deeply embedded in the social, religious n economic aspects. The anthropology of food focuses on the cultural and social significance of food and eating. Apart from geographical information of the people inhabitants, this paper also reveals the food habits and associated food beliefs among the ethnic Nepalese of Sikkim and adjoining areas.

**Key words:** food, culture, identity.

## *Introduction*

What do Nepalese eat? Rice, legume, meat, fermented foods, according to popular myth. There's no denying that for every person in Sikkim and adjoining areas rice is eaten daily and meat n fermented food items are consumed throughout the year. Yet the Nepalese diet cannot be so simply described. Just as the population of Sikkim includes numerous cultural groups, the food habits of Nepalese are equally diverse. Each Nepalese ethnic, religious or regional group has its own culturally based food habits. Many of these customs have been influenced and modified through contact with the majority culture and, in turn have changed and shaped Nepalese majority food habits. Today, a fast food restaurant or street stand is likely to offer momos, *alu* chiura, faley, pizza, egg rolls. It is the intricate interplay between food habits of the past and the present, the old and the new, and the tradition and the innovation that is the hallmark of the Nepalese diet. All animals require adequate nutrition to survive. Their consumption is guided by instinct. In the case of human beings intake of nutrients is guided by the cultural factors. Each culture has its own way of defining what food is and what non-food is, what is nutrient and what non-nutrient is. The food and nutrition appears very simple phenomenon in our life, but for anthropologists it is a cultural phenomenon. In every human society, food is deeply embedded in the social, religious and economic aspects. The anthropology of food focuses on the cultural and social significance of food and eating habits. The Anthropology of Food involves analyses of food patterns in a culture. The primary purpose for food is nutrition; it also has a cultural dimension by which people choose what they eat not only by flavor or nutritional value, but by cultural, religious, historic, economic or social status, and environmental factors.

Sikkim is a mountainous state of India with an area of 7096 sq. km and altitudes ranging from 300 m to 8500 m. The state comprises four districts North, South, East and West. The total population of Sikkim is 610,577 (Census 2011) and comprises three major ethnic groups of people, the Nepali, the Bhutia and the Lepcha. The food culture of the Sikkim Himalayas is reflected in the pattern of food production. Agriculture forms a major component of a mixed farming system. Depending on the altitudinal variation, the main agricultural crops are rice, maize, finger millet, wheat, buckwheat, barley, potato, soybeans, large cardamom, ginger, and a variety of seasonal vegetables such as cabbage, brinjal, chilly, mustard leaves, cucumber, pumpkin, sponge gourd, radish, carrot, tomato, etc. Preparation of wild edible plants including bamboo shoots, ferns and their parts such as seeds, fruits, roots, leaves, flowers in local diet is an important component of food culture. Seasonal fruits such as orange, apple, banana etc. are grown and eaten. Livestock mostly plays a subsidiary role in the mixed farming system. Cattle rearing are common for milk, milk products and meat. Yaks (*Bos grunniens*) are reared mostly on extensive alpine and sub alpine scrub lands between 2100 m to 4500 m altitude for milk products and meat.

### **What is Food?**

Food, as defined in the dictionary, is any substance that provides the nutrients necessary to maintain life and growth when ingested. When most animals feed, they repeatedly consume those foods necessary for their well-being, and they do so in a similar manner at each feeding. Humans, however, do not feed. They eat. Food is a fundamental human necessity, essential to the sustenance of the human body. At the same time, food may be associated with pleasure, passion, even luxury. Food is also essential to the social body. Who eats what, who eats with whom, and whose appetites are satisfied and who's denied are all profoundly social dynamics through which identities, relationships, and hierarchies are created and reproduced. The choice of which foods to ingest is further complicated, however, by another psychological concept regarding eating—the incorporation of food. Consumption is understood as equaling conversion of a food and its nutrients into a human body. For many people, incorporation is not only physical but associative as well. It is the fundamental nature of the food absorbed by a person, conveyed by the proverbial phrase, “You are what you eat.” Food choice is, in fact influenced by self-identity, a process whereby the food likes or dislikes of someone else are accepted and internalized as personal preferences. Research suggests that children choose foods eaten by admired adults (e.g. teachers), peers, fictional characters, peers and older siblings.

The development of food habits clearly indicates that for humans, food is more than just nutrients. Incorporation has meaning specially because people are omnivores and have choice regarding what is consumed. Humans used foods symbolically, due to relationship, association or convention. An essential symbolic function of food is cultural identity. Beyond self-identification, incorporation can signify collective association. What one eats defines who one is, culturally speaking and conversely, who one is not. The food habits of each cultural group are often linked to religious beliefs or ethnic behaviors. Food that demonstrate

affiliation with a culture are usually introduced during childhood and are associated with security or good memories. Such foods hold special worth to a person, even if other diets have been adopted due to changes in residence, religious membership, health status or daily personal preference. They may be eaten during ethnic holidays, festivals, personal events, such as birthdays or weddings, or during times of stress. These items are sometimes called “comfort foods” because they satisfy the basic psychological need for food familiarity.

### *What is Culture?*

Culture is broadly defined as the values, beliefs, attitudes and practices accepted by members of a group or community. Culture is learned, not inherited; it is passed from generation to generation through language acquisition and socialization in a process called enculturation. It is a collective adaptation to a specific set of environmental conditions and cultural behavior patterns are reinforced when a group is isolated by geography or segregated by socio-economic status. It changes over time, from place to place, and in response to social dynamics.

Cultural membership is defined by ethnicity. Unlike national origin or race, ethnicity is a social identity associated with shared behavior patterns, including food habits, dress, language, family structure and often religious affiliation. Food functions vary culturally, and each group creates categorizations reflective of their priorities. These categorizations are commonly used by members of each culture and are associated with the meaning of food. It includes:

- cultural super foods, usually staple foods that have dominant role in the diet e.g. rice;
- prestige foods, often protein items or expensive or rare foods;
- body image foods, believed to influence health, beauty and well being;
- sympathetic magic foods, whose traits, through association of color or form, are incorporated; and
- physiologic group foods, reserved for, or forbidden to, groups with certain physiologic status, such as gender, age or health conditions.

Food links the State of Sikkim to history, culture and identity to the country. It also links people to cosmological theories of inner substance and its transformations, to concepts of ritual purity and pollutions, to modernity and to tradition. The great stories of food in the State in the later half of twentieth century are movements to improve indigenous farming, and creation of a distribution system that aims to ensure that every individual have access to an adequate basic diet. It examines food cosmology, the theories of food and diet that underline cuisine and food related etiquette in the State. Cosmology links food, medical perspectives and concepts of purity and pollution.

## Food Culture

Food culture of Sikkim is directly related to the pattern of food production in the State. It has evolved as a result of traditional wisdom and experiences of generations over a period of time. It has been based on agro-climatic conditions suitable for cultivation of different crop species such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds, fruits, vegetables, spices and availability of wild edible plants, ethnic belief systems and preferences. Traditional foods have an important bearing in the dietary habits of people of Sikkim (Tamang, 2005:1-2).

Stone Age (Paleolithic Age Antiquity to 5,000 B.C.) nomadic hunter- gatherers were roaming across the world at least 70,000 years ago and some researchers believe the primitive humans may have lived in Sardinia (Italy) as long as 400,000 years ago. By around 4,000 B.C. (Neolithic Age of 5,000-2,000 B.C.) the Neolithic humans developed the art of land cultivation due to scarcity of food available for hunting and gathering. Agriculture required people to stay in one spot and so fixed settlement emerged. According to the legend of the Kiratas (Mundhum-oral tradition of the Limboos), the Black Soyabean was the first crop, domesticated and cultivated by the Kiratas (Limboos). The alone cultivated crop was thus eaten in a variety of ways to avoid monotonousness of eating. Thus they ate it and still eating it raw, boiled with pods, dry frying, crushing, boiling the beans, as fermented product etc. and thus developed a variety of production includes famous “*Kinema*”. Later on a number of crops were added up for cultivation through improvement of with crop plants and through plant introduction. Sikkim is very rich in flora and faunal diversity. Thus, the people of Sikkim adopted eating of tender shoots, leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, root and tubers of a variety of plant and animal species available in Sikkim. This practice has ultimately evolved a number of traditional food cultures in Sikkim Himalayas (Subba, 1999: 49-52, 159-160; Subba, 2002:48-187).

Food symbolizes the culture of a community and provides it with a distinct identity. The *bhat-dal-tarkari-achar* (rice-legume soup-curry-pickle) is a typical food of every Nepali of Sikkim and adjoining areas, signifying the identity. *Dhenroh*, or boiled maize-flour, eaten with butter milk is another typical Nepali food. Regarding the typical Nepali’s food habits, the morning starts with a full mug of tea taken with sugar or salt with or without milk, and with or without a pinch of black pepper or ginger or *tulsi* leaves. The first meal eaten in the morning is a simple *bhat-dal-tarkari-achar*. It is followed by the light refreshment with mostly traditional snacks and tea in the afternoon. The second major meal is dinner, which is served early in the evening, and which consists of the same *bhat-dal-tarkari-achar*.

Traditional Nepali food is less spicy and prepared in *gheu* (purified butter) and animal fat, but nowadays most of them use edible oils except in remote villages where the traditional medium of cooking persists. Most Nepalese are non-vegetarians but beef is rarely cooked at home except by Tamangs, Sherpas and Yolmos. Newars prefer buffalo meat. Cooking is usually done by women. Elderly members of the family are served the meals first and the women eat afterwards. More than 40 varieties of ethnic fermented foods and beverages, 100 types of non-fermented foods and 190 species of edible wild plants are consumed by different groups of

Nepalese as staple foods, vegetables, pickles, condiments and herbal materials. Most of these foods are lesser known outside and confined to particular groups and places. Some ethnic foods of the Nepalese are : *dhenron, chamrey, chatamari, gundruk, sinki, kinema, selroti, churpi, dahi, mohi, gheu, maseura, khalpi, mesu, sidra, sukuti, sukako maacha, sukako masu, phulaurah, somar, phapar ko roti, kwanti, chhwelaa, wachipa, alum, folding, falki, khoreng, goyong, kodo ko jaanr, raksi*, etc.

### ***Food Mealtime***

The people of Sikkim are basically rural, and generally take two heavy meals and two light refreshments. Unlike in the other parts of the country, people of Sikkim in the rural area prefer to eat four meals a day: Morning meal (*Bihan ko Khaza*) before going to the morning field-work; mid-day meal or lunch (*Din ko Bhat*) before going for a day's field-work; afternoon refreshment (*Deunso ko Khaza*) and evening dinner (*Beluka ko Bhat*). The urban people also follow the same pattern with some difference.

### ***Morning Light Meals***

In the rural village of Sikkim the morning starts with tea or alcoholic beverage (*Chang/Jaanr/Bhati ko Jaanr*) with dry-fried whole maize or soybean or beaten rice/maize or boiled potato or colocasia or *ghar tarul*, or any seasonal foods, and proceed for morning work of fodder/fuel-wood collection or agricultural works such as ploughing, field preparation, manuring, sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, storing etc. Tea is taken with sugar or salt, with or without milk, or with a pinch of blank pepper or ginger paste.

### ***Mid-Day Meals (Lunch)***

After finishing the morning work the rural people may come for lunch at home or the lunch is served to the field depending on the nature of work. *Bhat-dal-tarkari-achar* (rice-legume soup curry-pickle) is the basic of the Sikkimese meal corresponding to cooked rice, dal or vegetable mixed with potato curry, meat or milk product –*mohi* and various kinds of *achar* with hot chilly (Tamang,J.P. 2005:2-3). The rice is very often substituted by *Makai ko Bhat-Dhenroh, Hariyo Makai, Kodo ko Roti, Phapar ko roti, Gahun ko roti* etc. The legume soup-curry is often substituted with seasonal vegetable curry or meat curry or *mohi*.

### ***Afternoon Refreshment***

In the late afternoon, the rural people may take light refreshment with tea or alcoholic beverages (*Chang/Jaanr/Bhati ko Jaanr*). The refreshments may be of seasonal root or tuber crops (boiled cassava, potato, colocasia, greater yams, sweet potato, Iskus-chayote root or fruit etc.), dry-fried maize or soybean, *phapar ko roti, kodo ko roti, gahun ko roti, chewra* (beaten rice), *murai, champa* (roasted and powdered maize, wheat, barley, gram etc.).

### ***Evening Meals (Dinner)***

In the evening the rural people take tea or alcoholic beverages (*tongba*- fermented millet beer put in bamboo or wooden cans/*Chang/Jaanr/Bhati ko Jaanr*) before dinner. The dinner is also composed of the basic *Bhat-dal-tarkari-achar* as mentioned above. The Bhutia and Lepcha tribes usually eat *thug-pa*, noodles in soup. The rural person mostly eat cooked maize as staple food such as *Dhenroh*, boiled maize rice, and continues to be a staple food in villages. The rice is slowly being replaced by *roti* or *chapatti* (wheat-based baked bread), even in the rural areas today. In high altitudes mainly in north Sikkim, people drink *pheuja*, butter tea prepared from yak milk (Tamang, J.P.2005:2-3).

The urban people generally take morning tea, breakfast or early lunch in the morning, lunch or afternoon refreshment in the mid-day meal, and dinner. They may take non-alcoholic or alcoholic beverages before dinner. The food items may vary depending on their ethnic traditional choice of food items available in the cosmopolitan areas.

Most of the people in Sikkim are non-vegetarians but some members of Bahuns and Chettris are vegetarians. Nepali food is less spicy and prepared in *gheu* or butter, or mustard or rape oil or animal fat in the rural areas. The non-vegetarians take beef, pork, mutton, chicken, fish, buffalo, sheep etc. depending on the community preferences and social taboos.

### ***Cultural Importance of Foods***

Certain foods have huge cultural significance in Nepali society of Sikkim and adjoining areas. For instance, celebration of festivals is incomplete without *selroti*. It serves as a confectionery during festivals. It is prepared particularly during the *Tihar* festival and is offered by the sisters to their brothers on the last day of this festival. It is also served during marriage and funeral ceremonies.

Among the Bahun and Chettri castes of the region, the boys after *bratabandha* and girls after marriage are not allowed to take stale food. As per this customs, food cooked in the roofless place was not allowed to be eaten and this custom still prevails among them. *Dhakaney*, rice cooked in butter and milk is served exclusively to married daughters at their parental house a day before *teej* (a Nepali festival). This is called *dur*. This dish is quite heavy and nutritious and people can fast the following day easily. *Khir* is another dish, which is prepared by cooking rice in milk only. It is served on special occasions to symbolize prosperity. The members of these castes eat *khir* and *phulaurah* on *shradh* (death anniversaries).

*Dahi* is a sacred item in many of the festivals, religious occasions and marriages of Nepalese. It is also used by Nepalese as an adhesive for rice grains and color to make *tika* which is applied on the foreheads of the younger members of the family by their elders during festivals and marriages. It is mixed with *chiura* and eaten in *ashadko pandhra* (which falls in the month of July) signifying the beginning of work in the fields for farmers.

For a Hindu Nepali, *gheu* (purified butter) is a sacred thing. It is used in the rituals related to birth, marriage and death as also in other *pujas* as sacred offerings. The Nepalis, Bhutias and Lepchas use *gheu* also for lighting the lamps for gods and goddesses in the religious places. During *maghe sankranti* (a festival of Hindu Nepalis), a variety of boiled tubers or *tarul*, *tilko laddu* (sesame balls mixed with molasses), *papadko phulaurah* (buckwheat fritters) are eaten by the Nepalis.

The cultural significance of food among Newars is also interesting. For instance, the most common expression for greeting in Newari is *ja naye dwuno la?* It means, “Have you had your rice?” Meat and alcohol are culturally acceptable to them. Two food items- *dhau saga* and *khe saga* are important in ritual exchange among Newar relatives. *Dhau saga* consists of *dahi* and flattened rice and *khe saga* consists of egg, *chiura*, meat, fish, *wa* (roasted pulses) and *ayela* (distilled liquor). Newars believe that *dahi* is associated with masculinity and purity, and the egg is associated with sexuality and fertility. *Kranti* has its own connotations. It is related to the mysteries of creation and growth. Nine kinds of pulses and beans symbolize the *nava-Durga* cult, the cult of nine Durga, the goddess of Hindus. Traditionally, it is not eaten by Newars for a year after death.

Traditional alcoholic beverages have strong ritual importance. Social activities like marriage and festivals require consumption of appreciable quantities of alcoholic beverages among the Limbu, Rai, Gurung, Mangar, Tamang, Sunuwar, Newar, Sherpa, Bhutia and Lepcha communities. *Jaanr* and *raksi* are essential to solemnize the marriage ceremony of these communities. Elopement is a common practice among Nepalese. Relatives of the boy usually go to the girl's house with bottles of *raksi* to respect the verdict of her parents and pay the penalty for elopement. Once the consent is granted by the girl's parents, freshly prepared *raksi* is served to all and the marriage is solemnized.

Alcoholic beverages are offered to perform the *pitri puja* or *kul puja*, which means worship of ancestors. *Mandokpenaa thea* or *kodoko jaanr*, filled in *tongba*, and *raksi* are among the important materials for performing a ritual of the Limbus called *tongsing*. Those who come to offer condolences at the funeral or a memorial service for the deceased are served with alcoholic beverages, mostly among the non-caste Nepalis.

Drying of *gundruk* and *sinki* in the sun is a remarkable step in the traditional processing of foods. They are preserved for several months without refrigeration and consumed during monsoon when fresh vegetables are scarce. Dry *gundruk* and *sinki* are comparatively lighter than the weight of fresh substrates and can, therefore, be carried easily while travelling. Carrying dry *gundruk*, *sinki*, *kinema*, hard *churpi*, *sidra*, *sukuti*, *sukako masu*, *maseura*, etc. is still common practice among the Nepalese of Sikkim and adjoining areas. Because of the acidic taste, *gundruk* and *sinki* are said to be good appetizers, and people use these foods as remedies for indigestion.

Regular consumption of meat is expensive for a majority of the poor rural people. They slaughter domestic animals usually on special occasions, like festivals and marriages. During *dasain* (a festival of Nepali), goats are ritually sacrificed to please the goddess Durga. After the ceremony, the meat is cooked and eaten. The

remaining meat is preserved by smoking to make *sukako masu* for future consumption. Such meat can be kept for several months.

Among the Rais, marital status is very strong determinant in the preparation of certain items. For instance, only widows or unmarried women are allowed to make *marcha*, a traditional dry starter for alcohol production. Those who make it believe that addition of wild herbs gives more sweetness to the product and adding chilies and ginger get rid of devils that may spoil the product. This is actually to check the growth of undesirable microorganisms that may inhibit growth of indigenous micro flora in *marcha*.

### **Conclusion**

Today these foods are associated with culture and tradition, and they are consumed during special occasions and festivals. Whatever be their antiquity, there is no denying the fact that *dhenroh*, *kinema*, *gundruk*, *sinki*, *jaanr*, *raksi* etc. represent a distinct cultural identity of the Nepalese of Sikkim and adjoining areas. Nepali food culture in Sikkim and adjoining areas have been shaped mainly by agro-climatic conditions, evolved as a result of traditional wisdom and experiences of generations over a period of time and have even been influenced by other interactive communities.

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