

A SOCIOCULTURAL STUDY ON NAGAS AND FOOD: AN APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION:

"Aizu Hah me meipushiwangwa oh koi" (Bhalerao et al., 2016)

(English Trans.) Let there be plenty of fruits; Let my friends enjoy the happiness of crops and let there be admirable growth of food in the fields. (Naga Agricultural Folksong)

Food - a composition of traditional wealth, cultural heritage and identity. The role of food is not limited to the above, for it is an amalgamation of habits, beliefs, rituals, practices and lifestyle. In this study, Naga culture is explored through food related to the sources from the selected film Axone (2019) and the selected text Bitter Wormwood (2011). In metaphysics, anything that is edible or part of nature is not the only property of food, but food is a real component made up of real attributes "for interpretation to cleave to and articulate." (Kaplan, 2019, p.3). The dynamic nature of food represents the human being and is interpreted comprehensively. The feature of the Nagas' identity study of food is focused here. Diet is an important arena in the debate about hill tribe identity among plains people because "the study of food has matured enough to serve as a vehicle for examining large and varied problems" (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002, p.100).

Axone- Plot

Axone is an Indian film that was released in 2019. Directed by renowned Naga director Nicholas Kharkongor, it stars Sayani Gupta, Lin Laishrom, Tenzin Dalha and many North East Indian actors. It is a satirical movie in which North East Indian tenants live in a North Indian hostel where they are forbidden to cook their stinking native dishes. Kharkongor deals with the issue of food and identity, which is caught between prejudice and hateful remarks. The traditional food of the Nagas is Axone, the favourite dish of every Naga in Nagaland, and it is the protagonist of this daring film. The director has very skillfully portrayed the role of Axone in the lives of the Nagas by highlighting the importance of Axone in their daily lives. A group of friends from the Northeast attempt to cook their native's favourite dish to celebrate their friend's wedding anniversary and the film explores the difficulties they

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face while preparing the stinky delicacy.

The movie begins with the main characters meeting with a vendor who sells Naga ingredients such as smoked pork, fermented soybean paste (axone), dried fish, shrimp and more. The main characters live in an apartment building in the crowded streets of Delhi, where people from different Indian states like Bengal and people from different countries like Africa live. The grandson of the old landlady, Shiv, helps them prepare the food that they end up cooking on their terrace. When they started cooking it in their kitchen, the people in the surrounding houses couldn't stand the smell of Axone and started insulting them, which ended with one of the female leads collapsing due to a panic attack. The group consists of people from different northeastern tribes like Khasi, Bodo, Mizo, Meitei, Sema, Tangkhul and also Nepali. The girl who gets married in the film belongs to one of the Naga tribes for whom they cook Axone. In the end, they all wear their traditional tribal dresses for the wedding and eat the delicacies of their homeland. Shiv, a boy from Delhi, is disappointed because he doesn't eat traditional wedding dishes like butter chicken and paneer. The film shows the vast differences between the tribal communities of the North East and the people outside the North East.

Axone, as a dish represents the Naga ethnicity, as it is an authentic Naga delicacy. "axone is... used both as an ingredient as well as a condiment while making dishes like chutneys or meat curries, etc. It is also interesting to see that each tribe has their own creative spin on the dish and added their own unique recipes to making axone." (Axonen.p.)

Bitter Wormwood

It is a novel by Easterine Kire, published in 2011. The novel tells the coming-of-age story of Mose in three parts. The life of Mose is told together with his daughter Sabunuo and his grandson Neibuo. In this novel, the author discusses the history of the Naga people during colonization and after independence. The novel explains the discrimination against the Naga people by the British colonizers and the Indians after independence. When Neibuo migrates to Delhi to study, he is bullied by adolescent boys who never treated him as an Indian, while both Moses and Neibuo never considered India as their own country due to discrimination and oppression.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH GAP:

There is a promising research activity on Naga oral literature and English writings, highlighting the multifaceted thematic studies and theoretical approaches, but within the extensive academic spheres of the customary curriculum, there remains an obvious gap in the literary exploration of the exclusive expression of Naga films, especially films made over the years in the context of Naga struggles. Exploring the dynamics of film from Northeast

India along with literary works from Northeast India offers valuable insights into the ways in which the creative world of Northeast India transitions into multidisciplinary attributes of literature. The article explores the role of representation of Northeastern culture in films and delves into cinematic and literary cultural aesthetics to understand the status quo of the tribes, particularly the Nagas.

METHODOLOGY:

The methodology for the analytical approach of *Bitter Wormwood* and *Axone* features the cultural aesthetics of food presented in the selected works, focusing on the effects of diffusion in culture. The framework of the paper conceptualizes Naga food and *Axone* to examine the biases imposed on the Nagas through their food. It provides a lens to understand how the plight of Naga migrants pushes them to the level of PTSD. It explores how film and fiction create awareness by drawing attention to Naga people while reinterpreting and reshaping their identity. The analysis explores how the parallel study of film and novel functions as a form of cultural exploration of the Nagas by extending the exploration beyond books. By examining the visual representation of the Nagas, the study attempts to recognize how interpretation enhances the cultural values of the Nagas. The cinematic representation of the Nagas emphasizes the creation and diffusion of content related to Naga life outside Nagaland. Considering the active participation of actors from the Northeast in the film, the struggle to portray their problems is emphasized. The study examines the strong involvement of the film and the novel in the sphere of discrimination and gustatory criticism. It explores the common views of the Naga director and the Naga writer on the issue of cultural discrimination creating a common interpretation and method of approach. The food elements included in the selected works maneuver the analysis of cultural struggles, considering how racial elements contribute to the study of the Nagas, and also include the study of the social system, the economy, and the political situation. The framework explores the racist expressions about the Nagas, using food as an element of discrimination to subjugate the Nagas altogether. By examining the food as a racist element that questions the identity of the Nagas and is tainted with prejudice, the analysis expects to understand why these delicacies like *Axone* and meat are the reason for their total eradication, creating a parallel narrative of film and novel that reflects the Naga culture.

DISCUSSION:

Sustenance: Identity and Food in *Axone* and *Bitter Wormwood*

"Research shows that the relationship between the foods people eat and how others perceive them and how they see themselves is remarkable." (Almerico, 2014,p.4). Since food is the representation of people, it reveals the trans-culture diffusional attributes that

people experience in their own culture. The main idea behind the representation of food on people in both fiction and film is to create awareness "that racism exists in this country and people from the North East, living out the Northeast, bear the brunt of it." (Mehtani n.p.). The conflation of food and identity highlights the lack of humanism where racism gets the best of humanity, driving victims to poor self-criticism and suicide. The survivors of prejudicial expressions and violence suffer from PTSD and remember the horrific experiences that have left a scar on their psyche. In both selected works, the protagonists experience the worst of racism, forcing them to resist their desires to form new relationships and engage with their new surroundings.

Every year from Nagaland, more than a handful of migrants move to other Indian states for various reasons. The National Sample Survey office in Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation published a Multiple Indicator Survey- 2023 to find the approx. percentage of migrants and their respective reasons, for the year 2020-2021. The consolidated table highlighting only the Nagaland migrants is incorporated below:

Table 1: Multiple Indicator Survey report focusing Nagaland migration				
S. No	Reasons forleaving last usual place of residence	Percentage distribution		
		Urban	Rural	All
1	In search of employment	3.0	5.2	3.9
2	In search of better employment	1.6	4.9	3.0
3	Business	0.8	3.7	2.1
4	To take up employment/better employment	11.1	12.3	11.6
5	Transfer of service/contract	4.1	8.5	6.0
6	Proximity to place of work	0.5	1.3	0.9
7	Studies	19.9	28.7	23.7
8	Marriage	26.8	13.2	20.9
9	Social/political problems (riots, terrorism, political refugee, bad law and order etc)	-	0.1	0.1
10	Displacement by development project	-	-	-

11	Scarcity of water	-	-	-
12	Acquisition of own house/flat	0.8	0.7	0.8
13	Housing problems/insufficient landholding	0.2	-	0.1
14	Health care	1.1	0.4	0.8
15	Post retirement	0.4	0.8	0.6
16	Natural disaster (drought, flood, tsunami, etc)	0.7	-	0.4
17	Migration of parent/earning member of the family)	7.3	11.2	9.0
18	Others	21.6	8.9	16.1

Regarding the prime reason for migration, Jamir states, "At 23.7% the single largest driver of migration or persons moving from 'usual place of residence' to others areas in Nagaland is due to studies... All together the NSSO's 78th round survey conducted from January 2020 to August 15, 2021 across India found that 19.6% of the population in Nagaland were staying in a new place other than their last usual place of residence." (Jamir, n.p)

To represent these Naga migrants, the creators of these works manifest the power that does not exist in reality. By empathizing with the helplessness of Naga victims in their works, they convey the sense of power to fight back against the senseless racist statements and actions while influencing the entire North East to move forward. It is the social power in India that has denied the characters in the works access to their food. Arnold asserts in his comprehensive study *Famine* (1988), "food was and continues to be, power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form." (Arnold, 1988, p.3). In the novel, Kire says: "insulted for their culinary habits, for cooking beef and pork." (Kire, 2011, p.183). The Naga migrants are denied the freedom to eat as they please, which often makes them regret their decision to migrate, as it deprives them of the opportunities they were originally given. For the Naga tribes, food stands for power and status, it brings dignity to the celebration of merit, which is still practiced in the villages of Nagaland today. The Feast of Merit is the prestigious ceremony of the Nagas, where they share their wealth with others by inviting the entire community to a feast to which the neighbouring clans are also invited. Mithuns are sacrificed, in line with the host's budget, and ceremonial activities take place before the feast. Kire explains the power of the men who hosted the merit feast and writes: "The houses of men who had hosted Feast of Merit stood out distinctly in the village. They had earned the right

to use special house ornamentations... displayed markers of social status." (Kire, 2019, p.37). Such wealthy Nagas men and women tend to lose their hard-earned dignity and right to landed food. The power expressed through opposition to the indigenous Naga food suppresses their excitement and breaks their confidence. Harsh comments like, "You should thank God I am letting you live here! You can't cook your food in this house from today! If you do, we'll throw you out of this neighbourhood! Just like they did in Munirka." (Kharkongor, 2019, 00:36:20-00:36:40) is seen in the film, that shows strong resistance to the mere presence of NE people in other parts of India. Counihan notes that in any culture, the attributes of class, ethnicity and gender manifest themselves in the rules based on food and the tendency to impose rules on others. (Counihan, 1992). The aspect that links food to identity is the power that is abundantly available to people in their homeland and which the Naga migrants lack. Power in the oppression of migrants from the Northeast is linked to various issues such as discrimination, physical abuse and gender discrimination, that confirms Counihan's comment about the power of food.

Referring to Naga food in a religious context, he explains its sacredness and spiritual qualities. The tainted image of beef and pork in the lives of Naga migrants tarnishes the image of migrants from the perspective of metro people by deliberately distancing them. The cow is considered sacred in Hinduism, while the pig is considered the dirtiest animal, making the consumption of these two meats disgusting for the people in the city. However, the climatic conditions and vegetation in the Naga hills favour the inclusion of the available foods in their diet. The Naga people, who practise an animistic and pagan religion, have religious beliefs and supernatural rituals related to food. The controversial element of food, meat, is buried with the dead in Naga funeral rites and is considered the most important dish in Naga cuisine. Ghildiyal says about Naga meat dishes in her article "The simple yet complex flavours of Naga food" (2019),

Naga cuisine is simple in its meal composition - indigenous red and other rice varieties are central to the diet and eaten either boiled or steamed, accompanied by a meat dish of some kind (either fresh, smoked or dry), boiled vegetables (a simple soupy dish to neutralise fat from the meats and wash down the meal) and assorted condiments...A typical meal includes a meat dish, and sometimes even simple dishes may have a chunk or two of meat added for flavour...meat dishes unapologetically boast large, chunky pieces of meat...Add to that a variety of sundried and smoked meats preserved for use all-year round... (Ghildiyal n.p.)

During festivals and celebrations, meat dishes are prepared in large portions. Those who cook these feasts are mainly Naga men. Naga food unfolds a unique form of equality

between the sexes. Despite the influence that Naga food exerts, it is considered a strange food, which includes the fondness of some Nagas for dog meat, that many Nagas themselves find disgusting.

Apart from these religious and social status contexts, Naga food is still dominated by the people in the metros as the migrants share their walls with the metros. Compromises in Naga food and condescension of Naga identity are possible consequences of insufficient power and show the helplessness of Naga migrants. Characters like Neibuo in *Bitter Wormwood* and Bendang in *Axone* have been victimised because of their appearance, where they live and the food they eat. Remarks such as "pahariya" (Kire, 2011, p.181), "badchalan" (Kire, 2011, p.182), "hot chick" (Kharkongor, 2019, 00:10:44), "These people deserve it!" (Kharkongor, 2019, 00:12:10), "India-China" (Kharkongor, 2019, 00:41.30), are found in both works, whether they are literary or visual works, they make similar comments about how the Nagas were treated. Both the director and the writer have claimed that most of the violent incidents are loosely based on real events that happened to Naga migrants in other Indian states. These statements show the hatred shown towards the Nagas. Hate crimes such as verbal abuse and physical attacks are casually filmed and written down in the works as they happen all the time in the daily lives of Naga migrants. When men are victims of physical attacks, women are traumatized by sexual harassment and body shaming. Phrases such as "carefully planned rapes" (Kire, 2011, p.182), "Northeastern girls were easily available" (Kire, 2011, p.182), "they moan..." (Kharkongor, 2019, 00:10:52) prove this in these works. In the movie, one of the main female characters named Chanbi is subjected to inappropriate comments that allude to her background and highlight the persistent harassment of northeastern women in other Indian states.

The visual and literary depiction of Naga lives outside Nagaland conveys the essence of their lives and at the same time highlights the importance of their cultural rights. Chanbi argues, "We have the right to cook our food!" (Kharkongor, 2019, 00:50:34), to which Martha, a supporting character in the film, argues: "they have the right not to suffer due to the smell of our food." (Kharkongor, 2019, 00:50:43). These different arguments in this context create chaos among the characters. These tense conversations and pressurized arguments lead to the differences between the Nagas and the others being exposed. In 1947, after independence, the Nagas fought against the then Indian government to withdraw from the nation and form Nagaland as a separate country, which was the initial resistance between the hill people and the plains people. The resistance of the Nagas was expressed through a plebiscite, the formation of a Naga Underground Army and resistance writings that were suppressed with the help of the Indian army and violence, which Kire has detailed in most of her works. After the struggle, when the Naga people decided to live in harmony

with India, they started migrating to other states. The work describes in detail the life of the migrants from the North East in the cities of Munirka, Humaynpur etc. in Delhi. However, the acceptance of the Nagas was rejected by the metros, leading to chaos and hate crimes. The works also highlight various issues that NE migrants face during their stay in the big cities in search of work and education. Apart from racism, there are a number of other problems, namely sexual harassment, PTSD, physical violence, neglect by others, verbal abuse, ragging in educational institutions, extortion in the workplace and many more.

As these problems were criminally neglected, the Naga people distanced themselves from the rest of India before they could distinguish themselves on the basis of their appearance and diet. In both works, the Naga characters see other people as 'Indians' and themselves with the identity of 'Nagas'. Despite religious differences, the Naga have common views on food and treat it with more responsibility. The Naga identity among other Indians is treated with racist remarks even today. In modern times, Naga culture, explored through movies, books and social media platforms, entices others to try Naga cuisine, which has led to the establishment of Naga cuisine restaurants in major cities like Delhi. Even though this is seen as a form of upliftment of Naga cuisine and identity, it is a shame for the others as they are the result of their long years of negligence. Likewise in European countries, "Immigrant foods are first considered cheap and not prestigious when lots of immigrants move to the U.S. but slowly gain clout as the people themselves become more culturally established." (Adetunji n.p). This trend of food racism is not only in India, but also in major migration countries, where the immigrants food is considered as insignificant.

CONCLUSION:

The novel was published in 2011, while the movie was released eight years later in 2019. This shows that nothing has changed for Nagas when it comes to food discrimination. Naga cuisine is considered exotic in India, which shows that the tribal communities in India are not sufficiently known. To elaborate the everyday discrimination that Northeast migrants face, this topic of food racism is offered. The study of food racism highlights how social concerns are embedded in the day-to-day life of Indians. The dietary choices of Northeastern migrants offer cultural knowledge about their origin. The fascination about the NE homeland food like Axone, fermented bamboo shoots, pork and river snails calls for upgrading the rudimentary knowledge. The study of the movie and novel on food discrimination against the Nagas has highlighted the seriousness of this problem and its impact on the people. To avoid such incidents, a better understanding and awareness of every culture in India needs to be achieved, which can only be done as a team and not alone.

Study on food racism can be done in more NE fiction works as well as movies and it also applicable to apply the methodology to various other works referring to any culture; also to examine the psyche of food racism victims, trauma and behaviour theories can also be implemented; further, to explore the racism and discrimination, the same can be done in Dalit literature works.

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