

Indigenous Food of Manipur—Women Custodians of Culinary Culture

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Manipur is a small landlocked state in North East India with a population of approximately three million, and the state shares an international border with Myanmar. The women enjoy a fairly high status, albeit in an overarching patrilineal framework. They enjoy considerable mobility which is often mistaken for empowerment. Women are proud custodians of the knowledge and practice of indigenous food and as custodians, they are a link between the past and the present. Indigenous Food is a mark and symbol of a people's culture and identity. The knowledge that women possess is passed down generations and so preserved for posterity. But do women get the recognition they deserve as preservers and bearers of Indigenous Food culinary practices? Are they adequately compensated for their labor and time? It is taken for granted that a woman, whether as a leishabi (girl), mou (married woman), or hanubi (older woman), has certain duties and responsibilities related to household and agricultural work which are a great incidence on the time, labor and well-being of a woman. The entire chain of agricultural production from the field, market to home is largely the preserve of women. Women not only work in cultivation and adopt environmentally friendly practices, they also transport produce to the market, sell it, and take some home for consumption. A part of the food is processed for sale and future household consumption, cooking of indigenous dishes on a daily basis in the home is done by women who also have a role in food preparation for festivals and other occasions which mark the Passage of Rites. Women perform these tasks largely by rote; their daily cooking is largely unappreciated and undervalued. What would happen if women withdrew from these tasks? Across the world it is women who are primarily responsible for the entire chain of food production. It is imperative that practical strategies are implemented to ensure gender parity and justice. Women must be fully empowered and receive recognition for their labor, and their position as custodians of Indigenous Food.

Keywords: Indigenous Food, custodians, symbols of culture, agricultural cycle, empowerment

Introduction

It is an indisputable fact that without women, there would be no food. Much of the world's food production comes from the labor of women and girls, who play a crucial role, from production in the field, transportation to the market, and finally to family and community kitchens. Women perform a variety of, as also an outstanding array of tasks, and at every step, the role of women is crucial. A woman expressed it: "We grow the food, we process it, and we cook it". By their actions, not only do women implement food security, but also ensure its sustainability. Women and girls are responsible for contributing to 60% to 80% of food production. The landscape

of the global South in any market is dominated by women and girls (IPES-Food, 2025). At the center of the capital city of Imphal, stands the iconic IMA (Mother) or Women's Market, often referred to as the largest women's market in Asia. In Manipur, women play a central role in food preparation, intertwined with their cultural identity and other economic activities. They adopt environmentally sustainable practices in cultivation; they are actively involved in post-harvest management, in marketing and cooking, contributing significantly to both household sustenance and the state's economy.

Objective

The objective of this paper is to look at Indigenous Food and its custodians from a different perspective, and to create awareness of the necessity of implementing national strategies to recognize women's labour, and dignity; to give women the respect they deserve for not just ensuring sustainable livelihood but complete empowerment of these custodians who for generations have handed down indigenous culinary practices. Oral history which can be characterized as a body of knowledge, comprising folklore, myths, legends, ballads, traditional practices, taboos and omens, is undoubtedly a part of the intangible heritage of North East India. In North East India, historians give special importance to oral history, because in the region there exist societies for whom there is little or no recorded history for various phases of their development. The history of Manipur before the Christian era cannot be traced with any degree of certainty, except bits of information collected from folklore and other references made in passing in the chronicles of adjoining kingdoms (Irene, 2016). Oral history is not only a tool or a method, it is also a theory of history, which maintains that the common people and the dispossessed, have a history (Okihiro, 1996). Oral historian activists use oral sources to right an imbalance in historical records, which have favored the literate and the formally educated, over those whose culture has not left written records (Vansina, 1996). Broadly, one can list three main classes of oral tradition, recognizing literary forms, generalized historical knowledge, and personal recollections. The last is applicable to Indigenous Food. When oral history is passed on to another person, usually of the succeeding generations in that family or lineage, it becomes oral tradition. (Okihiro, 1996)

Methodology

Methodology is a combination of oral history and action research, the latter taken up as a form of practitioner enquiry focused on an attempt to improve practice through a systematic cycle or cycles of planning, doing and reflecting (Hammond & Wellington, 2015). A review of literature emphasizes oral tradition, primarily, with field interviews and focused group discussions. Secondary sources comprise largely recent research papers by academicians and other researchers, and most can be accessed from different research web sites.

These articles bear striking commonalities: first, women's work is undervalued because it is not reflected in the GDP, this inhibits women's empowerment. Secondly, the playing field for women in this profession is not level—they have less access, especially rural or not well-educated women, to new knowledge, technology, finance, labor saving devices, better working conditions/better workplaces.

Thirdly, indigenous custodians have a strong belief that they can meet the challenges of the modern food industry, because Indigenous Food is both a hall mark and symbol of culture and a unifier in Manipur's pluralistic society. As stated on a research website (village in India). Manipur's food is more than just a source of sustenance. It plays an important role in shaping the cultural and social fabric of the area. Meals are often shared in a communal setting during festivals and ceremonies.

Women-Custodians of Culinary Culture

Women in Manipur enjoy a relatively high status, albeit in an overarching patrilineal framework. Nevertheless, they are the true mistresses of their kitchens and decide the daily menu of traditional food. They are extremely mobile, but freedom of mobility should not be confused with empowerment. They enjoy mobility for historic reasons. If we reflect on the history of the state, when Manipur was an independent kingdom, it was engaged in continuous warfare with its neighbors. The population was small (in 1941, the total population was 512,069 and in 1951, it increased to 577,635). Moreover before colonization (1891), the feudal system of Lallup or compulsory military service was in vogue.

What this translated to in practice was that women became responsible for the sustainable livelihood of their families. They worked both in and outside of their homes. It was inevitable that women would become custodians of Indigenous Food, and its cultural practices especially those associated with The Passage of Rites. In this capacity, women are the link between the past and the present, and the culinary knowledge they possess is handed down over generations. It is a part of oral tradition and oral tradition is the first form of History, but women are not receiving the recognition they deserve as bearers and preservers of oral tradition. Moreover, it is taken for granted that a female, whether as a leishabi (young girl), a mou (married woman), or a hanubi (older woman) has certain responsibilities and duties related to the welfare of the family, agricultural and associated economic activities, household management, etc., which are a great incidence on women's time, labor and well-being. The last is not taken adequate cognizance of, with the result that women's work remains undervalued and is not reflected in the GDP. Indigenous food brings in its wake inclusivity as people of all communities get together to participate in asops (feasts where traditional food is served). Inclusiveness is the need of the hour in Manipur which has a pluralistic society and has been in turmoil for two and a half years already. It also accelerates communal harmony.

Agricultural Activities

Women in Manipur are actively engaged in various agricultural tasks, including land preparation, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest management. They play a significant role in both crop production and animal rearing, contributing in great measure to the food supply of families, communities and the state. They are also involved in processing and storing agricultural produce. As a tribal woman remarked, by cultivating their own farms, both wet and jhum, they contribute to food security, as they grow both rice and vegetables (Monsang, 2025). The women have great respect for nature, and use cultivation methods that do not despoil the land. Because women historically have played a significant role in food production, it has led to the phenomenon of what is commonly referred to as "*feminization of agriculture*". With the passage of time the role of women has evolved and changed from primarily manual labor to use of modern technology in agricultural practices, to entrepreneurship and management and decision making, as many male farmers have migrated to urban areas to pursue a better living (Sene, 2023). In comparison to the rest of India, Manipuri women work at a comparatively higher rate. Women make up 42.59% of Manipur's workforce, and 48.83% of the women work in manufacturing, processing, etc. Manipur has an almost even balance between males and females. Total 2021–2,855,794: Female (1,417,107) Male (1,438,687) (Bembem et al., 2022).

Food Preparation and Cooking

Women are the primary cooks in Manipuri households, preparing 3-4 meals on a daily basis. By performing this essential task, they ensure household food security which is vital especially in times of crisis. (e.g., The COVID Pandemic, Disturbed Conditions from May 2023). They ensure access to nutritious food because they

are well versed in the indigenous knowledge system; they simultaneously preserve bio-diversity and ensure food sustainability. Food is recognized as a hallmark and symbol of culture and tradition, both oral and written, of what to cook, how to cook indigenous dishes, and possesses both social and religious values, as it is closely associated with rites and rituals, which form a part of traditional practice. (The offering of “pan” to religious deities and to guests on all auspicious occasions and festivals especially those related to the Passage of Rites). As Christopher Muscato stated: women have traditionally been guardians of culinary traditions, especially in times of cultural stress or migration (Muscato, 2024). When people partake of indigenous dishes, invariably memories associated with especially grandparents, senior aunt’s, uncle’s, etc. surface. One woman stated: The food that people of a community, village or region share, is defined by geography, lifestyle and work culture, which is manifested in community celebrations, becoming thereby a symbol of people’s culture. (Monsang, 2025)

Preparation, cooking and eating of Indigenous Food strengthens familial ties, besides serving as a unique indicator of identity. The traditional associated cultural practices, besides providing joy and comfort, provide people with a sense of purpose and cooperation. Many such traditional dishes which women prepare are specific to the Passage of Rites and festivals, while others like Eromba (spicy chutney) and Singju (Manipuri salad) are cooked daily. Special fish dishes are specific to occasions. In the hill areas inhabited by different tribes, indigenous preparation of various kinds of meat predominates.

Traditional drinks are served—rice liquor and rice beer. In earlier times, mithuns were slaughtered for important events but the cost of the animal is now quite prohibitive and so not generally cooked.

Preparation of traditional food empowers local women cooks who are the custodians and keepers. They preserve for posterity a People’s Culinary Heritage, an important component of intangible heritage.

Bonds between family and community members are strengthened, and as an interviewee said: Indigenous Food is always associated with communities, binding them together (Chinky, 2025). What has been expressed recently by the owner of Rynsan in Shillong which specializes in indigenous preparations is also true of Manipuri women who are “Indigenous Chefs”. The goal is to elevate local cuisine, create new dishes, from our own rich ingredients and recipes, and most important to add to the cultural heritage of our beloved hometown. All across the country and the world, regional cuisines are taking center stage. We all know that North Eastern cuisine is incredibly delicious. (Chaudhuri, 2025)

As however, Women’s unpaid labor is not reflected in the GDP, it is usually not given recognition, and does not contribute to Women’s Empowerment. This stands in stark contrast to professional chefs in five and seven star hotels. The amount of time and labour expended by our tribal women in the preparation of indigenous sausages which are a universal favourite, is not commensurate with their earnings which is minimal. Other tribal dishes are cooked on a slow fire for hours together. In like manner, Eromba an essential and a universal favourite among traditional dishes cooked daily also involves much time and effort. A brief description of the process facilitates better understanding. Initially, after the selected vegetables like potato, colocasia, taro, etc. are washed and diced, they are boiled along with chillies, until the requisite temperature is reached.

The cooking pot is then set aside to cool. Fermented fish-ngari, together with ngamu, a fresh water fish, (usually kept in a water pot in all Meitei kitchens) are semi-roasted, thereafter steamed, until fully cooked. The chillies are segregated from the boiled vegetables and pounded in a pestle, with the addition of salt. The steamed fishes are deboned, and added to the chillies, the boiled vegetables are finely mashed. The chilli fish mixture is added to the mashed vegetable with the addition of a little water to ensure finer mashing and the right consistency. The final touch is the garnish, a blend of onions and herbs. (Moirangthem, 2025)

Although a sizeable number of women work in agriculture and its allied activities, land, especially in the hills, is owned and managed by men. Women and girls usually do not have the agency or autonomy enjoyed by men and boys. Unless these gender inequalities are addressed, the whole food system would be skewed in favor of financial capital and profit moving away from sustainability and feeding people. As it is women who implement food security, it is essential that women's decisions be taken seriously and acted upon (IPES-Food, 2025). Women generally remain undervalued in developing countries. A native woman suggested a means to do away with this discrimination. Women should be a part of the village authority, the decision making body in tribal communities customary laws should be gender-neutral (Monsang, 2025). In addition, women have less access to necessary resources, limiting their efforts towards sustainable development and placing impediments in their work in food production.

Investing in women yields dividends as they accelerate progress and development. A festival like Ningol Chakouba (a day set aside for brothers to honor their sisters) illustrates the cultural significance of Indigenous Food. In the schedule of professions and skilled labour, in the Census, women custodians of Indigenous Food find no mention.

Marketing and Trade—Women are actively involved in marketing and trade, as they have been the backbone of Manipur's economy from the earliest times. Studies indicate that more than 90% of fish marketing is handled by women. And it is the women who cook traditional fish dishes every day, along with the vegetables they both grow and market. In some of the fishing farm activities like processing and storing, women predominate. Recognition of their contribution should not be overlooked, just because these farm women's primary duties revolve around their status as wives, mothers, home-makers (Devi, & Singh, 2015). One of the most common but popular fish dishes is the traditional Kangsoi, a healthy nutritious boiled stew of vegetables and fermented and smoked fish. Food preparation in Manipur is not just a daily chore, its roots are embedded in cultural, traditional, and social events. Festivals like Ningol Chakouba and Gaan Ngai, highlight the importance of indigenous food in social bonding and cultural expression: during the first, brother-sister bonds are strengthened, whereas in Gaan Ngai, celebrated by the Zeliangrong tribe over a period of five to seven days, besides, community religious rituals, songs, dances, lighting of fire, etc., a number of traditional dishes of meat, fish and vegetables are prepared as also indigenous rice drinks, but by both women and men. Today instead of all community members joining hands to make the rice drinks, it is sourced from professional vendors in the community. Brewing is an ancient food fermentation practice which has long been associated with women. In this context, the behaviour or qualities that are attributed to women is defined as femininity. The art of brewing is deeply rooted in social, economic, spiritual and gender based factors, and is prevalent particularly among the hill tribes and scheduled castes of Manipur. There is a gamut of relational work that the society performs, with women in particular being in charge of their homestead and jhum lands, thus idealising brewing as women's work. Women brewers are informed and familiar with the act of distillation to produce different kinds of rice fermented drinks, whether wine or beer. In the rural areas, especially distant hamlets, when men return from their work, they relax by drinking the traditional rice beer. Besides recreational use, it is used for indigenous religious purposes. (Jyrna, 2024)

Women's Economic Contribution

Women's involvement in agriculture and food related activities contribute significantly to the state's economy, as they are involved in various income generating activities like farming, trading, and small businesses related to food. Their economic participation is crucial to the family kitty and to the overall development of the

state. The women are empowered but not to the extent that they are entitled to, however appreciation of and recognition of their work display an upward trend.

The food of Manipur is known for its use of indigenous herbs and spices and combination of flavors. Prominent ingredients are bamboo shoot, both fermented and unfermented; fermented soybean, fermented and smoked fish etc. The fishes cooked on a daily basis gives a distinct and unique flavor to Manipuri cuisine. In the state, women are the primary providers, processors and marketers of food—smoothly integrating their role with the state's tradition, economy and social structure. Women of all communities in Manipur remain central to food from sourcing of ingredients, to perfecting traditional dishes sometimes with a little twist like the popular Ani's Beef preparation exclusive to "Hoksa's kitchen" at Imphal, an authentic Tangkhul preparation (Tangkhuls are a well-known tribe of Manipur).

The Meiteis who live in the valley have a unique culinary tradition, guided by specific cultural/ritualistic norms that are largely the preserve of women. Besides being central to household nutrition, they have specialized knowledge in the preparation of fermented foods like ngari (fish) and hawaijar (soyabean), essentials in everyday cuisine. They also specialize in feast/festive platters—usop chakluk for social events primarily associated with the passage of rites, following strict guidelines with reference to purity and sacredness. In the hills tribal women perform the same functions where their culinary traditions have been influenced by their history and geography. As foragers and farmers, women in Naga communities, such as the Tangkhul, play a vital role in foraging for wild herbs and edibles like mushrooms and berries, in the nearby forests, especially in the non-cultivating season. Kuki women have also traditionally participated in all aspects of agriculture. (Villagesquare.in 2025).

Fish Based Fermented Foods

Ngari is the most important fermented foods, as a meal for the Meiteis is never complete without it, either in the form of hot chutney—Eromba, Ametpa, or in Kangsoi, Singju, etc. Fresh water fish are used. Removal of dirt and weeds is followed by intense cleaning, fish are left to drain overnight and then sun-dried. The fried "phabou nga" is spread on gunny bags, covered too with gunny bags, stamped and pounded with a long handle-droomboo, to crush and soften the bones and heads, for quick better fermentation. The crushed, softened fish is tightly packed into pots. To prevent the passage of air, legs are used to press the fish down, also a pestle-shuk is used for packing the ngari-chafu (fish pot). This ngari chafu is a thick earthen pot netted on the outside with iron wires for support; the inside is coated with mustard oil. Around 40-50 kgs of fish is packed in the pot, which to keep it airtight, is sealed with a polythene sheet, fish scales, oil slurry, mud, sand, cow dung slurry. The pots are stacked in a dark place. Fermentation is completed between three to six months, maturity attained in twelve months. The fish is protein rich, and is also used in traditional healing practices.

Other essential fermented foods are hentak fish paste, soibum-bamboo shoot and yu/atingba—a beverage prepared from rice. Such foods prepared at the household level are a unique example of food processing skills, handed down over generations. (Ayam & Soibam, 2018)

Women Entrepreneurs of Traditional Cuisine

Catherine Soyamphi started a food processing unit to produce traditional jams, pickles, chips, candy, fermented products sourced locally. In doing so, she created employment opportunities for women, empowering them by giving them self-confidence and a sustainable livelihood. The use of only local resources highlights the rich biodiversity of Manipur. The entrepreneur in fact gets all she needs from her village Lungshang, in Ukhrul district.

Women are custodians of diets and recipes, ensuring that families and communities have access to nutritious and diverse food. They play a critical role in making decisions about food purchases and meal preparations, affecting the health and well-being of their family members. We need to recognize and celebrate their immense contributions (Sene, 2023).

In all traditional occasions, ceremonies, rituals, the molasses product has become an indispensable part of existing culture—it is used in asops, (feasts), sharadha ceremonies etc. Edible food made with molasses, such as kabok (puffed rice balls), molasses heingan, hawai, kabok, leibak, are also used. But the challenges that women face in the production of molasses are many. Women working in molasses production are generally not well educated. Their health is precarious as they lack nutritious food and regular health check-ups. They lack the power of decision making, access to resources, information on upgradation of production technology (Dhaneshwar, 2018).

In recent years women food entrepreneurs have given traditional flavors a modern twist, for example N. Rita Ningthoban, who makes Chakha (black rice) Gulla by using a machine. She has adjusted an age-old recipe in order to modernize it, while simultaneously preserving cultural heritage and giving a boost to the local economy especially at festival times when her products fly off the shelves.

What the owner of Rynsan in Shillong stated about his indigenous food preparations is also applicable to Manipur's women entrepreneurs. We are and will always be a space, that lets the local culture shine. While we are firmly rooted in the rich traditions that have been passed down, generation after generation, we also firmly believe that we must create new things from what has been entrusted upon us. Inspiration comes from within, and we also seek it from all around. Food is a great unifier and also one of the best preservers of human history. Each dish, if studied closely, offers many secrets and answers to how cultures have developed or emerged. Visitors from outside should feel that they're in a new avatar of the old, a balance between what is familiar and something new—the modern takes on the classics. Several of our dishes are cooked exactly as they would be in your grandmother's kitchen. (Chaudhuri, 2025).

Meira Foods, a packaged food company run by Shubhra Devi, produces pickles, sweets and salted dry fruit made from Manipur's indigenous fruits and vegetables. The company employs mainly women and today, the venture earns an annual turnover of a few crores. To boost the economy, organic fruits and vegetables are purchased from local farmers, sellers and suppliers which has spawned a whole new supply chain, associated with the burgeoning business. (Wangchuk, 2021)

Women own about 44% of total business, which is about 2.5 times the national average. Women owned businesses and enterprises are focused on agriculture and food products, or handloom and traditional fabrics.

Another mechanized industry for production of an indigenous food is a project funded under TDUPW, DSIR for Capacity Building of Women in Manipur: Mechanized System of Making Hawaijar, a traditional fermented food of North East India. It reduces drudgery by the use of a scientific method and adoption of hygienic practices.

Women are becoming key figures in disseminating information and managing natural resources within their communities, contributing to food security and sustainable practices by becoming agricultural entrepreneurs, engaging in food processing and manufacture, connecting markets, women are gaining economic independence. Simultaneously they preserve the eco system through their knowledge related to food systems.

Challenges and the Way Forward

The major challenges to Indigenous Foods are mechanized fast foods, which have grown exponentially in popularity. Such foods reduce much of the manual labour and time involved in the preparation of traditional

dishes. However one woman interviewee was confident that Indigenous Foods can survive the challenge, because not only are they rooted in the history and culture of a people, but also as indigenous communities assert their separate identity or are on a quest for identity, traditional food remains a prominent marker of identity.

While it is an acknowledged fact that women play a pivotal role in everything to do with food, they do face challenges such as unequal access to resources, new information and technology and decision making power. Studies do suggest that women's contribution in agriculture is often under-valued, as their role in society does not remain static, nor does the economy. Fusion food whether sold by street vendors or high class eateries as also fast food outlets like McDonald's or Piazza Hut pose a challenge, sometimes a threat to women custodians of Indigenous Foods. Moreover the comfort and ambience of modern restaurants acts like a magnet, drawing in customers, and people of all ages want to sample new foods and try out new eateries. However the social bonding between families and communities attending an asop together, and the close affection and displayed ensures that Indigenous Food is an intrinsic part of culture which people want to retain. Although many restaurants today serve a wide range of imported alcoholic drinks, the majority of native drinkers cherish the traditional rice brew—Yu or Sekmai, which retains its importance on festivals and occasions. Women from all indigenous communities are combining traditional knowledge and culinary traditions with new forms of entrepreneurship, they do not lose the old while embracing the new, as for instance in Hoksa restaurant, specializing in authentic Tangkhul cuisine. A serious challenge that women encounter in the workplace is that many are assigned to manual and menial tasks while male workers skills are consistently upgraded. Despite the popularity of fast foods like burgers and chicken lollipops etc., the alarming rise in obesity and child diabetes has put a break on the sale and consumption of such items.

Conclusion

As 62% of the world's women work in agriculture, it is women who bear the responsibility of food security. Until this responsibility borne by women is recognized, they cannot be fully empowered. A most vital component for that empowerment is financial security and independence. Financial incentives, subsidies, rewards, loans at low rates of interest must be made available for women. And in addition, workplaces must be made non-threatening with harassment of women strictly penalized.

Upgradation of skills by government departments, NGO's, etc. is a necessity at regular intervals. Women must have decision making power, continuing access to education and credit, especially rural women. Indigenous Foods which form a part of oral tradition are a community's cultural legacy, which forges a shared sense of identity, purpose and cooperation, especially in times of crisis and difficulty. Memories associated with traditional food bring vivid pictures happy moments. Age old culinary traditions are however under threat from cultural theft and may need to be patented. Women despite the time and effort spent in cooking do not grudge these responsibilities, because they are filled with joy when the consumers appreciate their work by literally wiping the dishes clean (not just the plates). Aku Zeliang, an expert craftsman from Nagaland recently exhibited at Delhi and called his craft "Tradition in Motion", a combination of heritage and modernity. This trend is seen in food preparations in Manipur. As women prepare three to four meals a day for family, friends, customers, a boost must be given to them in the form of ordering traditional dishes from the women custodians, and by including their labour in the GDP.

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