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Culinary Practices of the Monpas: A Study of Traditional Food and Beverages and Their Socio-Cultural Significance in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: The Monpas, an indigenous community residing in the Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh, possess a rich culinary tradition deeply rooted in their cultural, religious, and environmental context. This paper is an attempt to explore the traditional food practices and fermented beverages of the Monpas, highlighting their role in daily life, rituals, and seasonal festivities. This paper shows how Monpa cuisine is unique to the region and has its own importance in the cultural life of the Monpa people.

Keywords: Food, fermentation, beverage, tradition.

Food is not just recognised as a means of sustenance, it is an expression of one's own cultural identity, environmental adaptation, and the community bond with each other. The culinary practices of the Monpas often serves as living repositories of their unwritten history, belief systems, and social values. Their unique process of food preparation, brewing of local wine highlights their indigenous knowledge and environmental adaptation that is instrumental for carrying a culture forward. The culinary practices of the Monpas also have an important role to play in their religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, this paper shall look into how traditional food system reflects broader socio-cultural and environmental relationships. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore food practices and culinary culture through a combination of fieldwork observations and secondary data analysis. Fieldwork was conducted to have an in-depth understanding of culinary traditions of the Monpas.

The Monpa people have a rich culinary tradition, crafting a range of meticulously produced ethnic fermented and boiled foods using diverse crops, forest produce and

meat from both wild and domesticated animals often accompanied by age old traditional beverages brewed by the people. Traditionally, rice and finger millet form the backbone of their meals, supplemented by maize, barley, wheat and other grains reflecting an agro-ecological adaptation. In addition, a wide range of leafy vegetables, mushrooms, several wild vegetables and fruits also occupy a significant place in their meals, highlighting sustainable relationship with the environment. In the past, their livelihood depended both on agriculture practices and animal husbandry. The people being followers of Buddhism do not slaughter animals. However, when an animal dies, its meat is sliced into strips and sun-dried for future consumption. While some of them are vegetarian, others include meat in their diet, preferring dried and roasted varieties. Like all other societies, cooking is primarily the responsibility of females. The cooking process is easy but labour-intensive turning simple ingredients into nourishing, flavourful dishes, a unique technique passed down through generations.

Ghee (butter) and *churpi* (fermented cheese) are an integral to the cuisine of the Monpas. *Churpi* is used to enhance the flavour of curries. *Churpi* comes in two varieties—one made from yak milk called *chur* and other made from soyabeans called *greb-chur*. The *Brokpas*, yak herders follow an efficient but quite labour-intensive process in making *ghee* and *churpi*. They milk their herds while seated on a small wooden stool, strapped around their waist. Every day the fresh milk is stored in a locally crafted pot and mixed with a small amount of previous day's milk to initiate fermentation, demonstrating an indigenous understanding of microbial culture. Then it is poured into a long cylindrical churner made of either wood or silver. The mixture is then churned vigorously, using a long wooden piston, near the fire place. Once the *ghee* flecks rise to the surface, they are skimmed off with a wooden ladle and kept aside. Then the remaining curd is heated over a simmering coal fire until it clots. It is then strained through a bamboo sieve to separate *churpi*. Now the *ghee* and *churpi* are ready to serve fresh. The *ghee* and *churpi* are also kept safely in animal skin bags for future use.

Another ingredient, soaybean *churpi*, is prepared through a week-long process. The seeds are separated from cover and then boiled, drained on a bamboo sieve and mixed with a pinch of salt. After that, the beans are placed in a bamboo basket and covered with banana leaves. Then the whole bamboo basket is wrapped tightly in layers of cloth and kept near the hearth for warmth. It is rotated towards the fire side for almost a week, until the beans develop a sticky texture and strong aroma. The fermented soyabean is then pounded in a mortar and pestle and sun-dried. The process is repeated for few more days for further refinement, until finely textured. Then the final product is kept in a cane or wooden containers for daily use.

There are a variety of ethnic dishes such as *zan*, *gyapa-khazi*, *puta*, *bresi*, *khura*, *tsizin kyola*, *khazi*, *momo*, *thukpa* cooked with unique techniques. *Zan* is the staple

dish, often forming the core of daily meals. It is a thick porridge prepared from finger millet or maize flour. Water is boiled on a pot and flour is added to the boiling water and stirred well with a wooden spatula until it forms a thick paste. It is then paired with any vegetable curries or *churpi chutney*. Another significant traditional dish is called *puta*, a noodle shaped dish made from the flour of buck wheat. It requires a locally crafted press wooden device with small holes to form noodles for making the dish. Water is boiled in a utensil and a small amount of *ghee* is added. After placing the dough, a person sits on the edge of the wooden device to give pressure, resulting in the emergence of noodle shaped dough. These noodles are then boiled until they float to the surface. Then it is taken out and drained and served with onion curry. It is a joint venture. The dish is prepared during marriage and other social gatherings signifying communal eating and egalitarian food sharing. Another traditional dish is *Tse chin kyola*, a semi-liquid dish made from the flour of buckwheat. The process of making the dish is similar as that of *zan*. However, more water is added to make the paste a semi-liquid consistency. Another age-old dish is *Gyapa-khazi*. *Gyapa* means trade and the dish was usually cooked by the Monpa traders when they carried long distance trade. It is cooked by mixing rice, *churpi*, dry fishes, ginger, chillies and *ghee* together in a utensil, indicating innovation and adaptation of rich culinary practices. *Khura* is another dish made from the batter of buckwheat and golden wheat flour. It is mixed with water and stirred well with small amount of rice beer for flavour and left overnight near the hearth for fermentation. The next day, it is fried in thin round layers on a flat greased pan. The cuisine of the Monpa people is not restricted to these wonderful dishes. Another dish called *khrangpa* (as the name suggests coarse-textured dish) is made from crushing maize into small pieces, soaked in water for few hours, then turn into paste and cooked slowly in low flame. The dish is then usually served with chutney. Then there is *Bresi*, a ceremonial dish, cooked and served usually as *prasada* on auspicious occasions. Cooked rice is mixed with butter, sugar and almonds to create a sweet and fragrant delicacy. Another popular dish is called *khazi*, involves mixing cooked rice with *chutney*, chopped raw cabbage or other leafy vegetables seasoned with salt and is usually served as lunch. But the well-known dish known to all is the tasty *momo*, which has become a delight all over India. Dough is shaped by hand into small balls, which are then stuffed with small chopped vegetables or minced meat, moulding them into small onion shape dumplings. These are steamed in stacked trays until it is cooked. Another popular traditional dish is called *thukpa*. They are widely prepared in different forms with various ingredients such as *usum thukpa* made from maize and *koh thukpa* made from barley. *Usum thukpa* is cooked from minced maize with vegetables like beans, radish. For richer bite; chillies, salt, *churpi*, *ghee* are added and cooked for several hours while gradually adding hot water. Meat is optional. *Kho thukpa* is prepared from barley. It follows the same cooking

process as that of *usum thukpa* but consume less cooking time. The noodle *thukpa* is also cooked in boiling water and let to drain. It is then fried in a pan with mustard oil by adding onions, minced meat, garlic, ginger, and chillies.

A variety of vegetables and herbs are found abundant in the region. The Monpas have tradition of storing sun-dried vegetables for winter seasons ensuring year round food availability and efficient use of natural resources in the highlands. The process of cooking curry is very simple. Vegetables are chopped into small pieces and boiled with water, salt, soyabean *churpi* and chillies. When it is half cooked milk *churpi* is added which is considered as the main ingredient for cooking vegetables. Every meal is incomplete without *chutneys*. For the *chutney*, a handful of chillies are crushed in a small mortar and pestle, then to it is added both types of soyabean and milk *churpi* for enhancing flavour. Sometimes, even roasted tomatoes and brinjals are also added for richer taste and served alongside main meals.

One of the most culturally significant and commonly consumed beverages in the Monpa society is salted butter tea, a drink that transcends nutritional value and signifies respect, social cohesion, tradition and warmth. The preparation of butter tea is symbolic. It begins with boiling water in a pot infused with tea leaves. Meanwhile, in a cylindrical cane, milk, salt and a generous dab of *ghee* are added and then the boiled tea is poured into the mixture. It is then churned vigorously pushing slowly downwards and pulling upwards with great force using a wooden piston. The churning process continues until the tea attains the desired consistency and flavour. This process of making tea is not simply a culinary technique but it represents an art of traditional knowledge that has been passed down from one generation to another.

Among the Monpa tribe, the consumption of locally brewed alcohol called *chang* by the Tawang Monpas and *yu* by the West Kameng Monpas is not only common but deeply rooted in cultural and ceremonial contexts. It is not merely a drink but has cultural meaning embedded in the social life. They prepare it using a variety of grains such as rice, barley, finger millet and wheat. These grains are used individually or mixed, then fermented with locally made yeast tablets. Alcoholic beverages are central to every occasion, such as marriage, birth, death, festivals, house buildings, agrarian cycles and religious rituals. As a token of love and shared celebration, it is customary to carry homemade alcohol to each other's homes during festivals. The Monpas have the tradition of consuming alcohol in group called *dunchang*. It is a tradition where alcohols are consumed collectively in groups by all members of society, young and old alike, sharing drink in the same cup. Usually after agricultural work, families, relatives, friends and neighbours join together for *dunchang* not only to drink but to socialize and make strong bond. The addition of local ingredients such as *ghee* and eggs not only enhances flavour but it is believed to relief body ache, reflecting their indigenous

traditional knowledge system. Various types of other alcoholic beverages such as *themcha* also known as *singchang*, *ara* and *bangchang* are prepared by them.

Among locally brewed alcoholic beverages, *themcha* or *singchang* holds a significant place. The process begins with boiling grains in a big aluminium vessel, then spreading the paste over a bamboo mat and after some time two or three pieces of yeast tablets are mixed in and after cooling, the mixture is shifted into a wooden cylindrical container and sealed tightly with banana leaves or fern. The wooden container also contains a small pipe at the base, sealed by the leaves and to stop its out let, *ghee* is applied on the corner of the pipes. It is then kept untouched for a period ranging from one to three years. After three years the seal is opened and the liquor is held ready for consumption. The liquor thus formed is believed to contain medicinal values, used to relive body and muscle pain, dysentery, weakness, itching etc.

Bangchang or *laopani* is another alcoholic beverage which is prepared from rice, barley, finger millet and wheat. It can be prepared by any of these crops separately or by a mixture of two or more crops. The method of preparing is almost the same. The crops are boiled in a big vessel and spread over a bamboo mat and two-three pieces of yeast tablets are mixed. When it becomes cool it is transferred into another big vessel and wrapped by layers of thick woollen cloth for fermentation. After four to five days, the fermented mixture gives off a strong alcoholic aroma indicating it is ready to serve as *bangchang* or *laopani*. Then the clothes are removed and filtered through a bamboo sieve and consumed during *dunchang*, festivals and ceremonies. For those seeking higher potency, the fermented paste may be aged further in airtight containers, for months or years for the production of strong liquor called *ara* popularly known as *rakshi*.

The preparation of *ara* or *rakshi*, which is very strong and intoxicating, is quite meticulous and labour-intensive. A large pot is half-filled with fermented paste and a small tri-pod is placed inside the pot, supporting a smaller mud vessel half-filled with water. Over this, a brass vessel filled with cold water is fitted snugly on the mouth of the large pot, which is then sealed tightly by cloth. Fire is set from below, causing the water in the brass vessel to boil. The resulting steam distils the alcohol from the fermented paste and condensing it as droplets of *rakshi* that falls back into the mud vessel. The water in the brass vessel has to be changed continuously for six to seven times so as to complete the preparation of this alcoholic liquor.

The food practices of the Monpas are a way of cultural performances where every ingredient, technique, and tools carries historical and symbolic meaning. For the people living in the highlands alcoholic beverages are not just drinks but symbols of social bonding, used in every occasion ensuring cultural continuity and communal ties. The food prepared also showcases the tough life in the highlands where people have to consume whatever is locally cultivated like millet, buck wheat and the food

prepared from it as well as the milk products of the locally adaptable animal in the hill, the yak. This shows the adaptability of the Monpas to the hilly terrain and how it has shaped their history and culture. A glimpse into their culinary practices is enough to understand the life of the Monpas and the use of traditional indigenous practices put to its best use. The food forms an integral part of their religious life as well. They have tradition of offering boiled beans of different varieties, rice, traditionally baked *khura*, corn and other items as part of ritualistic offerings to their village temples on auspicious occasions and religious festivals. The food offerings in the form of *prasada* symbolize not only faith but a harmonious blend of devotion and local agrarian traditions.

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