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## Ethnic food habits of Reang Tribes of Tripura state, India

Samsat Debbarma

Assistant professor

Department of Human Physiology

Ramkrishna Mahavidyalaya

Kailashahar, Unakoti Tripura, India

### Abstract

The north Tripura district in Tripura state is home to Reang community, one of the 19 tribes of the region. A comprehensive field study was conducted from July 2022 to August 2023 in several villages of the district, focusing on traditional foods, their preparation and ingredients.

The study revealed that the Reang community exhibits an astonishing diversity of culinary knowledge, utilizing various parts of plants in their dishes. Most of their traditional dishes are boiled and cooked without oil, fermented fish being a common ingredient. Bamboo shoots and specific species of bamboo are extensively used in their cooking. Traditional culinary practices are orally transmitted from elders to the younger generation, the decline in interest in wild foods among the younger Reangs poses a risk to the preservation of their ancestral food heritage. This abstract emphasizes the urgent need to document the current Reang culinary practices to safeguard their traditional knowledge and pass it down to future generations. Preserving their distinct food culture can contribute to the preservation of the Reang community's identity and heritage.

**Keywords:** Reang, Culinary knowledge, Traditional foods, wild edible plants, Tripura

### Introduction

Ethnic food is an integral part of cultural heritage, reflecting the tradition, flavours, and culinary practices of various communities around the world. It encompasses a wide range of cuisines, each with its unique ingredients, cooking technique, and historical significances. Traditional dietary patterns associated with specific ethnic groups can have beneficial effects on health outcomes. The traditional food system of indigenous peoples is characterized by foods sourced from the local, natural environment that are culturally meaningful and accepted. Cultural identity can be identified by its traditional food. Item selection is classified based on cultural preferences, affordability, the impact of education and media, and biological needs. Women have vast knowledge regarding the selection of plant species to be cooked rather than men. The diversity in taste and cooking method differs among villages and with location. Many of the plants included in the preparation of dishes have medicinal properties.

The small, hilly state of Tripura is situated in the northeastern region of India, sharing an international border with Bangladesh and national boundaries with Assam and Mizoram.

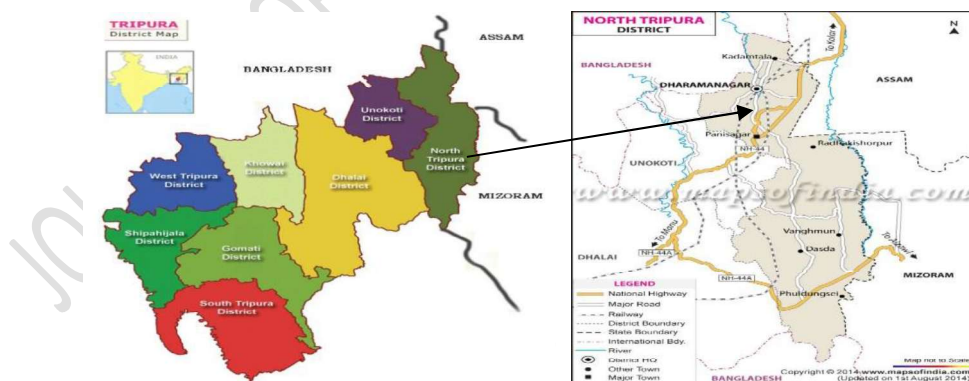
surrounded on its 3 sides. Geographically located at 22°56' and 24°32' N latitude and between 90°09' and 92°20' E longitude. The state is inhabited with 19 indigenous tribes namely Tripuri, Halam, Kuki, Uchoi, Bhil, Bhutia, Chakma, Garo, Orang, Santal, Lepcha, Khashia, Munda, Jamatia, Noatia, Mog, Chaimal, Murasing, Reang (Bru).

The indigenous Reang (Bru) tribes have a unique culture, are geographically isolated, and face lower socio-economic conditions.. Population of Reang tribes is 188,220 according to 2011 census. Majority of Reang tribes has been found to settle in the districts of North Tripura, Unakoti Tripura, Dhalai Tripura, Gomati Tripura, South Tripura and Khowai Tripura, and few in the state of Mizoram and Assam. They are also found to resides in some parts of neighbouring country Bangladesh. Foods are collected mainly from the forest for daily consumption as well as for economy. Several studies have been conducted, and documentation of traditional foods has been compiled. The use of various wild edible plants to prepare traditional recipes has been passed down through generations among different ethnic communities. But the food habit has not been studied so far. Therefore, present study is designed to study the food habits of Reang (Bru) tribes and their way of preparing those recipes in order to conserve the knowledge gain from their ancestor, which is losing its authenticity due modernization and alienisation of the food habits adopted the younger generation.

## Materials and method

### *The research area and its inhabitants.*

The North Tripura district (24°19'N latitude and 92°01'E longitude) in Tripura state covers an area of 1422.19 sq. km and is home to a large population of the Reang community, one of the 19 tribes of Tripura. The traditional religion of the Reang people is animistic, involving a belief in multiple deities. Jhum cultivation is main form of agriculture. Rice and other minor crops are cultivated, rice being the staple food the Reangs.



**Figure 1.** Map of North Tripura district, Tripura.

(Map source: ENVIS Centre: Tripura state pollution control board, Govt. of Tripura and mapsofindia.com)

### *Collection of ethnobotanical data*

A comprehensive field study was carried out from July 2022 to August 2023, spanning the villages of Khakhomthai, Konpui Para, Gachirampara, and Tuisama. Permission for the field study and interviews was obtained from the village head (known as Rai). Group discussions were held with the elders of the villages who have vast knowledge regarding traditional foods. This discussion focused on dishes, modes of food preparation, raw materials, ingredients. Photographs were taken of food preparation and various food items.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Culinary knowledge and food system*

The Reang tribes utilize nearly every part of plants, including leaves, stems, tubers, young shoots, rhizomes, inflorescence, flowers, fruits, and seeds, demonstrating a remarkable diversity of culinary knowledge. The majority of their dishes are boiled and cooked without the addition of any oil. Fermented fish, known as *Bermai* or *shidal*, is commonly used in almost every traditional dish. It is primarily prepared by fermenting *Puntius sp.* and *Setipinna phasa* fish in a traditional dish. The fermentation process typically takes around 3-4 months. Bamboo shoots mainly of *Mirtinga* or *Owandal* (*Bambusa tulda* Roxb.), *muli* or *owathai* (*Melocanna bambusoides* Trin.), *Sil barak* or *Owachaur* (*Bambusa balcooa* Roxb.), *Owamli*, *Raphai* or *Bari* are most preferred species used in cooking.

The Reang tribes often do not have specific names for many of their traditional dishes. Below is a brief list of some key dishes among the Reang tribes:

### *Batehma*

*Batehma*, a traditional food of the Reang community, is derived from the corm of *Amorphophallus campanulatus* Roxb. To prepare *Batehma*, the corm is thoroughly washed to remove any soil particles and organic debris. The outer skin is peeled off, and the tuber is cut into approximately 1 cm thick pieces, which are then boiled. Once boiled, the pieces are crushed and mixed with *chaukhoi mtoi*, a traditional ingredient made by burning bamboo and filtering the ashes through a bamboo strainer. The mixture is transformed into *Batehma* cakes, allowing them to be conveniently stored for future consumption.

### *Muiya Chaukhoi*

The dish comprises tender bamboo shoots that are prepared using *Chaukhoi mtoi*. The fresh and tender shoots of bamboo are carefully cut and thoroughly washed. Additionally, around 30 g of rice are soaked and set aside. The bamboo shoots pieces, along with other ingredients such as crushed chili paste, salt and *bermai* or *shidal*, are then placed into a utensil and brought to a boil. As the bamboo shoots are almost cooked, *Chaukhoi mtoi* is introduced, imparting a beautiful red hue to the dish. Simultaneously, the soaked rice is ground into paste and added to the boiling mixture, providing a sticky texture to the dish.

*Muiya muitru*

It is a delightful culinary creation featuring tender bamboo shoots combined with a variety of vegetables like long beans and egg plants. The tender shoots undergo a thorough washing to remove any debris, while around 30g of rice is soaked and set aside. The cleaned bamboo shoots are then added to a pot along with crushed chili and salt, and boiled for approximately 45 minutes. As the dishes nears completion, the flavourful *Bermai* or *shidal* is incorporate, along with soaked ground rice, and allowed to simmer until fully cooked. Finally, for an aromatic touch, fresh coriander leaves are introduced.

*Thamsohumo*

This particular dish predominantly showcases the fiery essence of chili, crafted by blending a chili paste. Roasted *Bermai* or *shidal* is combined with onion or garlic, along with a pinch of salt. It stands out as a highly favoured accompaniment among the Reang community, often enjoyed alongside rice and a variety of curries. Additionally, this dish serves as a potent flavour enhancer in many salads, complementing the tanginess of citrus fruits. It is particularly embraced by individual with limited financial means, who primarily consumed it with rice.

*Samchota phanthau mukhoi lausih*

It is a popular dish among the Reang community of North Tripura district, consisting of a salad made from finely chopped Samchota (*Centella asiatica* L.) and tomatoes. These ingredients are then mixed with *Thamso humo*, a paste made from chili and roasted fermented fish. To enhance the flavour, onions are also added to the mixture.

*Muikhando youmo*

This dish features Muikhando (*Diplazium polypodioides* Bl.), a type of fern that is harvested from the riverside. The tender part of the stem and the fiddlehead are carefully cut into small pieces. These pieces are then added to boiling water, along with chili, onion, and fermented fish. A pinch of salt is added to taste.

*Skangbuh bermai mtoi*

This dish is crafted using Skangbuh (*Filopaludina javanica*), a fresh water snail harvested from a freshwater body. The Skangbuh is soaked overnight to remove any internal impurities, and then carefully washed by rubbing. Afterward, it is added to boiling water along with salt, onion, and *Bermai* (fermented fish). Once cooked, finely chopped garlic is added to enhance the flavour.

*Muikhoing mthai peingmo*

This dish, popular among Reang community, revolves around using banana flower of *Musa acuminata* Colla. The preparation process begins with collecting the banana inflorescence and delicately extracting the tender flower part after removing the spathe. The tender flower is then

cooked with chili, *bermai* (fermented fish), onion, and salt, creating a flavourful mixture. Once cooked, the dish is carefully smashed and transformed into paste-like consistency.



Figure 2. (a) Batehma, (b) Muiya chaukhoi, (c) Muiya muitru, (d) Thamsohumo, (e) Samchoto phanthau muikhoi lausih, (f) Muikhando youmo, (g) Skangbuh bermai mtoi, (h) Muikhoing mthai peingmo.

Table 1. A list of plants used in key traditional dishes of the Reang tribes

Scientific names of plants [family]	Reang names	Part used	Habitat	Food product	Distribution
<i>Amorphophallus campanulatus</i> Roxb. [Araceae]	<i>Batehma</i>	Corm	Waste land	Thamsohumo	Frequent
<i>Bambusa sp.</i> [Poaceae]	<i>Owandal</i> <i>Owathui</i> <i>Owachur</i> <i>Owamlang</i>	Young shoots	Wet hills	Muiya chakhoi Muiya muitru	Frequent
<i>Centella asiatica</i> L. [Umbelliferae]	<i>Samchota</i>	Leaves	Shady places	Lausih	Frequent

<i>Diplazium polypodioides</i> Bl. [Athynaceae]	<i>Muikhando</i>	Tender coiled leaves	Shady places	Muikhando youmo	Seasonal (Rainy)
<i>Filopaludina javanica</i> [Viviparidae]	<i>Skangbuh</i>		Fresh water	Bermai mtoi	Frequent
<i>Oxylum indicum</i> L. [Bignoniaceae]	<i>Taokharung</i>	Pod	Shady places	Lauhsih	Frequent
<i>Musa acuminata</i> Colla [Musaceae]	<i>Muikhoing</i>	Flower	Humid	Peingmo	Frequent
<i>Musa acuminata</i> Colla [Musaceae]	<i>Laiphang</i>	Stem	Humid	Lauhsih	Frequent
<i>Solanum melongena</i> L. [Solanaceae]	<i>Phanthau</i>	Fruit	Warm condition	Bermai mtoi	Frequent

#### *Shifts in food patterns within the Reang Tribes*

The new generation of Reang Tribes has undergone substantial shifts in their food preferences, leaning towards a preference for oily and western cuisines. Due to improved financial conditions, the new generation of Reang community has experienced notable lifestyle changes. With the establishment of numerous restaurants, fast-food outlets, and modernized hotels, western food culture has been integrated into their traditional dietary practices. Consequently, many young individuals now opt for western foods over their traditional boiled dishes. Unfortunately, this has led to lack of knowledge about wild edible plants among the younger generation. Inter-community marriages with other ethnic groups have created significant opportunities for the exchange of traditional knowledge and the development of new food habits. As a result, many food items that were previously unfamiliar among the Reang communities have been introduced and integrated into their food system.

#### *Propagation of ancestral dietary customs through cultural heritage*

The oral transmission of traditional culinary expertise in preparing wild edible plants passes down from elders to younger generation. Although these practices have not been documented in writing, mothers commonly share their culinary knowledge with their daughters through hands-on cooking experience at home. However, with the influence of modernization, the younger generation tends to overlook wild foods, posing a significant challenge in preserving and passing on traditional culinary knowledge and food preparation to them.

## Conclusion

The Reang tribes possess a distinct expertise in food preparation that sets them apart from other communities. Each individual has their own unique approach to adding ingredients to various curries, resulting in diverse culinary knowledge within the Reang community. However, the younger generation of Reang's has undergone changes in their food pattern due to shifts in their lifestyle, primarily driven by financial improvement and decrease interaction with other communities. Sadly, the younger Reang's lack of familiarity with the wild food's possesses a risk to the gradual decline of traditional knowledge within the society. Nevertheless, there are still many Reangs who strives to preserve their traditional food practices. Documenting the current Reang culinary practices can play a crucial role in safeguarding their ancestral food habits and passing down this valuable heritage to future generation

## Declarations:

Author Contributions: Samsat Debbarma conceived the study and wrote the draft of the manuscript. Samsat Debbarma critically reviewed the full manuscript content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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