

INDIGENOUS FOOD TRADITIONS OF THE MATAK COMMUNITY: PROSPECTS FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL GROWTH

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Abstract: *The Matak community of Assam, rich in cultural and historical heritage, possesses a unique and diverse range of traditional food practices that remain largely unexplored in academic and entrepreneurial domains. This study aims to document and analyze the indigenous food traditions of the Matak community and explore their potential for fostering entrepreneurial ventures, especially in the context of sustainable rural development and cultural preservation.*

The primary objectives of the study are:

- 1. To identify and document the traditional food resources and culinary practices of the Matak community.*
- 2. To assess the cultural, nutritional, and economic significance of these food items.*
- 3. To explore the possibilities of transforming these indigenous food practices into viable entrepreneurial opportunities.*
- 4. To examine the challenges and limitations faced in commercializing traditional food items while retaining their authenticity.*

A mixed-methods approach has been employed in this research. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through field surveys, interviews with elderly members, women practitioners, and local entrepreneurs within the Matak community. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to gather deeper insights into traditional recipes, preservation techniques, seasonal availability, and food-related rituals. Additionally, a market analysis was carried out to understand the demand and scope for indigenous food products at local and regional levels.

Preliminary findings suggest that the community's culinary practices are deeply rooted in ecological knowledge, seasonal cycles, and sustainable resource use. There is a growing interest among youth and local stakeholders to revitalize these practices through food processing, packaging, and small-scale enterprises.

The study concludes that traditional food heritage can serve as a strong foundation for entrepreneurial growth, provided there is adequate support in terms of training, financial assistance, branding, and market linkage. Promoting the Matak community's indigenous food can contribute to cultural preservation, nutrition enhancement, and local economic development.

Key Words: *Matak, traditional food, culinary practices, Entrepreneurship, indigenous, Commercializing.*

1 Introduction:

The Matak community of Assam, a socio-culturally vibrant indigenous group, has long been recognized for its rich heritage, deeply embedded in history, tradition, and sustainable ways of living. Among the various aspects of Matak culture, traditional food practices stand out as a significant yet underexplored domain. These culinary traditions not only reflect the community's deep ecological understanding and harmonious relationship with nature but also serve as a vital link to their cultural identity. Passed down through generations, Matak food practices incorporate unique preparation methods, use of locally available ingredients, seasonal consumption patterns, and community-centered cooking rituals.

Despite their richness and diversity, the traditional food systems of the Matak community have remained largely undocumented and marginalized within mainstream academic and commercial discourse. With rapid modernization, changing dietary habits, and increasing dependence on industrial food systems, these indigenous culinary traditions are facing a gradual decline. However, in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in reviving traditional food knowledge as a means of sustainable development, health promotion, and cultural preservation.

This study seeks to bridge the gap by documenting and analyzing the traditional food resources and culinary practices of the Matak community. It also aims to explore how these food practices can be transformed into viable entrepreneurial opportunities, particularly in the context of rural economic development. Traditional food entrepreneurship, rooted in indigenous knowledge, offers a promising avenue for income generation while preserving biodiversity and cultural heritage. The growing market demand for organic, ethnic, and heritage foods provides a timely opportunity to commercialize Matak food traditions without compromising their authenticity.

Preliminary findings underscore the potential of Matak culinary heritage as a catalyst for grassroots entrepreneurship. Many of the food items identified are rich in nutrition, ecologically sustainable, and have a unique cultural appeal that could attract niche markets. With the right institutional support such as training in food processing and packaging, branding, and digital marketing—these traditional food products can enter local, regional, and even global markets.

1.1 Objectives of the study:

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3. To explore the possibilities of transforming these indigenous food practices into viable entrepreneurial opportunities.
4. To examine the challenges and limitations faced in commercializing traditional food items while retaining their authenticity.

1.2 Methodology of the Study:

By adopting a mixed-methods research approach, the study engages directly with community members—especially women and elder knowledge holders to gather oral histories, cooking techniques, and food-related customs. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), field observations, and interviews with local entrepreneurs reveal not only the cultural and nutritional value of these foods but also the practical challenges faced in scaling them into business ventures. Issues such as lack of infrastructure, inadequate training, limited access to finance, and absence of market linkage have emerged as significant barriers to the commercialization of traditional foods.

1.3 Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the documentation, preservation, and potential revitalization of the traditional food practices of the Matak community of Assam. In an era of rapid globalization and dietary transition, indigenous food knowledge is increasingly at risk of being lost. By focusing on the unique culinary traditions of the Matak community, this study aims to safeguard a valuable cultural asset that embodies ecological wisdom, nutritional richness, and socio-cultural identity.

One of the key contributions of this research is its potential to highlight the economic value of traditional food systems. By identifying viable entrepreneurial opportunities rooted in indigenous culinary practices, the study seeks to provide a framework for sustainable rural development. Traditional food entrepreneurship can create income-generating avenues for local people, especially women and youth, while promoting food security, biodiversity conservation, and cultural continuity.

Furthermore, the study adds to the limited academic literature on the Matak community and their traditional knowledge systems, offering insights for researchers, policymakers, and development practitioners. It also demonstrates how indigenous knowledge, when properly documented, supported, and integrated with modern entrepreneurial strategies, can become a driver of inclusive and sustainable development.

1.4 Delimitations of the Study

This study is subject to the following delimitations, which define the scope and boundaries of the research:

Geographical Scope: The study is confined to selected areas inhabited by the Matak community in Assam, particularly within the districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, and Sivasagar. Other regions where Matak populations may reside have not been included due to time and logistical constraints.

Community Focus: The research is specifically focused on the Matak community. Traditional food practices of other indigenous or ethnic groups in Assam are beyond the scope of this study.

2. Major Findings:

The traditional food of the Matak community reflects their deep-rooted connection with nature and local ecology. It includes a variety of seasonal, organic, and homegrown ingredients. Their culinary practices emphasize simplicity, health, and sustainability. Recipes are often passed down orally through generations, especially by women. These food traditions are an integral part of Matak cultural identity and community life. The major traditional food resources are as follows:

i) Rice: Rice holds a central place in Assamese cuisine, and the Matak community an integral part of Assam's cultural fabric shares this deep-rooted culinary tradition. It is believed that the Austro-Asiatic communities were among the first to introduce wet rice cultivation in Assam's fertile plains. Over time, communities like the Matak community have nurtured and preserved unique rice-based food practices that reflect both their heritage and close relationship with nature. Assam grows a wide range of rice varieties, including Indian

and Japanese strains. Among them, Joha - a fragrant, aromatic rice is especially valued. Other indigenous varieties like Bora, Komal Chaul, Mishiri, Aijung, Ranjit, Gamiri, Sali, and Swarnamachuri are commonly used in both Assamese cuisines.

In Matak households, as in much of Assam, rice is prepared using two traditional methods: *Aroi* (made from sun-dried paddy) and *Ukhua* (made by boiling the paddy before drying). These methods influence the texture and flavor of the rice and are chosen depending on the dish or occasion. For the Matak community, rice is not just food it is a symbol of cultural identity, sustainability, and ancestral wisdom.

ii) Poita Bhat (Fermented Rice): Poita Bhat - fermented rice soaked overnight in water - is a cherished traditional dish in Assamese cuisine, and holds a special place in the food culture of the Matak community as well. Prepared by soaking cooked rice overnight, it develops a slightly tangy taste by morning due to natural fermentation. Especially during the hot summer months, Poita Bhat is favored for its cooling effect and digestive benefits. Among the Matak, it is commonly eaten with mustard oil, salt, green chilies, and sometimes paired with mashed potato, roasted fish, or fermented bamboo shoot. This humble yet nourishing dish reflects the Matak community's sustainable food habits and deep connection with seasonal living. Similar versions of fermented rice are also found in other rice-based cultures across India and Asia, but the Matak preparation retains its own distinct identity rooted in local tradition.

iii) Rice-Based Snacks and Sweets in Matak Culinary Traditions (Pitha): Apart from being a staple food, rice also forms the base of a wide variety of traditional snacks and sweets in Assamese cuisine, which includes the rich culinary heritage of the Matak community. Different types of rice are used depending on the requirement some varieties are preferred for cooking meals, while others are ideal for preparing snacks. In most Assamese households, including those of the Matak community, rice is used in some form every evening, highlighting its cultural and dietary significance.

During festivals and special occasions, especially Rongali Bihu and Bhogali Bihu, traditional rice-based sweets known as Pitha hold a special place. These are primarily made from rice flour and are considered a unique cultural asset of Assam. There are many varieties of pitha - each with its own method of preparation, taste, and significance—and they are integral to Matak festive hospitality like other Assamese Communities. Guests are warmly welcomed with an assortment of these sweets during celebrations and family gatherings. In recent times, while many still prepare *pitha* at home, others prefer purchasing them from local markets. This growing demand has led to the rise of a cottage industry around Pitha and related sweets.

Following are some of the key rice-based Pitha that are popular across Assamese households, including within the Matak community. Each of these items reflects indigenous food wisdom, simplicity, and a deep connection with local agricultural practices:

iv) Chira (Flattened Rice): Chira is made by parboiling paddy, drying it, and then flattening it. It is lightweight, easy to digest, and often consumed with curd, jaggery, or milk. During festivals like Bhogali Bihu, it is served with doi (curd) and gur (jaggery). The most common and traditionally used paddy in Assam for preparing Chira (flattened rice) are:

a) Bora Dhan: Bora is a glutinous (sticky) rice variety commonly used to make Chira in Assam. It is extremely popular due to its soft texture and slightly sweet taste after processing.

b) Bakul Bora Dhan: This is another sticky rice variety used for preparing Chira. While not as commonly available as Bora dhan, Bakul Bora produces good-quality flattened rice and is favored in many rural areas.

c) Chakua or Mou Bora Dhan: Chakua or Mou Bora dhan is used to make a more flavorful variety of Chira. It is known for its natural aroma and is often chosen for special occasions. The Chira made from this paddy has a soft yet firm texture.

d) Malbhog Dhan: Malbhog is a fragrant rice variety that gives Chira a distinct and pleasant flavor. Though not as sticky as Bora dhan, the Chira made from Malbhog is considered a delicacy and often consumed with jaggery, milk, or curd.

v) Sandah (Roasted Rice): Sandah is prepared by roasting paddy in a hot sand-filled pan until it puffs up, then winnowing and pounding it to separate the husk. It is dry and crispy, often consumed with salt and mustard oil or with curd and jaggery. In rural areas, it is considered a filling and energy-boosting snack.

vi) Komal Chaul (Soft Rice): Komal Chaul is a special type of rice that does not require cooking. When soaked in water for just a few minutes, it becomes soft and ready to eat. This makes it ideal for quick meals. It is commonly eaten with curd, sugar, jaggery, or milk. It's especially favored during summer for its cooling effect and ease of digestion.

These rice-based snacks are not just simple food items but also a part of Assam's and the Matak community's rich cultural and culinary heritage. They showcase how rice, in its various forms, continues to nourish generations through sustainable and time-tested practices.

vii) Khar: Among the Matak community of Assam, khar holds a special place not just as a traditional cooking ingredient, but as a symbol of heritage, healing, and everyday life. In Assam, food isn't just about taste it's about tradition, memory, and a deep connection to the land. One such example is khar, a uniquely Assamese ingredient that's been part of the region's cuisine and culture for generations.

Khar is made in a very traditional way. People collect the peels of Bhimkol (a type of local plantain), dry them in the sun, and then burn them. The ash is soaked in clean water, and the liquid that comes out a pale yellowish, slightly bitter solution is called kharoni. This is what's used in cooking. Sometimes, ash from other natural materials like Madhuna leaves or paddy straw is also used.

But khar isn't just a cooking ingredient—it has a story. Long ago, salt wasn't easily available in many parts of Assam. It was expensive and rare, especially for common people. So instead of salt, households used kharoni to season their food. Over time, it became more than just a substitute. People began to love its distinct flavor and health benefits. Because it's alkaline, khar helps reduce acidity, making it especially comforting for those with digestive issues.

Not all khar is meant for the kitchen, though. The kharoni made from paddy straw, for instance, was traditionally used for washing clothes, cleaning utensils, and even rinsing hair. But the one made from Bhimkol and Madhuna is what makes its way into Assamese dishes.

One interesting thing about khar-based food is that people usually avoid adding turmeric. When turmeric is mixed with khar, it turns the dish a deep yellow or golden color, which changes its original look and feel. So, to keep the natural, earthy tone of the dish, cooks often skip turmeric altogether.

Khar is used in a wide variety of Assamese dishes—each simple, nourishing, and full of flavor:

Matimahor khar – black gram cooked with khar..

Amitar khar - raw papaya with a clean, slightly bitter taste.

Sewali phulor khar– a seasonal dish made with night jasmine flowers.

Kol posolar khar – banana stem and raw banana cooked together

Titaphulor (Basak) khar - bitter flowers or medicinal leaves like vasaka.

Khar bhat - plain rice flavored with khar.

Doron shakhor khar - wild greens cooked in khar water.

viii) Muhudi: After meals, the practice of chewing tamul (betel nut) as a mouth freshener, known as 'Muhudi' is a beloved tradition among the Assamese people, including the Matak community. Typically, tamul is chewed with paan (betel leaf), slaked lime (chun), and dhopat (tobacco). In addition to these, bark from the bahot tree is also customarily used as an additive, enhancing both flavor and texture.

Over time, the practice has expanded to include aromatic and digestive elements such as dried guamari (a fragrant plant similar to camphor), clove, dried silikha (terminalia chebula), dried amla (Indian gooseberry), dried ginger, and korphul (a local aromatic herb similar to camphor). These additions not only freshen the breath but are also believed to aid digestion and bring a pleasant end to the meal.

ix) Bah Gaj: In the traditional food culture of Assam, especially among communities like the Matak, the use of bamboo shoot—locally known as bah gaj is both common and cherished. For generations, the Matak people, like many others in Assam, have relied on the land's natural offerings, and bamboo shoot holds a special place in their seasonal diets and food preservation practices. A well-known Assamese delicacy made from these shoots is khoricha.

To prepare khoricha, the outer layers of the bamboo shoot are peeled off, and the inner tender portion is either ground in a traditional stone grinder (pihona) or pounded in a wooden mortar (dheki). The resulting bamboo paste is packed into a bamboo cylinder or a clean glass jar, sealed, and left to ferment naturally. Within 20 to 30 days, the sour and tangy khoricha is ready. It can be preserved in its natural fermented form or sun-dried to make dry khoricha, which lasts longer.

Khoricha has a distinct sour flavor and is used in a wide range of Assamese dishes—cooked with fish, meat, kachu saak (taro greens), and other vegetables. It adds a bold, earthy punch to the dish, making it both flavourful and traditional, a true taste of Assam's culinary heritage.

x) Eri Pupa: Eri pupa (*Philosomia Ricini*) is a highly valued traditional food among various communities in Assam, including the Ahom, Mishing, and Matak people. Both the Eri pupa and its larva (leta) are consumed in different ways—raw (after proper cleaning), boiled, or deep-fried in oil.

In these communities, especially among the Mataks, eri pupae are not only linked to sericulture but are also deeply rooted in their food culture. Often served during special occasions or to welcome guests, eri pupae are appreciated for their rich protein content and nutritional value. This unique ingredient forms an integral part of the region's indigenous culinary traditions.

xi) Weaver Ants (Amoroli Poruwa): The eggs and larvae of the weaver ant, locally known as 'Amoroli Poruwa', are traditionally collected and stir-fried with onions in oil to prepare a flavorful and nutritious dish. Among several indigenous communities of Assam, including the Matak, this unique delicacy holds cultural and medicinal value.

According to local beliefs, Matak community as well, consuming weaver ants on the day of Goru Bihu (a traditional Assamese festival dedicated to cattle) is believed to promote good health throughout the year. It is also thought to enhance immunity and protect against common seasonal illnesses like colds and fevers. This dish reflects the deep connection between nature and traditional food wisdom in Assamese society.

xii) Dry Fish: In Assam, most communities' dry fish on a bamboo tray placed over a smoking fire, using the heat from the fire to preserve it. Once dried, the fish is cooked with various vegetables and spices as needed. The people of Matak, community grind the dry fish with Hiju leaves and taro stems, and then store it inside bamboo tubes for later use.

3. Prospects of Entrepreneurship Development Based on Traditional Foods of the Matak Community:

The traditional food culture of the Matak community—deeply embedded within the broader Assamese culinary heritage—presents a rich foundation for entrepreneurship development. These foods, prepared through time-tested, eco-friendly, and sustainable methods, hold strong market potential due to their unique flavors, cultural value, and growing demand for ethnic and organic products. With proper branding, quality control, and market linkage, these traditions can be transformed into thriving business opportunities.

3.1 Rice-Based Products

Rice, the staple food of the Matak community, is not only a daily dietary necessity but also the base for numerous traditional snacks, sweets, and fermented dishes.

Pitha Production Units: Setting up small-scale or cottage industries producing traditional Pitha varieties (Til Pitha, Ghila Pitha, Tekeli Pitha, etc.) for local markets and online platforms.

Value-Added Rice Products: Commercial production of Chira (flattened rice), Sandah (roasted rice), Akhoi (puffed rice), and Komal Chaul, packaged for retail and export.

Gourmet & Organic Branding: Marketing indigenous rice varieties like Joha, Bora, and Malbhog as premium products in urban and international markets. Now a day due to growing consumer interest in organic, gluten-free, and traditional food products offers high potential for branding and niche market targeting.

3.2 Fermented Foods:

The Matak tradition includes several fermented items such as Poita Bhat, khoricha (fermented bamboo shoot), and preserved dry fish. These products have unique flavors and are increasingly valued for their probiotic and health benefits.

Bamboo Shoot Processing Units: Standardizing khoricha production with hygienic fermentation and attractive packaging for supermarkets.

Ethnic Fermented Food Restaurants: Establishing specialty eateries or food stalls serving traditional fermented dishes to tourists and locals.

3.3 Dry Fish & Preserved Protein Sources

Dry fish, eri pupa, and weaver ant eggs are traditional high-protein foods with distinctive local preparation methods.

Dry Fish Packaging & Branding: Introducing hygienic, vacuum-packed dry fish with seasoning options.

Insect Protein Products: Commercially processing eri pupae and weaver ant eggs for sale in niche health and gourmet markets.

Export Potential: Meeting the rising demand for dried and preserved ethnic protein sources in North-East Indian diaspora markets.

3.4 Traditional Condiments & Seasonings:

Khar is a signature Assamese alkaline extract with culinary and medicinal uses.

Bottled Khar: Production of standardized, ready-to-use khar for retail in glass bottles or eco-friendly pouches.

Heritage Spice Kits: Combining khar with other traditional herbs, spices, and condiments for sale as “Assamese Cuisine Starter Kits.”

3.5 Cultural Food Tourism:

The Matak community’s rich food culture can attract culinary tourists looking for authentic rural experiences.

Home stay & Food Trails: Offering visitors a chance to stay in Matak villages and learn traditional cooking techniques.

Festival Food Stalls: Setting up stalls during Bihu and cultural festivals to sell traditional snacks and beverages.

Cooking Workshops: Organizing paid workshops for tourists, food bloggers, and culinary students.

3.6 Cottage Industry & Women’s Empowerment:

Many traditional food items can be prepared from home, making them ideal for small-scale, women-led businesses. Community-based cooperatives could produce rice snacks, pitha, bamboo shoot products, and dry fish for local and regional markets.

Traditional food of Matak Community with potential entrepreneurship

Sl. No.	Traditional Food Item	Potential Product / Service Idea	Target Market	Business Model
1	Rice (Joha, Bora, Malbhog, etc.)	Premium packaged indigenous rice varieties (organic branding)	Urban health-conscious consumers, export markets	Farmer–producer cooperatives, direct farm-to-consumer sales, online platforms
2	Pitha (Til Pitha, Ghila, Tekeli, etc.)	Ready-to-eat and packaged festival sweets	Local markets, Assamese Diaspora, tourists	Cottage industry, seasonal festival stalls, e-commerce
3	Chira (Flattened Rice)	Flavored or plain packaged Chira (with jaggery, dry fruits)	Local retail, supermarkets, online ethnic food stores	Small-scale processing units, cooperative packaging
4	Sandah (Roasted Rice)	Roasted rice snack packs (salted, spiced, sweetened)	Rural and urban snack markets	Micro food processing units, women-led SHGs
5	Komal Chaul (Soft Rice)	Ready-to-eat Komal Chaul packs with condiments	Students, office-goers, quick-meal segment	Vacuum-sealed packaging, convenience food branding
6	Khar	Bottled liquid khar, khar spice kits	Assamese households, gourmet markets	Standardized production, eco-friendly packaging
7	Khoricha (Fermented Bamboo Shoot)	Fermented bamboo shoot in jars, sun-dried khoricha packs	NE Indian markets, gourmet Asian stores	Fermentation units, export-oriented packaging
8	Dry Fish	Vacuum-packed dry fish (plain/spiced)	NE markets, Assamese Diaspora, online	Hygienic drying units, brand-based retail
9	Eri Pupa	Frozen or dried eri pupae, protein snack products	Niche protein market, eco-food lovers	Integration with sericulture units, online gourmet sales
10	Weaver Ant Eggs	Packaged seasonal delicacy (fresh/frozen)	Ethnic food markets, medicinal food niche	Seasonal collection & processing, cold-chain logistics
11	Muhudi (Betel Nut Mix)	Branded betel nut mixes with herbal additives	Local consumers, cultural events	Small-scale processing & flavor innovation
12	Food Tourism	Matak food experience tours, cooking workshops, home stays	Tourists, culinary students	Tourism–food venture partnerships

7. Conclusion

The traditional foods of the Matak community—ranging from rice-based snacks to fermented bamboo shoots, dry fish, eri pupae, and khar—offer a treasure trove of entrepreneurship opportunities. With rising consumer demand for authentic, healthy, and sustainable foods, these products can be transformed into commercially viable ventures. By blending cultural authenticity with modern business practices, the Matak community can create a strong niche in both domestic and global markets, while preserving their heritage for future generations.

Notes and References:

Primary Data:

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