The Culture and Politics of Food in Contemporary India

Edited by
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## Contents

**List of Figures and Tables**  
ix

**Preface**  
xi

1. Introduction  
   Kiranmayi Bhushi  
   1

2. The Making of 'Edible Animal Source Foods' and its Contemporary Reality in Delhi  
   Estelle Fourat  
   37

3. Appropriating the Cow: Beef and Identity Politics in Contemporary India  
   James Staples  
   58

4. Eating Akbuni in India  
   Dolly Kikon  
   80

5. Health, Standardization and 'Bengali' Sweets  
   Ishita Dey  
   103

6. Treating Children, Feeding Junk Food: An Inquiry into a Middle Class Project  
   Anjali Bhatia  
   128

7. Diaspora Dish: Cooking, Writing, and Creating Identities in Food-blogs  
   Sucharita Sarkar  
   157

8. Measuring Hunger: Debates on an 'Adequate' Diet in Colonial North India  
   Sanjay Sharma  
   184
List of Figures and Tables

FIGURES
4.1 A basket of fermented soya beans 83
4.2 Anoli Sumi making akhuni cakes 87

TABLES
4.1 Names of fermented soya beans in Nagaland 89
5.1 Relatively sweet sweeteners and their corresponding sweetness factor and calorie count 108
5.2 High-intensity sweeteners and their corresponding sweetness 109
8.1 Number of labouring poor employed by the charity of government at the sudder station of Agra 188
9.1 Average Monthly PDS Consumption of Foodgrains (Rice + Wheat) across States, kgs/person 228
9.2 Average Monthly PDS Consumption of Foodgrains (Rice + Wheat) across Deciles of MPCE, kgs/person 231
10.1 Dominant model versus food sovereignty model (Adapted from Rosset, 2003) 241
Eating Akhuni in India

Dolly Kikon

We are not exotic but ordinary
(Latour 1993: 127)

Introduction

I received a text message on a September evening in 2014. *Phrynium placenterium*; family *Marantaceae* appeared on my screen. Earlier that morning, a conversation about fermented soya beans, popularly known as *akhuni* in Nagaland, abruptly came to a halt. My *akhuni* interlocutors, an elderly woman and a young woman both praised in the neighbourhood as excellent *akhuni* makers, appeared embarrassed. They were unable to pinpoint the proper name, or as they put it, the ‘English scientific name’ of the leaves with which they wrapped the *akhuni* cakes. The young woman expectantly turned towards the elderly woman to salvage the conversation. “I will call my cousin brother who works in the horticulture department and text it to you,” the elderly woman said. The discussion quickly resumed.

The anxiety that surfaced during our conversation as a consequence of the pursuit for a scientific name of the leaf reflects, in Saurabh Dube’s words, ‘...the acute reflections of the hierarchies of modernity’ (2002: 731). Such moments of insecurities and the quest for scientific names are premised on creating ruptures with particular visions of the past. In the Naga people’s case, it is the dominant image of primitivism, savagery, and their knowledge systems being relegated as a ‘tribal’ practice that is simple and elementary. If one roughly reiterates a singular version of Indian modernity (Appadurai 1988), one would also make us accomplices in shying away from engaging and recognizing the primitive—the civilized versus the savage, the centre/modern versus the exotic oppositions. It is easy to reject such representations of Naga food; however, it would be a mistake to do so.

Notice the colonialist and Eurocentric views about Naga people and their dietary habits that appeared in the travel section of the *Daily Telegraph*, a national daily from the United Kingdom. Traveler Stephen McClerence wrote about his trip to Nagaland under the heading ‘No silkworm curry today, sir’. His xenophobic tone about the food, people, and the place are inseparable as he pens his views of Naga society. For instance, he describes the food in the following manner:

> *Delicacies include roast dog, snake kebabs, silkworm curry, pig skin (various recipes), and steamed hornet and snail stew. A friend who spent six years there recalls one challenging feast that climaxsed with bison cooked in dog’s blood. We’ve even heard, we tell a young woman who has dropped in for tea, that the Nagas enjoy eating wild frogs. “No, no, not frogs”, she protests. “Tadpoles only, I think.” The seven North Eastern States are usually, and accurately, described as remote.*

The description of Naga food is uncanny. It is taken out of context, out of season, and outside the realm of taboos, rituals, and feastings. Instead, it is constructed with dispositions densely packed with collapsing the place and its inhabitants. The ignorance based on the conversation with a young woman from Northeast India, on the one hand, and the immaculately global and cosmopolitan traveler gifted with powerful reasoning skills and knowledge on the other.

The simplicity of McClerence’s logic is clear. It reiterates the modern versus the primitive, the civilized versus the savage, the centre/modern versus the exotic oppositions. In the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of ethnic cuisines from Northeast India in metropolitan cities across the country. Following the food map and emerging literature on Northeastern cuisine, it appears as though the region’s eclectic flavours and its food cultures have caught the imagination of food enthusiasts and writers from New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and other metropolitan cities. At the same time, such musings and write-ups about consumption and food cultures of societies from Northeast India also reveal the pressing and disturbing imaginations of the nation, its citizens, and the incommensurable divide between civilization and primitivism.

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how food and consumption play a significant role in normalizing everyday expressions of repulsions and enchantments. In addition, the celebration of food and attention to dietary customs and practices also underlines the role of food in producing social meanings and memories. Therefore, McClarence's reactions to Naga food portray the inextricably entwined and complex relationship between food, race, and history.

In that context, the emergence of Northeast cuisines, cookbooks, and popular write-ups are important developments. Among other things, they are useful indicators to understand the politics of categorizing food as ethnic cuisine in contemporary India. However, the focus of this chapter lies elsewhere. It is not about ethnic cuisine. Instead, it examines how everyday processes of acquiring, rejecting, or negotiating tastes and dietary sensibilities captures the contextual and political parameters of tradition, articulations of contested belongings, and different experiences of citizenship in contemporary India.

This chapter seeks to explore two points. First, the project of placing achhuni on the nation's table in India focuses on capturing the sensory and emotive conditions of tribal modernity. Secondly, it outlines my concept of achhuni sentiments by which I mean the perpetual anxieties and emotions of eating smelly food and being modern. The embarrassment that surfaced in the conversation with the achhuni makers, an anecdote I shared in the beginning of this chapter, captures how food practices, be it preparation, consumption, or discussions, draw our attention towards the transformative power of dietary cultures and how food intimately shapes everyday engagements, imaginations, and projects of modernity. In order to explore these questions, I present an ethnographic account and reflect on the detailed moments that Michael de Certeau calls "the practice of everyday life" (de Certeau 1984). I critically examine how fermented food like achhuni shapes everyday practices and imaginations about citizenship, spaces of transgressions, and social meanings in contemporary India.

Dwelling on the moment of anxieties and contestations over dietary practices like eating achhuni, also means presenting how food and consumption are entangled with the social history of belonging and the divergent experiences of citizenship and modernity in India. The efforts of the achhuni makers to locate the scientific name of the leaf they wrapped the achhuni in capture the apprehensions of being a modern tribal. The conversation challenges the dominant notions of remoteness and centre that is often applied to measure the Northeast region as backward and underdeveloped where, in contrast to the rest of India, these are drastically different eating cultures. It underlines how projects and imaginations about modernity are constructed on particular political and power cultures. In Northeast India, such projects and imaginations are linked with power, development, and progress.

There are many ways to be modern, and one is the refinement of the palate and the process of acquiring a gastronomical knowledge. Achhuni or fermented soya beans simultaneously invokes a multitude of experiences for its consumers and those in its vicinity. Among all the food items that Naga people relish, achhuni occupies a distinct place in the realm of flavours and taste. What is the smell and taste of achhuni? A small metabolic process that transforms the chemical balance of soya beans, its texture, taste and smell, and also alters the relationship of the food with its consumers forever. Some become lifelong connoisseurs, while others develop a long-lasting repulsion, and detest it.

Anthropological literature informs us how dietary habits and taste are never neutral grounds (Mintz 1996; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Durham 2011; Rouse and Hoskins 2004; Kah 1986; Farb and Armelagos 1980). Moralties, transgressions, and boundaries can be traced to everyday practices of consumption across human societies. Unlike categories of food that fall in the dominant classificatory list of clean and unclean food, fermented food or smelly food is something else. While smell is local, it is also invisible. Smell crosses borders. There is something unnerving and subversive about the way it manages to pollute and infringe the most intimate and sacred spaces. It enters the nostrils and sticks on the membranes of the throat and tongue sending signals to the
brain and produces feelings of repulsion. For others, the same smell invokes feelings of comfort or memories of home. To invoke and remember home is to start by exploring the ways in which relationships, obligations, and ways of belonging are established.

**The home**

**Akhuni contact:** No, it is not done in this manner.

**DK:** What do you suggest?

**Akhuni contact:** The process has to start at least four to five days ahead of time. But I cannot guarantee anything. If it rains, then it will take longer.

**DK:** Can we talk about it?

**Akhuni contact:** You start the process, and I will come over.

**Akhuni contact:** Alright. I will organize the seeds. See you soon.

This phone conversation was the first step in doing away with misconceptions about akhuni. I had expected to start a conversation and record the process of preparing and fermenting the soya beans. However, for my field informant, the akhuni contact, it was not that simple. Smell, touch, time, season, and being present at the site to witness the process were integral to the story. The element of uncertainty about carrying out the meeting in case it rained was real. A continuous and consistent temperature was required for the fermentation process, not by relying on a laboratory setting, but on the everyday weather conditions in the area. In other words, the akhuni contact suggested that if I was interested in writing about akhuni, I had to understand not only the texture, scent, colour, consistency, and the taste of the item, but also be present and draw from my own sensory data to recognize how this food item attains every bit of its characteristics as well. One could not simply enter the world of akhuni and observe the process by wearing the enthusiastic anthropologist coat.

I was familiar with the taste and smell of akhuni. It was an essential presence in our household when I was growing up and continues to confidently claim its spot in my kitchen. When we were children, this food, along with a group of other herbs and vegetables, played an important role in making us aware about distinct Naga tribal characteristics, irrespective of how simplistic these understandings were. For example, we often sang a children’s rhyme in Nagamese, the lingua franca of Nagaland, which went like this:

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**Eating Akhuni in India**

*Akhuni khai khai Sema manu khai*

Sema people eat akhuni

*Bastang khai khai Lotha manu khai*

Lotha people eat bamboo shoot

*Anise khai khai Ao manu khai*

Ao people eat anise

What is significant about the rhyme is its improvisational feature. It is an open-ended ode that allows children to add names of different tribes and food items on the list. This quality of being open-ended was central to the personality of akhuni as well. It brought neighbours together to contribute their time, resources, and labour in making this item, which was then divided among friends and families.

When I arrived at my akhuni contact’s home, she told me that her father-in-law had been unwell. Since she had to take care of him, her friend from the neighbourhood stepped in to help out by boiling the soya beans and starting the fermentation process. The akhuni contact showed me a thick bush growing beside her kitchen and said that her friend had plucked some leaves from here earlier that morning to wrap the akhuni cakes. The Phrynium placentarium was growing beside her kitchen next to the water pump where an electrical wire ran above the leaves and across a pile of unwashed dishes lying on the concrete open-air washing area. Lunch was over in this household, and the ailing father-in-law played with the dog in the front porch as the akhuni informant tucked a pinch of tobacco on her gum. *Eshh. Leave your plate. Don’t wash it, we have to go,* she fondly reproached me. I wondered what was extraordinary and secretive about making akhuni. The mundaneness of this food bordered on a monotonous routine like the cars passing by the house and the lazy dogs wagging their tails on the porch. I quietly stumbled along with the akhuni contact, and fumbled with my camera to take some pictures of the akhuni bush, the unwashed utensils, and eventually shook hands with the father-in-law as we headed out to the neighbour’s house. The routineness of the akhuni contact’s home and the unremarkable character of akhuni dramatically shifted after we entered the neighbour’s kitchen.

It was with Anoli Sumi I learnt about the human characteristics that akhuni possessed. She said, *‘Some taste better than the others. It all depends on the hands that prepare it. Just as people have different personalities, so is the constitution of akhuni.’* At first I only saw it as a delicious food, but she demonstrated how the personality of the consumers and the makers played a significant role in producing the taste of this fermented food item. Illustrating how human agency not only contributed in developing the taste but also maintaining the hygiene and cleanliness of this particular food item, Anoli said, *‘One should not burn rubbish in the fireplace such as plastic during the...”*
period of smoking _akhuni_. Preparing this food appeared as a straightforward operation. Everyone I spoke to, including Anoli, explained a standard procedure.

First, the soya beans were soaked overnight, and then cooked in water without adding any herbs or salt. The cooked beans were shifted to a bamboo basket lined with banana leaves, teak leaves, or the _Phrynium placentarium_ whose scientific name was so important for my contacts. After that, a hole was made at the bottom of the basket to drain away the fermentation juice. The preparation was dependent on the climatic condition of the place. In cold places, the preparation time was around seven to nine days and in warm places the process was completed in two to three days. This description can be misinterpreted and subsumed with the existing dominant literature on tribal societies in India. Tribal people in India are perceived as simple people and this impression is carried over to describe their food habits, social relations, and customs. Particularly, understandings about dietary practices categorized as tribal food are often explained as plain, simple, and without oil or masala to indicate the lack of refinement, technique, and sophistication. _Masala_ is an Urdu term that refers to a mixture of ingredients to add flavour to a dish. It is a generic expression in India and elsewhere to indicate taste, opulence, and the richness of the dish.

Within such accounts, Naga food is often dismissed as boiled food. Unfortunately, those who hold such perceptions ought to be reminded that references to boiling is connected with the temperature that is achieved in the process of heating liquid. Naga people cook their food, which means there are engaged sensory aesthetics deployed to achieve the particular taste of every dish. Therefore, cooking Naga food is not a simple process. It includes the eclectic combination of herbs, knowledge of different textures of vegetables and roots, monitoring the intervals to add condiments such as a dash of lemon and pork lard, and mastering the various measurements ranging from a pinch of fermented fish paste to the precision of adding a fistful of fresh bamboo shoot. Besides that, the long list of guidelines to prepare fresh yam leaves, pennyworth curries, or assembling herbs for smoking and preserving is a lengthy one.

Therefore, when Anoli explained the steps of preparing _akhuni_, she chose her words carefully because it was not solely about boiling soya beans and drying them. This "simple process" emerged as a well-designed procedure that required the sensory technique of the maker and the external forces to connect. For instance, when I enquired about taste, she told me, "It is tastier to smoke it on the fireplace than to dry it in the sun, but we should carefully select the quality of the wood. The taste and aroma of akhuni is greatly determined by the quality of the wood one uses." Naga society is riddled with grand cultural and traditional artefacts. For example, in the quest for authentic stories of origin, history, or experiences, it is considered that the older the interviewee, the more genuine and honest the account. Such frameworks to search for authentic histories, customs, and practices of the Naga people have laid an overwhelming emphasis on voices of elders and tribal institutions. As a consequence, Naga experiences have been predominantly accounts of men and therefore extremely masculine and patriarchal in nature.

Under such circumstances, it was interesting and exciting to witness how young women like Anoli handled the topic of food and taste with the elegance of a specialist. In other fields, such as the participation of Naga women in parliamentary politics, the political experiences of the Naga armed conflict, or the proceedings of the 1997 Indo-Naga ceasefire agreement, voices of young women like Anoli were starkly absent because they failed to summon authority and legitimacy to the political project. As a high school dropout from her village in Zunheboto district, Anoli came to stay with her elder sister in Dimapur several years ago. She took care of her niece, cooked and cleaned the house and also prepared fodder for the pigs. The neighbourhood praised her as the best _akhuni_ maker and they were not wrong. The details she brought out and her appreciation for this food were apparent. With an air of confidence and grace, she explained how they ate this item at home:
"We know that it is ready when we see the white layers of powder and also observe that the soya beans have become dark. We do not check it every day, we just calculate the days and assume it. We do not touch it with our bare hands; we have to use a spoon. Everyone says that my akhuni tastes good. At home, we use two to three kilograms of soya beans every month. But we do not know how to control it. We use two to three cakes of akhuni just to make chutneys. Other households use a single cake for a week, but we use two to three cakes at once."

**Akhuni engagement**

True to its personality as a food with an ever-changing nature (from a bean, to a seed, a cooked item, and eventually into a smoked fermented darkly coloured relish), the reactions and the characteristics of its consumers also began to surface. There was an air of expectation and eventually an atmosphere of dismay and boredom as I enquired about akhuni. Who was interested to talk about fermented food in the midst of a political transformation in Naga society? 70 years of conflict that include 20 years of the Indo-Naga ceasefire, have produced a generation of articulate Naga activists and scholars. These individuals and the social organizations they represented in Nagaland and Manipur spent considerable time giving interviews, analyzing political changes, and most importantly communicating with numerous researchers carrying out academic projects on Naga politics and identity. Unless the topic had to do with the experiences of Naga women, it was rare to see a woman across Naga households in such political discussions reflecting and commenting on Naga society.

In that context, when I visited households during my akhuni fieldwork, it was often male members of the house who entertained my questions and sought to give their expert opinions. When the topic of fermented food, especially akhuni, entered our conversation, unintentional laughter filled the room and the men appeared amused. Was I really there to talk about food when there were so many important political issues that needed to be discussed? Even though the conversation took off, it evaporated quickly after realizing that there was nothing much to talk about a topic that appeared to be devoid of explicit terms like nationalism, identity, Naga people, culture, conflict, violence, and so on. Talk to my wife, talk to my daughter," they told me politely and excused themselves. However, it is important not to essentialize the practice where men appoint themselves as the experts to Naga society alone certain communities, but one that is witnessed across societies.

As mentioned earlier, whenever I inquired about stories of akhuni, there was an element of amusement and surprise. My Naga informants and interviewees perceived akhuni as an unexceptional presence in their lives. Table 4.1 shows the different names for fermented soya beans among the Naga communities.

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<tr>
<th>Naga Community</th>
<th>Chongli dialect</th>
<th>Mongsen dialect</th>
<th>Chang dialect</th>
<th>Yimchunger</th>
<th>Khiamting</th>
<th>Sangtam</th>
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When akhuni was relocated from a Naga kitchen to the larger Himalayan region, its characteristics and history underwent a transformation. As the lives...
of people across the hills of Northeast India merged with the Himalayas, the layered articulations about taste, communities, and sensory maps also began to unravel. This required acknowledging how everyday associations with fermented food and moments of amusements during akhuni conversations in Naga kitchens were important. It forces us to interrogate dominant conceptions about regions as solely geographical entities or systems of inclusion and exclusion (Massey 1995; van Schendel 2002). Instead, the particularity of fermented food like akhuni draws our attention towards the connections and social relations that were integral to understand processes of place-making and intersections — a point I elaborate in the following section.

**The region**

Fermented soya beans are a delicacy among several communities in Northeast India. Moreover, several Himalayan societies also relish fermented soya beans. Akhuni is known as kinema across the Nepali speaking parts of the Himalayas and is consumed by communities stretching from Nepal, Bhutan and all the way to the eastern Indian states of Sikkim and North Bengal. A Nepali food website notes that the term kinema is derived from the Limbu language kinamba: Kh referring to fermentation and Nimba meaning flavour. Besides drying, smoking, grinding, fermented food like kinema is an integral part of preserving food across the greater Himalayan belt.

**Mountains and its food histories**

The dietary practices of the people in this region offers a social and ecological map of this vast mountain range, the important migratory routes, waves of settlements along the foothills, movement, and finally the diverse agricultural and foraging practices adopted here (Kikon 2013). This fermentation spirit exists across the kitchens in Northeast India, particularly in tribal societies where caste-based Hindu dietary practices have not become entrenched along the lines of purity and pollution. For example, a Boro fermented-fish lover from Assam will be more likely to establish a dietary alliance with a Kuki fermented-fish devotee from Manipur, rather than with an Assamese Brahmin who will not touch such kinds of food. In that same spirit, imagine the dietary connection between a Lepcha and a Naga fermented soya bean eater sharing a dish of akhuni chutney.

In the course of my fermented soya beans fieldwork, one day I used the term 'smelly' to describe fermented food during a conversation at a Nepali household in Bagdogra, a small town not far away from the Himalayas in North Bengal. The mother immediately corrected me and said, 'It is scented, not smelly', to describe the character of kinemal akhuni. She used the term scent, a general phrase to refer to perfumes and other pleasant aromatic fragrances, to emphasize that the smell of fermented soya beans was indeed delightful. Other similar items, like fermented mustard leaves known as gundruk, also entered our conversation. There were two aspects of this conversation that reminded me how dietary practices are deeply connected with people's lives and therefore small details or passing comments are necessarily taken for granted and ignored.

First, the correction that fermented soya beans is not smelly but a scented food immediately challenged the foundation and implication of the modern sensory system. Going by this logic, techniques of tastes and the fundamentals of measuring and categorizing food within the global gastronomical hierarchy is constructed within a particular history of modernity, imperialism, class, and labour. Second, food and people's histories are intertwined. To shame or humiliate the dietary practices of a social group is to also shame and humiliate their history.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* presents the nation as an imagined community that is bound by legitimate and territorial sovereignty where its members are connected through language, print, and the map (Anderson 1983). The concept of communities across the Himalayas through a dietary map challenges Anderson's homogenous idea of camaraderie and fellowship where the members belong to a territorially well-defined sovereign nation. Instead, the communities of the Himalayan region seldom connect through print and map-making projects, but through complex idioms of exchange, eating cultures, and resource regimes. The vocal kinemal akhuni eaters of the Himalayan region are more closely aligned to political societies that are formed through everyday sites of negotiations and contestations (Chatterjee 2004). Therefore, if we consider the Nepali interlocutor in Bagdogra town as a member of political society, we witness a radical shift in the politics of food and consumption. We notice how the standardized sensory maps and hierarchies of food and taste are interrogated and contested every day.

Despite the different languages, social histories, and the territorial and political boundaries of the Himalayan states, the emphasis on fermented food as an integral part of their dietary practice is unmistakable. Today, there is a conscious attempt to redefine the relationship between dietary cultures and societies as this fermented food and its ability to arouse different senses is endowed with a political spirit that dictates forms of sociability, hostility, and solidarities. From local recipe books published in Sikkim, Nepali food blogs,
to neighbours in Nagaland sharing akhuni cooking techniques, the love for fermented food is indisputable.

A recipe book published from Gangtok describes how certain Sikkimese foods are pungent due to the fermentation process. The writer notes that fermented items like kinema became a staple diet during periods of food scarcity, but have gradually become an integral part of Sikkimese food culture today. Drawing a global connection, she notes that it is familiar to the Japanese-Korean natto that is available in departmental stores across the globe. Similar to the story of adopting kinema as a food item among Sikkimese society in times of scarcity, Ladhaki states that kinema/natto/akhuni continues to be popularly known as the ‘poor man’s meat in South East Asia (Ladhaki 2009: 66–67). She offers a Sikkimese kinema curry recipe as follows:

**Sikkimese kinema curry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinema</td>
<td>250 grams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chopped onions</td>
<td>1 medium size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sliced tomatoes</td>
<td>1 medium size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turmeric powder</td>
<td>¼ tablespoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>1 tablespoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilies</td>
<td>3, optional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>to taste</td>
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**Method**

Heat oil and fry onion till it becomes tender; add tomatoes and turmeric powder and fry for two minutes, and then once kinema is fried, add salt, sliced green chilies and fry for three to five minutes. A little water is poured to make a thick curry, and cook for five to seven minutes. Kinema curry is ready to serve with cooked rice. Sun-dried kinema is sometimes mixed with leafy vegetable to make mixed curry as side-dish.

As noted, both the recipes presented above are almost identical and perhaps do not come across as complex or savvy meals. Yet the specificities and the naming of the recipes as belonging to particular societies only reinforces the point I have made about the gastronomical geography of the Himalayan societies. Instead of situating these recipes as claims for a uniform and homogenous regional food map, I argue that these local cookbooks and food blogs are expressions of cosmopolitanism and self-determination simultaneously. The visible presence of kinema/akhuni is a political project to forge a new regional culinary culture by drawing on the sensory systems to document and connect the experiential gastronomical and food cultures of the past and the present in the Himalayan region.

**Pathos and food**

The kinema stories of the Himalayas draw me towards my own akhuni story in Nagaland. My memory of akhuni has nothing to do with its taste, but is linked with my grandmother. My grandmother Oreno grew up during the period of the Rhetso, a Lotha reference to the Second World War. She told me many stories about her experiences of the war that swept across the Naga Hills, in India’s Northeast frontiers, but her memory of the Japanese soldiers who arrived there is a peculiar one. According to her, when the soldiers came to her village in search of food and found the packets of fermented soyabeans, they...
wept before falling on their knees and devouring it. The WWII drama in the
Naga Hills was a consequence of the multiple intersections, negotiations, and
staging of power and order globally, but among all the stories I inherited from
my grandmother, there is something about weeping Japanese soldiers eating
fermented food that has stayed with me.

Stories about food are diverse and discussed in all human societies across
the world: every time a food writer in Sikkim offers a khauma recipe; every
time a Nepali food blogger describes the local food; every time a researcher
flips through the pages of The History of Natto and its Relatives, the most
comprehensive book on fermented soya beans; and every time I remember
my grandmother's akhuni stories. Therefore, food captures the pathos and
connections of human relationships such as loss, tragedy, and suffering.
Particularly, Naga accounts about the relationship between human societies
and food, similar to several indigenous cultures around the world, dwells on
the ever-changing transformation and connections of human, plant, and animal
cosmology. A Lotha Naga legend, Apfa Le Le Le Le powerfully captures the
dilemmas about the distinction and naturalization of food, eating, and taboos.

According to legend, in a village one day, the wife of a fierce warrior
discovered a strange lump on her head. When she asked her daughter to check
the growth, they discovered it was a small pair of antlers. In those days, it was not
usual for humans to turn into animals. However, after such transformations,
hunters and warriors killed the animal. Thus, months went by and the mother
and daughter hid the news from the father. Around this time, the woman gave
birth to a baby boy. During the period of nursing, her body began to undergo
a transformation. Knowing that the end was near, she took her daughter and
the baby to the jhum (swidden) field. Once they were there, she marked certain
areas that were densely covered with wild plants and rice plants, and told the
daughter that she will leave milk for the baby in cups made of leaves.

The daughter returned to the village with the baby brother but the mother
stayed behind. She began to eat the wild plants, fruits, and sleep under the trees.
The daughter visited the marked spots in the jhum field and collected the milk
for her baby brother. One day the father became suspicious and followed the
daughter and the baby to the field. Soon the father realized that his wife had
turned into a deer. When the daughter noticed that the father was hunting for
the deer, she carried her brother on her back and ran up to the upper elevations
of the field. Standing on a tree house, she waved her scarf shouting, "Apfa Le Le
Le Le." In Lotha Apfa means mother and Le Le Le Le is an expression to call the
cattle and guide them to the barn at sunset. Using this phrase Apfa Le Le Le
Le to communicate with her mother who was now a deer, the daughter warned her
to flee. The father, a skilful hunter managed to hunt down the mother. Later
that evening, the deer was slaughtered and cooked for the household members.
When the daughter refused to eat the deer meat, the father summoned her.

Father: Here, take a piece of the heart.

Daughter: No. It is my mother's heart. With this heart she loved me, so I will
not eat this piece.

Father: Here, take a piece of the thigh.

Daughter: No. It is my mother's thigh. I sat on the thigh and she sang for me,
so I will not eat this piece.

Father: Here, take a piece of the feet.

Daughter: No. It is my mother's feet. She carried me on her back and walked
me to places, so I will not eat the feet.

Father: Here, take a piece of the eyes.

Daughter: No. It is my mother's eyes. With these eyes she lovingly looked at
me and loved me.

Eventually the father forced the daughter to pick a piece of meat. But she
hid it in her mekha and threw it beside a river. The following morning when
the daughter went down to the river to fetch water, the meat had transformed
into a vegetable plant. The mother had become a beautiful gourd and started
connecting with the daughter. Delighted that her mother had come back, the
daughter carried her baby brother to the gourd plant and fed him special nectar
secreted from the plant. When the father discovered that the meat had turned
into a plant, he chopped it off and burnt it. Heartbroken, the daughter went
down to the river to look at the remains, but discovered that a tall healthy maize
plant stood at the site. The mother had transformed into a ripened maize and
started to communicate with the daughter.

While the legend of Apfa Le Le Le Le, like many indigenous accounts,
ruptures notions that the realm of rationality solely belongs to human society
or the nature/culture distinctions, this story in the context of akhuni serves two
purposes. It underlines how food and eating are entangled with memories of loss,
moral dilemmas, and social meanings. Secondly, it highlights how stories about
food and eating are not solely about sharing and feasting. Accounts of eating
and food are also fundamentally tied to the pathos of human relationships and
social practices to reinforce hierarchies or order, a point that is often overlooked.
Therefore, this story presents how rituals of eating or refraining from consuming
certain kinds of food play an instrumental role in establishing social relations or creating conflicts.

In order to understand the contentious politics that surround dietary practices and food cultures in contemporary India, we must turn our gaze towards the heartland of India. Once akbuni has crossed the Brahmaputra valley, hopped out of West Bengal, cruised over Bihar, and arrives in the heartland of India, how does it enter the list of horrible food? Why does it cause enormous smelly conflicts and nose burns? What are the anxieties of akbuni eaters in the nation's capital, and how do they negotiate to tame their taste buds? Dwelling on the theme of movement, Anna Tsing defines the term both as mobility and mobilization. She describes how both meanings allude to a change and enable us to think about local and global scales. Most importantly, they allow us to recognize forms of activism and the transformation of the consciousness. Tsing notes, 'Travel changes the way we imagine our home places. We suddenly see them as fragile, strange, and worth savoring in new ways' (Tsing 2005: 213).

Building on the moment of motion and mobility that Tsing propagates, akbuni can be regarded both as a transnational and a national food, and its consumers as mobile and modern. However, given the resentment towards fermented food like akbuni, one is forced to ask why is it that an item whose scale of circulation has crossed the Brahmaputra valley, hopped out of West Bengal, cruised over Bihar, and arrives in the heartland of India, is an expensive city. What is significant is the manner in which these everyday eating cultures have produced distinctive forms of sociality and solidarity, but also hostility, in these neighbourhoods. McDuie-Ra's ethnography describes how migrants from Northeast India move within their neighbourhoods in New Delhi:

Fiats are small and many are windowless, so the space between flats, landings and stairwells, and the streets and alleyways of the neighbourhoods become the space of encounter; especially in the very dense alleyways of Humayanpur and Munirka...in Humayanpur, migrants move between each other's flats without knocking and many leave their doors unlocked when they are inside. It is just like home.

So how are we to understand the dietary practices and smells that seep into these neighbourhoods in urban spaces? In conversation with McDuie-Ra’s description of the spaces and neighbourhoods Northeast migrants inhabit, I turn to the everyday dietary practices and the circulation of akbuni stews, curries and chutneys in New Delhi. By presenting the perspectives of akbuni eaters in the city, I highlight the emergence of akbuni affects, by which I mean (a) how akbuni consumers identify their sense of being modern and negotiate everyday obstacles; and (b) the relationship between consumption, modernity and the

**Eating Akbuni in India**

These foods from the eastern Himalayas travelled with professionals and students who arrived in metropolitan cities for work and education in the 1970s and 1980s, thus connecting fermented food, mobility and being modern. Today, migrants from Northeast India are one of the most visible faces of the hospitality sector and in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) units. In his work on Northeast migrants to New Delhi, Duncan McDuie-Ra emphasizes this trend, stating:

Contemporary Indian metropolises are experiencing a rapid increase in migration from frontier areas, including large numbers of migrants from the Northeast region. This is significant given that migration involves engagement with the people and places of the Indian heartland, which clashes with the anti-India underpinnings of social and political life in the Northeast.

(McDuie-Ra 2012: 13)

Northeast residents of New Delhi are students, workers and professionals, and the majority of them live in extremely modest places, given that New Delhi is an expensive city. What is significant is the manner in which these everyday eating cultures have produced distinctive forms of sociality and solidarity, but also hostility, in these neighbourhoods. McDuie-Ra’s ethnography describes how migrants from Northeast India move within their neighbourhoods in New Delhi:

So how are we to understand the dietary practices and smells that seep into these neighbourhoods in urban spaces? In conversation with McDuie-Ra’s description of the spaces and neighbourhoods Northeast migrants inhabit, I turn to the everyday dietary practices and the circulation of akbuni stews, curries and chutneys in New Delhi. By presenting the perspectives of akbuni eaters in the city, I highlight the emergence of akbuni affects, by which I mean (a) how akbuni consumers identify their sense of being modern and negotiate everyday obstacles; and (b) the relationship between consumption, modernity and the
reasoning that certain food and smells ought to be eliminated from the public space by claims of functional necessity. There is no dispute that smelly food literally creates a stink in the relationship between the migrant tribal population from the Northeastern region and dominant social groups in New Delhi. By dominant social groups, I refer to those sections of society that frame Indian culinary tradition based on ideas of race and caste and notions of purity and pollution. In that context, Arjun Appadurai notes that food and consumption among Hindu societies in South Asia, more than in any other culture around the world, are imbued with strong moral and cosmological meaning (Appadurai 1981). It is widely accepted that food preferences significantly connect social groups. So strong are these associations that an entire social world of control, desire, taboo and transgression are produced around them (Mintz 1986; Douglas 1966; Janer, 2008; Farb and Armelagos 1980; Bhattacharya 2008; Jha 2009).

Describing her dilemma in deciding whether to eat akhuni everyday, Lucy, a professional from Manipur who calls the city her home, said: 'I cannot live with akhuni, neither can I live without akhuni'. While this food created tension in her neighbourhood, an upscale locality in New Delhi, she also spoke about a conflict that occurred between her cousin, a tenant in Humayanpur, and the building owner over the cooking of 'smelly' food. Requesting her cousin to refrain from cooking akhuni everyday, 'we have to admit it really smells', she said, and shared methods to enjoy the dish discreetly. 'I do not boil it. I pour hot water and cover it. After it has cooled down, I add garlic, chilli, salt, and onions. It still tastes good', she said.

The pleasures of eating akhuni were obvious. I was barely able to keep up with the number of recipes that my informants shared with me. But I was also unable to ignore how, irrespective of the wonderful notes of praise, all of them underlined that the food possessed a special scent/smell/odour. During a conversation with Bokato in Nagaland, I asked him about the smell of akhuni. He linked the process of making it with its taste, a method I described earlier in this chapter. Then, he described how smell played a significant role in generating the contours and knowledge of particular social spaces and geographies. Elaborating, he stated:

Yes, akhuni has a peculiar smell. Some people will get headache because of that. You cannot block smell; it will come and go. The smell of akhuni is limitless. It can be compared to a person smoking; the smell travels. But those who are addicted to it, they like the smell.

...But there are different kinds of smell. For instance, the smell of rotting meat is different from chicken shit. By that logic, pig shit and human shit also smell different. So when it comes to akhuni, it does not smell like chicken or pig shit or human shit. It has its own smell; it is the akhuni smell...every being shit and emits different smells...human body smells different from that of a goat or pig, and we call it a human smell. Using that same logic we call the fermented soya beans the akhuni smell. How else to define smell? Therefore, when some people like it and others don't, it comes down to one's taste.

'What kind of food do Northeast people eat? Is this curry made of shit?' Anita, a student from Nagaland, quoted her neighbour who made this comment about akhuni. Anita also lived in Humayanpur, where windows opened onto thick walls and into the neighbours' bedrooms and kitchens. Anita emphasized that the longer one cooked the fermented food, the tastier it became. Cooking a cake of akhuni, she added water to bring out the texture and consistency of the dish and said: 'By now the smell will be all over our locality. One day when I was cooking this dish, a boy who came up to deliver some package commented 'What a terrible smell! Even if someone gives me $1,000 I will not eat it!' But whatever people say, once people get the taste and like it, they cannot leave it. Despite such rude comments, Anita said, 'I will eat this food as long as I live. Yet, she appeared anxious about the implications of the smell on her body and noted: 'If we cook in the gas stove, the smell is all over our body. So we have to wash up nicely and change our clothes to get rid of the smell'. It is important to recognize these signs of apprehension and anxiety because such moments expose the instability and prejudices about how one eats certain food and where it is eaten. Eating fermented food in the nation's capital, then, captured the prejudice that is inherent in everyday social interactions in urban India. Therefore, Anita's assertions that she would eat akhuni as long as she lived was not simply due to the flavour of the food, but could be seen as her opposition to the hostility this food attracted, and a declaration of self-respect and dignity.

Describing Humayanpur as a cosmopolitan place, Anita said: 'People come here from different cultures and states. Some of them do not like the smell. They say that they will complain to the landlord, but we tell them that everyone has their own curry, so this is our curry. We are not cooking it every day because even we know that it smells'. Such negotiations were routine in the locality. James, Anita's neighbour from Manipur, described how he accommodated this food in his life. He joked and said: 'It has a very nice smell!', but also quickly expressed that he felt vulnerable. 'We love this item but it creates problems. I am worried about the landlord, so I am using an exhaust fan. If the landlord comes to know that I am cooking akhuni, he will be very angry. He might ask me to vacate the room. That is why I look for chances to cook this item. Suppose
the landlord is not at home then I cook akhuni. So we are also looking for the right time to cook this food. That migrants living in Delhi choose to eat food that smells like ‘shit’ is to recognize the multiple conditions and characteristics of modernity in
contemporary India. First, how hierarchies of reason and traditions of a singular modernity are constantly interrogated (Ferguson 1999: 13); and second, how the food cultures of the food cultures of eastern Himalayan societies, relegated to tribal and communal status, rupture the neat bundle of modernity. Instead of restricting fermented food to a tribal kitchen, akhuni eaters in the nation’s capital are prepared to exhibit its presence in their lives despite the protest and conflict this engenders. To underline how she was willing to accommodate other food practices, Anita described the thick air of masala and oil that wafted into her bedroom from her North Indian neighbour’s apartment. She said: ‘It is like this. There are different cultures and ways of cooking. There are some people who use too much masala. We can smell it from miles away. Those smells also annoy us. (But) people should understand one another, instead of complaining and shouting. This is how God created us and we should be proud of the way we live and what we eat.

Conclusion

Indian culinary nationalism exists within a tedious national food framework that is bereft of an immense variety of flavors and herbs. In this chapter, I have argued how this is symptomatic of an unappetizing concept of citizenship rights, guarantees, and democracy. As I have demonstrated, everyday consumption practices are important locations that produce prejudices against social groups and communal stereotypes. These sites also underline the porous nature of boundaries and transgressions, an account that is erased and disregarded. It is important to recognize how communities routinely adapt new ideas, tastes, and connections in nuanced ways—a pinch of fermented soya beans, a dash of turmeric, or a handful of bamboo shoot. It is here, in the intimate spaces of the kitchen, the blurred boundaries of a geographical region, and the everyday negotiations between masala eaters and akhuni consumers in New Delhi, which are often uncomfortable yet routine, that everyday notions of citizenship, belonging, democratic spaces, and understanding of secularism are constantly challenged and redefined in powerful ways.

One of the central arguments I have highlighted in this chapter has been the presence of fermented and smelly food in the registers of modernity in contemporary India. The everyday gastro-politics that encompasses the jars of spices and herbs in one’s kitchen stretching from Bagdogra to Dimapur, to the complex layers of memories, paths and taste, and the everyday enchantments and anxieties of being modern draws our attention towards the multitude stages and performances that are played out in contemporary India. There is no dispute about the place of fermented food like akhuni or smelly food on the nation’s dining table. It is already present and proudly takes its space, despite attempts to dislodge it. Therefore, any conflict about eliminating or retaining it from the table necessitates how one engages with dietary practices of consumption and their understanding about everyday politics, geographies, and people’s histories.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this chapter, titles ‘Fermenting Modernity: Putting Akhuni on the Nation’s Table in India’, had appeared in South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies. Necessary permissions for the present elaboration have been taken.
3. Source: Author
4. Anise is prepared by smoking and drying the yam leaf paste.
5. Source: Author
8. It is important to note that Sikkmese identity is embraced by a diverse social group starting from the Lepcha, Nepali, and the Bhutias who live in the state of Sikkm.
10. A wrap around worn by women.
11. The Indian media and official reports always referred to the Nagas nationalists as misguided youth (who, presumably, needed to be brought back to the mainstream) and hostiles (who needed to be dealt with sternly). Of course, this covered almost all of Naga society from 1951 to 1997.”

References


Mc Duie Ra, D. 2012. Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge, and Retail. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.


