



Importance of Khar in Assam as an Alternative of Salt during Colonial Period

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Abstract:

During the Salt Movement of 1930, Khar played an important role in Assam as a local alternative to salt and became a symbol of resistance against British rule. Due to landlocked geography of Assam and far from the sea or ocean coast, the state historically lacked in access to sea salt. Besides Under British rule, the Salt Acts created a government monopoly, making it illegal for Indians to collect or produce salt independently. To maximize revenue, the British imposed heavy taxes and flooded the market with expensive salt imported from Liverpool. In landlocked Assam, the cost was further inflated by transportation, making salt so precious it was compared to gold. The easily processed homemade khar used as substitute of salty and its rapid and widely use in Assamese society brings a cultural identity. The use of Khar encouraged self-reliance and reduced dependence on colonial goods. It also showed how indigenous knowledge and local resources could support the freedom struggle. Thus, Khar was not only a kitchen ingredient but also a quiet yet powerful tool of protest, reflecting the unity and determination of the people of Assam during India's struggle for independence. In this paper it has been tried to explore the how Khar act as a Political Protest during Colonial Assam. By choosing Khar, the Assamese people sent a clear message: their survival and heritage were not dependent on the British crown, turning their dining tables into a daily site of anti-colonial resilience.

Key words: *Khar, Alternative of Salt, Colonial Period, Assam etc.*

Introduction:

Khar is the typical soul of Assamese cuisine, serving as both a unique ingredient and a signature class of dishes that define the region's culinary identity. It is a natural alkaline extract, traditionally prepared by filtering water through the ashes of sun-dried peels or stems of the Bhim Kol (a seeded variety of banana, *Musa balbisiana*). This dark brown, smoky liquid, often called Kola Khar, is prized for its ability to soften vegetables and pulses while imparting a distinct, earthy aroma.

Historically, Khar served as a vital alternative to table salt (sodium chloride) in Assam, during the colonial period. At a time when salt was a scarce and expensive commodity reserved for the aristocracy often equated in value to gold the local population relied on home-made alkaline extracts as a seasoning substitute. Chemically, this "liquid salt" is rich in potassium carbonate rather than sodium, making it a naturally occurring mineral supplement that provides a salty and astringent flavour profile. While salt is now widely available, Khar remains a preferred ingredient for its ability to balance the body's pH levels, especially in a region where the soil and many natural ingredients are highly acidic.

Beyond its historical use as a salt substitute, Khar is valued today as its high alkalinity acts as a natural antacid, helping to neutralize stomach acids and cleanse the digestive tract. Besides, it softens tough vegetables (like raw papaya) and pulses more effectively than salt alone, significantly reducing cooking time. It imparts a unique smoky and earthy aroma that distinguishes traditional Assamese dishes from those of other regions. Due to its high pH, it was historically used as a natural preservative to keep food fresh for longer periods.

Methodology:

To study requires multidisciplinary methodology is required to capture its economic, social, and nutritional roles reviewing colonial-era documents, such as the Assam Land and Revenue Manual and the Census of India, to track salt trade dynamics and the impact of British salt taxes. Collecting community memories and oral traditions to understand how households historically replaced expensive rock or imported salt with homemade alkali extracts like Kalakhar. Analyzing the mineral composition of Khar (potassium carbonate) compared to sodium chloride to determine how it satisfied physiological mineral needs in a landlocked region. Investigating the relation between salt scarcities where salt was often valued equally to gold and the widespread adoption of Khar among the lower economic strata. Studying regional trade hubs like Goalpara, which transitioned from a local salt-substitute reliance to a centre for Bengal salt trade under British monopoly.

Discussion:

In Assam, Khar is more than just a cooking ingredient; it is a cultural cornerstone that represents the region's identity, health practices, and ancient wisdom. Its importance in the present time remains rooted in several key dimensions. Traditionally served at the beginning of a meal, Khar acts as a powerful palate cleanser and natural antacid. Its high alkalinity helps neutralize stomach acidity, aids digestion, and prepares the digestive tract for the courses to follow. The significance of Khar is deep that the people of the region and it symbolizes a connection to the soil and traditional ways of life that distinguish Assamese cuisine from other regional Indian food traditions. While historically a salt substitute, it is now prized as an "all-in-one" ingredient that tenderizes tough vegetables like raw papaya and pulses, while adding a unique smoky, earthy flavour. Beyond the kitchen, Khar has historically served as a home remedy for colds and as a natural detergent for washing clothes and hair. In rural areas, it is even used as a mild antiseptic for minor cuts and a traditional pesticide. Moreover In various local traditions, Khar is associated with cleansing rituals to purify both the body and soul, and is often prepared during agricultural festivals to represent fertility and growth of crops.

The mineral composition of khar, predominantly high in potassium carbonate, indicates how it partially fulfilled physiological mineral requirements in a landlocked area like Assam where sodium chloride access was restricted. Sodium chloride is crucial for sustaining fluid balance, nerve functionality, and muscle activity, whereas potassium is an important mineral necessary for heart performance, muscle contraction, and cellular equilibrium. Khar, while not a direct nutritional substitute for salt, provided potassium and alkaline characteristics that somewhat supported digestion and electrolyte balance. Due to geographic and colonial restrictions leading to salt shortages, the utilization of khar enabled communities to address mineral deficiencies and maintain essential health requirements, showcasing a dietary adaptation influenced by environmental and economic limitations

The Salt Satyagraha, also known as the Dandi March or Salt March, was a landmark nonviolent civil disobedience campaign led by Mahatma Gandhi in 1930 against the British colonial salt monopoly and tax in India. While the primary action occurred on the Gujarat coast, it sparked significant, localized resistance in Assam, where geographical constraints led to unique forms of protest. The Salt Satyagraha greatly influenced the people of Assam by raising political awareness and promoting widespread involvement in the fight for freedom. Motivated by Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement, individuals throughout Assam demonstrated against the British salt regulations by defying salt laws, rejecting foreign products, and coordinating marches. Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi and additional local activists rallied farmers, students, and women, connecting the national movement more closely to daily life in the area. The unrest bolstered solidarity among various societal groups and confronted British economic exploitation, particularly the salt monopoly that impacted ordinary citizens. In general, the Salt Satyagraha intensified nationalist feelings in Assam and signified a crucial movement toward direct opposition to colonial governance.

Times of salt scarcity in Assam, during which salt was frequently esteemed nearly as much as gold, directly impacted the extensive use of khar among the lower income groups. Salt shortages were exacerbated by challenging landscapes, scarce natural resources, and eventually by colonial monopolies and high taxes, rendering salt too costly for impoverished communities. In this situation, khar, made locally from the ashes of plants, emerged as a feasible and readily available alternative to salt for regular cooking. Its utilization enabled economically challenged families to fulfill essential dietary requirements without relying on expensive market salt. Consequently, the dependence on khar emphasizes how lack of resources and economic disparity influenced dietary practices, promoting native innovations as survival tactics among the disadvantaged members of society.

British colonial policies significantly influenced the dynamics of the salt trade in India, especially through the implementation of substantial salt taxes and state monopolies. Salt, a vital daily requirement, became heavily regulated, with the colonial government overseeing its production, transportation, and sale to raise funds. These taxes drastically raised prices, rendering salt hard to purchase for many people and disturbing established methods of local salt production and trade. The monopoly favored British business interests while disadvantaging peasants and the impoverished, who had to either cut back on consumption or find alternatives. Consequently, the salt

trade emerged as an emblem of colonial economic oppression and a central element of popular opposition to British governance.

Regional trade hubs like Goalpara demonstrate a notable shift during the British colonial era, moving from dependence on local salt alternatives like khar to becoming centers for the trade of Bengal salt under British control. Previously, communities relied on locally sourced alternatives because of restricted access to salt, but as colonial administration grew, Goalpara became an important river market connected to Bengal via the Brahmaputra. The British enforced stringent oversight on salt manufacturing and distribution, routing Bengal salt into Assam via controlled trade paths and markets such as Goalpara. This transition incorporated the region into the colonial economy, diminished reliance on conventional alternatives, and strengthened British economic dominance over daily essentials, while also altering local trading practices and consumption behaviors

In contemporary Assam, khar still retains cultural, culinary, and symbolic significance even though salt is widely available. It is a vital component of traditional Assamese cooking, particularly in recipes like khar tita and kharoli, appreciated for its distinct alkaline flavor and digestive benefits. Apart from food, khar embodies traditional knowledge systems and sustainable methods, as it is made from natural plant materials through environmentally friendly practices. Its ongoing use signifies a deep link to Assamese identity and culture, especially in rural homes and during cultural ceremonies. Today, khar reminds us of self-sufficiency and historical strength, connecting modern Assamese culture to its history.

Conclusion:

In the colonial era of Assam, khar served as a significant substitute for salt, particularly within rural and indigenous populations. Khar is an alkaline material usually made from the ashes of banana stalks and other botanical items, and it has been extensively utilized for cooking and preserving food. As the British colonial administration enforced high taxes and tight regulations on salt production and distribution, it made salt costly and harder for ordinary people to obtain. Consequently, khar acted as a readily accessible and cost-effective alternative, assisting individuals in sustaining their everyday meals without relying on taxed salt. Its application demonstrated economic independence and traditional wisdom, serving as a subtle form of resistance against colonial control of vital resources i.e. salt.

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