

# QUEST

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# Culinary History of Assam: Traditions, Influences and Evolution

*Dipankar Mohan*

## ABSTRACT

Assam's culinary traditions are like a colourful picture, showing its rich cultural heritage and the diversity of its ethnic communities. The culinary traditions of Assam are influenced by local customs, the Ahom dynasty, neighbouring regions, and even colonial interactions, Assamese cuisine is characterized by simplicity, the use of fresh and locally available ingredients, and a deep connection to the natural environment. This paper explores the culinary traditions of Assam, tracing the evolution of its food culture, the role of traditional ingredients, signature dishes, and the impact of historical and social changes on its cuisine.

**Keywords:** Culinary, tradition, ethnic communities, Assamese cuisine, food culture

## Introduction

Assam is renowned for its unique cooking traditions rooted in its geography and diverse culture. The cuisine of Assam is an amalgamation of local practices, the legacy of the Ahom dynasty and influences from Bengal, Tibet, and Myanmar. This article is an attempt to explore the culinary history of Assam and see how its food culture evolved over time.

The culinary history of Assam is vibrant & filled with flavours shaped by its unique heritage and geography. Assamese cuisine known for its simplicity and distinct flavours reflects the agrarian lifestyle of the people where rice, fish, and various indigenous greens play main roles in meals. The cuisine is marked by minimal use of spices, allowing the natural essence of ingredients to shine through.

Over centuries, Assamese cuisine has evolved, shaped by the region's ethnic diversity and external influences from neighbouring regions and countries. The Ahoms, who ruled Assam for nearly six centuries, brought with them unique cooking techniques and ingredients that became integral to Assamese food culture. The influence of Bengal, Southeast Asia, and the British colonial period also left a lasting imprint on Assam's culinary practices.

As Assam modernizes, there is a growing effort to preserve and celebrate its traditional food heritage while embracing new trends. The evolution of Assamese cuisine shows the region's ability to adapt while keeping its cultural identity strong.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To trace the historical roots of Assamese cuisine.
2. To explore the impact of indigenous, Ahom, Bengali, and colonial influences on Assamese food.
3. To understand the impact of globalization on Assamese cuisine.

### **Methodology**

The approach of this research is historical and exploratory in nature. This article uses a multidisciplinary method, analysing existing research on Assamese cuisine, cultural history, and food traditions. In this regard, secondary sources such as articles, books, journals etc. are taken into consideration.

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## Discussion

The culinary traditions of Assam are deeply rooted with the region's geography and agricultural practices. Assam's location in the Brahmaputra Valley, surrounded by the Himalayas to the north, the Patkai Hills to the east, and the Bengali plains to the west, has played a significant role in shaping its cuisine. The region's fertile soil, abundant water resources, and favourable climate make it an ideal place for growing a wide variety of crops, including rice, tea, and a range of fruits and vegetables. The proximity to the Himalayas has also facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas with neighbouring regions, such as Tibet and Bhutan, which has contributed to the diversity of Assamese cuisine. Assamese cuisine is characterized by the use of fresh, locally available ingredients, minimal use of spices, and a focus on preserving the natural flavours of food.

- **Indigenous Tribes and Food Practices:** Assam is a melting pot of different tribes each with its distinct culinary traditions. The Bodos, Karbis, Misings, and other tribes have traditionally relied on food practices that are closely connected to the natural environment. Fish, meat, and fermented foods are integral to the diet, reflecting the region's rich biodiversity.
- **Rice as a Staple:** Rice is central to Assamese cuisine, consumed in various forms such as plain rice, puffed rice (*muri*), flattened rice (*chira*), and rice cakes (*pitha*). Assam features unique kinds like Joha (aromatic) and Bora (sticky) which are used in special dishes and rituals.
- **Foraging and Shifting Cultivation**

Indigenous communities have traditionally relied on shifting cultivation (*jhum*) and foraging for wild greens, bamboo shoots, herbs, and edible ferns. These practices have led to the development of a cuisine that emphasizes the

use of fresh, locally sourced ingredients. Fermentation is a key technique in Assamese cooking used to preserve food and enhance flavours. Fermented fish, bamboo shoots, and soybeans (axone) are integral to the diet of many indigenous tribes.

### **Historical and Cultural Influences**

Assamese cuisine is a vibrant blend of flavours shaped by centuries of historical and cultural influences. The region's culinary traditions have been shaped by its indigenous tribes, rule of the Ahom dynasty, neighbouring Bengal and British colonialism. Each of these influences have contributed unique ingredients, cooking techniques, and flavours to Assamese cuisine, resulting in a diverse and distinctive food culture. From the use of fermented foods and fresh herbs to the importance of rice and fish, Assamese cuisine reflects the rich history and multicultural interactions that have shaped the region over time.

**Indigenous Roots and Tribal Influences:** Assam's culinary journey begins with its indigenous tribes, who have lived in harmony with nature for centuries. Tribes such as the Bodos, Misings, Karbis, and others have long relied on the natural resources around them, developing a cuisine that emphasizes fresh, locally sourced ingredients. These communities practice shifting cultivation (jhum) and foraging, which have led to a diet rich in wild greens, bamboo shoots, herbs, and a variety of meats and fish.

Fermentation is a key technique in tribal cooking, used to preserve food and enhance its flavours. Dishes like "*Poitabhat*" (leftover rice soaked in water) and fermented fish preparations are common among the Misings, while the Bodos are known for dishes like "*Oma Bilahi*," a simple yet flavourful pork and tomato stew. The use of minimal spices and a focus on natural flavours are hallmarks of these tribal cuisines, reflecting a deep connection to the environment.

These indigenous culinary practices form the foundation of Assamese cuisine, preserving age-old traditions and sustainability. The influence of tribal food culture is evident in many of Assam's signature dishes, showcasing the rich heritage and diversity of the region's culinary landscape.

**Ahom Influence: A Culinary Legacy:** The Ahom dynasty, which ruled Assam for nearly six centuries from the 13th century onwards, had a profound impact on the region's culinary history. Their arrival from Southeast Asia introduced several new cooking techniques, ingredients, and food preservation methods that became integral to Assamese cuisine. One of the most significant contributions of the Ahoms was the art of fermentation, a technique they popularized and which remains a mainstay of Assamese cooking. Fermented foods like *khar* (an alkaline dish made with raw papaya, pulses, or meat) and fermented fish are iconic examples that highlight this influence.

The Ahoms also brought with them a tradition of using herbs and greens extensively in their cuisine, often for both flavour and medicinal purposes. Dishes like *Dhekia Bhaji* (stir-fried fiddlehead ferns) and *Maan Dhaniya* (meat cooked with cilantro) reflect this practice, showcasing the importance of fresh, seasonal ingredients in Assamese food.

Their influence extended to the use of simple, natural flavours, often enhanced by slow cooking techniques that allowed ingredients to retain their authentic tastes. The Ahoms' culinary legacy is a defining element of Assamese cuisine, contributing to its rich and diverse food culture that continues to be celebrated today.

**The Bengali Connection: Shared Culinary Practices:** Bengali influence on Assamese cuisine is significant, particularly due to the geographic proximity and cultural exchange between Assam and Bengal. This influence is evident in several

culinary aspects, such as the extensive use of mustard oil and mustard seeds, which are staples in both cuisines. Assamese dishes like *Masor Tenga* (a tangy fish curry) and *Aloo Pitika* (mashed potatoes with mustard oil) reflect this shared culinary tradition. Similarly fish, a central element in both cuisines, is prepared in similar ways, emphasizing freshness and subtle flavours. The concept of using *panch phoron*, a five-spice blend, is another Bengali contribution, adding depth to Assamese vegetarian dishes. Moreover, Bengali sweets and snacks have been embraced in Assamese culture, especially during festivals and celebrations. This culinary exchange has enriched Assamese cuisine, adding diversity and complexity to its flavours.

**The British Raj: Colonial Influence on Assamese Cuisine:** The British colonial period introduced new culinary practices and ingredients to Assam, many of which have been seamlessly integrated into the region's food culture. The most notable influence of the British is the introduction of tea plantations, which not only transformed Assam's economy but also embedded tea into the daily lives of its people. Today, Assam is one of the world's largest tea producers, and tea drinking has become a ritual across the state. The British also introduced bakery products, leading to the popularity of bread, cakes, and biscuits in Assamese cuisine. The establishment of clubs and tea estates brought Anglo-Indian dishes like fish cutlets, meat pies, and stews into Assamese households, where they were adapted to local tastes. Additionally, the British influence extended to using more refined cooking techniques and introducing new vegetables like potatoes and tomatoes, which have since become staples in Assamese cuisine.

Today, the legacy of British influence is still evident in certain Assamese foods and dining practices, particularly in urban areas. The integration of these influences has added a unique dimension to Assam's rich culinary heritage, reflecting the region's adaptability and openness to new cultural elements.

**Migration and Cultural Exchange:** The migration of various communities to Assam over the centuries has further enriched the state's culinary landscape. The Marwari community, originally from Rajasthan, settled in Assam as traders and brought their community, originally from Rajasthan, settled in Assam as traders and brought their vegetarian culinary traditions. They introduced a variety of sweets, such as *Jalebi* and *Ladoo*, and snacks like *Kachori* and *Samosa*, which have become popular in Assamese households, especially during festivals.

Similarly, the Nepali community, which migrated to Assam during the colonial period, introduced dairy products like curd and paneer. These ingredients have since been incorporated into Assamese dishes, adding to the diversity of the region's cuisine.

**Modern Influences and Culinary Evolution:** Modern influences have significantly shaped the evolution of Assamese cuisine, blending tradition with innovation. Globalization has introduced international ingredients and culinary techniques that leads to the creation of fusion dishes that combine traditional Assamese flavours with global elements. For instance, local fish curries might now incorporate spices from other cuisines, and traditional *pithas* (rice cakes) are being reimagined with fillings like chocolate.

Urbanization has also played a role, with busy lifestyles driving the popularity of ready-to-eat packaged foods and modern interpretations of Assamese classics in urban restaurants. Despite these changes, there's a strong movement to revive traditional ingredients like *Bhut Jolokia* (Ghost Pepper) and indigenous rice varieties, which are being reintroduced with contemporary twists.

Health and wellness trends have further influenced Assamese cuisine, emphasizing organic and sustainable practices. Traditional dishes, known for their simplicity and use of fresh ingredients, align well with modern health-conscious diets.

Media and technology have amplified these trends, with social media and food blogs spreading Assamese recipes and culinary innovations to a global audience. This has helped preserve traditional practices while encouraging creative experimentation, ensuring that Assamese cuisine continues to evolve while honouring its roots.

**Festivals and Culinary Traditions:** Assamese festivals are deeply intertwined with food, with each festival having its own set of traditional dishes. Bihu, the most important festival in Assam, is celebrated with the preparation of special dishes like *pitha* (rice cakes), *laru* (sweet balls), and *jolpan* (traditional breakfast items). These foods are made using seasonal ingredients and are shared with family and friends, reflecting the communal spirit of the festival.

Food is also central to other Assamese festivals, such as 'Magh Bihu' which marks the end of the harvest season. During this festival, communities come together to prepare and enjoy traditional dishes like '*sunga pitha*' (sticky rice cake cooked in bamboo) and '*til pitha*' (rice cakes filled with sesame seeds) etc. These culinary traditions are not only a celebration of the harvest but also a way of preserving the agricultural and cultural heritage of Assam.

## Conclusion

The culinary history of Assam is a testament to the region's rich cultural diversity, historical influences, and deep connection to the natural environment. From the indigenous food practices that form the bedrock of Assamese cuisine to the influences of the Ahom dynasty, neighbouring cultures, and colonial interactions, Assam's culinary traditions have evolved into a unique and flavourful heritage. As the state continues to modernize, there is a growing recognition of the importance of preserving this culinary heritage, ensuring that the distinct flavours and traditions of Assam are celebrated and enjoyed by future generations.

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