

Traditional Methods of Preparation of *Choko* : A Fermented Rice Beer by the Rabha Tribe of Goalpara District, Assam

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ABSTRACT

Investigation was carried out to document the traditional methods of preparation of *Choko*- a fermented rice beer by the Rabha tribe of Goalpara District, Assam. The key ingredients, methods of preparation and socio-cultural significance of the item are reported in this paper. Traditional knowledge of preparing this drink is mostly confined among the aged peoples of the tribe. It is the need of hour to conserve the knowledge by documentation and scientific processing of this drink, which will attract the local youth for its commercial production.

Keywords Rice beer, *Phap*, *Choko*, Rabha tribe, Assam.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity of ethnic foods is the fruit of human wisdom, struggling with the various environments

including sentiment in the long history (Chun 2018). The North Eastern Region of Indian subcontinent consisting of eight states has a huge reserve of traditional fermented foods owing to its rich ethnic diversity and also due to the availability of surplus bioresources in the region (Narzary *et al.* 2016).

The Rabha, a tribe of Mongoloid origin is widely scattered and concentrated in the undivided Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang Districts of Assam. As per census 2011 data, their main concentration is found on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in Goalpara-District (93912) and Kamrup District (88191). This tribe has a special type of food system depending on their resources like- agricultural products and forest collection (Rabha 2019).

Rice beer is prepared by a major percentage of the people of the Rabha community (Deka and Sarma 2010). Scientific documentation is one of the fundamental methods of conserving traditional knowledge (Govindasamy *et al.* 2018). This paper is an attempt to document the traditional methods of preparation of *Choko*- a fermented rice beer by the Rabha tribe of Goalpara District, Assam.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Goalpara District of Assam lies between latitude 25°53' to 26° 30' N and longitude 90°07' to 91°05' E covering an area of 1,824 sq km. The district is bounded by West and East Garo Hill districts of Meghalaya on the south and Kamrup District on the

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Fig. 1. Key materials for the preparation of *Phap* and *Choko*.

East, Dhubri District on the West and mighty river Brahmaputra all along the North.

The present study was carried out from August, 2019 to January, 2020 in five remote villages of Goalpara District, Assam. The selected villages are densely inhabited by Rabha population. Information was collected through interview with 150 old aged experienced people of the villages. During the study, it was found that women are mostly engaged or have expertise in the preparation of this fermented rice beer (*Choko*). So, focus group discussion was conducted in each village to collect data mostly from females in the age between 18–60 years. The key ingredients, methods of preparation and socio-cultural significance were documented during the period of study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rice beer accounts for one quarter to one half of the daily caloric intake of the Rabha inhabitants of Goalpara District (Deka and Sarma 2010). The traditional methods of preparation of *Choko* (rice beer) of the Rabha tribe have been documented. *Phap* (rice beer cake) is prepared first, which is an important

ingredient of *Choko*. The procedures of preparation of both *Phap* and *Choko* were documented.

Preparation of *Phap*

Phap is the starter cake used by Rabha tribe, which is pre-requisite for the preparation of fermented rice beer (*Choko*). It is also commonly known as *bakhor*. The main ingredients required for its preparation are: *Phap jibra* (*Scoparia dulcis*), *Pan-chung* (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), *Mai* (*Oryza sativa*).

Procedure

The ingredients are mixed and grinded to powder. Water is added to this mixture and mixed thoroughly. Some round and flat globules are made from the mixture. The globules are now sundried for about 4 to 5 days. Dry globules (cakes) are kept in a pan for further use in preparing *Choko*.

Preparation of *Choko* (rice beer)

The important materials required (Fig.1) for the preparation of *Choko* are : *Jonga* (an earthen pitcher with 4-5 kg capacity), *Janthi* (a filter made of bamboo, *Bambusa vulgaris*), *Rai* (leaves of banana, *Musa balbisiana*), *Kur* (rope made of bamboo, *Bam-*



Fig. 2. Spreading boiled rice on bamboo mat.

busa vulgaris), *Hanger* (a small piece of charcoal), *Mai* (*Oryza sativa*) and *Phap* (should be prepared before).

Procedure

In the first step, rice is boiled for about 20 minutes. Boiled rice is cooled by spreading on a broad mat made of bamboo for at least half an hour (Fig. 2). Now, *Phap* (already prepared) is grinded and mixed well with boiled rice (Fig. 3). Then this mixture of rice and *Phap* is put in the pot called *jonga*

(Figs. 4-5). The pot is tightly sealed with *Rai* (banana leave, *Musa balbisiana*) and a small charcoal (*Hanger*) is kept on top of it. This pot is kept for 5-6 days, after which it is untied and the mixture is filtered using *Janthi* (a filter made of bamboo, *Bambusa vulgaris*). For this process, water is added constantly with frequent stirring the wall of the filter inside the pot. After filtration, this rice beer (*Choko*) is ready for the drink. According to Deka and Sarma (2010), *Choko* or rice beer attains the actual stage for drinking after 4 to 5 days in summer and in winter, after 7 to 8 days. Similar to the *Choko*,



Fig. 3. Sprinkling *Phap* over the boiled rice.



Fig. 4. Preparation of *Phap* globules (cake).

Naga tribe of Nagaland also prepare a cereal based fermented rice beer called *Zutho* from rice (*Oryza sativa*) (Jamir and Deb 2014).

Socio-cultural significance

Choko (rice beer) is one of the most significant traditional natural drinks prepared by the Rabha community. It is considered as a nutritious drink for general

health and well being. The most famous Baikho puja of Rabha community is not fulfilled without the use of *Choko* (rice beer). According to Sarkar and Mistri (2018) during socio-religious festivals, the Rabhas of West Bengal are prepared in many dishes such as meat of pig, fowl, goat including the local rice beer (*Choko*). During the time of engagement or marriage also this drink is a necessary drinking item.

Rabha people believe rice beer to possess high medicinal value in relieving headache, body ache, inflammation of body parts, diarrhea and urinary problems (Deka and Sarma 2010). It has been observed that the traditional knowledge of preparing various ethnic drinks or foods remain confined mostly among the aged peoples of the tribe. Therefore, it is the need of hour to conserve the knowledge by documentation, scientific processing and commercial production of the items. Apart from knowledge preservation, it will also give employment opportunity to the local youth.



Fig. 5. *Choko* kept in the *jonga*.

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