

The little fish in big rivers

Author - Avantika Bhuyan, Published on - 2.4.2018

From Assam to Nagaland, fish is an integral part of local culture as well as a favoured ingredient in the Northeast

Women transfer the catch from Loktak lake in Manipur. Photo: Alamy

In Assam, there's a popular folk tale about a

baak

—a ghost that loves fish. In villages, people talk in hushed tones about their plans to go fishing. It is believed that if the

baak

gets to know, he will take the guise of a friend and accompany the fisherman in the morning, steal his catch, and bury the fisherman upside down in mud. The only way to ward off this ghost is to carry a torn fishing net along—it's believed he is petrified of the sight.

“Even now in villages, people don't carry fish from the market or from one household to another at night without the protection of teekhi mirchi (red chillies) and garlic. There have been countless stories of people acting funny (possessed) when they didn't heed this advice,” says Mumbai-based Gitika Saikia, who regularly hosts Aanth Bhani (8 Sisters pop-up) dedicated to the tribal cuisine of the North-East. Her pop-up had few takers when it was first launched in 2015 but has come to be widely appreciated, with awareness of regional cuisines growing. Such fables abound throughout the region, indicating that fish is not just an ingredient, but an integral part of local culture and everyday life.

From the elusive hilgorhia, found near the hills of Upper Assam, the rainbow trout in Sikkim, to the sareng from Manipur and the carps and eels in Nagaland, the sheer range of fish species in the region is astounding. Though each North-East state has its signature fish preparations, the kind of variety that Manipur and Assam offer can't be seen in the other states. This diversity is matched by the number of cooking methods. Fried, sun-dried, stewed, roasted, boiled, steamed, fermented, pounded and ground—you mention a technique, and they will have it. It's no wonder then that people take umbrage when outsiders limit their repertoire of fish preparations to the ou tenga masor tenga, a tangy fish dish made in Assam with the elephant apple.

Saikia, who grew up in Namrup, Assam, vividly remembers holidays spent in her father's ancestral village during the planting of the first crop, and the harvest season. The first day of the planting would be marked by a feast in the paddy fields where families would bring along sticky rice and a chutney made with the tiny goroi or mourola fish which thrive in the flooded fields during the monsoon, combining the agrarian community's two great loves: fish and rice. “People would catch these fish with their bare hands. We would eat this chutney with rice and veggies. It was one of the best meals I have ever had,” says Saikia. In fact, in most Assamese households, goroi is mashed with roasted eggplant or potato. Or it is skewered and roasted on a fire, to be eaten with salt, mashed potato and a heap of rice. For the goroi maas pitika, freshwater fish is deboned and mashed with aromatics such as ginger, coriander, green chillies, and dollops of mustard oil. Goroi can also be steamed, wrapped in banana leaves or stuffed in bamboo hollows.

Some believe that the diversity of fish species in Manipur outnumbers even Assam and Bengal. Diana Chingakham, a Delhi-based author and editor who hails from Manipur, says children get a taste of fish early on, in their first solid meal. “Ngamu, which is a freshwater catfish, is roasted, and the cooked white flesh is then mixed with steamed rice and fed to kids,” she says. Chingakham remembers her maternal grandmother putting this roasted fish in khichdis and stews to create unusual combinations. “We were picky eaters, so she would try different things,” she says. Sometimes, she would even mash the ngamu with salt, onions and green chillies to make a chutney.

A tangy 'ou tenga masor tenga'. Photo: Picasa

It is believed that the best quality of fish in Manipur comes from Loktak lake, which is the largest natural freshwater lake in the North-East and has the Keibul Lamjao, the only floating national park in the world. The government and the people of Manipur have ensured that there is not much human habitation near the lake, and that the ecosystem is not disturbed. “Only fishermen and women live on the [phumdis](#) (floating landmass) in the lake and daily catch a variety of fresh fish,” says Chingakham. “The water of the lake is so clear that you can see the fish floating within.”

On special occasions, people in Manipur use the **sareng**, an expensive catfish which doesn't have any scales. You need to rub it with rough guava leaves to get rid of the stickiness. “**Sareng** is served on special occasions in Manipur, such as the Ningol Chakouba festival and weddings. Five days after the wedding, the bride's parents invite the newly-weds home, along with the boy's parents and relatives from both the families,” says Chingakham. One gets to see a virtual smorgasbord of fish dishes on the occasion.

From the elusive 'hilgorhia', found near the hills of Upper Assam, the rainbow trout in Sikkim, to the 'sareng' from Manipur... the sheer range of fish species in the region is astounding

Another popular fish preparation in the state is the *nga atauba*, a simple fish preparation which can be eaten with rice. *Nga atauba* can also be transformed into a gravy-based dish, with herbs, crushed garlic, ginger, onion, tomato and bay leaves being used to enhance the flavour. “We also fry fish intestines, bitter bile, fins and other offal, which are normally ignored by others, along with chillies, ginger and onions, to make a yummy dry dish,” says food writer and journalist Hoihnu Hauzel. She also hails fish head as quite a delicacy in Manipur. All you need to do is get it cleaned and cut at the time of buying, give it a good wash in the kitchen and follow the same prep as for fried fish.

Rohu and **katla** bind fish lovers across the North-East and are cooked in different ways in each state. “There is also a category of fish known as **dori kona**, which covers all the small fish, which you can't name or clean,” says Saikia. She believes that many of the fish of the region, like **heengi**, **maagur** and **kusia**, have medicinal properties. For example, a pungent curry of **heengi** fish with **manimuni** (Asiatic pennywort) and **bhedailota** (skunk vine), both herbs, is fed to patients recovering from surgery—it is believed to heal internal wounds. Then there are others that require elaborate prepping, like the **kanduli**. “It is such a bony and scaly fish that even the **hilsa** will take a bow in front of it. The fish, which is mostly eaten fried, can't be cleaned with a knife. The mouths of two **kanduli** need to be rubbed against each other and only then do the scales come out,” she says.

Across the region, fish is always prepared in combination with local herbs, ferns, flowers and seasonal vegetables. For instance, a popular winter delicacy is the *kawoi* fish cooked with a black sesame seed paste. “In summers, we make light fish curries using bottle gourd and ridge gourd. We also make a curry using *norosingho*, or curry leaves and ginger, garlic and black pepper,” says Guwahati-based chef Kashmiri Barkakati Nath. The dish, believed to have healing properties, is usually fed to women after childbirth.

Sikkim and Meghalaya both focus more on meats such as pork over fish. “Our way of making fish is similar to the Bengali style. We make a basic, non-spicy curry with mustard, onions and tomatoes. The other is a deep-fried fish called Tareko Matcha,” says Binita Chamling from Sikkim, who offers this dish at her restaurant, Nimtho, in Delhi.

One thing that weaves a common thread across states in the region is the love for fermented fish. Every household will preserve fish so that they never run out of it even during the official 45-day government ban on marine fishing in the Bay of Bengal between April-May and during the spawning period in local waters in the monsoon months. This is perhaps the biggest indicator of the region’s profound love for all things piscine.

First published by [Live Mint](#)