

Socio-Cultural Factors Behind the Transformation of Food in North East India

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Abstract- North East India possesses one of the richest food cultures in South Asia. The region's dietary traditions have historically been shaped by ecology, ethnicity, indigenous knowledge systems, subsistence agriculture, forest resources, shifting cultivation, and community-based food practices. Traditional foods such as fermented bamboo shoot, soybean products, smoked meat, fish preparations, wild edible plants, millet, rice-based dishes, and locally sourced vegetables have long formed the foundation of everyday life and cultural identity. However, over the last few decades, significant transformations have occurred in food production, preparation, consumption, and distribution across the region. These changes are closely connected to urbanization, globalization, migration, commercialization, changing lifestyles, market expansion, technological development, and shifting socio-cultural values. This paper examines the socio-cultural factors responsible for the transformation of food systems in North East India. Drawing upon the concept of nutrition transition and socio-cultural theories of food, the study argues that food is not merely a biological necessity but also a cultural marker, social institution, and symbol of identity. The paper demonstrates how changing family structures, education, media exposure, consumer culture, migration, and aspirations toward modern lifestyles have altered traditional food habits. While modernization has increased food diversity and market accessibility, it has also contributed to the decline of indigenous food knowledge and growing dependence on processed and commercial foods. The study concludes that preserving traditional food heritage while adapting to contemporary realities is essential for cultural sustainability and public health in North East India.

Keywords: North East India, Food Transformation, Socio-Cultural Change, Nutrition Transition, Indigenous Food Systems.

I. INTRODUCTION

Food occupies a central position in human society. Beyond fulfilling nutritional needs, food functions as a marker of culture, identity, social relationships, and community belonging (Bourdieu, 1984). Every

society develops distinctive food traditions shaped by its ecological conditions, historical experiences, economic systems, and cultural values. In North East India, food is deeply embedded within indigenous lifestyles, tribal customs, agricultural practices, religious ceremonies, and seasonal rhythms (Singh et al., 2007).

Historically, the food systems of North East India evolved in close interaction with nature. Communities depended heavily on locally available resources such as rice, fish, meat, wild vegetables, bamboo shoots, fermented foods, forest products, and indigenous crops. Traditional food practices were transmitted across generations through oral traditions, communal activities, and family-based learning (Singh et al., 2007). However, contemporary North East India is experiencing rapid social transformation. Urban growth, economic development, educational expansion, migration, digital communication, and market integration have significantly altered everyday life. These processes have also transformed food habits (Kumar, 2022).

Conceptual Framework: Food and Socio-Cultural Change

Sociologists and anthropologists have long emphasized that food is a social phenomenon. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues that food preferences are influenced by social class, cultural capital, and lifestyle choices. Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) viewed food preparation as a cultural process through which societies organize relationships between nature and culture. Food choices are rarely determined solely by nutritional considerations. Instead, they are shaped by family traditions, religious beliefs, ethnic identity, gender relations, social status, and cultural meanings (Das & Priya, 2022). The concept of nutrition transition is particularly useful for understanding contemporary food changes. Nutrition

transition refers to shifts from traditional diets based on locally produced foods toward diets characterized by increased consumption of processed foods, sugar, fats, and commercially manufactured products (FAO, 2024).

Traditional Food Systems of North East India

The food cultures of North East India are highly diverse yet share several common features, including dependence on local resources, extensive use of fermentation techniques, consumption of wild edible plants, and strong community participation in food production and sharing (Singh et al., 2007). Traditional foods such as bamboo shoot, fermented soybean, smoked meat, millet, fish products, and rice-based preparations have historically played important roles in nutrition, health, and cultural identity. Research indicates that ethnic foods in North East India are intimately connected with social organization, ecological adaptation, and indigenous knowledge systems (Singh et al., 2007).

Urbanization and Lifestyle Changes

One of the most significant factors driving food transformation in North East India is urbanization. Cities such as Guwahati, Shillong, Imphal, and Agartala have experienced rapid growth, leading to changes in work routines, household structures, and food consumption patterns (Kumar, 2022). Traditional food preparation often requires considerable time and labor. Modern urban lifestyles, however, encourage dependence on ready-to-eat foods, restaurant meals, and packaged products. The shift from joint families to nuclear families has also reduced opportunities for intergenerational transmission of food knowledge (Kumar, 2022).

Globalization and Consumer Culture

Globalization has profoundly transformed food cultures across the world, including North East India. The expansion of global markets has increased access to multinational food products, fast-food chains, processed snacks, soft drinks, and packaged foods (John & Babu, 2022). Television, social media, and digital advertising frequently portray Western-style food consumption as a symbol of modernity and social status. Consequently, younger consumers increasingly

associate foods such as burgers, pizzas, noodles, and fried chicken with urban lifestyles and contemporary identities (Kumar, 2022). Globalization therefore contributes to dietary homogenization while simultaneously reducing dependence on indigenous food systems (FAO, 2024).

Migration and Cultural Exchange

Migration for education and employment has become a major factor influencing food transformation. Students and workers from North East India often move to metropolitan centres such as Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Kolkata, where they encounter new food cultures and consumption practices (John & Babu, 2022). Returning migrants frequently introduce new tastes, ingredients, and cooking methods into their home communities. Such exchanges contribute to the emergence of hybrid food cultures that combine indigenous traditions with external influences (Kumar, 2022).

Education and Changing Aspirations

Educational expansion has significantly influenced food behaviour across the region. Educational institutions expose students to diverse cultural environments and facilitate interaction with national and global food cultures (Kumar, 2022). Food choices increasingly reflect aspirations toward modernity and social mobility. Commercially marketed foods are often perceived as symbols of sophistication, while some traditional foods are associated with rural lifestyles (Das & Priya, 2022). Educational mobility therefore contributes to changing dietary preferences and consumption patterns.

Media, Technology, and Digital Influence

Digital technologies have become powerful drivers of food transformation. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube expose consumers to global culinary trends and influence food preferences (Kumar, 2022). Food influencers, restaurant reviews, and online advertisements encourage experimentation with new cuisines. Moreover, food delivery applications have increased access to commercially prepared foods, reducing reliance on home-cooked meals (John & Babu, 2022).

Transformation of Gender Roles

Changing gender relations have also contributed to food transformation. Traditionally, women were central to food production, preservation, and transmission of culinary knowledge. However, increased participation of women in education and paid employment has altered household food practices (Das & Priya, 2022). Time constraints associated with modern employment often encourage greater reliance on processed foods and commercially prepared meals. Consequently, traditional culinary knowledge is less frequently transmitted across generations (Singh et al., 2007).

Market Expansion and Commercialization

The commercialization of food systems has transformed food consumption across North East India. Traditional food systems that were once embedded in subsistence economies are increasingly integrated into market networks (FAO, 2024). Supermarkets, convenience stores, and food chains provide year-round access to products previously unavailable in local communities. While market integration increases consumer choice, it also encourages dependence on commercially manufactured foods and contributes to declining consumption of indigenous crops and traditional dishes (Singh et al., 2007).

Cultural Identity and Revival Movements

Despite rapid social change, traditional foods continue to play a crucial role in cultural identity. Many communities actively promote indigenous cuisine through food festivals, cultural exhibitions, and heritage tourism initiatives (Singh et al., 2007). Urban consumers increasingly view traditional foods as symbols of authenticity, ethnic pride, and cultural belonging. This phenomenon demonstrates that food transformation is not simply a process of cultural loss but also one of adaptation and revival (Das & Priya, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The transformation of food in North East India reflects broader processes of social, cultural, economic, and

technological change. Urbanization, globalization, migration, educational expansion, digital media, changing gender roles, and market integration have collectively reshaped dietary practices across the region (Kumar, 2022; John & Babu, 2022). Food transformation is not merely a nutritional issue but a socio-cultural process involving changing identities, values, lifestyles, and social relationships (Bourdieu, 1984). While modernization has increased access to diverse food options, it has also contributed to the erosion of indigenous food knowledge and growing dependence on processed foods (FAO, 2024). Therefore, preserving traditional food heritage while adapting to contemporary realities remains essential for ensuring both cultural sustainability and nutritional well-being in North East India.

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