Khali pete thaka to teni xadharan*: Lived Experience of Food among Women in Assam

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Abstract

The paper explores the lived experiences of food among women from multiple locations of caste, class, tribe, religion and region within Assam, India. The everyday experience of women from *Namasudra*, *Bodo* and *Char based Muslim* communities in Nalbari district forms the empirical context. The various ways of production, procurement, preparation, distribution and consumption of food in these communities are explored. All these practices in general reflect the embodied patriarchal values. The women's body and nutrition become important for the community when she is pregnant. Here the women have minimal negotiating power, but there has been some resistance of late. Thus, it is argued that the dynamics of conforming and resistance to the dominant practices has to be located in the intersectional matrix of social reality.

Note On The Title

* Staying empty stomach is normal

Introduction

Human beings are embodied social agents as all perceptions are embodied (Merleau-Ponty 1962). The senses of human beings cannot function independently of their bodies. We constantly negotiate and shape the physical vis-à-vis the social, but we are rarely aware or conscious of our bodily actions in this process. This paper tries to explore these negotiations through the lived experiences of food among women in Assam, India. In everyday life the body is taken for granted, and absent (Leder 1990), but the experiences the body generates in interacting with everyday life become the center of discussion in most of social science literature. Here the body is not only a biological entity; it is constructed socially, and it is lived. There are various norms and values that regulate the experiences of the lived body. While the inner world of the lived body internalises the normative systems, the outer world constructed boundaries of bodily action (Douglas 1992). The lived body thus embodies the objective context of these rules and restrictions in the context of food too. Further the body subjectively engages with these rules and restrictions that results in differential experiences. These embodied behaviours are internalised within the individual's socio-cultural and political space. Power is central in shaping the discursive construction and reproduction of foodways. The differential distribution of social power symbolically explicates in various ways of production, procurement, preparation, distribution and consumption of food in the everyday life.

Present study looks at the lived experiences of women from both the subjective and material context of food related ideas and practices in their cultural locations. It attempts to understand, whether women have agency or space in this negotiation process? Do women internalise and reproduce male-centered notions in their everyday life? If so, to what extent? How do the differential axes of social inequality influence the food consumption? What are the local belief systems centered on food? How does the symbolic power related to food operate among women? This paper critically engage with the often taken-for-granted assumptions on food through the empirical context of women in three communities

having different social locations. The paper argues that majority of the women belonging to socio-economically marginalised section have internalised gendered ways of food behaviour in multiple ways, which have a bearing on their self and identity.

Locating the Empirical Context

The data used in this paper were gathered during fieldwork conducted at Nalbari District of Assam, India, during October 2016 to November 2018 for a larger study of Gendering Health. Nalbari District is situated in lower Assam between district of Kamrup and Barpeta. The district is one of the recurrent flood affected areas of Assam where most of the villages have to face flood more than three times in a year. Three villages are purposively selected for empirical study. Following section tries to locate the women in these villages in their socio-cultural context.

Barximaliya

The village Barximaliya is located 20 km from the district headquarter and mostly inhabited by Namasudra community. The geographical vulnerability to flood as well as lesser development of infrastructural facility locate the village to the margins of socio-economic development indices. The village has 285 households with a population of 1,394, where 74 % of them are scheduled caste Namasudra^[i] (Census 2011). The Namasudras in Assam are listed as scheduled castes. This community migrated from the neighbouring state of West Bengal to Assam before British regime. The census report shows that the overall literacy rate among the women of the Namasudra community is relatively poor in comparison to the other scheduled castes. The women in traditional Namasudra society, do not have any hold over the property and other resources like land, animals. They share relatively less space in both private and public sphere. Since the early period, the community preferred fishing as their prime livelihood. The availability of fishes is not the same all the year around. Thus, they take up manual labour for feeding their families as they have little land for agriculture. Earlier fishing was done in the adjacent Barali Lake, but currently, the lake has been buried by soil erosion from the Pagladia River. As a consequence, the traditional livelihood of fishing is in decline. Despite the female's active participation in manual labour, they have little control over the production system. The female hardly has the space in the decision-making process of the community or the individual family.

Chatra

The demography of the village consists of Bodo, Muslim and few Hindu families. Even though it is a bodo dominated village, it is not under the BTAD^[ii] area of Assam. The village has 209 households with 1056 people with a better literacy rate of 73.57%; where 80.93% reported as male's literacy and female literacy is 66.02%. The prime livelihood in this village is agriculture. Meanwhile, apart from the agriculture labourers, there are different livelihood that the people have adopted for survival. Being the inhabitants of non BTAD area, they face land alienation as the land can be purchased by any other rich persons. The gradual shrinking of land area has affected the agricultural negatively. In Chatra village most of the Bodos depends on the preparation of *jou-bishi* (rice beer) and weaving related work for sustenance. In

traditional Bodo society, women can participate in domestic decision-making process and there are hardly any rules on women within the household premises. They can freely participate in the selling of agricultural and non-agricultural commodities. Among the Bodos, women have some property rights especially in absence of sons in the family. Women are allowed to own pigs, fowl, etc, and can sell them without prior permission from their fathers or husbands. If there is a single female child in the family, the entire property is bequeathed to her after the death of the father. In such cases, the bridegroom moves into the house of the bride after marriage. This is an accepted system of marriage in Bodo society and is called *Garjia Lakhinai*. However, after her death, the property is inherited by her sons, not daughters (Brahma, 1992). However, women are not encouraged to get an education, and therefore, the literacy rate among the Bodo women is relatively poor. Bodo women traditionally play a significant role in religious life.

Bhaganmari Char

Bhaganmari Char village is coming under the Barkhetri region on the southern side of Nalbari District. The village has 2780 households with a population of 15252, where 48.43% of them are females (Census 2011). The majority of Char based people belong to Muslim community. The migrants from East Bengal came to Assam through different routes, which was facilitated by the colonial administration. They used these immigrants to transform various remote and forest lands for agriculture and human habitation. In due course, these char-based Muslim immigrants made it as their homeland (Ismail Hussain, 2008). The historical anecdotes suggest that this area was inhabited by Nepali communities in the 1950ies and they left the place in early part of 1980ies for increasing immigration of Bengali speaking Muslims to that area. The Hindu population in the adjacent Laupara also left the place after selling these lands to the immigrant Muslims settled in the Bhaganmari village[iii]. The char area is a geographically vulnerable area as these are the sand beds on the riverside susceptible to periodic floods. In common parlance the Muslims residing these areas are referred as 'miyas', which invokes a stereotypical categorisation as they are the 'illegal migrants' from Bangladesh/East Pakistan. However, they form important working class labour force in Assam. The villagers are poor agricultural laborers where both men and women contribute their labour more or less equally. The women in the village have little control over the income they earn, or they have little role in any decision-making process. The prevalence of child marriages, *parda pratha* (purdah system), domestic violence, divorce (*talaq*) and polygamy locate these women to the margins of the margin.

[i] In the Census report of 1901, the Namasudras were categorised as Chandals. Later, people protested the use of the word 'Chandal', which compelled the British government to abstain from using this term. The Oriya manuscript, *Yasomati Mallika*, stated that the Namasudra community had previously occupied a higher position in the caste system, and that the name of the community came from Namasa or Lomasa Muni. It also stated that they were the descendants of a union of the son and daughter of Namasa Muni, who cursed them to become Chandals for committing incest. Later, this group of people migrated from West Bengal to Assam. (For more details, see Singh, 1999)

[ii] BTAD means Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District. The Sixth Scheduled of the Constitution of India allows for the formation of Autonomous District Councils to administer areas that are given autonomy within the respective states. This area comprises four administrative districts, such as Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang and Kokrajhar of Assam.

[iii] Those Nepali community people lived there reared cattle and cultivated especially maize and Nepali tobacco. But slowly the number of Muslim migrants increased in Bhangnamari Char. During Assam movement, the differences between the Hindus and the immigrant Muslims started increasing, and as a result, the Hindu people from Laupara had to leave their place. They sold those lands to immigrant Muslims. (For details, see Shebkh, 2013)

Methods

The women belonging to scheduled caste (Namasudra), scheduled tribe (Bodo) and Char-based Muslim women from *Barsimaliya*, *Chatra* and *Bhaganmari* Char villages forms the empirical context of the study. From each village, twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with women from the age group of 18 to 49. Additionally, their male counterparts were also interviewed. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated into English and qualitative analysis was done with the help of Atlas ti-7^[iv]. The study does not involve any risk to the informants or any other who are directly or indirectly involved with the study. The respondent's participation in this study is completely voluntary, and the narratives are recorded with their consent.

Gendered Food

'Khali pete thaka to teni xadharan'

'Staying empty stomach is normal' for many of the women in all these villages. It is often a virtue legitimised by multiple explanations. Sacrificing for others are considered positive within the religious space. At times the economics of 'poverty' necessitates such an experience. The South Asian Rural women's experience of 'malnutrition' has to juxtapose with the body politics of 'size-zero syndrome' among the affluent women across the world. Food is both material and cultural reality that is entwined in one's negotiations of body in everyday life. Availability, accessibility and control of food largely depend on the local hegemonic structures. It varies with one's social locations of caste, class, ethnicity or gender and its multiple intersections. Among the studied population, the differential allocation of social power negatively affected the women across the spectrum. The lower economic status limited their choice and accessibility to food and thus legitimizes such practices. The women experienced burden of poverty relatively more than the other members of the family. Many studies have established that food preferences are gendered. A male child gets preferential treatment over others. Such reproductions of patriarchal values are often seen across these different categories of women. Non-accessibility and control of the required food resource is the primary reason for such differential distribution. Many of the respondents are aware of the nutritional values and their physical requirements. But they sacrifice it for a

more significant cause like familial responsibility. Variations from these established modes of negotiations with the patriarchal value systems were also available in the field.

Food Production and Collection

Among the three different communities, it is the men who controlled the production and collection of food. Men from all these studied communities regulate the production or procurement of food to their respective families. However, there are variations among the way they participate in these processes. The economic resource and power are vested mostly with the men as they engage in income generating activities. The assistance provided by the women are generally not acknowledged.

In Barsimaliya village, currently only male members are engaged in their traditional livelihood of fishing and there is a gradual shift towards agricultural labour as prime livelihood for them. Baby Namaxudra, an elected member of the local body in the village talked about these changing process of livelihood.

My husband has been engaging in traditional fishing activities, and it becomes a challenge for us, because... you know what, nowadays people from our community do not have the hold on 'Mass Dhara Jevika' (i.e., fishing as livelihood). Things have been changing and many new people, especially the Miya Fishermen... come into this profession... we are gradually losing our hold.

Baby Namaxudra is so benevolent to her husband for providing 'food' to them. She added that most of her decisions as panchayat member have been taken by her husband only. The man as 'bread earner' and 'head' of the household has been deeply ingrained her psyche. Her political participation or access to political structures rarely challenges the existing value system. The men in the community itself have been threatened by the migrant people in terms of their livelihood. The women are further excluded from such practices as they are 'unskilled' and 'unsuited' for the male world. The minor activities of animal husbandry are not making them financially independent. It is generally the male folk who engages in economic activities and buy food materials for the family.

On the other hand, in the Bodo and Char areas, women equally take part in the production of food items, but they do not have control in the context of distribution and consumption.

I usually help my husband in doing the agricultural activities. In our locality, the number of women agricultural labour is more than men... I cant decide what to buy or not to buy... Usually, my husband deals with the selling of crops.... We the women remain as workers without much hold... Most of the time I receive less amount of wage than my husband.

Sarala Bodo (40), Chatra village

Sarala has been very active women. Along with her household work, she works as agricultural labour-cum-cultivator. In her free time, she makes traditional rice beer and sells it for professional use. Women provide their labour that produced the goods and exchanged by men, and she does not have any control over the production. Earlier in tribal society, the women shared equal property right with the male

members of the community. But male dominance in socio-economic life started to increase in tribal society too, when people move away from hunting and gathering society and settled down in agriculture. The price hike in essential food commodities makes trouble for them to collect essential foods. However, poverty affects the women comparatively more than the rest of the family members. Therefore, these women mostly depend on the vegetables found in their backyard. The fertility of the land in char is relatively better than the rest of the two studied villages. The significant vegetables in the char area are primarily: banana flower, water spinach, taro stem, pumpkin, sweet potato, pigeon pea, sponge gourd, pea etc. Along with that some of the other vegetables like wax gourd, okra, brinjal, etc. are also found. From the empirical work, it has been seen that most of the women in three different social groups prefer vegetables in their daily food. Meanwhile for the womenfolk, collecting the vegetables is much easier than the other food items. Therefore, the female-headed household frequently has green vegetables or leafy vegetables on their list of diet.

It has been noticed that in most of the cases, it is the male of the household who collects food items and also consume major portion of it. The women have relatively less hold over the production of the food across the three different communities. Women is generally absent here in terms of procuring or producing food items for the family consumption. Being in the margins of the margin, the structural codes of normative restrictions / control are embodied among them more pervasively. In most cases, the women's agency in everyday life mirrors the patriarchal notions. However, there are variations amongst them in the way they perform it. The elder women in the female-headed household enjoyed maximum authority and control in the affairs of the family. However, they reproduced the gendered beliefs and practices by performing as the 'patriarch of family in a woman's body'.

Consumption Behaviour

Consumption of food is also influenced by the socialisation process. Use of food is part of the culture, where some food is considered as pure, while another one impure or prohibited. The female in the household usually takes the food especially after serving their husbands and other male members in the family. But the same woman gets preference from the other members of the family when she gets pregnant.

'My husband is the bread earner of our family. He has to work under sun light every day and therefore his body needs more nutritious food than me. Therefore, whenever good food comes, I give it to him...

Prativa Namasudra (38 Years), Barsimaliya Village.

Many other women in the Barsimaliya echoed Prativa. These gendered consumption practices are often legitimized through various narratives of sacrifices for the husband. Most of the Bodo households have fisheries and animal husbandry, and thus consumption of fish and meat are quite common for them. They also eat various vegetables and leafy vegetables like ridge gourd, wax gourd, lady's finger, brinjal etc. Two different plants, i.e., *Mwitha Gwkhwi* (Maista Tenga) and *Mwitha Gephardt* (Maista Tita) have

been used in their regular diet. The leaves of jute plant is usually consumed with the fish. The Bodo households do not have gendered preferences of food consumption in general. They have reported about equal consumption of food with their husbands and children. But that does not mean the tribal society is free from the gendered ways of food consumption and practices.

Most of the people in Bhagnamari Char are farmers and fisher folk, where both male and female participates but not equally. The male members are involved in major kind of work, while the majority of women have to work as the marginal labourer. Even in the domestic space the husbands often dictate, at times they decide what to cook. The women have little role in their core areas of domestic activity.

Being the member of the agriculture-based family, green vegetables like the banana flower, water spinach, taro stem, pumpkin, sweet potato etc. are always available in our kitchen. So, I can consume all of these. Fishing is quite common in our place.

Johra Khatun, (37), inhabitant of Bhagnamari Char

Johra got married at the age of 18. Both she and her husband have been working as daily wage labours in the agricultural field. But they do not have agricultural land that is why most of the time food grains have been bought from the market. In spite of her involvement in the income-generating activities, neither she has right over the resources, nor has the decision-making ability in day-to-day life. In a world defined by and for men, women are the other (De Beauvoir & Parshley, 1972). Here the socio-economically marginalised women do not enjoy the equal space in social and as well as private life. The field suggests that apart from the social locations of inequality, geographical location also affect the consumption pattern. Each studied pocket of the district are known for different food habits. The availability and production of food differ from place to place and the socio-cultural constructions centered around it. It was observed that poverty makes women's condition more vulnerable and that takes away her control to choose food according to her wish. She has been socialised to sacrifice the food for the family.

Food behaviour of Pregnant & Menstruating Women

One interesting observation from the fieldwork is that most of the food-related beliefs are centred around pregnant women's health. Pregnancy is an important life cycle event where the patriarchal value system accord primacy to women's body. During the pregnancy, women receive the highest attention from the other members.

One of the aged women from Barsimaliya village stated about her pregnant daughter in law's food habit.

I am very much concerned about my daughter in law's diet, at this stage, she needs extra care, and I told my son to buy some nutritious food for her. He often buys Mother Horlicks for her. Along with that food, she use to consume some vegetables... green leafy vegetables are very good for the pregnant woman; therefore, I usually collect those especially from the backyard.

Namako Namaxudra (50), an inhabitant of Barsimaliya village

Namako is quite active and aware of the traditional medicines as well as about medicinal effect of the various vegetables. She has been living in this village for the last 30 years with her husband and children. Recently her daughter in law joined her family. The narratives of Namako suggest that women get care and importance from the others when they became pregnant. During that period her health acquires the comparatively more attention from the state and the family. Most of the respondents admitted that pregnant women's health needs more care than the non-pregnant one. Because such period is very crucial in entire her life cycle. The pregnancy is considered as bliss and while infertility brings various social stigma in one's social life. In this village, although various green leafy vegetables are available. The empirical work shows that the women who have crossed the period of pregnancy are hardly interested in consuming them. These women have internalised that nutritious diet is necessary while one gets pregnant.

There are traditional knowledge on the harmful and beneficial foods for women during pregnancy. People in Barsimaliya village believe that sponge gourd is not suitable for those who are pregnant and who have the problem of high blood pressure. Meanwhile, there are other vegetables like pumpkin, malabar spinach are harmful especially for those with high blood pressure. In char area, most of the women said that consumption of *taro* would create significant health impact, especially for the pregnant women. It is believed that taro can diminish the effect of medicines that are consumed by them. There are also beliefs regarding the optimal amount of food to be taken during pregnancy for the successful reproductive outcome. Many studies have shown that the food taken by a large section of pregnant women in India is deficient in caloric content, protein and other nutrients, a leading cause of maternal and child mortality (Nag, 1994).

The Namasudra in the Barsimaliya village, strongly believes that pineapple is considered harmful to women in the early stages of pregnancy. Pregnant women should also avoid the spicy foods which are considered as hot. In popular belief, certain foods are considered as hot, while another section of foods is recognised as cold. The concepts of 'hot' and 'cold' foods are quite widespread in India and many other countries but the underlying criteria for classifying foods as 'hot' and 'cold' are often not clear (ibid). Apart from spicy foods, the local *khar*, *mahar dal*, *white gourd* are also considered as harmful to pregnant women. It is believed that consumption of these might lead to gastritis and nausea related health issues. Meanwhile, taro, white yam is also on the list of most avoided food. Again, some of the women stated that consumption of *pui xakh* (Malabar spinach) might lead to coughing problems for the pregnant women. Further, the different kind of meat has different side effects on pregnant women's health. As the duck meat is considered as harmful to high blood pressure and especially the pregnant women are advised not to have it. On the other hand, those women who have been suffering low blood pressure problem are suggested to have pigeon meat.

Similarly, in char area, more or less similar nature of beliefs and restrictions prevail regarding pregnant women's food behaviour. Food is not only nutritious continent, but also an epitome of rules and restrictions specially for the pregnant women. During the field study in the three different communities it has come to know that the socio-economically marginalised women relatively more obey the societal

restrictions. Their lack of economic independence snatched their negotiating power in everyday life. Meanwhile women's confirmation towards the societal norms is relatively more than her male counterparts and it exists irrespective of caste, tribe and religion. The non-pregnant women also reported various restrictions related to food habit. Majority of such restrictions are the outcome of the women's sacrificing nature that has been internalised.

'There are certain restrictions related to my food habit. For example, I do not include pumpkin and eggplant in my diet. I usually avoid duck meat also.'

Phul Khatun (43), an inhabitant of Char area.

Phul Khatun from the char area got married before 18 years of age. Her husband again married to another woman and started to stay with her. Khatun has been working as wage labourer under the MNEREGA[v] Scheme. The monthly income is 3,000. As labour, she has to work very hard under the sunlight, and that leads to various health issues. She has been avoiding nutritious food for a long time and wants to give such foods to her children whenever it comes to her family. The habit of sacrificing nutritious food is deeply embedded by most women of socio-economically marginalised communities.

Among the three social groups, it has been noticed that various green vegetables and leafy vegetables are considered beneficial food for pregnant women. Rather than consuming meat, pregnant women are advised to take vegetable food more frequently. It is also noticed that these beliefs are failing gradually with the help of modern medicinal system. The ASHAs[vi] have been playing an important role, and they help the rural folk to develop the 'modern' scientific temperament. Therefore, the majority of pregnant women are forced to move away from the existing beliefs and practices.

Taboos and restrictions on food habit of women is a way of controlling her body and subjectively within the patriarchal value system. The newly menstruating women of Namasudra and Bodo groups have to stay separately for four days, and they are not allowed to have pakka food. The food restrictions are more prominent, especially during the very first menstrual time. They are allowed to have some of the specific fruits only. Sugarcane is considered harmful in that period. But such kind of restrictions is not observed among the Muslims in char area. However, in the rest of the two communities, the food restrictions are rigid for the first menstrual time. Thus, women have to internalise various rules and restrictions in her different life cycle vis-à-vis food ways. The rules of conduct of the body and food varies according to the location of religion, caste and ethnic background. The women inculcate those restrictions through the childhood socialisation. Therefore, the lived body experiences differ in multiple ways. Across the spectrum of women, their body and nutrition become important for themselves and others around, when they perform 'the reproductive roles'.

Food and Symbolic Power:

It was observed that both vegetables and meat enter the household of all the three communities. However, who consume more(?) and what(?) becomes important in understanding the symbolic power

associated with food and its consumption. As elsewhere, the men in the three communities consume the most and the best. The beliefs and norms associated with women and food mostly revolve around, what vegetables to be consumed or not to be consumed during different life cycle events of women. Meat is often left for the control of men. It symbolises aggression and power. In popular saying: 'Without meat, he cannot enjoy food'.

'I usually like vegetarian food, but my husband does not like to have it. He usually prefers meat and as per his choice different kind of meat have been part of our diet, and I am told to cook it'.

Beena Narjarry (37), an Inhabitant of Chatra village.

Beena Narjarry a mother of two children did her schooling up to 10th standard. As an ardent follower of Bathou religion[vii], she submits herself towards the normative practices followed by their community. Even though the religious rituals accord more space for women, the intimate partner's relations are structured by the larger 'patriarchal norms'. 'She has been told and she has to cook'.

Similarly, among the Namasudra community, in most cases it is the male members who are decision makers in most of the everyday life issues including the food choice. One of the respondents from the Barsimaliya village stated:

We are living in such a place where fishing is one of the prime livelihoods. Living in such environment since my childhood, I lost interest in consuming fish. The smell of the fish usually irritates me... My husband likes fish and expected me to help him in collecting the same at least for domestic consumption.

Pratibha Namaxudra (38), an inhabitant of Barsimaliya village

Pratibha has been living in this village along with her husband and two children. She is very much dependent on her husband for many reasons and she is not earning for herself. Her husband incurred heavy losses owing to his defeat in the last local body election, and was forced to return to fishing, the traditional livelihood of the Namasudra community. He had to close down the grocery shop he owned. Even within the changed economic context, the decisions or suggestions of her husband dominates all spheres of Pratibha's everyday life. The deteriorating economic situation hampers Pratibha relatively more than the male counterpart.

Similarly, women in char area equally participate in the labour force in agriculture but did not have the control over the production and consumption. Most of the time she has to cook according to her husband's choice. Thus, from the agricultural field to kitchen domain, husband enjoys relatively more freedom than his wife.

The gendered ways of food habits of three different communities are more or less similar. The Bodo society is considered as liberal and women in this society are better off than in the other communities. But it is not completely free from gendered value-based notion of subordination of women in private

sphere. On the other hand, the Namasudra and Char-based Muslim women have experienced relatively strict gendered notions of food habit.

Negating Normative Practices

In spite of having gendered rules and restrictions, there are women who question the normative practices. One of the women from Barsimaliya village argued against giving preferences to male members while consuming the food. She said:

In my family, there are no restrictions regarding food habit....I along with my husband and children use to consume food equally...I make ensure not to give preference any particular member so that everyone could get the equal amount of food..... majority of women sacrifice their food for others, I think that should not be done, being women we need more protein and nutritious food.

Bhavani Namaxudra (45), an inhabitant of Barsimaliya village.

Bhavani has been living in Barsimaliya village along with her husband and three children. She did her schooling up to class IX, and her literacy background is relatively better than most of the women in her locality. The village is known for endogamy practices, but her husband did not follow that. Being the outsider of the village, initially, she had faced some problems in terms of adjustment, but later she overcame. An educated outsider status helped her to challenge the dominant patterns and allowed her to engage the same differently.

Labita Namaxudra (35), who have come to village after getting married, also echoed the concerns of Bhavani Namaxudra. Only the economic hardships affect the quantity and quality of food consumption.

We equally share the food with the family members, and there is no discrimination in terms of distributing the food My husband works as daily based labour in a hotel and with that limited amount of money we have to take care the whole expenditure of the house. Nutrient food hardly comes to my house and when we get the opportunity to have those we prefer to consume equally.

Thus, these women have been negotiating with the structures of dominance in her everyday life. Being the outsider of the village, the socialisation process that they have gone through are different from the rest of the women who are born and brought up within the village. Moreover, formal education training also enhanced their negotiating power with the existing patriarchy.

Similarly, in char area also too few voices come which stand against the structure. Mazida Khatun (28) shared her experiences related to food habit.

We are non-vegetarian. We take meat and fish thrice in a week. But in our family, everyone consumes equally. There is nothing like that food preferences have been given to the husband than the other members of the family.

Mazida did her schooling up to class eight, and she is one of the few women in her locality, who has formal education training. She thinks education helps them to develop the better understanding of one's health. However, these women also have the better understanding of the importance of hygienic living condition.

Thus, the marginalised women across the three different places have embodied the lived experiences related to food habit and behave accordingly. They have internalised such behaviour through the process of socialisation and reinforcing and reproducing such behaviour and practices throughout the different generations, but voices of disagreements are also there. There are few sections of women in each studied community, who have been trying to negotiate with the existing pattern of food-related behaviour. At times their outsider location, literacy background and economic independence help them to negotiate with the hegemonic structures and made a way out. Meanwhile, the anecdotes of negating normative food behaviour also observed among women who neither have better literacy background or economic independence. The peer group discussion helps them to put their stand against the dominant patterns of being.

[iv] Atlas ti 7 is a computer application for qualitative analysis. It has larger bodies of textual, graphical, audio and video data that can be used in the qualitative research. Here in this study all the interviews have been transcribed and coded with the help of this software.

[v] MGNREGA- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Gurantee Act is a social security scheme that attempts to provide employment and livelihood to the rural labourers in the country. Earlier the scheme was addressed as NREGA, which was passed as labour law and implemented across 200 districts on 2006. In 2008 the scheme was implemented in the entire country.

[vi] ASHA- Accredited Social Health Activist are community health workers . They have been working under National Health Mission (NHM), which is a part of Government of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare(MOHFW). ASHAs are local women who are trained to act as health educators and promoters in their localities. Their main task are motivating women for institutional delivery, increasing immunisation among the children, popularising family planning methods among the masses (e.g: surgical sterilisation), trating basic illness and injury with first aid, keeping demographic records and improving village sanitation.

[vii] Bathou Religion – The Bathou is one of the oldest religions in the world. The Bathou (Ba+Santhou) meaning the philosophy of five basic elements namely Ha (Earth), Dwi(Water), Bar (Air), Or (Fire) and Okwrang (Sky/ Space) represents the pancha tatva. Bathou is completely independent from the Vedas or Hinduism. The supreme God of this religion is known as Bathoubwrai or Sibarai (Siba).

Conclusion

Food is an essential part of existence. Food is deeply embedded in the social, religious and economic aspects of everyday life in society, and has implications on wider socio cultural mileu. The men produce or collect the food for the family and the benevolent wife prepares the food as per the direction of the husband. This common caricature of a 'patriarchal family' is reproduced in Nalbari district, but with its

own contradictions. Here the women are not simply a passive agent of the dominant patterns of oppression. Many of them are aware about it, but they are forced to ignore it for the larger cause of a 'happy family life'. The women's role in the collection of food is restricted to the vegetables available in the backyard or neighbourhood. The economically productive women as agricultural labourers have little choice left to them. The foods are symbolically structured as superior or inferior and masculine or feminine. The symbolic realm is reproduced through the rules governing the food ways among them, which further have implications on the material realm. Thus, certain food is proscribed and others are suggestive. The best portion of the meat is often consumed by the men or children. The women are happy with the 'leafy vegetables' available in the backyard. The women in general internalise these practices and embody it. They rarely questioned these practices and often undermined the importance of their body and self. The submissive self of women often hailed as a virtue of a good women. Their body become important for themselves and the community in general, when they perform reproductive functions. During pregnancy, women's body and health receives the highest attention. They need to take cold food, or other food items helpful for both the mother and foetus. Thus, during the pregnancy period, consumption of food-related restrictions is used to ensure the better health of the women, while in other context, restrictions are imposed to reify secondary position of women. Women are treated differently in their different life cycle contexts with specific rules and restrictions on food.

Thus, the paper outlined the symbolic context of food and associated power relation in the lived body of socio-economically marginalised women. The process of negotiation with oneself and societal norms largely reproduces normative conformity. Beyond the symbolic realm, the material availability of food stands out as the most crucial and pragmatic concern. The agency of women is limited in this overarching narrative of economic marginalisation. Most of the women are economically dependent to their male counterparts and cannot raise their voice against the existing structure. There is a culture of silence that reproduces the hegemonic value systems. At times the 'poor economic status' legitimises the internalisation of 'sacrifice' among women. They have deeply internalised the ideals of sacrifice and care for others. In the process, they undermine their bodily requirements and live in sickness. Within these grand generalisations the possibility of negotiating with the dominant value systems of oppression is evident in the field. Such negotiations are contextual and intersectional that the locations of class, caste, ethnicity and religion operates differently with the gendered experience of 'food'. These are further facilitated by the exposure to the outside world, education, awareness, etc. The ways of oppression and axes of interaction are different for different sections of people in the study area. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) argued that there is variation in terms of women's lived experiences within the third world countries, the empirical context of this study highlights such complex ways of interaction in the lived experiences of food.

The location of religion, caste and tribe have little variation in terms of the everyday experiences of the women. The poor economic condition has been suggested as the prime reason for the differential distribution of food. In fact, the economic logic of everydayness has deeply embodied and masquerade the gendered oppression. Even though the tribal context provides a better interactional space for women, the embodied patriarchal logic structures the everydayness of food among them. They rarely question

these practices and sometimes justifies the gendered nature of food ways in terms of the economic logic. The women who are socialised outside with better education have tried to challenge these gendered notions. The research itself empowered a section of the respondents to critically engage with their everydayness of 'the' food.

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