

Religious Feast of Meitei Hindus of Manipur: An Assessment of Cooking Style and Nutritive Values

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Abstract: Religious feasts are held in many cultures throughout the world in honor of a deceased person of a family or community. Among the Hindus, such a religious feast is offered, generally, during the 15 days falling towards the end of September which coincides with the LangbanTha (September) till the new moon of the same month. This provides venue for social cohesion and obligation. It is also performed in connection with a diseased person to mark the last ritual observance (phiroi) at the completion of one year. In a feast, food takes important role in the observance of various religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism etc. Moreover, it serves as vehicles for supplying nutrients into the body and also for fulfilling human hunger and pleasure. Foods offered to the deity (Prasad) is thought to bestow considerable religious merit, purifying body, mind and spirit. Ethnic cuisine encompasses a wide variety of regional and traditional style of cooking depending upon the cultures and food habit, and passed on from generation to another. The data of the present study were collected mainly using observation, and interview methods, particularly, from the cooks (Pujari Brahmans) and amongst the invites of the religious feast. Diet survey was conducted using weightment method. The different weights of raw foods of the feast were taken before cooked. Then, per consumption unit of each individual was calculated. All individuals were adult sedentary workers ranging in age between 18-75 years. The nutritive values of foods consumed by each unit were assessed using the table on Nutritive values of Indian foods. The information on the methods of preparation of various dishes was collected from the cooks of the day. The present paper envisages to study the religious feast of Meitei Hindus of Manipur, particularly, the cooking style and nutritive values. .

Keywords: Religious feast. Cooking style. Nutrients. Meitei Hindus.

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I. Introduction

Feast mark a ritual occasion, the life cycle of individuals and the reconfiguration of the communities. Comparative anthropological and historical analysis illustrates how feast act as a driving force of social attraction and the communal consumption of food and drink serves as a powerful tool for status recognition. They provide for venues for social cohesion and exclusion, formal and informal authority. Ethnic cuisine encompasses a wide variety of regional and traditional style of cooking, depending upon culture, religion, occupation and food habit. Many religions have particular cuisines or tradition of cookery associated with their culture.

Food choice is influenced by social factors because attitudes and habits develop through interaction with other (Feunekes et al., 1998). "Food getting is a physical imperative, subsistence a fundamental interest, hunger a diffuse primary drive" (Hoebel, 1958¹). It is something that living creatures take to provide them with energy and help them to develop and to live. Foods properly cooked and attractively served are inviting and stimulus to the secretion of the digestive juices. It plays an important role in worship, and the food offered to the deities (*prasad*) is thought to bestow considerable religious merit, purifying body, mind and spirit. Taking *Prasad* that has been cooked and offered with devotion inclines the mind towards spirituality and served in the form of a meal especially on religious feast days. A *prasad* is considered as sacred, and is handed out to worshippers by the cooks. Hindus offer their food before eating to the deity. Customarily, in feast occasions, meals are taken without any cutlery and crockery with cross legged on the floor which are cooked by professional Brahmans and served in a proper manner.

India is a country inhabited by various ethnic groups such as Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Jains etc. having diverse food habits. Majority of Hindus adopt vegetarian dishes and give more emphasis on vegetables, pulses, nuts, fruit, milk products etc. However, younger generations are fond of eating meats nowadays. The Meitei represents 53% of the population of Manipur state. Hinduism became the dominant religion of the State during the reign of King Pamheiba whose Hindunised name was Garibniwaz in the early part of the 18th century (1709-1748). Vaishnavism school of Hinduism became a dominant force in Manipur in the eighteenth century when the king, Garib Niwas declared it as the official State religion. According to 2011 census, Hinduism is the major religion in the state, closely followed by Christianity. Other religions include Islam, Sanamahism, Buddhism etc.

The main language of the state is Meiteilon (also known as Manipuri). Tribes constituting about 20% of the state population are distinguished by dialects and cultures. About 41.39% of Manipuri people are Hindus. Hinduism is mostly professed by the Meiteis, who are majority in the state. However, some section of the Meitei peoples are still following the traditional Meitei religion called Sanamahism. The districts of Bishnupur, Thoubal, Imphal East and Imphal West are all Hindu followers with 67.62% (range 62.27–74.81%) according to 2011 census data (Census of India, 2015).

II. Objective

The objective of the present study is to envisage the religious feast of Meitei Hindus of Manipur.

Data collection and methodology

The data of the present study were collected mainly employing observation, and interview, particularly, from the professional Brahmin cooks (pujaries) and amongst the invites (140=males and 60=females) of the religious feast. Diet survey was conducted using weighment method suggested by Swaminathan (2004). The different weights of raw foods of the ritual feast were taken before cooked. Then, per consumption unit of each individual was calculated as per Swaminathan (2004) for males and females. All individuals were adult sedentary workers ranging in age between 18-75 years. The nutritive values of foods consumed by each unit were assessed using the table on Nutritive values of Indian foods (Gopanlal et al., 2004). The information on the methods of preparation of various dishes was collected from the pujaries of the ritual feast day. The following are the methods of preparations of the various items of religious feast.

1. **Laphueronba (local name):** Among the various recipes, it is commonly taken as one item. It is prepared by cutting the banana plant (young banana stem) into thin slices (1/8 inches thick) and wash the slices and boiled along with soaked yellow pea (soak it overnight before cooking) and red chilli until it become soft. Then transfer the mixture in a large bowl and remove the chilli. Now crush the Banana stem slice and yellow pea by using the bottom of a steel glass. Crush the chilli and sauted maroinakupi into a fine paste by adding the salt. Then add the paste in the crushed banana stem slice and yellow pea and mix well by adding water. Finally, garnish the mixed curry with chopped Phakpai (Percaria odorata), Lomba (Elsholtzia Griffithii) and Tuningkhok (Chameleon plant). Young broad bean, potato and yongchak (parkiaspeciosa) are also suitable ingredients for making eronba.
2. **Singju (local name):** It is a very delicious type of local salad consists of varieties of ingredients such as cabbage, pea tips, cauliflower, lotus root, unripe papaya, chameleon plant, banana flower. These ingredients are finely mixed with a little amount of chilli, salt, roasted black sesame seed and chick pea's powder (coarsely powder).
3. **Chagemooti (local name):** It is usually made with small pieces of rice and paankhokla (taro leaves). Other green young leaves of tomato, sponge gourd, pomegranate leaves and sponge gourds are used in this preparation. For this preparation, wash the rice and put in a pot with some water. Set it on the flame, then wash all the leaves and put into it and let it boil. After boiling for some time, it becomes mushy, soft and disintegrates into paste. Now, add baking soda, continue boiling and when all the leaves disintegrate into paste, turn off the stove and set it aside. Then, heat the oil in a pan and fry the nakupi (Slovenian) in it, till they start turning brown. Then pour it into the porridge and lastly, add salt and cook further for about 1 to 2 minutes.
4. **Moong dal:** Wash moong dal and cook with ample amount of water till it become smooth and creamy. Then heat the oil in a pan and fry thenakupi, ginger paste by adding with cumin (Jeera) and coriander powder. Then pour it into the dal and cook them by adding turmeric and chilli powder. Stir till it becomes soft; add salt and garnished with coriander leaves.
5. **Musur dal, Urad dal, Yellow split pea dal:** The preparations of these various kinds of dals are the same as Moong dal.
6. **Rice kheer:** Kheer is prepared with milk, rice, sugar and cardamom powder. First, heat and simmer the milk then pour the rice grains. This process continues for about 35-37 minutes on a low flame. After that,

add sugar, stir and continue to stir so that lumps may not found. Add almonds, cashews, cardamom powder to get more taste and flavour.

7. **Black rice:** Soak the black rice which is locally known as Chakhao for 15 minutes and drain it well then heat the water in a sauce pan and bring to boil. Add the soaked rice to the heated water and cook until all the water is absorbed. Then lower the heat. Cook it until the rice is softened and at last sprinkle some cardamom powder.
8. **Madhur-Jaan:** For this preparation take some besan in a bowl and add little sugar. Mix it to form a thick consistency using as little water as possible. Take care so that the mixture does not become runny. Pour oil in a pan and heat it for deep frying. By using a spoon, drop the besan mixture into the hot oil and fry the balls until they are golden brown in colour. In the meanwhile, take some milk in a pan and put it on the median flame. When the milk starts boiling add dry bay leaves and sugar and keep stirring. Add besan dumplings into the milk and let it boil for few minutes. Add cardamom powder and mix well and let it cool.
9. **Fruit curry:** This fruit curry is locally known as Heithongba. For preparing this, heat some oil in a pan, add all the spices to it also add some tamarind, chillies then cover the pan and cook together by adding sugar at least for another 10 minutes. Lastly, salt is added to it and remove from the flame.
10. **Potato cauliflower sabji:** Cauliflower sabji is made by frying local green leafy spices, ginger paste with nakupi along with masala. When it turns into golden brown, then add potato, cauliflower and tomato. Cook it for about 10 minutes. Then add salt and garnish with coriander leaves.
11. **Mustard leaves sabji:** Mustard leaves sabji can be cooked in many ways and it is a very common dish in religious feast. For this preparation, first fry the green leafy spices, nakupi along with ginger paste by adding jeera masala. Then add small pieces of mustard leaves. Cook it for 5 minutes. Add water and let it boil until mustard leaves are cooked completely stirring. Salt and coriander leaves are added at the end.
12. **Pakorathongba (local name):** The main ingredient for this preparation are gram flour, nakupi pounded ginger, fenugreek, coriander powder, turmeric powder, bay leaves, salt and oil for shallow fry. Various ingredients of gram flour, turmeric powder, masala and salt are mixed in a container. Add finely chopped the slovenian (*allium odorunlinn*) to the mixture by adding water, make a smooth pokora paste. Then in frying pan heat up the oil hot enough for shallow fry and keep it to medium flame. Drop the pokora paste in a rounded shape into the pan. Pakora should not be deep fry and keep them half immerse. This made the pakora a unique shape. Splash some gram flour water/plain water on the frying pan. This process will help to create holes on the pakora and hence resulting in creating more spongy and soft pakora. Fry them till dark brown colour. Remove them to keep aside. In another pan (kadai) put oil on a medium high heat and add bay leaves, and masala. And add nakkupito continue to fry until crispy. After that, add some tomato (finely cut into pieces) along with water or pea stock for base curry. Then add red chilli powder, salt and masala. Bring them to boil. Once it is boiled, add the pakoras and slow down the heat and let it simmer for 15 minutes or till the pakora become soft. Garnish with maro in nakupi.
13. **Maroithongba:** The main ingredients used in maro curry are Slovenian chopped, bori (dumpling made from black gram lentils), potato, bay leaves, ginger (crushed) fenugreek seed, turmeric powder, chilli powder, whole green chilli (cut in slices), ground nut, salt, mustard oil, coriander leaves for garnishing. For this preparation, first heat the oil in a pan, fry the groundnut until they slightly brown remove and keep aside. In the same pan with the remaining oil fry the bories for 2-3 minutes, remove from the pan and keep aside. Then heat the oil in a sauce pan/ big pot. Once it reached smoking point add the bay leaves, chives and add ginger paste. Cook about 4 to 5 minutes, then add potato cubes and cover the lid. Add chilli powder, turmeric powder, mix well and then cover and cook. While cooking the chives release its juice. Let it cook till the juice completely dry out and oil started to separate, add hot water/ hot rice water (chinghi) When it started to boil add groundnut, bory and salt. Put the lid on a simmer in low heat for 15 minutes. When the potatoes are soft and the gravy thickens (adjust the consistency as per our choice), garnish with coriander leaves.
14. **Paneer sabji/ Sana thongba:** The main ingredients are paneer/ cottage cheese (cut into cubes), chilli mustard oil, ginger paste, nakupi (finely chopped) pea, turmeric powder, jeera, milk, salt to taste. Heat the oil and fry paneer until golden brown. Remove it and keep aside. Add cumin/jeera seed, add ginger paste. Sauté until it become golden colour. Add water and bring to boil. Reduce heat, cover and cook. Add milk, green peas, chillies, turmeric and salt. Bring to boil, add paneer and boil for a while. Boil it till the gravy is thickened and ready garnished with coriander leaves.
15. **Morokachar/ Green chilli pickle:** Different varieties of green chilli pickle may be prepared but, generally, in feast instant green chilli pickle/ morokachar is prepared. For this preparation, the main ingredients are rai powder, green chillies (cut in slice), mustard oil, tomato (cut in the cubes), amla and salt. In a bowl, add rai powder then add water mustard oil and salt. Mix properly, then add chilli, tomato, amla and mix all very well. The instant morokachar is ready to serve.

- Leibakhawai (Peanut) and brinjal fry:** The ingredients of this preparation are leibakhawai (Peanuts), brinjal, masala (jeera, coriander powder and fenugreek), ginger paste, moroinakupi, green chilli (slit lengthwise). ~~salt to taste.~~ For this preparation, pour oil in a pan and peanuts in the next step ~~for frying.~~ The peanuts get fry ~~cooled~~ slowly as the oil gets heated and does not get burnt. Remove the peanuts from the oil when it starts cracking, sprinkle salt (and chilli flakes, if not using green chillies) and keep aside. In the same oil, add chopped nakupi, green chillies, ginger paste, and turmeric and cook it till it becomes ~~become~~ translucent. Add masala and brinjal and cook till it become tender. Lastly, add salt then mix with the fried peanuts and garnish with coriander leaves.
- Nongmangkathongba:** In feast, the leaves of the plant nongmangkha (*phlogacanthus thyriformis*) are used to make the bitter black-ish dish called suktani. This preparation is a compulsory item in any feast. But in the domestic kitchen, it is not compulsory. The leaves are chopped and fried crisp; or bitter still, dip the leaves as whole in a thin batter of besan (flour of either gram or pea), salt and deep fry it. Other spices can be mixed and a little bit of chilli powder is more than sufficient for the crunchy snack.

Analysis of nutritive values of ritual feast

Table below displays the nutrient intake in terms of Kcal, protein, fat carbohydrates, calcium, iron, vitamin A, thiamine, riboflavin and niacin among the invites of religious feast. The ICMR (Indian Council of Medical research) recommended 2425 Kcal and 1875 Kcal per day for adult male and female ~~per day.~~ The Meiteis consume two meals/ day i.e. one in the morning and the other in the night. The Kcals obtained of one meal from the religious feast for adult male and female are 2629.72 Kcal and 2053.33 Kcal respectively, which are more than the requirements of RDAs. While assessing separately of each nutrient, it is found that iron (26.05 mg), Vitamin A (2895.76 µg /d) in females and riboflavin (0.98 mg and 0.77mg for both genders are found to be deficient than the RDAs. Moreover, niacin (14.91mg) is also lower in males than RDA (16.0 mg/ day). Remarkably, it may be mentioned here that deficiencies in case of females in some particular nutrients mentioned above are due to lower consumption unit, but more or equal RDAs of female as compared to males. In this present study, the highest consumption of nutrient is fat in both sexes with 63.66g (male) and 50.31g (females) whereas the RDAs is 20g /day in each gender.

Table 1 Average unit per day intake of calorie, carbohydrate, protein, fat, calcium, iron, vitamin a, thiamine, riboflavin and niacin among invites of religious feast

Age (yrs.)	Sex	No.	Energy (k cal)			Carbo Hydrate (g/d)	Protein (g/d)			Fat (g/d)		
			RDA	PI	% deficit/ excess		RD A	PI	% deficit/ excess	RD A	PI	% deficit/e xcess
18-70	M	140	2425	2629.72	108.44	443.22	60	71.41	119.02	20	63.66	318.30
	F	60	1875	2053.33	109.51	354.42	50	57.02	114.04	20	50.31	251.55

Continue to Table 1

Age (yrs)	Sex	No.	Calcium (mg/d)			Iron (mg/d)			Vitamin A (µg/d)		
			RDA	PI	% deficit / excess	RD A	PI	% deficit/ excess	RDA	PI	% deficit/ excess
18-70	M	140	400	894.6	223.65	28	32.6	116.43	3000	3619.0	120.63
	F	60	400	715.66	178.92	30	26.05	86.83	3000	2895.76	96.53

Continue table 1

Age (yrs.)	Sex	No.	Thiamine/B1 (mg/d)			Riboflavin (mg/d)			Niacin/ B3 (mg/d)		
			RDA	PI	% deficit / excess	RD A	PI	% deficit/ excess	RD A	PI	% deficit/ excess
18-70	M	140	1.2	1.37	114.17	1.4	0.98	70.0	16	14.91	93.19
	F	60	0.9	1.03	114.44	1.1	0.77	70.0	12	12.01	100.08

Note: PI = present intake.



Fig. 1: Prepared dishes ready to offer for Deity.



Fig. 2: Invites taking prasad.

III. Discussion

Among the Meitei Hindus of Manipur, varieties of prepared food items consisting of at least 15 to 20 are offered as a religious observance in connection with a diseased person. These varieties of dishes provide different tastes such as bitter (nongmangkha dish), sweet (kher), sour (fruit curry), salty (pakora, singju, sabji, ironbaetc), stringent (cauliflower, lentils, spices) and pungent (ginger, chilli) having different functions as anti-biotic, energy giving, digestive, cleanses tissue and increases absorption of minerals, and stimulates blood circulations. The different preparations of a religious feast provide the necessary nutrients of the body cells and even can make up the long term deficiencies for undernutrition group who cannot access food sufficiently.

Hindu religious feast is a pure vegetarian food. Analysis of the feast in terms of average nutrients intake reveal that the average fat consumption are much higher i.e. 63.66g and 50.31g in both sexes as compare to RDA i.e. 20 g/day per individual (ICMR, 1991). Fats/ oils give flavor to the tasty and it is used in all preparations in large quantity, specially, in religious feast but high consumption of fat is hazardous to health. The higher amount of protein is obtained from 3/4 items of dal such as moong dal, masur dal, urad dal, yellow split dal, milk etc. used in kher preparation and curd dish etc. In all religious feasts, various vegetables are included and from these vegetables such as cabbage, mustard, cauliflower, singju ingredients and green leafy spices, high amount of calcium can be obtained. Low intake of riboflavin is found in many studies since this micronutrient is contained in small amounts in all foods, but the riboflavin (1.70 mg/100g) in sheep liver

contained the highest of all and the daily requirements are 1.4 mg and 1.1 mg for adult males and females. Papayas (0.25mg), cow's milk (0.19 mg), dry chilies (0.43), pulses, wheat, millet, green leafy vegetables are other sources of riboflavin. Among the several B complex vitamins, riboflavin deficiency is the most widespread (Gopanlal et al., 1996, and Devi, 2018). Niacin/ B3 vitamin is lower in males than RDA, but not found in females, This is due to higher RDA in males which needs to revise the RDA. On the contrary, iron intake is deficient in case of females (26.05 mg) as compare to RDA (30 mg), however, enough requirement can be obtained from various dishes of the ritual feast in males. ICMR recommended higher dose of daily iron /day for females, since women need more iron than males.

IV. Conclusion

Cuisines and ingredients of Meitei religious feast vary from religion to religion and community to community around the world. A Hindu religious feast is a pure vegetarian preparation which includes all kinds of foods such as rice, pulses, green leafy vegetables, other vegetables, milk, curd, varieties of condiment spices including maroinakupi (slovenian), fruits etc. except onion, garlic and hing (asafoetida). These three items are not included in a Hindu pure vegetarian food. The Manipuri cuisines are famous for its delicious taste. Moreover, all the necessary nutrients can be obtained from the various preparations of the feast, except for some vitamins which are present in small amounts in all foods. In this religious feast, which has been chosen randomly for assessing the cooking style and nutritive values, fruit salad is missed. A fruit salad of various fruits ingredients is recommendable to obtain some more vitamins and one item of dal may be reduced to cut down the excess protein intake.

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