

# **Culinary Traditions, Aesthetics and Practices: Constructing the Cultural Identity of Amri Karbis of Northeast India**

Pinky Barua\* & Kedilezo Kikhi \*\*

## **Abstract**

*Culinary practices are apparently clear indicators of cultural identity. The choice of food is a cultural decision. The study of food, culture and identity are intricately interrelated. The eating practices refer to the cultural or religious beliefs or individual choice. Apart from this, food reflects the socialization process of a community. This paper is an attempt to account the 'Inkut' or kitchen, daily and celebratory eating habits and traditional culinary practices of Amri Karbis and explore subsequently how their cultural identity is constructed through it. Many of the culinary aesthetics and practices have been abandoned due to in-group and out-group acclimatisation; yet many of the culinary traditions have significantly engrained deeper into the social structure. Thus, this paper will also attempt to explore and document the continual culinary traditions as well as the occurring changes in food habits.*

## **Introduction**

Food, cooking and dietary pattern plays a fundamental role in every culture. Food acts as an important mark of one's culture, ethnicity and religion. The study of food, culture and ethnic identity are interrelated and depends on the topographical context too. Since everyone must have to eat and indulge in eating with the available food in the area; with the available food, they develop their own culinary art which becomes one of the powerful cultural symbols of the given community. Food and food habit creates social differences, sometimes, among different communities and strengthens social bonding at the same time among the

community natives. Food also plays a crucial role in establishing gender role, caste and the class association in any society (Wilson, 2006).

Food, religion and belief system represent an intricate relationship. Food is the main component of any belief system and offering different type of food (or sacrifices) to God is a form of an expression towards divinity. So food or dietary pattern ties a particular religious community together. Again, there are some taboos relating to dietary patterns which distinguish one from the other on the basis of food intake. The symbolic meaning of food is more associated with the rites, rituals and customs of a community and eating socially significantly communicates with community members and relationship than with mere nutritional gain. Today, as is seen amongst many ethnic groups in Northeast India, food pattern has changed with the influence of Hindu Assamese society and Christianity. For instance, 'ceremonial cake' is a common inclusion, 'fennel seeds' are often offered after meals, wines (or local beer) are taken in glasses, all distinctively embodying the enlargement of aesthetic manner amongst the ethnic groups of Northeast India.

It is understood that food is essential for human body and living. The growth of human body depends on food and its nutrients. The study of food genre is important to understand the community, personality and the family. Thus, the study of food genres fills the gap to understand the cultures and historical periods. The food culture of any community reflects its culture and tradition of its own. The culinary history of any community has certain aspects of social, cultural and economic history which many historians and anthropologists have focused in their writings (Kumari and Dutta, 2012).

According to Levi - Strauss, food is poised between natural and cultural worlds (David Inglis cited in Kumari and Dutta, 2012). Food is the symbol of the identity of a culture. It is an instrument in maintaining good relations among people, interactions between human and their gods (i.e. myths) as well as the mode of communication. Food is related to the living and the dead. The framework of food system is very complex as the modern food system is transforming (Kumari and Dutta, 2012). It is also a social urge of any community. Food is generally eaten together and always shared; sometimes at events where the whole family or settlement or village comes together to eat. Simultaneously, food is a material and a physical entity; it is a product of human activity, and a

very powerful carrier and reservoir of symbolism. Pitte opines that food stuffs are characteristics of a region or a country and within it are results of complex interrelations between nature and human (cited in Kumari and Dutta, 2012). Again food is the central point of individual identity and the way of eating food in any given society is always institutionalized into a hierarchy.

The food habit of a community actually develops over a period of time depending on the climatic and topographic factors of the region to which they belong, while the other main factor is the culture in relation to food consumption. Again, it is critical to note that the traditional norms, religious beliefs and societal values also influence the consumption patterns. The food habits of a community can be broadly divided into two, i.e., vegetarian and non-vegetarian, and it is observed that food habit of people vary from place to place. For that matter, culinary practices, food habits, preparation and preservation, are closely interrelated with the material culture of any community. The primary motive, thus, is to study the food habits or culinary practices and linked them with the socio-cultural dimensions of the Amri Karbi society.

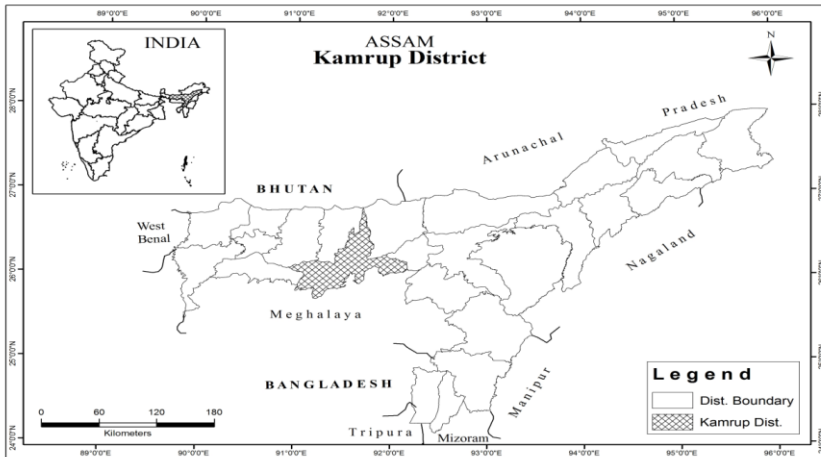
### **Methodology**

The study has been carried out at Sonapur Circle of Dimoria Block in South Kamrup district of Assam which is about 35 kms from Guwahati. Sonapur Circle is situated at National Highway 37 on the river bank of Digaru which flows into the Kalang River close to the Brahmaputra. Sonapur lies at 26.12°N latitude and 91.98°E longitude. The Amri Karbis are presently dispersed in South Kamrup (Sonapur, Dimoria, Rani, Chandrapur) and Nagaon districts and they prefer to live at the foothills of the above mentioned places. This group follows a distinct culture, customary practice, culinary practice and social organization which differentiate them from the Hill Karbis of Karbi Anglong district.

Assam is one of the eight states of northeast India. Northeast India has to be differently understood and placed in the background of its geo-political entity and historical context. Geographically, northeast is at the extreme north-eastern part of India, and has international boundaries with Bhutan, Tibet, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The region is geographically isolated from the rest of India because its only land link with the rest of the country is through a narrow strip of land in the state

of West Bengal. Therefore, northeast is a geographically ‘recognisable entity’. For that matter, northeast is unique making it altered from the mainland India in terms of its topography, climate, different ethnic groups, unique caste structures, races and the other groups - each having its own distinct culture and customs.

**Map 1: Kamrup District of Assam (Study Area)**



Many of the food patterns and drinking habits of northeast tribes are alike. For instance, rice beer is a significant drink common to all the tribes of the region. The only variance is in the terminology while the process of making and its utility remains the same for all tribal groups in northeast India. Rice beer is popularly known as *hor* amongst the Karbis, *xaj-pani* amongst the Tai-Ahoms, *zu* amongst the Lalungs and Angamis, *ozo* amongst the Chakhesangs, *suze* amongst the Deuris, *apong* amongst the Mishings and *zou* amongst the Dimasas, etc. Rice beer is not only taken as food but forms a significant part of religious rituals in many tribal groups.

There are two types of rice – *ahu* or sown rice and *sali* or planted rice in Assam. Depending upon the process of husking the grain, there are two types of rice for cooking- *ukhuwa* or brown rice and *aroi* or white rice (Hunter, 1982 cited in Saikia, 2013: 2). Assam is inhabited by several distinct tribal groups generally known as plain tribal groups - Bodos, Mishings, Kacharis, Rabhas, Lalungs (Tiwas) and Deuris and hill tribal groups - Karbis, Dimasas and Kukis. All these tribes can be

categorised distinctly through their traditional attires, ornaments, songs, dances and food habits. Each of these tribes has its own dialect to communicate with the members of their community. Each tribe has at least one or two of its own unique food habits. Otherwise, generally these tribes alternately consume boiled food, alkaline or sour preparations.

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data is collected through interview schedule which is the main research tool. Interview schedule is supplemented with observation technique, in-depth interviews, key-informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and selected case studies. Secondary data from reviews of relevant literature, books, journals and magazines, newspapers, related research and surveys conducted by various organizations, e-resources, published and unpublished articles, and government records collected from different libraries are triangulated with the empirical data generated from the field.

### **The Karbi Tribe: Sub-groups and Social Structure**

The Karbis, mentioned as Mikirs in the Constitution Order, Government of Assam, constitute an important ethnic group in the hill areas of the present Assam (Bordoloi et al 1987, cited in Das, 2003). They are one of the many Tibeto-Burman communities inhabiting Assam (Lyall, 1908 cited in Das, 2003). The Karbis racially belong to the Mongoloid group and speak a Tibeto-Burman language. The majority of the Karbis inhabit the Karbi Anglong district and some pockets of the adjoining North Cachar Hills, Sivasagar, Nagaon and Darrang districts of Assam. According to Charles Lyall (1908), the Karbis inhabit in greatest strength the Karbi Anglong Hills (cited in Das 2003) which is subsequently named after them. The Karbi Anglong Hills corresponds to the isolated mountainous block which seals the triangle between the Brahmaputra on the north, the Dhansiri valley on the east and the Kopilli on the west (cited in Das 2003).

In terms of social structure, the Karbis are divided into five clans or *kurs* which are exogamous. The five *kurs* are namely *Terang*, *Teron*, *Timung*, *Inghy* and *Ingti*. From the point of view of habitation, the Karbis are divided into three groups: *Chintong*, *Rongkhang* and *Amri* (cited in

Das 2003). Those who live in the plains are called Amris while the hill Karbis are known as Chintong and Rongkhang.

The Amri Karbi group is originally found to be the western most settlers who now largely occupy the hills of Amri Block, that is, the western most part of Hamren sub-division, the Ribhoi areas of East Khasi Hills, low hills and foothills of Southern Kamrup (from Guwahati eastward) and the scattered areas of Kamrup district up to Mayang. The Amri group came to reach this western most portion in the course of their migration from the east (Phangcho, 2003). And as stated earlier, the Karbis living in the plains are known as Amris having a distinct identity. They are also known or called as Dumurali. Dumurali Karbis are plain dwellers who now inhabit the southern part of Nagaon district covering mainly Jamunamukh on the east and Sonapur (in southern Kamrup) on the west. They are believed to have come down from the neighbouring hills in the south after having lived there for many years (Phangcho, 2003).

In the hilly areas, the Karbi houses are mainly built with bamboos and timber posts. In the plain areas, the houses are constructed on the ground (Das, 2003). The house design of the plain (Amri) Karbi is similar to that of Boro Kachari, a predominant plains tribe of Assam (Bordoloi, 19871). The main house is called *borghor* (Kitchen House) and is one of the most important parts of Amri Karbi house. The *borghor* is divided into two parts, one is *ingkut* and the other is *ingkum*. *Ingkut* is the kitchen of the house and *ingkum* is the adjacent big room for the family. According to the Amri custom and culture, *ingkut* is traditionally the most sacred domestic space. *Ingkut* or the kitchen is the domain of the Amri women. In every kitchen there is a fireplace for cooking and over the fireplace there hangs a rack called *raak* where fish, meat and other items are left for drying. In recent times it is seen that LPG cylinder and electric heater are beginning to be used by the villagers, but it has never replaced the fire place of an Amri Karbi kitchen.

The Karbis follow a patriarchal system. By rules of descent they trace the line of descent through the male members only. The common form of marriage is monogamy. However, asymmetrical cross-cousin marriage is preferred among them (Das, 2003). Cross-cousin marriage is ideal as per their customs to maintain purity and harmony within the family, while at the same time to keep the ancestral family property intact. They have no

concept of the system of bride price as is prevalent in some other tribal groups. The traditional village council of the Karbis is known as *Mei* and it consists of all the elderly male members of the village (Das, 2003). The *Mei* is also used for the village council among the Amri Karbis. No women are allowed to be a member of the traditional village council. The study finds that the Karbis maintain different burial grounds in terms of clans and they cremate the dead.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the Karbis. They practice both shifting and settled cultivation. Settled cultivation is generally practiced in the plain areas and shifting cultivation in the hilly areas (Das 2003). Weaving, basketry, rearing of livestock and fishing are common amongst them. Craft work is exclusively done by Karbi men. All Karbi women are expert in weaving and produce most of the clothes in their family loom for the family members. Silk worm or *endi* is reared by most of the women in families (Das 2003). The staple food of Karbis is rice. The food of the Karbis, which depends on the available plants, animals and crops of the region, does not differ much from that of the other tribes of northeast India. However, because of the long association with the Assamese Hindu society certain taboos have crept into their culinary practices and culture (Phangchoo, 2003).

### **Culinary Culture: Aesthetics and Practices of Amri Karbis**

Many of the culinary aesthetics and practices of the Amri Karbis have been abandoned due to in-group and out-group dissimilarities; yet many of the culinary traditions have very deep roots in their culture. This section of the essay explores and documents the culinary traditions and practices, while at the same time recording the changes occurring in the food habits of Karbis.

#### *Kitchen Tools*

Traditionally, the utensils used for preparing the food items and for preparing liquor are made of earthen and bamboo or wood respectively. Food used to be served in banana leaves and bamboo tubes. Today, they are using steel utensils and cups; yet, the earthen pots, banana leaves and bamboo tubes are significantly used at all special occasions and during rituals.

### *Food Habits*

Rice is the staple food of Amri Karbis. They take three meals a day and each meal consists of rice. They prefer vegetables which are locally available; some wild varieties of herbs, arum, yam and bamboo-shoots are commonly consumed. Traditionally they don't use oil in any of their cooking, but now by assimilating with the larger Assamese community, they have started using oil in their food preparation. Otherwise, the food preparing process is simple but unique. It includes a) boil b) burn or roast in the fire and c) cook in bamboo pipe d) drying in the sun or smoked. The Amris have a traditional knowledge of preserving food items and dry leaves for the lean seasons of the year. Some of the traditional and unique Amri Karbi food items and the process of preparing them are given below:

- i) *Kang-Moi* (alkaline): Alkaline is prepared from the ashes of the dried banana stem.
- ii) *Sukan Mas*/fermented fish (dry fish): The fish is first dried with salt and then smashed turmeric is applied on it. It is then put in a locally available bamboo tube to be sealed and kept for two to five months.
- iii) *Gaaj* (bamboo shoot): Like the other tribal groups of the region, bamboo shoot is one of the most favourite ingredients in Amri Karbi cuisine. The Amri Karbis have a unique style of fermenting and storing bamboo shoot to prepare delicacy items. The tender shoots of the bamboos are collected, cleaned, cut into small pieces and then stored in bamboo tubes for fermentation. When the bamboo shoot is ready for use, it is cooked with dry or fresh fish and meat and sometimes it is used as pickle during meals.
- iv) *Dry Meat*: The Amri Karbis usually dry a variety of meat such as wild pig, domesticated pig, goat, deer, etc. Before cooking the dry meat, they soak it in water and then they boil or cook it.

It is also to be noted that betel-nut and betel-leaves play a very vital role in their food habit. In the plains, chewing betel-nut after meals and on special occasions is a common practice.

### *Cuisines*

All cultures have recognizable cuisine and specific cooking patterns because of their special ingredients and spices. The Amri Karbi curry



comprises of meat and fish, which are generally smoked, dried and fermented. A typical Amri Karbi meal for the day consists of meat (mainly pork, chicken or duck), some boiled vegetables and rice. Fermented bamboo shoot is cooked with fish or dry pork (which is commonly sun dried or smoked). The hanging shelf above the kitchen fire, called *raak*, serves as the storing rack for smoked meat and fish. The study reveals that Amri Karbis are mainly non-vegetarian with pork as the most preferred meat, which is served at community festivals and meetings. Ginger and chili are indispensable items in the Karbi food preparation.

#### *Non-vegetarian*

The non-vegetarian food of the Amris mainly includes pork, egg, mutton and chicken. Fish, both dry and fresh, eel, tortoise, crab, snails form part of this non-vegetarian meal. They eat all varieties of fish, besides wild pig, deer, duck, wild duck, etc. Small fish are usually dried in the sun or over the kitchen fire and the big fish are cut into small pieces for drying in the sun or smoked on the *raak*. The eggs of chicken and duck are usually boiled and eaten with rice.

#### *Cereals*

As described earlier, rice is the staple diet of all the Karbi groups. It is cooked in utensils, or steamed in a bamboo tube. Toasted or flattened rice, as also fried and powdered rice are used during rituals. The home brewed rice beer or *hor*, made of rice is a popular drink which is indispensable for any ritual ceremony (Teron, 2009).

#### *Spices*

Amri Karbis use various kinds of spices like sweet basil, ginger, wild turmeric, *maan-dhonia* (a kind of wild coriander), coriander, turmeric, sesame and the commonly used garlic and onion. The Karbis use various kinds of chilies as part of their culinary art (Teron, 2009).

#### *Insects and Larvae*

The food of the Amri Karbis also include insects and larvae. Different varieties of larvae and some varieties of grass-hoppers are used in Karbi cooking. Larvae are collected and roasted in banana leaves by wrapping

it with the addition of freshly pounded raw turmeric, garlic or onion or ginger (Teron, 2009). *Eri* silk worm is another delicacy of the Amris usually taken with boiled rice.

### *Mushroom*

Dharamsing Teron (2009) mentions in his work that Karbi ancestors had knowledge of a wide variety of mushrooms and never made mistake in identifying the edible mushroom from the poisonous variety. Some of the surviving mushrooms today grow in mound and in the hey-stack, etc.

### *Milk*

Karbis in the hills usually do not take milk and ghee (Phangchoo, 2003). The study finds out that even in the plains, the Amris do not normally take milk, ghee, cheese, butter, sweets and any other products made of milk. The knowledge of milking and preparing milk products is totally absent among the Amri group. They are not aware that milk is the main source of calcium. Because of that, children and women usually suffer from calcium deficiency and early tooth decay as milk intake is not common among the Amri Karbi tribe.

## **Amri Food, Customs, Festivals, Taboos and Beliefs**

This section of the essay deals with the implication of food and food items at selected rituals and festivals. It attempts to interpret as to how the social customs and customary practices inhibit the community members while subsequently reinstating their cultural identity.

### *Food and Festival*

Amri Karbis have a peculiar feast and worship and a unique way of offering foods to the gods. *Dehal Katsirdom* is a significant community worship of the Amri Karbis which is prevalent in the Sonapur Circle of Dimoria Block and the neighbourhoods of Eastern Guwahati. *Dehal Katsirdom* is considered as a symbol of unity and togetherness of all the Amri Karbis. In *Dehal*, Lord Shiva is the main deity worshipped by Amri Karbis and along with Lord Shiva, Parvati is also worshipped. They worship them as *Patuk Sarpo* and *Tamlong Sarpe* in their own dialect. The *Dehal Katsirdom* is continued for three days and each village household contributes flowers, fruits, *Hor* or traditional rice beer, goats

and fowls or pigeon for *Katsirdom*. They believe that the rice beer is as pure and sacred as milk, for which they offer *hor* to Lord Shiva.

Ankimi Kitso is a feast celebrated after harvest. They are of two types: Ankimi Kitso, popularly known as community Ankimi Kitso or Ankimi Kitso Pe, and family Ankimi Kitso or Ankimi Kitso So. During this feast, they mainly worship the 'God of Agriculture' and offer *hor*, new rice and vegetables. In the month of February, community Ankimi Kitso is observed by the Amri Karbis and different types of fish are prepared for the feast and served with rice; but pork is not acceptable on this occasion. Family Ankimi Kitso or Ankimi Kitso So is celebrated with the family members within the Amri household. Ankimi Kitso is a feast as well as a worship marked for merry making and thanksgiving dedicated to the 'God of Agriculture'.

#### *Food and Customary Law/Practices*

Even today the Amri Karbis follow strictly their customary practices which mark their difference from the other groups. Any disobedience to customary practices culminates in paying fines according to the nature and gravity of offence. The penalty weightage for offences differs from case to case. The fine for major offences to the customary practices is paid in pigs (as many as 6-7 depending on the offence) with *hor* or local rice beer to the village courts. For relatively smaller offences, the village court demands fowl and betel-nut as per Amri traditions. Presently, money is also imposed or accepted as fines for violating traditions and customs.

#### *Food and Health*

The Amri Karbis have preserved their indigenous knowledge on traditional health practices. There are valuable herbs used in traditional Karbi food which have medicinal and healing properties. For instance, the Amri Karbis uses:

- i) Ginger (*hanso*) - to treat flu and cough.
- ii) Garlic (*harsunKelok*) - to treat flatulence.
- iii) Turmeric (*curcuma longa linn*) – to heal cuts (Teron, 2009).

### *Food, Social Customs and Beliefs*

It is observed that among the Amri men and women cook; but during the menstruation period women are considered as impure and hence they are prevented from entering the kitchen. The Amri Karbis regarded their kitchen as a very sacred place and they prefer to enter it after having a bath. During the period of pregnancy, pregnant mothers are expected to avoid alkaline or *khar* because they believe it may lead to body swelling of the pregnant woman. After the delivery of the baby, the mother requests for the special traditional curry of chicken with arum and chili. *Amen Kibi*, the name giving ceremony of a child, is observed with customary practice. Purification of the family and the child comes with *birkilt* ritual. On this auspicious occasion, the guests and relatives are invited to suggest a name for the new born baby and are entertained with *hor*. This is followed by a sumptuous feast.

It is interesting to note that there are no restrictions on the widows concerning the consumption of food. They are allowed to eat all kinds of food. If there is any death in the family, all the non-vegetarian food is avoided until the death ceremony is observed by the family. Usually, during that period, they cook food without alkaline and oil and also avoid bitter things as well. While grieving for the dead person, the family avoids tasty and delicious food for a few days according to their tradition, since alkaline and oil enhances the taste of food and makes it delicious. Avoiding bitter food during such times is also a cultural norm.

While attempting to study the position of women, it has been observed that women are not allowed to take food along with the men folk at community and other religious ceremonies or at funeral feast. On embracing Christianity, many such disabilities suffered by women have been done away with. Thus, at Christian religious festivals and programmes, both men and women eat together at the same place. Nevertheless, it still has a long way to go for women to qualify to be at par with men.

### *Food Taboo*

Amri Karbis have restrictions on eating habits. For a Hindu Amri Karbi, cow is considered a sacred animal; so, beef is taboo, whereas a Christian Amri Karbi may not hesitate to eat beef or any other meat on auspicious occasions. Bitter vegetables like gourd, margo-leaves,

fenugreek leaves are not eaten at night. Radish is another vegetable which is forbidden to be eaten in the month of January. Eating banana flower is a taboo for the Karbi priest known as *Kathar* who hails from *Ingti* clan. Alkaline and turmeric are never used together in any preparation, while sour and bitter ingredients are also never mixed or eaten together (Teron, 2009). The Amri Karbi folk tales describe the tiger and man as being brothers once, thereby tiger meat is forbidden to them. Amongst the other animals which are not to be eaten are dog, elephant, bear, crow and snake.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, in no society do we find people eating everything, everywhere, with everyone and in all situations. Most cultures have a recognizable cuisine, a specific set of cooking traditions, preferences, and practices. Almost every form of life, whether plant or animal, has been used as food for nutritive or ritual purposes by one or more human societies at some time in the past or present. The choice of food is a cultural decision. People do not accept all possible substances as edible but make choices (Marak, 2014). Culture defines how possible nutrition is coded into accepted food (Levi-Strauss 1966, cited in Marak, 2014). Ecological, biological and economic conditions affect our choice of food too, but it is the cultural understanding and categorization that structures food as edible or inedible. The consumption of food is governed by rules and usages that cut across each other at different levels of symbolization. These symbolizations define the social contexts and grouping within which food is consumed, and prohibits or taboos the consumption of other types of food (Marak, 2014).

Today, in the modern context, the impact of globalization is a pronounced threat to the language, tradition, cultural practices and food habits of indigenous communities because it invites the younger generation to modern lifestyles, leading to the evaporation of indigenous cultures, traditions and culinary habits. Globalization has brought with it significant changes in the food systems and has also resulted in the availability of global food even at remote corners of interior villages. However, more or less the culinary culture (or identity) of the Amri Karbis in Sonapur Area where the research work has been conducted remains essentially traditional. There are many petty shops (as

elsewhere) selling packed pasta, noodles, semolina, bread, chips, chocolate, cake and soft drinks, etc. The school going children prefer these fast-food items and packed foods which are easily available in the shops.

Still, food and food habits acts as important marks of one's identity, ethnicity and religion. Food consumption practices are apparently clear indicators of cultural identity. Thus, the study of food, culture and identity are intricately interrelated. The eating practice refers to the cultural or religious beliefs or individual choice. It is interesting to note that due to in-group and out-group acclimatisation with other cultures, the traditional culinary cultures are getting adulterated, but not completely lost. Today, the Karbis offering tea (black tea) with cookies to the guest instead of *hor* (rice beer) as per their tradition is an observable change which has come with the influence of other communities residing close by and interacting with them. Due to close-habitation and inter-mixture with various societies, the other food habits are also changing. Some of the rich Amri traditional culinary values and its consequent cultural identity are on the verge of fast waning, and this has become a matter of concern and regret. At this rate, these traditional culinary practices will become diluted or extinct, and it would be difficult for the present generation to reminisce their traditional culinary arts unless they are meticulously researched and documented. As a matter of fact, the Amris have to realise that losing these culinary values pose a threat to their distinct cultural identity manifested through it. The local cuisines have to be preserved and re-emphasised through alternative measures. Feasibly, Amri food festivals could be planned to revive the ethnic cuisines or restaurants could be launched across the region to popularise and preserve the Karbi cookerries; but this initiative has to come from the indigenous populace themselves.

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\***Pinky Barua** is Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Tezpur University, Assam.

\*\***Dr. Kedilezo Kikhi** is an Associate Professor & Former Head of Sociology Department, Tezpur University, Assam.