

Stewards of Food Culture and Biodiversity: Voices from the Northeast

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All photos by Rucha Chitnis

Indigenous communities of Northeast India are custodians of its rich agrobiodiversity and unique food culture

Northeast India is a biodiversity hotspot with rare avifauna, flora and species with high endemism. A journey on a food trail in the region also reveals a rich agrobiodiversity and a unique food culture that has been stewarded by local communities—from the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam to remote mountainous tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. In the face of modernization, mining, oil exploration and escalating deforestation, both, the biodiversity of species and food crops, including wild edibles, are threatened.

“Our forests are also a vital source of food,” said Shangnaidar Tontang of Weaker Sections Development Council, a civil society group in Manipur that works on sustainable agriculture, livelihoods and food security initiatives. “We need holistic sustainable development that benefits our communities and protects our natural resources as well,” she said.

India’s Look East Policy to bolster its position as an economic power by cultivating strategic relations with Southeast Asian nations has worried activists in Northeast India on its impact on ecology and food culture as large infrastructure projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway, are built. Furthermore, climate change is exacerbating food insecurity as floods and capricious rainfall affects the agricultural cycle of small farmers.

In the face of these threats, food justice activists in the northeast are building the resiliency of their communities by promoting agroecology, seed saving and are protecting community forests and rights of small farmers. Here are four voices from Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland that are advocating to preserve Northeast India’s rich agrobiodiversity and food culture:

[Seno Tsuhah](#)

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Seno Tsuhah is the Project Team Leader of Northeast Network, a pioneering women’s rights organization that promotes women’s leadership development, human rights and initiatives to protect biodiversity and natural resources. Seno hails from the village of Chizami in Nagaland, which is considered a model village that has taken the mandate to farm organically and protect its biodiversity. “Slowly communities are recognizing the importance of biodiversity conservation and are imposing a ban on hunting and felling of trees and are protecting their water sources,” she said. Seno has worked tirelessly to advocate for the rights of indigenous women and highlight their critical role as farmers, seed savers and custodians of forests and agrobiodiversity. “We need women to be recognized for their contributions and be included in all decision-making spaces so that they can live their lives to the fullest,” she said.

Seno began her women’s rights work by first focusing on health. “We started a women’s health center in Chizami in 1998. We focused on maternal and reproductive health,” she said. “With time we began to do a lot of trainings on international human rights mechanisms and raising awareness on customary law and rights and entitlements of women farmers.” Seno and her colleagues also began making interconnections between the health of women with environmental health and biodiversity. They began educating women farmers to continue saving their traditional seeds and have pride in native food crop varieties. “Our agrobiodiversity is important, and we began to recognize women as its protectors,” she said. They also began linking with women farmers’ groups and networks across India, from dalit women in Andhra Pradesh promoting food sovereignty to pastoral communities in Kutch. “It’s vital to make the contributions of women farmers visible in our communities,” she said.

Pius Ranee

[Pius Ranee](#)

As a child, Pius Ranee followed his mother to the family *jhum* field on a steep mountain as she harvested vegetables and gathered fruits and greens from the surrounding forest. Pius is from the matrilineal Khasi tribe in Meghalaya, where children take the name of the mother’s clan. He watched as his mother, Bibiana Ranee, tended to over 30 varieties of crops in her home food garden and *jhum* field, growing a dazzling variety of yams, cucumbers, pumpkins, millets, greens and fruits. “Mothers are looking at different aspects of life, from the kitchen garden to farms to seed selection, gathering wild edibles and caregiving for their families,” he said. “I have a deep connection to my land because of my mother and community.”

As modernization and market economy began to influence rural communities, Pius began to notice monoculture and industrial agriculture permeating traditional farming practices. “Monocropping and fertilizers affect our soil fertility, health and biodiversity. Hybrid seeds are taking away the agency of farmers and leading them on a path of dependency,” he said. Pius is spearheading agroecology initiatives at Northeast Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Network that are promoting ecological farming practices, millet production and are educating communities on the importance of local crop varieties. “When one gets disconnected from their community and land, they are disconnected from Mother Earth,” he concluded.

Marybeth Sanate

Mary Beth Sanate (third from right)

Mary Beth Sanate is from the Hmar tribe in Manipur, who works on the intersection of gender, food, customary rights and livelihoods. As the leader of [Rural Women's Upliftment Society \(RUWS\)](#), a group that promotes sustainable livelihoods, ecological agriculture and human rights of women in the face of climate change and conflict. "The weather has become unpredictable, which has left rural communities in a difficult position and has affected their livelihoods and food security. Furthermore, the state has no concrete policy on climate change and disasters," she said. RWUS works on a number of initiatives to raise awareness on climate change and sustainable livelihoods with local communities with a special emphasis on women. RWUS also advocates for the rights of women in relation to discriminatory customary laws. "We need a strong gender policy in the state and women's participation in the development of climate change policies is key," she said.

Mary Beth is deeply immersed in Women in Governance network (WinG Manipur), an alliance of women across ethnic lines that advocates for equal participation and decision-making of women in governance—including family, local and state political institutions and religious bodies. Members include gun widows, survivors of domestic violence, women living with HIV/AIDS and human rights defenders. "Women are slowly realizing that the customary law is discriminatory. It needs to be reformed so that women can have equal access to property, political participation and other resources," she said.

[Shangnaidar Tontang](#)

Shangnaidar Tontang

Shangnaidar Tontang is from the Naga tribe in Chandel district in Manipur that borders Burma. She is a passionate advocate of preserving the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples, who are stewards of community forests and farms. "Food is linked with the cultural survival of indigenous peoples," she said. "It's an integral part of our rituals and festivals." Shangnaidar also believes that the rich agrobiodiversity of crops is the key to building resilient communities as a changing climate threatens livelihoods and food security of small farmers. "We have a rain shadow region and other parts that get plenty of rain. This is why we can't have only one variety of paddy as we need crops that adapt to such variations." Shangnaidar is a leader of Weaker Sections Development Council, a group that builds the capacities of small farmers on ecological farming, livelihoods and collective farming. "As indigenous peoples, our lives are deeply connected with nature. From the sound of an insect or a bird, we can tell it will rain. There is connectivity between lands and forests and connectivity among issues. Making these linkages is key," she said.

Last year as torrential rains triggered floods and landslides in Chandel District, Shangnaidar became one of the first responders, who led [disaster management efforts](#) on the ground. Many roads were destroyed or buried in the landslides, and Shangnaidar and her colleagues dived into relief work. They mobilized resources and began clearing roads for people to access hospitals and other critical services and buy their daily provisions. Their efforts demonstrated how women are often the first responders when natural disasters strike.

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