AITA'S PAKGHOR: VOICES AND NARRATIVES FROM THE KITCHEN

RITUPARNA CHOUDHURY
AND
PRERANA CHOUDHURY

ZUBAAN
128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor
NEW DELHI 110 049
EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com
WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

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INTRODUCTION

The kitchen is no stand-alone building. It is a complex unit in itself, rooted, though, in economic and socio-cultural factors. It invokes the ideas of life and abundance, often constituting the central point of people coming together in times of celebration as well as crisis; it is through the kitchen and the act of cooking that we witness people reaching out to communities in need at the time of disasters, natural or man-made. It has intrigued us always, this spirit of coming together through food and cooking for sustenance and providing aid, something that is often. missing in an otherwise technocratic blur of our fast-paced lives today. There is something inside the kitchen that will dictate a pause – the curry will cook when it has to; the spices will take their time to thicken the broth; the fish will sizzle in agreement with oil.

Growing up with two very commanding grandmothers who were the matriarchs of their own universes (and kitchens), we discovered the spell and power of the women of our family when it came to leading the activities of the kitchen. In uniting the rest of us during festivals and other special occasions, there was the lure of food, of the incomparable delicacies and pickle jars that were stored in the kitchen shelves for us to devour. The meandering route of our growing-up years, full of unexpected twists as well as predictable patterns of behaviour, consisted, of course, of a good chunk of time spent rebelling against the compulsion for the girl child to learn the crafts of the kitchen, and bear the responsibility of feeding the rest of the household members. There was also the difficult, awkward feeling that would arise from the sight of our mothers and aunts and sisters not partaking in meals with us children and the male members. Why do we never see the fathers and uncles serve the women members first on the dining table, we would wonder. Why give off the biggest and the juiciest pieces of meat and fish to everyone else and resign yourself to 'whatever is left'. It was often these recurrent structural performances being played out in the kitchen and during feasts and get-togethers that made gender dynamics quite visible despite and throughout the festivities. The kitchen, in this manner, brings to the fore contesting grounds for debate and discussion. Cooking and consumption of food can range from the truly visceral and corporeal to the more complex indicators of social conditioning, cultural codes and traditional norms. The traditional Assamese *pakghor* or *randhoni ghor* (kitchen) was, of course, quite different from the modern-day kitchens that are ubiquitous today. There has been a social and spatial shift in architecture with the decline of open spaces and a growing population. The change in the kitchen complex consists of one significant marker in north Guwahati – a spatial shift of the kitchen to accommodate the cylinder and stove, often moving away from the space that contains the traditional *souka* (hearth) or, in some cases, breaking it and flattening the earth altogether. In most of the houses we visited, for the families we interacted with, the hearth exists still as a potent reminder of the

bygone days, of plenitude and good health. The quintessential *sotaal* or the courtyards of the Assamese house, which host everything from children's play to the political discussions of the elderly lot over cups of tea and rice-cakes, are also on the decline. *Piraa*s (low stools) and *paati*s (mats) have made their way to the dining table, creating a segregation and distance from the hearth and *bheti* (the area of cooking containing the hearth and stove, often a slightly raised space) of cooking.

The relationship with the kitchen and with food and cooking undergoes an obvious change and encounters negotiations with such shifts in the society. North Guwahati, located on the northern banks of the Brahmaputra, still remains fairly untouched by urbanization unlike the city of Guwahati. Hence, its greenery is well-preserved and so are its large stretches of rice fields, tea gardens and meadows; although the place has long suffered from measly transportation facilities and an underdeveloped river transport system that make travelling to Guwahati for breadwinners a tedious process. In choosing to base our fieldwork here, we wanted to understand the crucial positioning of tradition and modernity through the realm of the kitchen, hoping to uncover some of the layers that constitute everyday life and its practices. North Guwahati has a diverse population of indigenous people like the Bodos, Garos, Koch-Rajbongshis, Chutiyas and Rabhas along with non-indigenous, caste-based people like Brahmins and Kaivartas. There are clusters of Nepali, Bengali and Bihari people who migrated to north Guwahati three to four generations ago and have adopted the language and dominant social norms of the Assamese people. Still, living mostly on the fringes of the socio-cultural and religious life of the people here, these communities harbour the fishermen community, the carpenters, masons, gardeners, sweetmeat makers and milkmen. Our interactions with people from across different caste and ethnic communities have revealed the relative isolation and distance that the people of one group maintain with the other. Even amongst the non-indigenous groups of people, rituals of

purity and pollution vary and construct separate narratives of gender, caste hierarchy and performative cultures.

'OUR ANSWERS ARE SLIPPERY FEET ON OIL'[1]: VOICES FROM THE KITCHEN

Socio-religious interventions in caste-based Assamese communities

When we started with our field-related travels, we did make an exception and stepped out of our hometown to visit Titabor, a town in the Jorhat district of Assam. A good friend informed us about the Thengal-Kachari[2] community of people, and a much-pending visit to his place prompted us to also visit the area where these people live. We were greeted one late August afternoon by Pratima Saikia, a school teacher teaching at Kesaikhati in Titabor. Obviously surprised but also delighted to hear us express interest in the Thengal-Kachari culture, especially in the cuisine, kitchen structure and associated rituals, she offered us some freshly cut *taamul paan* (areca nut and betel leaf) and said, 'I would have made rice beer for you had I known about your visit beforehand!'

Saikiani *borma* is affiliated to the Auniati Xatra of Majuli and is a Saraniya–Sankariya.[3] She talked about the Thengal-Kachari woman and her indispensable attachment to the kitchen, a mark of both familial and cultural responsibility that women often took pride in. The *maatir souka* (hearth) occupied the central position in the Thengal-Kachari kitchen, a marker of their identity, the source and metaphor for the primordial fire of sustenance. Even though the present-day household and society on the whole has switched to LPG cylinders, the *souka* continues to exist in the kitchen, evoking cultural memory; it is a ritual for most Thengal-Kachari households to cook at least one meal in the hearth every day, as a prayer and mark of respect for their ancestors.

When there is a death in the family, the *souka* cannot be used, conforming to the practices of purity and pollution.

Cooking is an elaborate process and starts with certain rituals. Traditionally, a *saaki* (earthen lamp) is lit in front of the *souka* after cleaning the *bheti* with water; nowadays, this is specifically done during Kati Bihu and Lakshmi Puja. '*Musi meli bonti gos jwolai he lokkhi muthi randhu aru* (we cook rice only after cleaning the area and lighting an earthen lamp),' says Saikiani *borma*. Also, during the Na-Khua *parba* (the event marking the start of the harvest festival during Magh Bihu through community feasting), the feast is prepared in the *souka* and the first serving is offered to the Bhakats.[4]

As we made our way to the kitchen, Saikiani *borma* iterated the performative aspects of taking *saran*, wherein importance is placed on her following the clearly defined rituals and cultural norms of her community. 'I believe I will keep the *pakghor* functioning within the rules and norms till I can manage,' she says. Once inside the kitchen, we saw the wide and open *souka pakghor* (kitchen with hearth) with two *souka*s elevated from the ground for the convenience of the women of the household. There lay a *toliya*, a utensil used for serving rice from the pots. Attached to this kitchen is another small kitchen space consisting of a gas stove where meals are prepared during times of emergency or other unavoidable situations. 'As we cannot enter the kitchen for seven days of our monthly cycle, the male members of the family cook food in the gas stove during those days,' she added. Rituals of purity further extend to elaborate practices of cleaning the kitchen as well as utensils. In the month of Aahar (mid-June to mid-July) especially, when Mother Earth is supposed to be menstruating, all the women partake in an extensive cleaning spree of the kitchen and the entire household as well. For us, it was particularly interesting to see how this narrative of strict, rule-bound functioning of such a household – and indeed the larger society – interacts and gets juxtaposed with changes brought about by education and professions chosen by more and more women today. There is the immediate consequence of managing time, of distributing it according to the various demands of

a ritually bound personal, social and cultural-religious identity as well as those of the secular workplace. 'Since most of us leave our home for work, we make it a point to share a scrumptious breakfast together, while the afternoon meal is had individually by us depending on when we return from work.' Adaptability and accommodation thus define the modern-day kitchen that very much exists in the realm of tradition but also includes the demands of the outside world.

We were intrigued by the presence of a *thapona* (altar) inside the kitchen. We soon learnt that it is a common occurrence in the kitchens of many indigenous communities of Assam. As we sat sipping tea, we shared our memories of the kitchens we grew up in, our grandmothers' cooking, the food preparations that we can still taste on the tip of our tongues; irreplaceable.

We reminisced fondly about how our paternal *aita*'s kitchen was a communal space, the centre stage for all discussions and *addas*. 'In many of the Thengal-Kachari families, the presence of the *thapona* indicates that the kitchen is no space for loud talking or even gossiping and laughing,' Saikiani *borma* responded. 'Our kitchen is like an austere space where we are forbidden from talking,' she added.

Attached to the *souka pakghor* is the *juhaal*, a kitchen space for cooking items that are forbidden to be cooked in the *souka.* We saw an intricately crafted sand filter. There is yet another space for cooking where they prepare food for the domesticated pigs. As she took us around, she begins to tell us about the kitchen complex back in her parents' house. 'The rules there are far more rigid – the women of the household are not even allowed to enter the kitchen without applying *xendoor* (vermillion) on their foreheads!' We had never before encountered or heard of such a rule. It goes on to reiterate that the kitchen is a sacred space and so is the activity of cooking. The compound of Saikiani *borma*'s house is a self-sufficient unit of production, with a fully grown and well-maintained *baari* (kitchen-garden located in the backyard), replete with lemons, green leafy vegetables, taro and yam, elephant apple, edible fern and what not! It is the quintessential rural Assamese kitchen garden, and we immediately

remembered the *baari* in our relatives' place at Sarthebari, our ancestral village. Urban narratives in cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore are increasingly working upon the idea of this self-producing unit of rooftop or front-yard farms, as small or limited as they are because of space constraints, but fuelled by the larger idea of self-dependence and self-sustenance that form an integral aspect of indigenous societies.

We talked about her memories of cooking and preparations from her mother's kitchen, how she first learned to cook, her special recipes. Is she the experimental or the traditional type?

'I had learnt to prepare *kosu* (taro, yam) and dry fish, sometimes ground or crushed, with pepper, *ou tenga* (elephant apple) and *dhekia* (a kind of edible fern) from my mother. She still cooks this dish when she visits us here. It is an item that rekindles so many memories … of the past, those golden days, that old kitchen from home.' She quickly pulled herself out of her reverie and continued, 'Now see, we cook this item of *toroi* (a type of sour vegetable) with potatoes. The right way is to fry them separately – first the potatoes and then the tomatoes. If you want to enhance the taste, you can add curry leaves. I like to experiment and try preparing the same vegetables in different ways.'

New dishes arrived when one of her brothers-in-law married a Mishing woman. 'Earlier, we never ate or cooked smoked pork. We mostly fried it. But *bhonti* cooks such delicious smoked pork, and now we have begun to prefer that!'

Saikiani *borma*'s mother-in-law joined us to share our conversation, and we welcomed her with obvious pleasure. Mai Kachari *aita* is a tall and healthy, though aged woman clad in a white *mekhela chador*. She recalled the days of her youth in parlance, stating the nature of fecund abundance of everything in nature, and how with time we are only witnessing a degradation of morals. She asserted the importance of strictly demarcated boundaries between different spaces, and mostly with regards to the *pakghor* and the *gosain ghor* (prayer hall/room). It is the *randhoni,* the central cook figure, who enjoyed sole access to the interior-most kitchen space that houses the *souka* and all items of cooking. No one could enter or trespass that space. She recalled how

she preferred cooking with firewood in spite of the arrival of the gas stove; she had by then stopped cooking after her daughters-in-law took up all household responsibilities. 'Earlier I used to love cooking, but now as I am growing old; I feel tired. I could cook for several guests and members of the family … but now I have given up as my daughters-in-law are here.'

The sense of power and authority in commanding the kitchen space was a palpable presence in our interactions with Saikiani *borma* and Mai Kachari *aita*. There is, perhaps, the knowledge and realization of the tremendous respect the kitchen commands, second to none, as sacred as the prayer hall. Laborious as the act (or should we say ritual) of cooking and maintenance of the kitchen spaces is, does it instigate questioning of the various rules of access and withholding? Does the often-synonymous equation of women with these performances not draw sighs of distress and discomfort from even the most rule-bound woman of the household?

'The kitchen in our house was a mud house. We even used clay utensils for cooking. Today all of that is gone and replaced … we have the gas stove, the pressure cooker and all these new things. We still use earthen pots sometimes though. Here too, the *souka* is preferred over the stove. We cook in the *souka* during family get-togethers too.

'I learnt to cook lentils with taro and yam, with lots of green chillies. And also crushed or ground dry fish with taro and yam. I used to enjoy cooking but nowadays I get tired very easily … and after my daughters-in-law arrived, I left the kitchen to their supervision.

'In our generation, it was not common for women to sit with men and eat. Women ate in the end, after feeding all the children and the male members of the house … all sisters and sisters-in-law sitting down for the meal together, free at last, sharing news and gossip from the day, laughing and making fun. If food got over, we would quickly rustle something together, often the most creative combinations! I never learned to shift to the gas stove even after it arrived and became a common entity in the kitchen … food tastes the best when cooked in *souka*. Those earthen pots and utensils of *kaah*, *pitol* are incomparable

when it comes to lending both taste and health to the food we eat. We have started to lose these aspects of cooking today. We used to have *dhoka, toliya* and such spatulas for cooking that are hardly found nowadays. In the old *souka pakghor* here, we never enter or cook without taking a bath first and lighting some incense sticks.'

Mai Kachari's story

We spent our night in Titabor at our friend's place and listened to the tales of the kitchen from his mother. Ruma *borma* treated us to *maasor tenga* (sour fish curry). Kitchen lore is variegated, much like the texture of fish bones, often predictable and sometimes not. She comes from the Kalita (a non-Brahmin) caste, married to a Xatradhikar.[5] While we relished the fish curry, *borma* narrated her story.

'When I was newly married and stayed in my in-laws' house, I saw that there were separate *souka*s for making tea, cooking rice and cooking fish. Because my mother-in-law is ill now, my sisters-in-law cook on the gas stove … maintaining and cooking on the *souka* takes far more time. And there are rituals associated with it when you cook on the *souka,* so you cannot hurry or cook food fast when required.

'The innermost sanctum of the kitchen that contains the main *souka* was used only by my *xahu maa* (mother-in-law). She used to cook for the whole family, even when guests visited, no matter how many! Nobody was allowed to enter that space. We had to wash our own utensils. After eating, we had to clean that area on the floor thrice – twice with water and the third time with cow dung paste. And this was to be done after every meal.

'Even the space where my in-laws ate was separated from where we had food; it was a slightly raised space, and my father-in-law was served food in *bankahi* and *banbati* only. There were so many rituals and rules to be followed, so many boundaries to be maintained … becomes a tough task when it is an everyday affair. Besides, we had no domestic help or helping hand of any sort. My elder sister-in-law left our in-laws' home for this reason.

'My father-in-law was a good man though. He would become unhappy with his wife's ill-treatment of me. I was allotted a separate kitchen because I came from a Kalita family. *Xohur deuta* (father-in-law) would visit my kitchen and eat the *jolpaan* (milk or curd-based porridge made of flattened rice and jaggery) prepared by me; he would pass me fruits through the door that he would be given during prayer sessions, without his wife's knowledge.

'My husband and I eventually shifted out of his parents' home and rented our own place in town. My husband could eat from *xahu maa*'s kitchen; after my sons were born, even they were allowed to, but not me. I was cast aside forever. She was uncompromising in her ways. But she is ill now and is bound to eat food cooked by her daughters-in-law. Rules disappear when the body is aged and ill; food becomes like medicine.'

The indigenous Bodo kitchen

Mrs Basumatary asked, 'Do you know that pork with *maati dail* is an excellent combination?'

We were sitting in the porch of Manju Basumatary's house at Rohdhola in north Guwahati. We were munching on homemade snacks and began by talking about the quintessential element of Bodo cuisine – pork.

North Guwahati has several pockets of Bodo people, all living together like an extended family of sorts. Some Bodo youngsters set up stalls selling pork meat every evening right by the grocery stores and the vegetable market. Manju Basumatary, an energetic woman probably in her fifties, shared happy anecdotes from the kitchen, her memories of cooking with her family, the dishes integral to the Bodo kitchen which 'mainstream' Assamese people continue to be oblivious to. 'I recall my mother's chicken curry seasoned with garlic, ginger and chillies,' she says, 'and boiled to perfection. Hardly any oil. Very healthy.'

We asked her about her earliest memories of learning to cook from her mother, the recipes she picked up in the kitchen. She laughed,

amused, and said, 'What else did I learn! Umm … *daal, jobra, onla*, fish, meat, the usual. I started cooking when I was in the fifth/sixth standard. I had to leave school because of domestic responsibilities.'

Sanjima, her twenty-year-old daughter-in-law, took us to their kitchen which is attached to one of the living rooms. It is a semi-brick kitchen with a mud floor. In the extreme left corner we see a *thapona* of sorts, well outlined as the sacred space of the kitchen where, we were told, a *saaki* is lit every day and two bottles of rice and water are kept as offerings to Goddess Lokkhi (Lakshmi). 'We are also used to preparing food for storage, I think it is an important part of our culture,' Sanjima said, bringing out the packet of *xukuta teeta* (a kind of dried leafy vegetable that tastes bitter), a bottle of *baahor gaaz* (bamboo shoot) and a bottle of *bogori achar* (pickled berry); 'we ferment a lot of eatables, and we can eat them for months and even years.' Fermenting food in salt, vinegar or oil and sun-roasting fish or meat are age-old processes of storing food for winters, droughts, unpredictable climatic conditions or times of crises born out of natural or man-made calamities. We discussed and reflected upon these incredible skills born out of our foremothers, forever fending for members of their families and for the sustenance of communities on the whole. Manju *baa* lamented the loss of the old ways. 'Where shall we find days gone by? The *souka*, the *dhuasaang*[6] are all gone now.'

There is nostalgia coupled with the corporeal displacement of old objects, old ways and the plenitude of fresh produce that characterizes the yesteryears. Manju *baa* mentioned the curious turn of rituals in the Bodo community. 'We never had any rules or rituals of purity and pollution, or boundaries barring the entrance or participation of women in the kitchen under specific circumstances. Now, though, with increasing assimilation of Hindu beliefs and norms in the Bodo community, these rules have gradually steeped in. The younger generation of women, for instance, consider it natural to not cook during the monthly menstrual cycle. For us, the older generation, it is a new thing that we have seen come about only recently.' She also acknowledged the positive influence of a modern-day outlook, helped

by the spread of education. It is no longer mandatory for women to take a bath before entering the kitchen in the morning; one can choose to divide tasks and time according to her schedule and comfort. Now women can sit alongside men and take meals. There is better and freer communication between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law as they can share the workload and not feel the pressures of supervising everything alone.

Another integral part of the Bodo kitchen narrative is the preparation of *saimod* (traditional homemade liquor). What is particularly interesting is that it is the women of the household who have expertise in it. In fact, we came to know that women in Rohdhola spend a considerable amount of time preparing it every day. It is a symbol of Bodo tradition, an assertion of their identity and a performance on the woman's part to establish herself in the gendered power equation between men and women. It is interesting, therefore, that the role of the kitchen complex expands and stretches beyond the conventional standards and ideals of only cooking meals; there is an intervention, a break when a woman prepares liquor that is sold in the market as much as it is consumed by members of the family – the kitchen becomes the microcosm of the larger economic transactions of the marketplace. Mrs Basumatary spends a major part of her daily routine preparing *saimod*, and there is no restriction on its consumption by women whatsoever. 'It is an essential drink during hot sunny afternoons as the women of the village rest for a while amidst work. It satiates and rejuvenates the tired body. It must be noted that the men of the community, too, partake in the preparation of the traditional liquor. If there is good firewood supply, up to thirty litres of liquor can be made per day this way. We visited the *dana ghor* where the liquor is prepared and the storage room containing plenty of rice bags attached to the *dana ghor*. The liquor that's ready for consumption is stored in buckets and then bottled for sale.

Sanjima was amused by our keenness to explore what must be mundane for her. Only twenty-one, she scurried around, attending to the tasks of the household and finding time to interact with us as

well. We could see that she is visibly curious about our visit and this participation and endless queries regarding their way of life. We asked her to tell us a bit about herself and her maternal home. She tells us that she is the eldest amongst her siblings; she has a younger brother and a younger sister. 'I hardly cooked at home since mother used to cook for everyone. She would let me make tea for guests sometimes,' she said shyly. 'The only task assigned to me that I had to do regularly was to sweep the house and the compound. My sister and I also brought water from the nearby pond. My mother would fish there with the other villagers.' Sanjima went on to describe her village in Rani as a beautiful scenic one, full of fields and ponds, and the hills sheltering them like an umbrella. She admits she has learned to cook – and to cook well – only from her mother-in-law.

The techniques of cooking dishes commonly prepared and even rules and regulations to be followed in the kitchen differ with the levels of interaction or relative isolation of a particular community with other groups of people in a society. Sanjima experienced a difference in the Bodo traditions on the northern bank and those at her maternal home and village on the southern one. 'We had no *thapona* in the kitchen there,' she said, 'but it was preferable to take a bath and enter the kitchen. Although I eloped to get married, I was given a warm welcome by my in-laws and the village people here; the rules are not stringent, which makes me feel very comfortable. We take lunch at different times because I mostly wait for my husband to come back from his work shift. I serve food to my in-laws and ask them to not wait. We do sit together for a good long dinner though.' She recollected the day of the wedding, which took place in accompaniment with the *gaon-or raiz* (all the people of the village), as a symbol of her acceptance and welcome into their social community. Although it is the bride's responsibility to cook the entire feast, she shared how her mother-in-law did all the cooking and asked her to move the spatula a few times, and serve the food after it was ready, because she knew that Sanjima did not know how to cook. 'It is gestures like this that are important,' she said. Through these elaborate conversations, we realized that in a

way, for this family at Rohdhola, the *dana ghor* commanded stricter rules than the kitchen. Young members of the family are not generally trusted with the task of preparing *saimod* as it is believed to be a nuanced process requiring a lot of time, patience, skill and expertise. Older members generally presume that unless someone from the younger generation is very interested, it is better to not entrust them with the task! There is also the risk, without correct proportions and techniques, that the drink will be spoiled and go to waste.

We then made way to Padma Swargiary's house, only a few steps from Manju Basumatary's home and caught the smell of something delicious and unique wafting in the air. Ms Swargiary stepped out of the house on hearing our footsteps, and we introduced ourselves and told her the purpose of our visit. On asking her about what's cooking, she laughed and said, 'Oh I am frying papaya flowers with potatoes!' We had never eaten the flowers of the papaya tree. This was new.

Her mother, we were told, was busy preparing liquor. *Aita* invited us to the *dana ghor*. '*Olop sulai khabi* (will you have some *sulai* liquor)?' she asked. We nodded, to her absolute delight.

'I am old now … around 75–76 … so it is difficult for me to prepare liquor all by myself. My eyesight has also begun to fail me, but I love to do this every day nonetheless. We also make *rohi mod* out of *maibrah* or *bora saul*. The food palate of the Bodos is quite different, as are the techniques of cooking. We love eating a lot of green leafy vegetables, mostly boiled with little or no oil and lots of ginger and green chillies … it's called *jobra*, and we also add fish to it sometimes. I learned how to cook a lot of these items from my mother – *khaar* (alkali), *tenga* (sour curry), *xaak* (green leafy vegetables) like *lai*, *lofa*, *khutura*, *alu-kosu* (potato-yam) … we dice the veggies really well and add them to the *deksi* (curry pot) or the cooker. Besides our food, the liquor we prepare is such an important part of our identity. I picked up the nuances of how to make liquor at a young age … and then everybody in my family started preferring the liquor made by me. We share bottles of liquor with our family members during Bathou Puja and Bihu. The kitchen shifts outside during winter, and food is

prepared with firewood under the open sky. This helps us keep warm while we cook. And cooking outside has a festive feel to it, doesn't it? People gather, sit by the fire warming themselves and conversations happen. We normally leave the firewood in the open area near the entrance during daytime.

'My husband passed away in 1980. I was around thirty-five at the time. He was a daily-wage worker and had no permanent job, and I had to work really hard after his death to raise my children. Now my children live near me. Even after Padma got married, she continued to live here in this house so that I would not be left alone.

'We also have some farmland near in Gouripur, near the bottling plant. We wake up by 5 in the morning, then take a bath and prepare tea for everyone, including the plough men who help us in the fields. After that we start preparing liquor and also get our children ready for school. It is 10.30–11 a.m. by the time we are free, and then we set off for the fields. I no longer farm because of old age. I make sure that the helpers have their afternoon meals with us every day … I feel bad to let them eat alone. Padma often takes the food to the fields itself; it is easier to do so during the winters. We also have a lot of fishing tools at our home – *jakoi, khaloi, polo* … My daughters go fishing regularly; I also accompany them – nothing like fresh fish from the village ponds. But these ponds are becoming dirty now because of waste matter from the newly built factories. Things like this have changed in the past few years.

'We have a Shiva temple inside the compound only, [she points towards the temple] so we keep away from the kitchen and the temple during the monthly menstruation cycle. But otherwise, we do not follow any rules as such … even if there are, I am not strict about it. *Mone mili jua suwali, buari pale pakghorot xumaiye diu*! (if I meet like-minded, friendly women, I let them into my kitchen without question!) I often ask guests to stay behind for lunch or dinner if they visit my home. Always feels good to share food with people … it builds love and camaraderie.'

The migrant Bengali kitchen of Anandanagar

Anandanagar is part of the more prominent area known as Rajaduar, where we find one of Assam's most well-known temples, the Doul Govindo temple. It lies very close to the Brahmaputra and is home to the fishermen community of north Guwahati. The village has a unique visual landscape. While the people inhabit one side of the road in houses of all shapes and sizes, the other side has logs arranged carefully in heaps for firewood, perhaps left to stay warm and dry. After walking for a while, we decided to enter the compound of a house that had a large Shiva temple. We met Bishu Barman, the eldest son in the family, from whom we tried to learn about the social profile of the village. Anandanagar is dominated by Bengali Barman people, with around four to five Assamese families. Approximately 120 households depend on fishing as an occupation. The river plays a crucial role as the people are dependent on it in several ways. On telling him about the purpose of our visit, he showed great interest and asked us to feel free to go inside and have a look at their kitchen.

The kitchen area is attached to the new house. The old kitchen, we were told, was located in the same area. We saw two women preparing lunch, the daughters-in-law of this family. Bimala Barman, the eldest, was cutting vegetables on a *bothi* (a carved, fixed knife used to cut fish and vegetables), sitting on the floor on one side of the kitchen whereas the younger one was preparing rice in the *souka*. 'We enjoy cooking together,' they said. They talked of how firewood is generally procured from the *chapori* (floodplain), by crossing the river on steamer boats. Logs of wood are brought from the riverine sandbar. During the rainy season, logs come floating in the river, and one can collect them directly. During summers, the women sometimes walk to the hillier areas of Rangmahal and Dirgheswari to collect them.

Bimala *baa* and Parul *baa* tells us that s*eka bhaat* (rice cooked in a large open vessel with the starch drained out unlike the rice cooked in a pressure cooker) is compulsory for their family. Pressure-cooked rice is not preferred. 'It makes one feel so lethargic!' they said laughing.

The kitchen is well spaced, as all cooking is done on the *souka,* 'because it is easier to sit and cook'. Aluminium utensils are hung on the wall in a line. Parul *baa*'s maternal home is not too far from her husband's place, a little further off into the hills. Her mother works as domestic help, lives alone and cooks and does all her chores by herself. 'Even at this age she is quite fit and active,' Parul *baa* said. 'She visits me frequently and spends the day whenever she is free.'

We found out that although they have a single *souka* in the kitchen, while most of the kitchens we had seen till then had two, they use separate utensils to cook vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. The daughters-in-law spoke about their mother-in-law, Matu Barman, a strong, energetic woman in her fifties. We heard of an interesting ritual that she follows during the month of *kati* (which falls between late October and November). She fasts for the entire month as it is believed to be an 'inauspicious time'; it is the time of the year when Assamese people observe Kati Bihu, an austere occasion during which people light *saaki-bonti* (earthen lamps) under the *tuloxi* (tulsi) plant and pray for a good harvest. She only eats plain rice and boiled potatoes for that month, cooking for herself and not eating anything cooked by anyone else. The food can be cooked only once a day and it can be had thrice, depending on the person observing the fast. On the last day of the month, all the women who observed the fast gather together and organize a community feast in the *namghor* of their locality. It is further interesting to note that this *namghor* is in actuality a Kali temple, not the quintessential Vaishnava institution sans idols that a *namghor* traditionally is. Together they cook a vegetarian meal and *payox* (kheer). There are separate utensils kept in the *namghor* especially for this occasion.

Just then, Matu Barman arrived. She greeted us and joined the conversation, insisting that we share the afternoon meal with them and not leave without eating!

'I and a group of women from our village had recently been on a pilgrimage to the Jagannath *mondir* in Puri. I just went to some

neighbours' homes to distribute the *prasad*. We already organized a big community feast after we came back from Puri. Going for that *tirtha* has really brought some peace to my heart.

'My mother was a strong woman. I never saw her fall ill in her entire lifetime. I remember the day she passed away. She was in her nineties. She had told me that she wanted to eat egg curry and wanted me to prepare it. My mother would never demand specific items from me any other time, so I was surprised but also happy that she asked me to cook for her. At night, she prepared fish. She ate a few morsels and said that she was going off to sleep. I tucked her in her bed and sat for my food. She never woke up from that sleep; we found out the next morning that she was gone.

'I live with my sons and daughters-in-law. Parul and Bimala look after all the kitchen chores and I lend them a hand here and there whenever needed. We share our work, that way no one is overloaded. Most of the day is spent in the kitchen – as it always happens. Earlier when I used to work as a domestic help, I had to be out of home for long hours, so my sons would be the ones doing all the kitchen chores, cooking included. We always take a bath first and then enter the kitchen; we do not cook without cleaning ourselves first. We also do not enter the kitchen or cook during the first three days of the menstrual cycle every month. During those few days, the men cook. We sometimes have to bring water from the river although that isn't the cleanest source of water … hardly ten households in this area have private water supply. The rest of us must go the public water-supply facility and wait for our turn to fill up our pots and buckets. Earlier, though, before the water-supply facility arrived, all of us women would go down to the river to bring water for our daily needs.

'My father had migrated to this place from Cooch Behar. My father-in-law was from Sirajuli. Which is why we have something left of our Bengali roots, but at the same time we are assimilated into the Assamese society. You may find our tongue slightly different … it is because we speak both Assamese and Bengali and sometimes that makes a mix of the languages! Even the food we cook is a mix of

both the cultures. I love to make everything very spicy (*she laughs*) and always prepare a chutney along with the main items. Today, the quality of fish we get from the river is no longer what it used to be … the quality, the quantity, everything has deteriorated. Even we fishermen have to buy fish from the fish market and then eat, imagine! *Aagote tu maasor ubhoinodi aasil* (there used to be plenty of fish found in the earlier times) … but not anymore.

'We bring rice from different households in Rangmahal, Madhyamkhanda and Rudreswar, and store the sacks in a room. These are then taken for grinding. We are a big family … so we require a lot of rice. We used to keep poultry before but now that we have a Kali temple here we discontinued with that business.'

While we listened to her, some guests arrived for lunch. We are taken into the kitchen and served lunch while the guests are made to sit in one of the rooms and served food. The kids are fed first, then the men, and all the women sit down together in the end.

The migrant Bihari community of Krishnanagar

Krishnanagar is a small pocket on a hillock by the Brahmaputra, situated very close to Auniati Xatra of north Guwahati. It is constituted of several working-class people but the most prominent group of people comes from the Bihari migrant community who were earlier settled in Silsako, in the Dhuportol area, but were evicted a few years ago. This community of people is now spread over Krishnanagar and Madhyamkhanda. They trace their roots to Bihar when their forefathers from two to three generations back had migrated to Assam in search of work opportunities. Inter-community marriages are a common phenomenon here; and it will not be uncommon to find a Bodo, an Ahom, a Bengali and a Bihari within the same family unit, for instance.

When we entered Munni *di*'s compound, we were welcomed by her twenty-year-old daughter, Deepa. She lives with her two brothers, her father, mother and grandmother. The incessant rains had made the

upward route to their home quite slippery; the people of Krishnanagar have to traverse that slope every day to go to school, work or even to bring water and firewood. We got talking with Deepa; her mother and grandmother were out for work. She was sweeping fallen leaves and branches off the *sotaal*. We told her why we were there. She looked pretty amused. She told us that she has begun to cook too, as her mother had been insisting and panicking. 'She fears I will not be able to cook for my husband after I am married off,' she laughed.

Munni *di* is by birth a Bengali from Lanka in Nagaon, Assam. She had left her home quite young, looking for work and had reached Guwahati to be employed in a 'Punjabi family's home' as a domestic help. After working quite a few years there, she left and came looking for work in the northern bank of the river. She started working in a doctor's home soon after, and also eventually got married. 'My father is by origin a Bihari. But we have all been born and brought up here so we are very much Assamese too,' Deepa said.

Their kitchen is in a neat, petite corner of the house, furnished with a gas stove and cylinder, with the utensils and spatulas neatly stacked on a table. It is the women who do the cooking, mostly, except on fairly hectic days and on the first two days of the menstrual cycle every month. 'But it isn't rigid, the menstrual cycle rules, like in other families,' Deepa said. The kitchen has shifted spaces since her birth, broken and reconstructed quite a few times. She also praised her mother's cooking, especially because they get to taste dishes from different cuisines, as Munni *di* worked with families from different cultural backgrounds. Munni *di* arrived in the meantime and greeted us with her familiar wide smile. She joined the conversation while setting a saucepan on the stove. Because what is a conversation without tea?

'My parents are from Lanka in Nagaon. But I came to Birubari in Guwahati as a child to a Punjabi family to work. I was not well versed with their style of cooking. But I learned to make my first *roti*s there. I would watch the landlady twist and turn flattened wheat balls over the gas stove, and this way I also slowly started making them. I left home at such a young age … I don't clearly remember the exact age. I was too

small to realize, pick up or remember the nuances of a Bengali home. I got married to a family originally from Bihar; and, here too, I learned new dishes, new ways of cooking, such as *litti chokha*! Assamese food culture is a strong influence as we have lived here for a long time. I enjoy cooking *maasor tenga* (sour fish curry), *xaak bhaji* (green leafy vegetables fry) and so on. Recently, we went to my mother's place back in Lanka, and I realized our people have such different food habits and style of cooking. For instance, I found my family's preference for eating the stems of *puroi xaak* (a type of leafy vegetable), cooked with a lot of spices, while we eat only its leaves here, back home! Also, I normally prepare fish with *tenga*, but I saw my mother prepare it with different vegetables. I also saw my brother eat *vedailota* (skunkvine leaves) ground into paste, something we only make curry of.'

The conversation then led us to her mother-in-law, Lakkhi Das, who lives in the house adjacent to theirs with two of her sons and has a separate kitchen. Munni *di* and Deepa served us red tea flavoured with ginger and pepper, setting the monsoon mood quite right. We talk of the rains, festivals, the river, Bihu and Chhat Puja. We asked them about Chhat Puja; we wanted to know more about this festival, integral to the Bihari community and identity. It is part of the puja rituals that the afternoon meal on the fourth day has to be cooked by the women who bathe and worship in the river for everyone. The food is first offered to the Sun god after which the eldest female member is offered the meal as she is the primary figure in conducting the rituals. It was unique because it was one of the first religious-ritual instances we heard of where the first meal is served not to the patriarch of the family but to a woman. This meal consists of rice, dal and a very spicy mixed-vegetable item that contains potato, tomato, radish, beans, carrots, cauliflower pumpkin and beans. Lakkhi *aita*, we are told has lived a long, healthy and joyful life. Her kitchen stories must be equally interesting, we imagined! Born in Rehabari, Guwahati, she accompanied her cousin to north Guwahati when she was a child. She remembers her childhood days as the time when many households lived together in a cluster. Consequently, the kitchens were many and

diverse too, something that greatly enthralled her. She was married at the age of twelve. Her husband was eighteen years older than her. As a young bride, she did not know how to cook; she went on to learn it only after marriage. She recollected seeing her father-in-law cook quite frequently. We asked her about *litti chokha*, and she was delighted that we are familiar with it as it is her favourite dish. 'I still make it at times whenever we burn firewood. It is made of wheat and gram. The gram is made into a paste on the traditional grinding stone plate to which fried cumin seeds are added along with salt. Then the wheat flour is added from which big pancakes are made and finally roasted. I sometimes pan-fry it lightly with mustard oil or ghee.' We also asked her if any recipes were made especially during Chhat Puja. She told us how *pitha*s are a must during the festival. They are made of wheat or rice flour mixed with milk and ghee or semolina and coconut. They can be prepared only by those women who fast during the festival, a recurrent tradition signifying a woman's importance in upholding rituals, norms, the community and cultural identity. She took us to her two-roomed house; the kitchen space is arranged right on the floor – the gas stove laid out carefully surrounded by vessels, containers, buckets of water and other utensils. The stove replaced the *souka* as her sons decided to break the latter to save time while cooking. We asked her if she was comfortable cooking on the gas stove. She said, 'Yes, I sit on the bamboo stool to avoid pain in my back and waist. Standing for too long while cooking is both painful and exhausting. Whenever the cylinder is exhausted, Munni prepares our meal. This way we manage.' She also mentioned how stringent she is about the rules of conduct during the monthly menstrual cycle.

After we finished our tea and snacks, Lakkhi *aita* took us to the adjacent house, Tarabai's home. They are relatives. She has been a quintessential presence in several households of north Guwahati, throughout its length and breadth, owing to her knowledge of indigenous solutions to common ailments and also her love for elephant apples, star fruits, berries, ferns, herbs, leafy vegetables and what not that she used to diligently collect from the wilds! Tarabai

lives on the edge of the hillock of Krishnanagar, with the Aswaklanta Ghat at the foothills. She was out for her bath in the river – she never fails to do that, her grandson told us. Lakkhi *aita* told us that it is quite common for the people of her generation to spend an awful amount of time by the river. 'We bathe there. Earlier we brought water for all household needs from the river; all the women would take the walk together around 3 in the afternoon. And, of course, to catch fish, or to simply sit by the riverside and breathe in the fresh air.'

When Tarabai entered the gate, she was thrilled to see us. '*Eii tohot ketia aahili* (when did you girls arrive)?' she asked. She offered to make tea, and we could not refuse. Her daughter-in-law had been ill with jaundice for quite a few months and was mostly confined to the bed, hence the responsibility of performing all the chores had fallen to her, Tarabai informed us. We told her why we were touring north Guwahati and visiting as many households as we could in different areas. She agreed when we mentioned that we see a steady decline of the *souka* in almost all of the places we had visited so far. '*Ajikali souka dekhiboloi nepai … aagote ami soukate randhilu, ki xuwad*' (we hardly get to see hearths in use anymore … we used to cook in the hearth in earlier days and the food was so much tastier). She also mentioned that their names have appeared in the NRC list, and that they are all very relieved. The fear of political alienation is palpable for people like Tarabai, and for all migrant families living in areas like Krishnanagar and Anandanagar.

'I was born in Hajo. I do recall the two-faced *souka* in our kitchen that I had seen as a child. Not anymore. It was broken and a gas stove was brought in. My brother, his wife and their children live there now. My nephew, Harmohan, has rebuilt the house. I remember how the *souka* was regularly cleaned and wiped before and after use. I have fond memories of my mother and grandmother cooking. It was food from the region they had moved from, so they carried those cultural and familial aspects with them, and recreated them here. I used to hear beautiful stories of Bihar. The mangoes and the abundance of crops

and food, the pani puri wala who would do rounds of the locality in the evening and everyone would rush out. Such stories! I especially remember the chicken curry that my mother and grandmother used to cook; it was hot and spicy with lots of garlic, could cure any bout of cough and cold. It was so good during the winters. They always used to grind the spices by themselves, on a small mortar; there was no culture of buying packeted spices in those days. That's why people were healthier before … *Ajikali sobote bhejal* (nowadays all food items are adulterated). I remember that as a young girl, I was given the task of making the garlic-chilly paste in good quantity for the chicken to be cooked when guests were to visit. I would grind around two to three kg of chillies at once on a *pota-guti* (stone mortar)! Sometimes I would get angry, but then I would cool down thinking why not help the women. But I will not lie, I really have not cooked much. My mother-in-law and my husband mostly cooked. My father used to cook back home. He did not eat fish or chicken, so I remember how his utensils were kept separately. Even the utensils for cooking his meal were separate. We used to have a lot of guests regularly for lunch. My parents would not send back anyone without feeding them a good meal. Most of the villagers were Muslim. We had a cordial relationship with them but there was no inter-community dining. It was limited to tea and snacks.

'I love *ou tenga* (elephant apple) so much that I cooked *ou tenga maas* (fish curry with elephant apple) more than all the meals that I have cooked in my lifetime till now (*she laughs*). I first fry the fish in mustard oil with a lot of spices after which I would add the nicely sliced pieces of elephant apple to the boiling water.'

'THE HOUSE IS WHERE WE CAN DREAM IN PEACE'

Michael Pollan says, 'Do not eat anything your great-grandmother would not recognize as food.' The Assamese kitchen, as we have seen, is not a homogenous entity. There are aspects, though, that are reflected

consistently in the kitchens we visited, across the various communities we interacted with in north Guwahati – in terms of beliefs, rituals of purity and pollution, access and boundaries. The *pakghor* continues to generate gender narratives around women – the *randhoni* is the figure that stands fo sustaining her family, sustaining culture and community identities and for practices thought to be otherwise lost or transformed. For instance, this is what Birinchi Kumar Baruah writes on 'Khowa-Bowa' in his work *Axomor Loka-Sanskriti*:

'Maase goroka pasoli khaba
Xahuye goroka bowari baba'
(Eat vegetables cooked with fish,
Handle a daughter-in-law trained by a mother-in-law)

Another couplet says:

'Lon jalukere khuwaba jaal
Tewe stan ros hoibe bhaal.'
(Feed her a well-salted curry with pepper
And it will help her during lactation)

There are similar folk narratives that suggest unique food combinations considered healthy for a woman with an unborn child. For example, pigeon meat curry cooked with yam stems and pepper is said to boost the health of both mother and child during pregnancy.

Time enters the kitchen in complex and unique ways through women's experiences. To give an example, this is what Baruah writes:

'Xaak xukloti dinot baase
Xei ghorot lakhimi aahe,'

This particular saying suggests that the ideal timing to be followed even for cleaning and cutting different leafy vegetables is daytime; which, if followed, brings the blessings of Goddess Lakshmi. Time indicates following quite a strict routine for eating all the three meals, along with the body's needs for rest and movement. We heard several

women of our grandmothers' generation iterating the notion of 'doing everything in time, which is what has kept us in good health; the body is after all a machine that requires looking after.'

The kitchen embodies discipline as reflected in some of the perspectives discussed above. It also, parallelly, signifies the potential to outgrow its space and command a new structure, more space, greater movement. It metamorphoses. It is disposable in the same manner as the Assamese *bhelaghor*. Here is a poem by Siddhartha Sankar Kalita on *bhela-ghor* (translated from the Assamese):

On the eve of Magh Sankranti
We used to make Bhelaghor.
We made the structure out of unripe bamboo beams
And laying the hay over it,
When the harvesting is over,
We challenged each other on our skills of making the house
...and the grand feast was in the evening.

A little prayer was on our palms the next morning.
And then
Fire!
A grand fire event would happen,
Burning our house down in no time,
The craft of our immature hands were disposed.

When we were grown ups
Many colourful thoughts
Started building a house within ourselves.
That was burnt by the fire of our youth
We were burnt, we were hurt
But flamboyant thoughts started building
A house inside.

A thought can generate another in itself.
So even after the destructions
We thought of this house as a permanent one, a concrete one.

It was just another story of
The Bhelaghor
Made with our unripe hands.

Building the *bhelaghor* is a community process, a ritual activity. From one perspective, a *bhelaghor* is a community kitchen that accommodates the bodies of the people observing *uruka* who spend the night inside the temporary structure, only to set it on fire early next morning, to the accompaniment of people and prayers. It is the core construct of the ritual feast of Bhogali Bihu. Its essence lies in its disposability and the adaptability of the humble structure to fulfil both the ritual purpose of Bihu as well as the community feast of the people involved.

Through the meandering routes of migration stories or the stories of people across generations rooted to a certain place, we hear voices of survival, assertion and continuity. The kitchen can be a communal unit hosting friends and family over tea and snacks or during bigger festivities but can, at the same time, isolate those who fall outside the dictates of that particular caste or community. Will it be fair to 'idealize' the kitchen, then, as the space that brings people together? Perhaps not. Perhaps it is insufficient to search for a definition or attributes to give to the *pakghor* so as to make it reflective of the ideologies we wish to project upon it. Hence our effort has been to capture the voices of our participants as they are, and as they chose to speak, letting them share their experiential understanding of what it means to navigate through everyday social life by means of fending for themselves and their families, amidst socio-economic and environmental challenges, cultural multiplicities, caste and class hierarchy and the changing rural–urban landscape.

Having said that, our records as participant observers have made it clear that gender dynamics continue to dominate the narrative of the kitchen. Women continue to play the expected traditional role of cooking and fending for the family, while adhering to numerous ritual practices of purity and pollution. The constrictions of gender norms run parallel to the ritual norms, particularly in caste Assamese households, as we have seen. It will perhaps not be unfair to say that groups of people belonging to the upper rungs of caste hierarchy choose to practise the rules and regulations of the kitchen space in a more stringent manner that those who occupy marginal positions in society, be it caste, religion, or race. Accompanying such a stringent adherence to rules is an almost inevitable sense of pride which we encountered while interacting with these families. Pride, coupled with nostalgia, and a sense of sanctity allotted to antiquated thought processes and practices that are in 'persistent threat of disappearing'. *'Sob laahe laahe naikiya hoi goi aase' …* (everything is disappearing slowly) is one of the most common expressions we would get to hear. Could we call this a case of assumed 'cultural preservation' borne as duty and responsibility by people exposed to the throngs of an ever-changing world? Surely the overarching impact of digitalism and technocracy does not go unhindered and unseen even in relatively remote areas of our states, cities and townships. Interesting in this context, then, is to witness greater flexibility and a 'moving-ahead-with-the-times' attitude among the families from the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy; for instance, the Bodos, the fishermen community, and the like. The kitchen stands as an interesting microcosm of the dynamics playing out in the larger society as individuals, families and communities of north Guwahati grapple with the onset of modernity, slowly but surely in the tactile spaces. Can we dream of, wish for, and look forward to a day when the kitchen is freed of its boundaries and its spaces thrown open to people from all social backgrounds? On occasions where we have seen this happen, for instance, in Mai Kachari *aita*'s kitchen, it has allowed culinary and cultural exchanges to flourish and nourish. Can we strive to construct a discourse of an open-for-all

hearth and dining space that makes the spirit of community dining intrinsic to Magh Bihu an everyday reality? Only time will tell.

NOTES

1. The phrase has been taken from Nabina Das's poem, 'Waiting for News', available at https://nabinadas13.wordpress.com/2010/08/17/surfaces-poetry-reading-chapbook-launch/ (accessed on 12 May 2019).
2. 'The *Thengal-Kacharis* are one of the many small ethnic communities belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid race with mythical ancestry. They are a clan of the *Bodo-Kachari* ethnic group. *Thengal-Kacharis* are one of the ancient inhabitants of Assam and have rich cultural history. The community is believed to have derived their name *Thengal* from an ancestor, who is said to have ascended to heaven leg foremost. It is also speculated that the community served the Ahom Kings and wore a uniform consisting of a long shirt or *thenga* shirt touching their heels which might have led to the name Thengal. Being one of the oldest inhabitants of this region, the *Thengal-Kacharis* have evolved various practices in conserving and sustaining the bio-resources. Women of this community have played a key role in sustainable use of bio-resources through various practices and knowledge systems that have been transmitted through generations.' Madhumita Barooah and Ajit Pathak (2008), 'Indigenous Knowledge and Practices of Thengal Kachari Women in Sustainable Management of Bari System of Farming', available at https://www.niscair.res.in/sciencecommunication/ResearchJournals/rejour/ijtk/Fulltextsearch/2009/January%202009/IJTK-Vol%208%20(1)-%20January%202009-%20pp%2035-40.htm (accessed on 12 May 2019).
3. The dominant faith of a group of people following Assamese Vaishnav Hindu norms, started by fifteenth-century socio-religious reformer Srimanta Sankardeva.
4. Vaishnav monks who live in monasteries, known as Xatras, under the supervision of Xatradhikars.
5. The chief priest of a Xatra, also known as Mahanta.
6. A rectangular bamboo frame used traditionally by the Mishing community to make smoked pork.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Figure 1: Afternoon lunch with a fisherman's family, Anandanagar, north Guwahati.

Figure 2: Kitchen objects, Anandanagar, north Guwahati.

Figure 3: The hearth: kitchen space, Anandanagar, north Guwahati

Figure 4: Tarabai's kitchen space, Krishnanagar, north Guwahati.

Figure 5: Lakkhi Das, Krishnanagar, north Guwahati.

Figure 6: Synergy of objects and spaces: Lakkhi Das's kitchen space, Krishnanagar, north Guwahati.

Figure 7: Rituparna with Mai Kachari *aita*'s family, Thengal-Kachari, Titabor.

Figure 8: Dhuasaang in Mai Kachari *aita*'s kitchen, a typical Mishing kitchen 'heirloom', Titabor.

Figure 9: Mai Kachari *aita* in the separate, empty room attached to the kitchen that serves as the dining space, Titabor.

Figure 10: 'Newra kota': a corridor space attached to the main kitchen that is used for storing materials, Mai Kachari's house, Thengal-Kachari, Titabor.

Figure 11: Corollary kitchen space: secondary kitchen that serves as the 'public' kitchen, where males are allowed to cook, indicating easier mobility in and out of it; at Mai Kachari's house, Titabor.

Figure 12: Rohi mod: traditional rice beer prepared by the Bodo community. This rice beer has been prepared over a year; at Rohdhola, north Guwahati.

Figure 13: Kitchen space, Rohdhola, north Guwahati.

Figure 14: Liquor preparation, Rohdhola, north Guwahati.

Figure 15: When the man cooks; at Muslim Gaon, Rangmahal, north Guwahati.