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A STUDY ON THE USE OF TRADITIONAL ALCOHOLIC DRINKS IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Most of the ethnic groups of Assam in the north-eastern part of India possess the tradition of preparing rice beer. It is one of the rituals of the tribal communities to host the guests with traditional alcoholic drinks. The preparation and use of drinks are predominant in the tribal societies of the state. The people belonging to Bodo, Mishing, Sonowal, Deori, Rabha, Dimasa ethnic groups take these beverages as an integral part of their culture and tradition. Most of the tribes consider these alcoholic drinks as essential in their religious functions, festivals and rituals. Not only in Assam, the use of such drinks is widespread among other tribal communities of northeast India. They have different processes of preparing drinks. The names of these traditional drinks also differ from tribe to tribe.

Keywords: *Tribe, drinks, society, culture*

Method:

Descriptive method has been used for this paper titled “A study on the use of traditional alcoholic drinks in tribal communities of Assam.”

Introduction:

All the tribal groups of northeast India not only have their different traditional alcoholic drinks, but they have also variations in their preparations. Though different tribal groups coexist in Assam within the same geographical boundaries, they all have uniqueness in socio-cultural aspects.

(a) **Bodos:**

In population, Bodos are the largest tribe in Assam. They are enriched with magnificent culture and heritage. In the Bodo language, alcoholic drinks are called 'Jumai'. To prepare Jumai, plants and some tree leaves are dried for around a month. For this month-long process, the Bodo people collect some wild plants, banana leaves, pineapple leaves, some parts of sugarcane and smash them with rice and water. Then it is converted into some balls and kept for drying. They are dried on haystack. After getting dried for a month, it can be used to prepare the beer.

After the balls get dried, the main process of preparing Jumai starts. To make Jumai, adequate quantity of rice is cooked. After it becomes cold, the rice is sprinkled or mixed with the balls and kept in three earthen pots named Darkha, Maldang and Jonga. It becomes drinkable after nearly 3-4 days. The Bodo people use special species of rice to prepare Jumai.

The Bodos use Jumai to host the guests. On the other hand, this traditional drink is used in religious and social rituals also.

(b) **Mishings:**

Mishings are the second largest tribe of Assam in terms of population. They also use rice beer extensively in their social system. There are two types of drinks prevalent in the Mishing society—Nogin Aapong and Por Aapong. To prepare these drinks 'Aepor' (A special kind of balls) is used.

To prepare the Aepor, vegetable fern, eagle fern, medicinal herbs like hydrocotyle rotundifolia, sugarcane are used. They are washed and dried. Then it is mixed with rice and water to prepare the balls. After the balls get dried, an appropriate quantity of rice is made ready. Instead of cleaning the rice, some paddies or remaining pieces of husk are kept with the rice and boiled. After cooking the rice, it is kept for cooling. Then it is mixed with Aepor. Following the mixture of the materials, it is kept in an earthen pot capping the mouth with banana or some other leaves. Leaves are also kept below the pot. After 3-4 days, smell or drops of the beer come out from the pot. Then the 'Aapong' is preserved in another pot.

The Mishings have a different process of preparing Sai Mod or Por Aapong. Though they prepare Por Aapong like Nogin Aapong, they use hay ashes to make the former. The ashes are made in a three-step way keeping the hay and husk one after another. They half burn the hay and segregate the ashes. Some others directly mix the ashes with rice. Then it is kept in a bamboo pot. The pot is capped so that air can't enter. Banana or other leaves are kept below the pot. The Por Aapong becomes ready after keeping it for 15-16 days. To strain the drink, a bamboo utensil called Tasuk is used. Por Aapong is used in different festivals of the Mishing tribe including—Dobur, Nojonia, Urom Aapin, Dodgang and Aali Ai Ligang. Both Nogin and Por Aapong are used in weddings, festivals and to host guests. But Nogin Aapong is widely used and easily available.

c. Sonowal Kachari:

Sonowal Kacharis prepare Modpitha (A kind of cake) for their traditional drink. A special kind of rice called Aaroi is used to prepare this cake. The Sonowal

Kacharis women use different kinds of herbs and plants including potatoes, eagle fern, chilly leaves etc. Some other dry wild plants and herbs are also mixed with the rice and water.

The Sonowal Kacharis prepare beer from Aaroi and Bora rice. They steam the rice. This process is called 'Soyat diya'. The particular pot used to steam the rice is called 'Soya.' Now they also use some other earthen pots. They keep banana leaves or hay so that rice do not come out from the Soya. The soya is kept for steaming in a brass or another pot. Two banana leaves are used to cover this bigger pot. Some holes are created in the leaves so that the waters keep falling on the Soya.

After the rice is steamed, it is kept for cooling. Then it is mixed with dry Modpitha. The Modpitha is used according to the quantity of the rice. The Sonowal Kacharis use one or two Modpithas for a Kilogram of rice. The taste of the beer varies according to the quantity of this cake. Then, the rice is kept in a bamboo pot. The drops start to fall from another pot kept below the pot where the rice is stored.

While the Sonowal Kacharis call the liquid 'Rohi', they name the rice as 'Mera'. After 2-3 days, the Rohi and Mer are kept with water in an earthen pot. The beer becomes ready in 3-4 days during the summer or in a week during the winter. When the beer becomes well fermented, the Sonowal Kacharis call it 'Burha Mod.' Otherwise, it is called 'Kumoliya Mod.' The Burha Mod tastes strong. The Burha Mod is strained in pots. The remaining Mer is given to the cattle or poultry.

(d) Rabhas:

The Rabha tribe has also its distinctive process to prepare rice beer. They call the mixture used to prepare the drink as 'Bakhor.' The Rabhas use roots, pineapple leaves, jackfruit leaves, leaves of sugarcane, banana leaves, chilly etc. to prepare the Bakhor. These materials are dried, mixed and converted into a cake. Old Bakhor is used with the new one. The Bakhor is dried for several days.

There are several types of drinks of the Rabhas—Chokot Dasbru, Choko Mari (For social use), Loy Sabna (For personal use), Makham Sitha (Beer prepared from Bora rice) etc. The Rabhas also use another type of drink called Sinsinia. This drink is preserved for around 10 years and is used as a medicine. To prepare a drink, they half boil rice and keep it on banana leaves. Then the rice is mixed with Bakhor and kept in an earthen pot. Though at first time, the capping of the pot is eased, after 2-3 days, it is fastened well.

The way of making the Sinsinia is different. This drink is prepared from Bora rice. Half-baked Bora rice is mixed with Bakhor and kept in a bamboo pot. The pot is covered with hay. After a few days, the pot is covered with banana leaves. After around two months when the rice gets fermented, the drink is segregated. The drink is kept in another pot. After 10-12 years, it is kept in another pot to drink. This drink is very strong and is normally prepared during the winter.

(e) Deoris:

An alcoholic drink is called 'Suje' in the Deori language. The women collect and smash various types of wild plants, herbs, leaves and roots and mix them with rice. Then, the rice beer cake is prepared and kept for drying. After 7-8 days, it can be

used. The Suje is made from Aaroi and Bora rice. After cooking the rice, it is mixed with the beer cake.

Following that, the rice is piled as a pyramid. On the top of the rice, cinders, eagle fern and chillies were kept. It is believed that such things keep the rice pure.

The beer becomes ready in two weeks when it is winter. On the other hand, during the summer, it gets prepared within one week.

(f) Karbis:

The Karbi tribe in Assam has unique way of preparing rice beer. They first collect around 101 bitter leaves. The leaves are smashed with rice to make the beer cake. It becomes usable when it is completely dried. The Karbis call it 'Khaph' or 'Khinkur.' The rice is half-cooked and kept for cooling. Then Bakhor is mixed with the rice. Then, banana leaves are placed on the floor to keep the mixture of rice and Bakhor. During summer, it is kept for 1-2 days and 3-4 days during winter in an earthen pot. After nearly 7 days, the drink becomes ready. Foams are also extracted to drink. It is called Ula Mod or Karbuk.

The Karbis prepare a bamboo glass which is called Aalang Aahor. It is kept in the soil. The drink is extracted from the Aalang Aahor. On the other hand, after the drink runs short, the Karbi people get the juice by smashing the resources used to prepare the beer. This juice is called Aap Aahar. The resources are used as fodder for cattle.

The Karbi people heat the pots specially to keep the rice beer. The pot is placed above the hay and rice husk. There is an appropriate limit of keeping the pot in fire. It is believed that heating the pot makes the drink tastier.

They cover the pot with banana leaves and iron or cinders are placed above it. Not everyone is allowed to touch the pot where the drink is kept. The women who prepare the beer are only allowed to touch it. They believe that eating something sour makes the drink taste sour.

Result description:

- (1) In the tribal societies of Assam, mostly the women prepare their traditional alcoholic drinks or rice beer.
- (2) They make beer cakes for the preparation of the drinks.
- (3) Most of the tribes in Assam prepare their traditional drinks from rice.
- (4) All of them keep the beer in earthen pots.
- (5) The tribal groups in Assam necessarily use natural products like herbs, wild plants, roots and rice.

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