

Food and Rituals: Narratives of Food Consumed by Assamese Menstruating Women

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ABSTRACT

Food and its consumption carry with them, not only physiological meanings but have equal cultural connotations. It is so mundane an element in our daily lives that we do not realize the intensity with which it influences us socially, culturally and politically. Food, the way it is created, served, consumed and conserved, has not just health and nutritional ideals associated with it, but are also manifested in symbolically giving meaning to one's identity in a society. This paper will mainly deal with food which is ritualistically consumed during menarche by young Assamese girls as part of their procedural and symbolic manifestation of menstrual rituals of isolation demonstrating the beliefs associated to the concepts of purity and pollution. It will also delve into the kind of food Assamese girls/women are advised to follow during their menstrual lives and attempt to thus place food as an agency to exhibit the running of a culture and at the same time dig deeper into the subtle meanings that food holds in the carrying forward of one's identity and position in society. The paper will examine the above through the ideas of Mary Douglas (based on purity and pollution), Clifford Geertz (based on interpretive and symbolic premises), Victor Turner (based on symbolism) and Judith Butler (based on gender performativity) and demonstrate how

food has cultural significance in the way it is managed by society.

Keywords: Food, Rituals, Cultural implications, Symbolism, Performativity.

INTRODUCTION

Food and its consumption carry with them, not only physiological meanings but have equal cultural connotations. It is so mundane an element in our daily lives that we do not realize the intensity with which it influences us socially, culturally and politically. Food, the way it is created, served, consumed and conserved, has not just health and nutritional ideals associated with it, but are also manifested in symbolically giving meaning to one's identity in a society.

Anthropology has been dealing with food for a very long time. When it was developing itself as an academic discipline in the 19th century, we find works by G. Mallery (1888) and W.R. Smith (1889) who discussed food and the cultural meanings it carries with it. Franz Boas, whom we can easily state as an anthropologist par excellence delving into almost all aspects of anthropology, did not leave food alone either. In his study of the Kwakiutl, Boas (1921) provides an elaborate description of Salmon recipes shared by his respondents. His intention was not just to hand out how the Salmon was cooked by the Kwakiutl, but was to exhibit how their social

organisation and social scale were evident from the way the salmon was cooked.

Claude Lévi-Strauss too, while talking about social structures, in his *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), deliberated how the transformation that is created in the process of cooking makes food transcend from nature to culture. Mary Douglas who is known for her take on purity and pollution, provided a symbolic, interpretive viewpoint on food. She, like other aspects of culture, visualised food as a means of, “carving up the natural world into the pure and the impure” (1966).

Today the study of food as part of culture, has come a long way. It indulges in not only looking for newer aspects of research but is clearly utilised in testing anthropological theories and methodologies. In this paper, an attempt is made to talk about and understand the kind of symbolic value-creation which is built. Food as a form of study, in this case ritual food or ritualistic food allows an important place to examine symbolic explanation of human behaviour. Ritual food also leads to consumption of certain food and the avoidance of other. This too becomes an important area of study for anthropologists as to how it reflects cultural underpinnings of food in any human social structure.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This narrative here will mainly deal with food which is ritualistically consumed during menarche by young Assamese girls and women who get their menstruation during the month of Ambubasi (the month when Goddess Kamakhya menstruates) as part of their procedural and symbolic manifestation of menstrual rituals of isolation, demonstrating the beliefs associated to the concepts of purity and pollution. It will also delve into the kind of food Assamese girls/women are advised to follow during their menstrual lives. The paper will thus attempt to place food as an agency to exhibit the running of a culture. At the same time, it will dig deeper into the subtle meanings that food holds in the

carrying forward of one's identity and position (in this case that of a woman's) in society.

Symbolism or symbolic behaviour is manifested in almost every aspect of our lives, whether be it imagining and placing oneself in a make-believe scenario or giving everyday items deeper sociological meanings. Food which if blatantly looked at has a few simple purposes, to satisfy hunger, to help the human body grow and to keep the body healthy. But its consumption by human beings, not only has physiological connotations but have equal cultural connotations. Its routine existence in our everyday lives, may not immediately make us become conscious of how intrinsically it is exhibited in our socio-cultural behaviour. However, food always has played an important role or many a times determined the dealings of how people construct their social life which include their economic and political lives as well.

In this paper, we will use Mary Douglas' model of purity and pollution as a background to bring forth the idea of how “pure” food during menstrual pollution highlights the social fabric of a community. She postulated that, the very act of dirt leads to the act of cleansing. Douglas here took into consideration the regulation of social behaviour through various societal entities including food. Women at menarche, which in the realm of impurity is connected to the associated rituals of food are not merely influenced by supernatural or crude dealings, but in everyday life, is seen as a natural part of the social realm. The concepts of impurity and purity for Douglas (1966), are nothing but notions of hygiene displayed with a dose of beliefs. She further states that ritualism is in many societies and cultures viewed as a routine, as a habitual activity which needs to be enacted rather than to be felt innately. For example, the act of everyday worship can be seen as something done more out of regard to the customary tradition than out of intrinsic emotion towards the act. The norms and parameters associated with the carrying out

of the rituals are what the performers give attention to rather than individualistic emotions directed towards the rituals or their performance. Thus, the ritual becomes a symbol for Douglas with it having no apparent purpose but being still effective in running of a culture.

Along with Douglas, we will also use Clifford Geertz's interpretive and symbolic notions of viewing culture and Victor Turner's symbolic manifestation of ritualistic actions of individuals in society portraying everyday cultural implications.

Geertz's (1973) proposed that culture can be seen as an arrangement containing symbols. There are many components within this arrangement in a culture that also contain their particular set of symbols. These symbols carry meaning based on their capability to influence. Geertz noted that the most influencing symbols are found in the ambit of the sacred. This he feels is because the sacred is the most abstruse in all cultural spaces. For him, to know a culture, the symbols have to be interpreted. Behaviour that is symbolic or otherwise is never apparent on the outside. It can only be understood by the individual interpretation of the enactor in any role in society and the larger background within which it is played. So, symbols can be interpreted as having covered in entrenched sentiments.

Victor Turner, a contemporary of Douglas, illustrates the symbolic approach which too can be understood in studying ritual food. Turner notes that symbols introduce social action and can be "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action" (1967, p. 36). Turner's postulation deals with how beliefs which may be incomprehensible to many, can be logical when sought through meaning imbibed in culture. Another way of looking at the symbolic stance, is how behaviour is steered by interpretation, which permits symbolism to assist in depicting abstract and physical actions both. Turner's symbolic position can be read in this paper to highlight how consumption of certain kind of food during menstruation creates cultural meaning.

Ritual food can thus be seen in the context of Turner's symbols as "operators in the social process" (Ortner 1984, p. 131). Ortner points out that for Turner, these symbols or operators create "Social transformation" which ties the people in a society to its norms, resolve conflict and aid in changing the status of the actors (ibid). This fits the given value associated with the consumption of ritual food by young girls at menarche and menstrual women at varied times as will be discussed in this paper.

Lastly this paper will attempt to use Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to put forth the argument that ritual food consumed by girls/women at menarche/menstruation is an expression of the act expected from them as gendered members of society. The following discussion will show that as Butler (1990) had put it, what society views as an individual's gender is in actuality a performance which is performed to satisfy societal conventions and is not an actual manifestation of her/his identity.

METHODS OF INQUIRY

This study was conducted among menstrual women between the age group of 12 to 45 within the city of Guwahati in a locality named Uzan Bazar with a sample size of 120. This study can be viewed as part of a larger study that I had initially conducted as part of my M.Phil research. I built on it over the years through smaller focused studies taking specific topics related to menstruation. This particular study hence can be viewed as been continuously observed and examined over a period of 22 years (2001 to 2023). The categories of women used for this particular study are: a. newly menstruating girls; b. unmarried menstruating girls; c. newly married women, d. women without children; and e. women close to menopause.

The study of menstruation and ritualistic food practices in Uzan Bazar, Guwahati, employed a combination of observation, interviews, conversations, and case studies to explore how these customs are practiced

within this Assamese community and across Assam more broadly. Observational methods allowed the researcher to document rituals and behaviours as they naturally occurred, providing insights into unspoken norms and symbolic actions. Interviews, both structured and semi-structured, enabled a deeper exploration of individual experiences, beliefs, and generational perspectives on menstruation and food restrictions. Informal conversations further enriched the study by encouraging open dialogue in familiar settings, revealing personal narratives and intergenerational differences. Case studies of selected households provided a focused understanding of specific practices and their cultural rationale, highlighting both the shared traditions and the variations within and beyond the Uzan Bazar community. Together, these methodologies offered a comprehensive view of how menstruation-related rituals and dietary norms are practiced, connecting localised traditions in Uzan Bazar to the broader cultural landscape of Assam, reflecting both continuity and adaptation in response to changing societal contexts.

RITUALISTIC FOOD PRACTICES DURING MENSTRUATION

Interestingly, though Guwahati in Assam is a major city, exhibiting all forms of contemporary ideas and realities, in terms of conventions and norms, it still follows many of them as part of socio-religious tradition and culture. This, the city and other parts of Assam too, do to keep its identity alive, though some may be awkward in nature.

In Uzan Bazar, this conventional locality in Guwahati, young girls after attaining puberty, become the core participant of a ceremony to mark the initiation of a girl child into womanhood. This ceremony is called Shanti Biya. Shanti in this context means the parents' relief when the daughter menstruates, indicating the girl's capacity of getting married and procreating. There is another term Tuloni Biya to indicate the same where Tuloni means Tuli Luwa,

meaning the young girl at menarche has now been elevated to a higher social position in society. Biya means marriage.

Traditionally, from the first day of menstruation, a girl is kept in confinement in a room for seven days. And it is here that the consumption of ritualistic food comes to play. For the first three days she is not allowed to consume anything other than fruits, grams (uncooked), pulses (uncooked), milk and milk products. A bed of straw is prepared for her where she is made to sleep for the prescribed seven days. During this time, she is also made to adhere to certain restrictions or taboos. She is not allowed to view men, comb her hair, cut her fingernails, read books etc.

From the 4th to the 7th day, the girl is now permitted to consume boiled food called hobis. This comprises of boiled rice and lentils without the use of oil. She is allowed to have this only in the evenings after dusk, which she has to cook herself on a clay pot. In the mornings she has to consume only fruits. On the 7th day, a priest is called who is given her date and time of attaining menarche. He on the basis of this makes certain astronomical calculations to determine the destiny of her future marital life.

So according to the astronomical readings, for a girl who attains puberty early in the morning, she will have a peaceful life (as serene as the dawn itself) and she is assigned the name padmini kanya. For a girl who attains puberty after 9:00 in the morning but before noon, she is assigned the name siprani kanya, which means naughty and mischievous (chanchal) like the hustle and bustle of the day. One who attains it in the afternoon will be an ugro kanya and symbolise anger, as due to the heat one's temper is at its worst during this time. And a girl who menstruates in the evening, is a hostini kanya. This is viewed to be the worst kind as a woman becomes frustrated by evening as all the tension faced during the day gets accumulated in the mind and body. For all kinds, penances are chalked out by the priest to reduce the hindrances

associated with a girl for a better marital life. For this, fasting (broth) is prescribed by the priest for a particular number of days depending on the kind of obstructions she exhibits (based on the time of her first menses). This process is also linked to the girl's yug (fate). The fasting lasts from one week to a month, sometimes even for a year, based on the above factors. The fasting however can be stopped once the girl menstruates again. This fasting consists of food which is ritualistically and religiously dictated. Throughout the fasting period, only boiled vegetarian food comprising of daal mixed with vegetables but without turmeric, rice, seasonal vegetables and lemon is consumed.

Coming back to the 7th day of the rituals, which is the last day of staying as a pollutant, the girl is given another ritualistic bath similar to the one given on the third day of her ritualistic separation in the presence of a mock husband represented by a banana plantain and women. After the bath, savouries and eatables are distributed among the women relatives and neighbours who come to bless the girl.

In many households, this ceremony is amalgamated with a reception for neighbours and friends with the girl decorated as a bride. This is done to announce the girl's newly acquired social identity and the family's happiness. People bring gifts for the bride and they are entertained with music and a grand feast. The feast consists of food ranging from rice, daal, different varieties of vegetables, meat and fish. This is not really a part of the original rituals and is an add-on. This trend has caught on in many households and has become an indicator of social status.

In Brahmin families residing in Uzan Bazar, Guwahati, the cultural practices surrounding menarche and menstruation differ significantly from those of other caste groups in Assam. Unlike the elaborate and communal celebrations surrounding Tuloni Biya, Brahmin households tend to approach these events with a more understated and private perspective. This divergence

highlights nuanced differences in cultural practices among caste groups in Assam, shaped by historical, social, and religious influences.

For Brahmins, the celebration of menarche is a subdued affair, largely confined to the immediate family and close relatives. The term Tuloni, which signifies "to grow up" and metaphorically alludes to the procreative potential of the girl, is not favoured by Brahmins in Uzan Bazar. Instead, they use the term Shanti Huwa, which translates to "being relieved," focusing on the physiological and personal transition rather than the societal expectations linked to fertility. This linguistic choice reflects a distinct ideological stance, emphasizing the natural aspect of the event over its communal or ceremonial aspects.

Historically, the introduction of menstrual rituals in Brahmin households appears to be linked to the socio-political climate of the Koch Kingdom, particularly during the reign of King Naranarayan (16th century). Oral histories suggest that it was during this time that menstrual taboos and associated practices were institutionalized across all households, irrespective of caste. While these taboos became integral to Assamese society, Brahmin families maintained a reserved approach, likely influenced by their adherence to Vedic purity codes and an aversion to public displays of such events.

This contrast becomes even more pronounced when viewed in the context of other caste groups in Assam. For instance, among non-Brahmin Assamese communities, Tuloni Biya is celebrated with grandeur and symbolism, which is observed in Uzan Bazar, in this case. These practices are rich in symbolism, marking the girl's transition to adulthood and her readiness for societal roles tied to womanhood and fertility. The involvement of extended families and neighbours underscores the communal nature of the event, which contrasts sharply with the Brahmins' preference for privacy.

The nuanced differences in these practices reflect broader social hierarchies and the interplay of caste ideologies. For higher caste groups like the Brahmins, there is a distinct emphasis on maintaining ritual purity and discretion, aligning with their traditional roles as custodians of religious and spiritual practices. In contrast, the celebratory nature of menstrual rituals among other caste groups highlights a community-oriented approach, where menarche is not only a personal milestone but also a cultural event that reinforces social bonds.

These distinctions underline the complexity of menstrual rituals in Assam, shaped by caste, history, and cultural ideology. Brahmin practices in Uzan Bazar demonstrate how traditions evolve and adapt, incorporating broader societal norms while preserving caste-specific values.

It is important to mention here that the restrictions and norms related to food and other menstrual rituals are followed in varied ways. While there are families who follow them strictly to a T others have adopted ways to practice them in a way which suit their convenience. The stricter norms are mostly found in joint families with elder members not agreeing to evolve with the changing times. There are cases where young girls at menarche are made to be absent from their schools for a week in order to make them follow the rules accurately. Contemporary Uzan Bazar in Guwahati, like other parts of the city is facing a plethora of modern influx, mostly in the form of commercial and communal inflows. The exposure of young minds to newer forms of identities, make it quite a task for the continuation of orthodox and conformists notions and practices. While the norms which are easier to follow are still maintained strictly, like consumption of ritualistic food while confinement in isolation is followed accordingly to a family's suitability.

The rules and restrictions of the menstruating women become even stricter during a religious period called Ambubasi

or Xaat. It is during this period that as myths would go, Mother Kamakhya menstruates (there is a temple too by the same name which is much popular among the locals and visitors from all over India). The seclusion is like the first menstrual separation ritual. Conventionally, they are to remain on their beds for three days and eat only fruits. Boiled food without oil is served in the evening. Elderly women specially widows who are staunch believers of menstrual taboos do not cook anything for those four days and survive on fruits and milk. They believe that they should not use firewood for making food as wood is part of nature and nothing from nature should be disarranged for the whole earth, represented by Goddess Kamakhya is menstruating.

Women who menstruate during this time must commonly observe restrictions like not cooking, not performing puja (prayers) or reading holy books etc. When the temple is re-opened, prasad (sacred handouts to temple goers), as part of the food offered to the Goddess, is distributed in two forms. Angadhak--- the fluid part of the body – water from the spring, and angabostro--- the cloth covering the body- a piece of the red cloth used to cover the stone yoni during the days of menstruation. During Ambubasi mela, the rituals enacted fuse two natural phenomena that is perceived as distinctly different. The seasonal cycle of monsoon rains merges with the female physiology – the women's monthly menstrual flow. Both the earth's body and the female body processes can be deemed as profoundly sacred. Women have much faith in the religious activities that occur in Kamakhya during monsoon. Mothers mostly hope to acquire the angabostro, if not done so already, as it is said to have the capacity of curing women affected with disorders related to menstruation or also make one's reproductive life successful.

So, food which is ritualistically consumed during menarche by young Assamese girls happens as a part of their procedural and symbolic manifestation of menstrual rituals of isolation demonstrating the beliefs

associated to the concepts of purity and pollution as postulated by Douglas. The kind of food Assamese girls/women are advised to follow during their menstrual lives thus places food as an agency to exhibit the running of a culture and at the same time display the subtle meanings that food holds in the carrying forward of one's identity and position in society.

DISCUSSION

These rituals fit into the model of Geertz's interpretive and symbolic anthropology, including Turner's ideas on symbolism, where rituals are viewed as symbols from their social and cultural contexts. Anthropologists confirming to the symbolic viewpoint resort to the emic expression of describing society. Here culture is believed to be comprehended by the public performance of symbolic systems. These rituals and restrictions as symbols provide cultural meaning and importance. As Ortner, Geertz's student and eminent anthropologist, puts it, "culture is not a model inside people's heads but rather is embodied in public symbols and actions" (1984, p. 129). And such symbolic actions are directed by interpretation. Turner sees such symbols as mechanisms for the maintenance of society. Therefore, we may interpret the existence and continuation of menstrual rituals as one of the ways in which a patriarchal social order survives. Like other restrictions entailing a girl with the status of impure or a pollutant during menstruation, food too plays a significant role to keep this idea intact. It acts as a reality in the social identity of girls and women, delicately relegating them an inferior position in their society.

The need for the consumption of particular ritualistic food and other restrictions speak volumes about the manifestation of understated gender discrimination or subordination in Assamese society. The various kinds of minimal food provided to a young growing body at menarche, though considered healthy, only speak of the unnecessary specification of certain kinds of

food and avoidance of others. The newly menstruating body is hence utilised to exercise proscriptions. And young girls and later as women, follow these to survive as conventional perpetrator of their culture. Done as part of the patriarchal structure, the body is seen as contaminated, given a degraded status of a pollutant and made to observe norms, one being the consumption of particular food, more so during the following months after menarche based on the time of attaining menarche and to cleanse themselves from all obstacles (dukh) that they supposedly carry within them. These containment and management through something as ordinary as food becomes part of their training to build their femininity or feminine identity. Girls are through these processes instructed to be docile thus leading to bodily subordination (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Kissling, 2006). Kissling points out that feminine socialization is viewed as a pertinent necessity by society in order to internalize women about the predominant socio-cultural dialogues so as to build an identity where the women become an object (2006). Such is the process of socialization, that once internalized about the conventions of menstrual practices, including the practice of consuming particular kind of food, women believe that agreeing to follow these patriarchal tenets are for their best. Girls and women submit to such feminine embodiment without the realization that their bodies are controlled as objects to be controlled. To state Moore, embodiment becomes the essence of their identity (1996). And this validates the moral positioning of a woman's place by naturalizing the differences between men and women (Howson, 2013).

The consequence of the following of such food practice in the context of rituals and restrictions which leads to the subordinate social rank of women in Assamese society, provides her nothing but the category of the "other". This observing of women as an object fits into Beauvoir's creation on women as the "other" where women's

experiences and presence are produced by the dictates of society (1953).

To thus construct the process of consumption of ritualistic and restrictive food for menstruating women, the above explanation shows how the socially designed concept of gender is built in the creation and survival of an absolute "woman". So as Butler sees it, here it is nothing but the performance of rituals and restrictions in the ingestion of food making it symbolic by maintaining femininity which includes the following of definite customs. Such performance of partaking of ritual food produces gender and can be clearly stated that this is not biologically built. This performance according to Butler, determine social approval and prohibition. In the personification of gender, this performance lived as gender behaviour, are execution of patriarchal ethics and principles of femininity.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this paper, it can be asserted that the rituals surrounding menstruation and the consumption of ritualistic food for menstruating women in Assam, with a focus on Uzan Bazar, Guwahati, are emblematic of broader societal structures and beliefs deeply rooted in Assamese culture. Thus these rituals as discussed above, can be placed within the framework of interpretive and symbolic anthropology, particularly as articulated by scholars such as Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner. They represent symbolic systems that encapsulate the societal values, gender norms, and patriarchal ideologies pervasive in Assamese society.

While Brahmin families in Uzan Bazar approach these rituals with more discretion compared to the elaborate public celebrations seen in other caste groups, the underlying symbolism remains consistent across Assam. These practices reinforce the idea of femininity and societal roles through symbolic actions, including dietary restrictions and the emphasis on purity and pollution. This pattern aligns with Turner's

assertion that rituals function as devices for societal cohesion and Geertz's view of culture as embodied in public symbols and performances.

The focus on specific food practices during menstruation underlines the intersection of gender, body, and cultural identity. As seen in Uzan Bazar and other parts of Assam, these restrictions are not merely about health or tradition; they are manifestations of a broader system that seeks to regulate and define women's roles in society. Judith Butler's concept of gender as performativity further illuminates how these practices shape and sustain gendered identities, reinforcing patriarchal norms.

Over time, these rituals and their associated practices have evolved, reflecting broader societal changes while retaining their core symbolic significance. The shift in perceptions and practices, particularly among urban Brahmin families, suggests a move towards more private and simplified observances. However, the persistence of these rituals across caste groups indicates their continued relevance as markers of cultural and gender identity.

In conclusion, while variations exist in the observance of menstrual rituals across Assam, the symbolic essence remains intact. These practices serve as a lens through which we can understand the interplay of gender, culture, and power in Assamese society. Further research into changing attitudes and practices, influenced by education and globalization may provide deeper insights into the future trajectory of these rituals and their role in shaping gender dynamics in the region.

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