FOOD, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY: ORAL HISTORIES AND CULINARY PRACTICES

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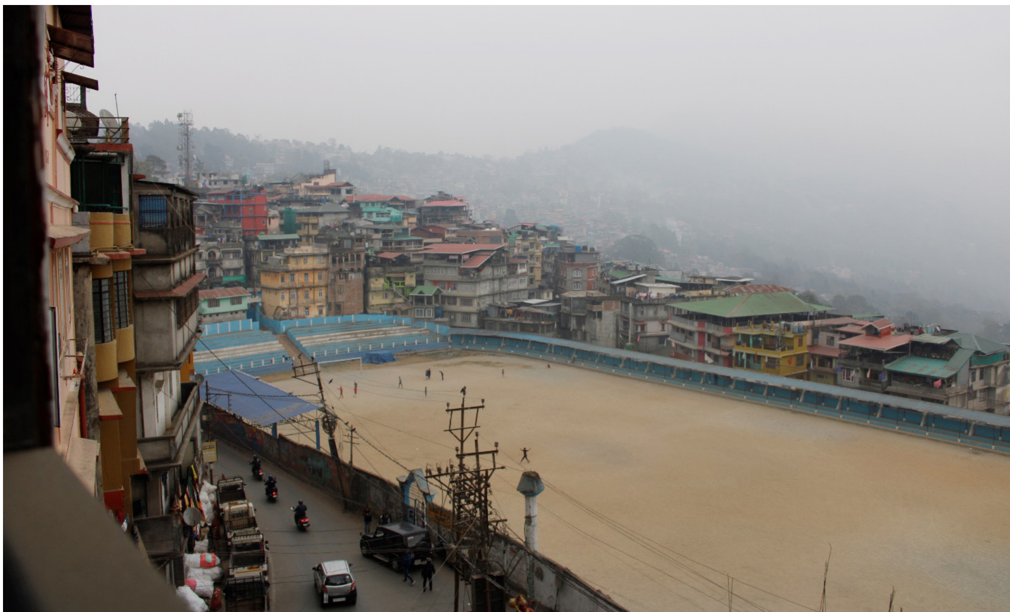
INTRODUCTION



Photograph 1: A view from a café in Mela Ground, Kalimpong.

'If there is one such thing about food, it is that it is never just about food,' asserts the literary theorist Terry Eagleton in his essay 'Edible Ecriture'. Eagleton thinks that food can multiply itself into several interpretations, and that its meaning is not static but continuous. Food that is served on a plate also serves as a metaphor for family, gender, sex, religion, social position, and group identity. Hence, what we eat or consume is often not just the food on the plate but also several edible metaphors. Food is said to communicate its thoughts and feelings through how it is prepared, and it is hailed as the mother of all arts. It holds much cultural significance, as it discloses the habits, customs, traits, and tastes of the community that it belongs to. Food often carries with it symbols of identity which then become a medium of communication with those who are consuming it. For instance, the waft of *momo* that hits one's senses in the middle of the busy bazaars of Kalimpong, a small town located in the northern part of West Bengal, becomes a cultural artefact that allows one to understand the embedded history of the region. Jars of *dalle ko achaar,* pickled round chillies, which are kept out on display in shops and houses, allowing them to bask in the sun, fill me with the feeling of home and provide a sense of belonging. They also act like a language, communicating between the producers and consumers. Garlands of *chhurpi,* Himalayan hard cheese, hang like beaded necklaces, especially in the shops of Tibetan ladies, alongside various assortments of *titauras,* sweet and tangy strips made out of a special fruit called *lapsi* or hog plum, mostly imported from Nepal. Thus, food or the way of preparing food becomes a communicative art. Peter Kubelka, an Austrian filmmaker and architect, also agrees that food becomes an old expression of worldview and identity.

It cannot be denied that the "task" of preparing food has always been assigned to women from time immemorial. Is it because of the belief that women are the sole nurturers of the family? The essence of womanhood is often measured by the way a woman cooks and the expertise she demonstrates in the kitchen. This notion has led to a majority of women holding themselves back and has restricted

Photograph 2: Haat Bazaar, Kalimpong.

them to only homemaking. Opinions indeed remain divided when considering whether women genuinely enjoy being homemakers or not. This largely depends upon a woman's personal choice, as values, beliefs, and preferences differ from person to person.

The interrelatedness of food and identity demands that women be at the centre, as the discourse of food carries with it the repetitive pattern of preparing food and consuming it. This pattern is often performed daily by women, and is mostly a result of being expected to do so. The inclusion of women is usually found to be missing in larger social structures. Women are thrust to the bottom rung, with their embedded histories erased further based on caste, class, race, and patriarchy. This kind of marginalisation undermines women and their stories. The struggles of women and their contributions are often pushed to the corner thus limiting women from walking closely with men as equal compatriots.

However, women like Renu Pradhan and Tshering Kipa in Kalimpong aren't deterred by such subjugation. Gorkhay Koseli is a popular shop in Kalimpong, which Renu runs like a one-woman army. Here you can find her huge collection of home-made pickles, and several imported items that also celebrate local eating habits. Tshering Kipa, on the other hand, is well-known in town for her makeshift shop in Haat Bazaar and her strategic entrepreneurial skills, which she displays with lively banter while selling wooden mortars and pestles and finding beauty in ordinary things.

In almost every household, the role of a woman in the kitchen is strongly felt but is also invisibilised and not acknowledged. Cooking as an activity holds social importance as the food that is served on one's plate nourishes the body and helps one to sustain life. Spaces like the kitchen stand as a representation of a woman's physical confinement, as most of the time, she is engaged in the repetitive task of serving a meal to her family. So when a woman cooks, it is considered "natural". These patriarchal beliefs are so rooted in one's mind that one can rarely think of a man occupying the kitchen. At the same time, the importance of the kitchen is minimal, often neglected, and this is a direct representation of a woman's place in the domestic hierarchy created by men. So they become invisible and disembodied beings, further so when their voices remain lost or overpowered by the sounds of the kitchen: pounding, grinding, sizzling, boiling, frying, and so on, or their voices are subjugated by patriarchal norms that don't often allow women to express themselves fully outside the kitchen space. This contributes to the historical oppression that women continue to experience, especially when it comes to measuring their intelligence, expertise, and creativity against men.

It is mostly women at the centre of the domestic cultural economy, as they are the ones who are trusted with the responsibility of making a home. They are considered natural, born homemakers. Since cooking food is an inevitable part of domestic life, it would be interesting to explore whether it is a part of women's marginalisation or empowerment. And if cooking is seen as the oldest expression

of one's worldview and identity, could women then be placed at the centre and no longer at the margins? A meal is often a mother's responsibility. A recipe gains more prestige when it becomes a "mother's recipe". Societal restrictions may have led women to learn mostly household chores, but the whole process of meal preparation and women's intricate relationships with food have allowed them to preserve testimonies of history which can also be revealed through the eating habits of a certain race and a community.

There is no denying the fact that there are men who love to cook. But the difference lies in the way the dynamics shift when talking about men's and women's relationships with food. Cooking in general is a gendered virtue, and as Anita Mannur writes in her book *Culinary Fictions,* women are most frequently 'associated with their positions within the domestic cultural economy [and] are often charged with the edifice of home life' (Mannur, 2010, p. 34). For women, unlike men, cooking is not a leisure activity, something they can associate with pleasure and play. Instead, for the majority of women, depending upon their respective class, caste, and community, the act of cooking is a part of the monotony of everyday life.

Cooking is a creative act, just like any other activity that demands an equal balance of skill, expertise, and imagination. However, in gendered discourse, women are repeatedly limited to the kitchen, and cooking has now become an integral part of their being. To be a daughter, a sister, a wife, or a mother is also to perfect the artistry of cooking, as the first requisite of being a "good" woman is to learn household chores. The ideal daughter is born only if she learns how to prepare a meal. The pressure intensifies with her age. Hence, a woman is left with no choice but to commit herself to the kitchen and cook as a performative body, and rarely stands against the patriarchal dogmas that have trapped her in the first place. Doesn't the act of cooking then become a robotic act for her?

Therefore, if food is a subject of discussion here, women are more than just performative bodies that can cook a meal, curate a cuisine, and pass down food knowledge to generations of women to come.

Nonetheless, in the camaraderie of women on food, a recipe or an ingredient when interpreted further is also likely to transform itself into a document on the oral history of the race or community that it may have come from. Thus, food becomes a key ingredient in reviving memories of the past in a manner where it could be possible to unearth a “feminine history” which otherwise may have been overshadowed by male dominance, as his story or history is her story too.

Thus, food serves as a sure medium through which to trace not only the memories of the past but also the subaltern histories of women. A retelling of the past is important, and food could provide an opportunity for women to look into the alternate narratives of women in relation to food and cooking which could help add more to the existing knowledge. At large, preparation of food is a woman’s inheritance and women must be allowed to make their voices heard. This will then add to the stock of knowledge on a region, race, or community, which has long been dominated by men.

Nation-building and identity formation are not a totally masculine occupation, even if the heterosexual patriarchy tries to silence the voices of women in general. The denial of women’s representation may have encouraged men to further overlook their contributions by controlling the discourse concerning identity and diaspora. However, in this play of power exercised by men, they tend to forget that, in the words of Mannur, ‘the domestic arena, so frequently associated with femininity, also becomes a space to reproduce culture and national identity’ (Mannur, 2010, p. 30).

Centring food as an important cultural artefact, this paper attempts to understand the history of Kalimpong as embedded in the food and food habits of its people, which are unique to the region. A diasporic consciousness is expressed through food, as the town serves as an “imaginary homeland” to many communities that historically have migrated here from elsewhere. Food in Kalimpong explores the human diaspora, and its connection with memory and identity is strong. It becomes an oral testimony of every community, as the food they prepare is a direct reflection of their social identity, their beliefs

and practices, and their unique norms and values. Roland Barthes, a French thinker on the semiotics of food, writes, 'For what is food? It is not only a collection of products. It is also at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, and a protocol of usages, situations and behaviours' (1979, p. 21). Thus, the question now arises of whether it is possible to think about food in terms of simplistic metaphors, or even complex ones that can effectively communicate the embedded history of a certain race, community, or nation as a whole.

One cannot be immune to Kalimpong's charm. Even if the culture of cafés is slowly gaining momentum, numerous legendary shops like Larks, Gorkhay Koseli, Lin Restaurant, and Shikhar provide a sense of nostalgia for what the town was like in the past. Their menus do not repeat the same lingo of various types of cafés with their cappuccinos, and neither can one find several kinds of pizza there. If Larks offers a glimpse into Kalimpong's past with European Christian missionaries, Gorkhay Koseli sets an example for how a middle-aged woman like Renu Pradhan can stand firm like a one-woman army in providing food knowledge through her huge collection of home-made pickles and several imported items that also celebrate local eating habits. Here, she successfully transgresses the boundary between the home and the world as she expresses her food knowledge and cooking expertise outside the kitchen space. In this process, she sets an example of a woman who is not bound by patriarchal dictums that state the act of cooking is limited to inside the house. The "ideal mother" who can cook with expertise can be an ideal entrepreneur too, and can share her food knowledge and cooking skills with the wider world.

On the days of Haat Bazaar, local produce from far-flung villages is displayed in the open in town. The vegetables are organic and the chickens are not reared on poultry farms. It is mostly the ladies who run the shops and who have now built a community and a sound domestic fellowship with one another. They treat each other less like strangers and more like members of the Haat clan, where almost everybody knows everybody. Apart from momo, a uniquely popular dish that one can only find during the days of Haat, there is the much-loved *phambi*.

This is a yellow jelly-like cube which, when mixed with spicy *achaar*, sauce, and served in a *paat* (a leaf picked with *sinka,* a thin stick), is a taste that I remember from childhood. The flavour stays the same. And since the town runs at its own pace, it is a common sight to witness people either clustering around the open momo stalls carrying bags of just-bought items or enjoying the peculiar taste of *phambi,* which one can also eat with Wai Wai, a variety of instant noodles especially popular amongst the hill community.

It is not a rare sight to witness women trusted with the responsibility of making a home. Since cooking food is closely connected to a person's life, it is interesting to see the contribution of women as a form of empowerment. And if cooking is seen as the oldest expression of one's worldview and identity, women then surely be placed at the center.

Through this paper, I aim to highlight the contribution of women in the society through food, which in turn gives a name to the community as often it is men's work that gets easily recognised and appreciated and forms a marker of the identity of a community. It is my purpose to open up a whole new discourse on food culture, wherein women form the identity of a community through their active participation in collecting, processing, and preserving food, and even marketing it. Their work also deserves to be placed within a broader economic worldview, and must not be pushed into the background as "the other". Food is crucial as it is an integral part of life. And since women share a much closer relationship with food, a community, race, or nation is dependent on women.

In this paper, my interest is in exploring the unrepresented and undocumented food items of Kalimpong that offer a mixture of history and taste at the same time. The amalgamation of several culinary practices that come from various communities is what gives a unique shape to the town, and this is explored through a focus on cooking and eating. In this way, I hope to be able to debunk the oft-carried stereotypes related to the hills of north Bengal. It is true and an undeniable fact that people have been traumatised by the revolutions

and movements related to Gorkhaland, a collective demand for a separate state in Darjeeling Hills. As a town, Kalimpong bears witness to myriad histories that have influenced its political crises, both past and present. I ask, can one look at the town through a whole new lens? Can food provide the much-needed shift in perspective, so that the town can also be studied considering the food and eating habits of the people?

The culinary history of the small hill town of Kalimpong is diverse. I will attempt to understand the eating habits of its people and the culinary practices related to them. I want to study food's contribution in shaping Kalimpong so that I can look at the town through a whole new lens, one other than the scarred memories of the gory violence that the town has witnessed in the past. For this, I rely on women and stories, especially connected with food. Since memory plays a central role in reviving these stories, the facts of these memories could be both fragmentary and partial. The women in the hills have been cooking, sharing recipes, and even capitalising on them for a very long time.

The permanent inhabitants of the town carry with them the rich history of their diasporic past. The influences of Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, and China are more profound than any other. This is mainly reflected in the food habits and the culinary practices that came with these diasporic communities, which have now offered the town its own unique identity. Hence, this paper studies the food habits of Kalimpong as a whole, and not just those of individual communities. In his essay titled 'Imaginary Homelands', Salman Rushdie writes, 'The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present' (Rushdie, 2010, p. 12). Rushdie's reference to the mirror is a way of saying that a reflection in a mirror does not just reflect reality, but also challenges it at the same time. Could food be that mirror, both reflecting and distorting realities at the same time, when it comes to women? The objective of this paper is to find new realities pertaining to the town and to the women who inhabit it. I will attempt to negate the realities, usually written and talked about, that employ a stereotypical understanding of the "other".

This paper attempts to study an "identity" through food by constituting its memory of the past, even if this is vague or fragmentary. By reading the language of the culinary practices and consumption of Kalimpong and its people, I aim to affirm the culinary ontology of the French gastronome Jean Brillat-Savarin – as he famously says in his book, *The Physiology of Taste,* 'Tell me what you eat, I'll tell you what you are' (Brillat-Savarin and Fisher, 1986, p. 15). However, unlike Brillat-Savarin's study on food and its connection with the entire well-being of a person, my research centres the interconnectedness of food with memory and history through the lives of women. After all, isn't the consumption of a dish also a way of tasting history on both the plate and the palate?

This paper is divided into three sections, the titles of which I have borrowed from the concept of a three-course meal: namely, Appetisers, the Main Course, and Desserts. In the first section, I have included three food items that successfully provide a perfect representation of the culture and history of Kalimpong as a town. I have especially selected *momo* as it has now become a soul food of Nepali-speaking Indians and, in the process, I have also tried to look into the several misunderstandings related to the dish. The second on the list is *sadeko gundruk,* an age-old practice of fermentation practised in Kalimpong especially by the people of the Nepali diaspora. I have linked this dish with *kimchi* and *sauerkraut* as it follows the same fermentation journey, even if the taste may differ. The last popular street snack that finds its place in Appetisers is *phambi,* which is said to be influenced by Tibetan and Chinese culinary practices.

The food items in the second section – the Main Course – are *sisnu ko jhol, khasi ko masu, sungur ra kinema, aloo phing shya,* and *iskus ko jara.* Here, the dishes come from the diverse cultures and communities that have learned to live together in Kalimpong. Through *sisnu ko jhol,* nettle soup, I have tried to understand the eating habits of the Lepcha community and their interconnectedness with nature. *Khasi ko masu,* goat's meat, is a much-favoured dish in the households of the upper-caste Hindu Nepali-Indians in Kalimpong. Similarly, *sungur ra kinema,*

pork cooked with fermented soybean, is a delicacy for the indigenous communities of the town, especially the Kiratas. Kalimpong is said to have been originally introduced to *kinema* by the Limbu community, and this has now become a favourite among those who can consider its "smell" an aroma. It is the same with *aloo phing shya,* as it is now also eaten by those who know how to cook delicious Tibetan dishes. Almost every popular Tibetan restaurant serves this dish, carefully reminiscing about Tibet. Lastly, *iskus ko jara* is a popular side dish that can be eaten by every community that thinks *iskus* is an ideal vegetable that represents the town well.

In the final section, Desserts, the items I have chosen are *kheer, Kalimpong lollipops, batare* or *damlo mithai,* and *chhurpi.* This mixed list is purposely curated to reflect the diversity of Kalimpong. If kheer is a representative dessert of the majority of Nepali-speaking people in town, *Kalimpong lollipops* bring alive the nostalgic past of the European missionaries in the town. *Batare* is also locally favoured, and is eaten more like a biscuit with tea by some. Lastly, *chhurpi,* especially the one with the hard texture, is a nutritious substitute for betel nut for the Himalayan community. In Kalimpong too, it is very popular, and is seen in the shops either hanging like garlands of beaded cubes or simply spread out to give passersby a clearer view.

APPETISERS

In his book, *Ways of Seeing,* John Berger writes that there are several ways of seeing the world (Berger, 1972, p. 1). One often sees it from one's own perspective. It is easy to lose the cultural meaning ascribed to objects when they are viewed by people who lack the knowledge to truly understand the culture they are engaging with. Several times, the misrepresentation of "other" communities in all forms of narrative, be they oral, visual, or written, is heard loud and clear. A book that became controversial for its misrepresentation of the Nepali-speaking Indian

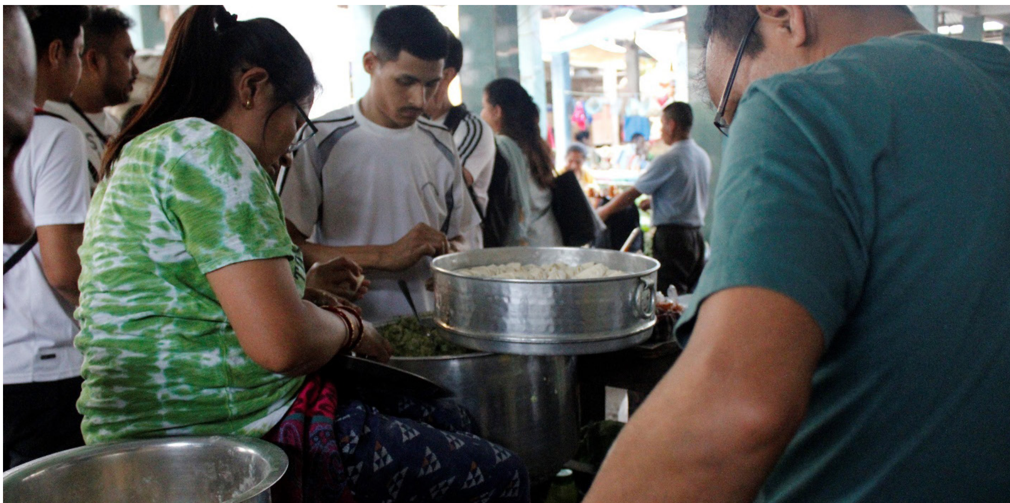
community was Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Another example is *Pataal Lok,* a TV show that wreaked havoc with its use of certain racial slurs. More generally, comments are often passed almost daily wherein communities and cultures of the "other" are labelled and stereotyped due to a lack of sound understanding.

So the question is, how can one try to gain a better knowledge of a certain place and the cultures that it belongs to?

It is perhaps possible to find several mediums that could work to bridge this gap between perception and understanding. Could food be one such medium, one that could fulfil the role of transmitting knowledge of a place and its people?

When one thinks of food, one also thinks about eating. And eating is considered a way of knowing what the food has to offer, going beyond the satisfaction of the palate. A food's offering could be its culinary history, which provides a sound understanding of the evolution of a certain kind of food and the eating habits of a specific culture and community. Thus, can food be used to understand a culture or a community better?

Momo



Photograph 3: Men and women involved in the momo-making process at Haat Bazaar, Kalimpong.

When loitering on the streets of Kalimpong, it is a common sight to witness ladies huddled in some corner beside a gas stove where the *moktu* gives off steam and wafts of intense flavour. These ladies could be married, unmarried, straight, queer, Hindu, Christian, Nepali, Tibetan, dark, fair, literate, illiterate, upper caste, or lower caste, and they could hold many other differences amongst themselves. But what binds them together is their love for a typical dish, which has now gained much popularity in India.

Momo enjoys a celebrity status in Kalimpong, and the ladies are aware of it. The streets of this little town are not bustling and are not busy, but they also don't remain empty. The pedestrians are quite slow walkers, and sometimes get so lost in their camaraderie that they forget that the narrow footpaths aren't the corridors of their houses where they can walk as leisurely as they want to.

The reason why *momo* is a perfect representation of the people of the hills, and more precisely of Kalimpong, is because it has now become like an identity marker for the hill community. And in the gaze of an outsider, *momo* and Nepali have almost become synonymous. They are so interconnected that when food, or rather Nepali food, is mentioned, *momo* often tops the list.

On unearthing the culinary history of this particular dish, one can find its origin in Tibet, one of the trading partners of Kalimpong in the past. It is possible that travelling Tibetan merchants could have introduced the dish to the town, and when people acquired its taste, they began to accept it as their own. However, there is no straight explanation for the cultural assimilation of *momo* by the people and the town.

Its preparation often demands a lengthy process. The skill of the hand is what matters the most. One has to be an expert at folding the tiny covering so meticulously that it looks like a pleated skirt. Is there an easy answer as to whether a man or a woman could perform the art of making *momo* well? This is because both are seen making it, and they often stand at par with each other. The kitchen is usually considered to be a woman's space, but could it be a man's too?

Gender differences seem to dilute when making *momo* as men often willingly participate in the entire process alongside the women of their household. From chopping onions to grinding meat for *kheema,* a *momo* filling, most men do not consider the preparation to be only the responsibility of women. Thus, men's visibility in the kitchen equals that of women, and sometimes surpasses it.

It surprises me sometimes to witness women handling the task of cooking and cleaning every day like it is a responsibility assigned to them by birth. Do they perform daily household chores out of liability, domestic responsibility, or out of genuine interest and care? And I look at society with equal astonishment when it lauds and glorifies men when they enter the kitchen. I do not stop myself from asking who is to be praised. Isn't the relationship that a woman shares with the kitchen deeper? It is because often in a traditional society, a woman is intrinsically connected with the kitchen. And is it fair to say that she holds more understanding of the chores like cooking and cleaning? If so, then why are men looked at with reverence and awe when they cook rarely, or even leisurely or even if they cook every day, their expertise receives more appraisal?

In her book *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?* Katrin Marcal coins a new term, 'second economy' (Marcal, 2016), which she correlates with the 'second sex' (de Beauvoir, 1949). Here she talks about the other kinds of work that, according to her, a man doesn't do. And this work that a woman does is taken for granted and remains invisible. The "invisible" work that Marcal discusses in her book is all about domestic chores, which include cooking and cleaning. Further, she writes, 'This definition meant that everything that women were expected to dedicate themselves to went unseen' (Marcal, 2016, p. 30).

In the context of *momo,* I have noticed women championing culinary capital more than men. This is because the dish also serves as a business strategy for struggling working-class people from the hills. Undoubtedly, it helps create job opportunities for them as the

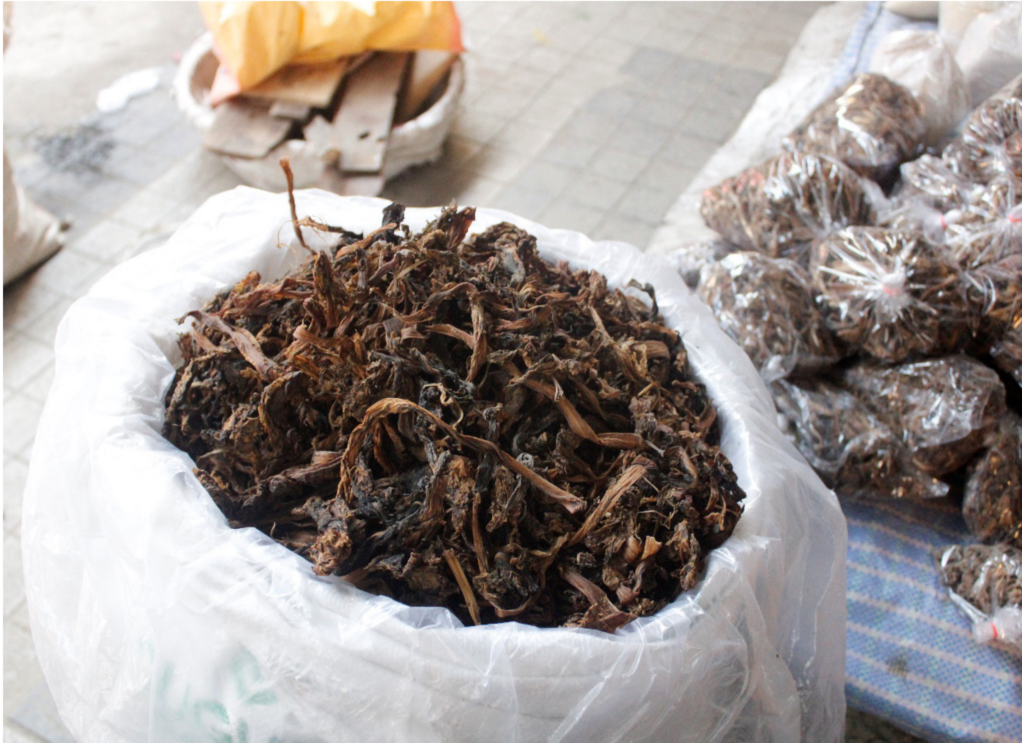
love for *momo* transcends cultural and caste boundaries when served with *piro* (spicy) *achaar,* and dipping sauce. The makeshift stalls of the ladies in town rarely invite caste and racial prejudices as the visitors' concern is mainly about the taste of the food compared to who made it. The diasporic women in Kalimpong remain divided politically and culturally. And within some of these communities, a caste hierarchy is deeply rooted. However, *momo* has almost acquired the status of a regional dish, thus binding people together when served on a plate.

Momo khanu jum! [Let's go eat momo!] is a phrase shared by the people of Kalimpong, as there is nothing better than these succulent dumplings, and their taste heightens when dipped in *piro achaar*. It is like the soul food of the hill people and also a community dish that brings people together under one roof. As much as the American southern fried chicken is loved all over the world, *momo* is gaining prominence. If not, would there be *tandoori momo* or *bun momo*?

However, the cultural appropriation of *momo* is so rampant that people who do not understand the culinary cultures of the hill community well have created several of their own versions of *momo,* which are often very different from the original. When a mandatory 's' is added to the name, momo(s), it makes it as obscure as when pizza suddenly becomes 'pizzas', the dish forcibly pluralised. The achaar that is served with momo becomes *chutney* in the outsider's gaze. On one hand, it is not wrong to introduce new interpretations of food, but is it also right to deprive the dish of its very essence?

In Kalimpong, or the Darjeeling Hills as a whole, *momo* is more than just a food item; it carries the emotions of its people who take pride in this delicacy being something of their own. And even though the dish has travelled from Tibet through Nepal to the Darjeeling Hills, *momo* has not gone through any such radical changes, at least in Kalimpong or in the Darjeeling Hills.

Sadeko Gundruk



Photograph 4: Sun-dried gundruk.

Another staple that is shared by almost all the communities living in Kalimpong is *gundruk.* It is undoubtedly a grandmother's recipe, at least in my household. It successfully reflects the history of the town's Nepali diaspora. However, it became difficult for me to find the etymological meaning of the word *gundruk* because there wasn't much information surrounding the name. Everybody only talked about its taste and how versatile it was as a dish. The culinary roots of *gundruk* can be traced back to Nepal, where it is as valued and revered as *kimchi* in Korea or *sauerkraut* in Germany. The similarities between the three different dishes lie in their shared fermentation journey, which is much required for their rich umami flavour.

Sadeko gundruk, marinated *gundruk,* is a family favourite in my house. Only my grandmother made it well, as she mixed her recipe with interesting anecdotes about the food history of the Nepali community.

She once said, "*Hami kheti-pati garne manche haru hau. Keti manche bhaera saag ropnu pani siknu parcha anta pakaunu pani. Bujis?*" [Our livelihood depends on agriculture. As a woman, one should learn to plant the greens and cook them too. Do you understand?]

Her statement left me pondering, as I couldn't agree with what she said about the importance of learning how to cook as a woman. We were both female, but we shared dissimilar views. When I asked her if she liked cooking, she gave me firm repeated nods. That was also the time when my radical feminism suffered a huge blow, as my graceful grandmother never complained about cooking for her family. Instead, cooking made her feel empowered, unlike me, who refused to cook or step inside the kitchen because for me, it was not only a woman's job to handle the household.

She wanted to teach me to make *sadeko gundruk.* I agreed, breaking my obstinacy for the very first time.

Her story started from the beginning of her teenage years when, according to her, Kalimpong was not the same as it is today. She often complained about the rapid modernisation of the town and believed that its old-world charm was slowly fading away. She had vague memories of her grandfather's history of migration, who she knew had come from Nepal for a better life and better opportunities. As a high-caste Hindu, he inherited a few acres of land and started his agricultural livelihood.

The process of making *gundruk* happened in the winter season, when there were enough greens from the fields. Along with her sisters and mothers, she would collect leafy vegetables such as *raayo ko aaag,* broad-leafed mustard greens, and *mulako saag,* radish leaves. The leaves were then allowed to wilt for one or two days and were later shredded with a knife or sickle. The wilted and shredded leaves were stuffed inside an earthenware pot, and left on their own for about five to seven days.

The fermentation process would end soon after as the *gundruk* acquired a strong acidic taste. And *sadeko gundruk* is one of the many dishes that was prepared with raw acidic *gundruk.* My grandmother

was always clear about the differences between *gundruk ko achar* and *sadeko gundruk.* The former was made out of the rehydrated leaves of dried gundruk, and the latter was prepared straight out of the just fermented non-dried *gundruk.*

However, this could be considered a trademark dish of my grandmother, who taught me that *sadeko gundruk* was best made with mustard oil with a pungent smell, which we called *khane tel,* finely chopped onions, green chillies, salt, and coriander leaves. When all of this was mixed together, the *sadeko gundruk* was ready.

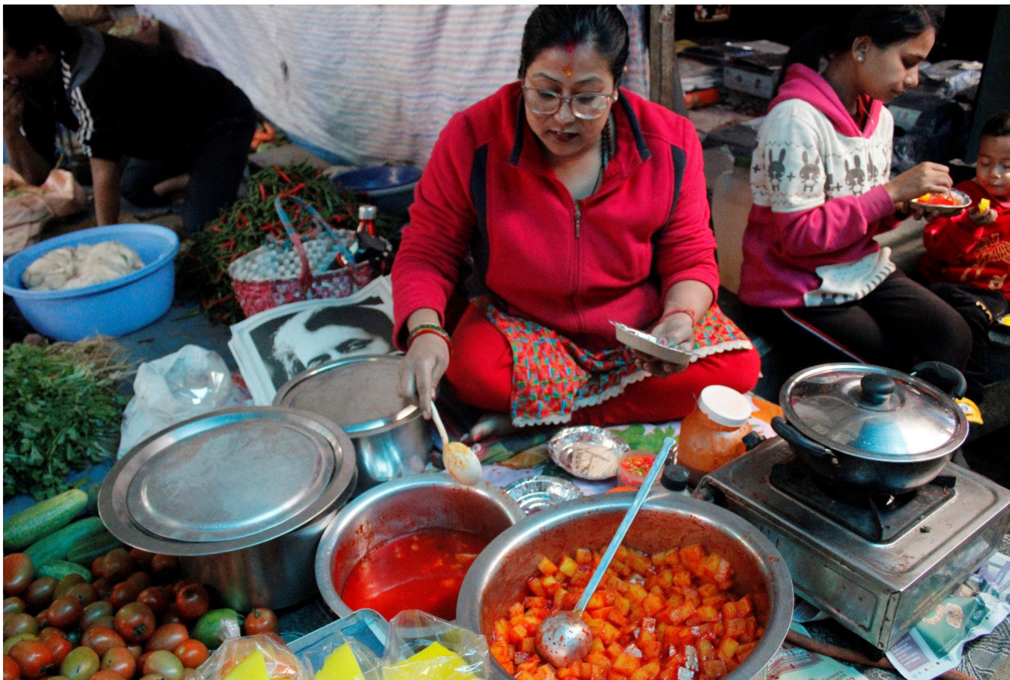
Dried gundruk is also eaten as *gundruk ko jhol* (gundruk stew), and gundruk ko achar (marinated dried gundruk). But in whatever form it is made, *gundruk* is an essential comfort food for the diasporic Nepali community.

I successfully learned to make the dish and embraced this generations-old culinary culture as a new part of my cosmopolitan lifestyle. However, I could not fully accept my grandmother's mandatory requirement for a woman to learn cooking. Why was it that, for my grandmother, cooking was a prerequisite to qualify as a woman? This was hard for me to comprehend.

After all, isn't cooking similar to any kind of chore in the daily life of a person? My grandmother and I shared the same world but not the same worldviews. She insisted till the last that it was important for me to learn cooking, not as an individual, but as a woman. When I tried to ask for a reason, she told me that she was told the same by her mother or the women in her family. I wanted to ask why cooking was always so intrinsically linked to a woman's identity. For my grandmother, her cooking skills were the expression of her identity as a woman. It was not the same for me. Though I learned to make *sadeko gundruk,* I saw daily ritualistic cooking as a mark of disempowerment and enslavement. However, whether cooking could be looked upon as a mark of love or a symbol of slavery is a highly contested question. My grandmother certainly held on to the traditional beliefs that considered men to be the providers for the family. Hence, she insisted that I learn to cook so that I fit in well with the traditional role that is assigned to a

woman, as she is expected to be the nurturer in the familial household. When viewing these gender roles through the lens of the modern world, it rather depends upon the choice of an individual. Some women enjoy cooking and looking after their family, whereas there are also women who choose not to learn cooking and refuse to be a programmed homemaker just because it has been that way in the past, a grandmother's lore passed down from one generation to the next that a woman needs to learn how to cook.

Phambi

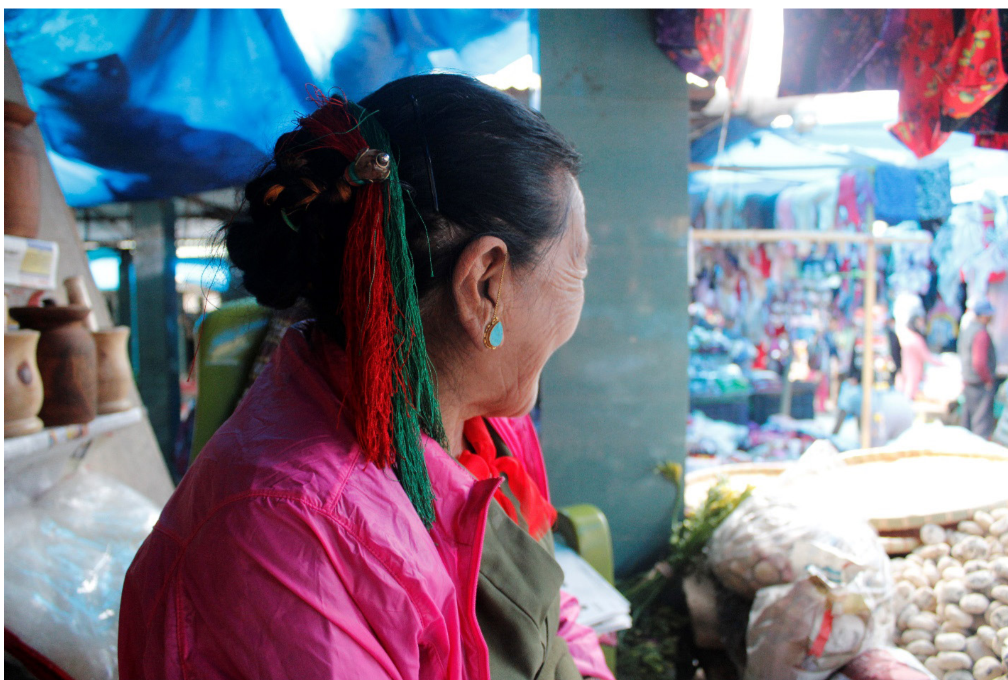


Photograph 5: A woman selling *phambi* amidst the bustle of the weekly market.

Haat Bazaar, the local village market in Kalimpong, is almost like a heritage site that offers its visitors a one-of-a-kind experience of regional flavours that come from the deepest and most far-flung villages in and around the town. It is also a hub of delectable local dishes that one can try. Most of the time, people come here to try a quintessential and popular street food called *phambi*. According to the

locals, it is the only dish that is found in Kalimpong and nowhere else, not even in Darjeeling.

On my visits to Haat Bazaar, I noticed that the ladies had a wise understanding of food economics and championed the culinary diversity of the town through their food stalls. Amidst the diasporic histories that each one of them carried, I could notice them faithfully representing their culture in the diaspora. If not food, they sold items needed in the kitchen or heirloom seeds and spices that represented their village and the kind of community they came from.



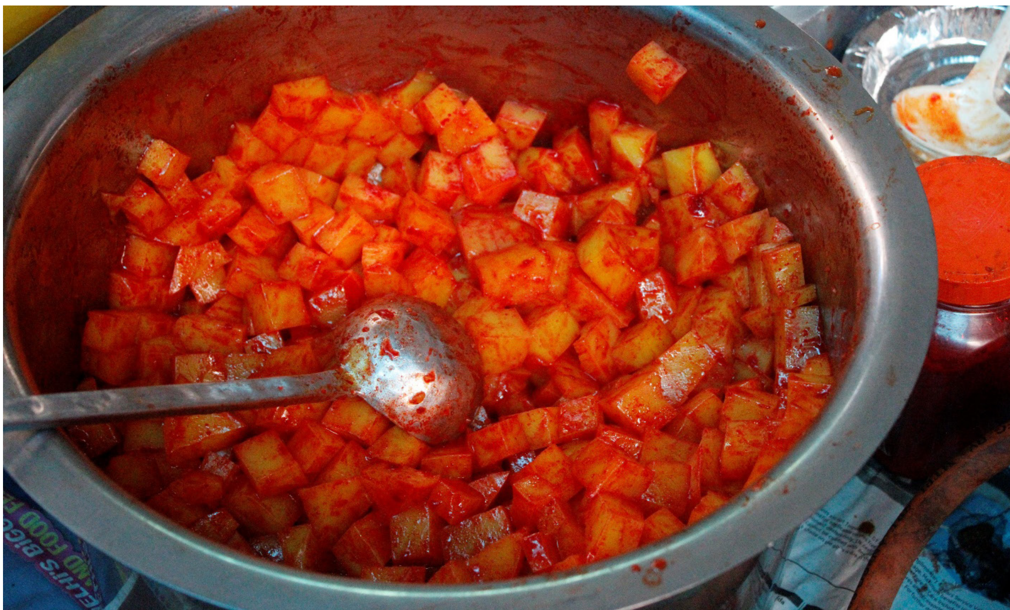
Photograph 6: Tshering Kipa in her shop. She has paired her traditional dress with *lacha dori*.

When I first talked to Tshering Kipa, I was instantly impressed by her vivacious nature and her Tibetan attire. She completed her look with *lacha dori*, which is a hair accessory that is also popular amongst Nepali women, mostly worn during weddings and festivals. In my observation, it felt as if she had mixed the two cultures, which made her stand out in comparison to all the ladies who were close by.

She was as curious as I was to know more. So, I sat beside her and we began to talk. Her shop sold traditional hand-carved mortars and pestles, and *marcha,* which she said was an important ingredient that helped in brewing traditional alcohol. Soon, she revealed that she was born in the year 1947 and was the thirteenth child. Her mother died when she was very young. Her father, Chwang Udup, loved her very much, and he took her along with him as he carried out his daily business and also taught her entrepreneurial skills. He used to run a cosmetics shop before, and they would go together to watch night shows where magic tricks were performed. She told me that she also remembered watching Harish Chandra Raja on the big screen.

Tshering Kipa was one of the many ladies in Haat Bazaar who were the unsung heroines of their communities. She was passionate about her work and refused to sit at home just to handle the house or the kitchen.

'It is impossible for me to sit still. When my father was alive, we would go on rotations in places like Lava, Pedong, Teesta, and Melli. I am old now. I can't do that anymore. But I still spread my shop in Teesta,' she said, smiling.



Photograph 7: *Phambi* being prepared in a *dekchi*.

As I passed on to the shop next to her, I went inside a narrow alley where a young woman was busy selling *phambi* from her huge dekchi, a silver cauldron that sat on top of the stove in her small makeshift kitchen. She served the yellow jelly-like cubes on a leaf plate mixed with *achaar*, a dipping sauce made out of red chillies. The combination of *phambi* with *achar* provides a unique taste to this popular Kalimpong street snack, which is made out of the starch water of soaked mung beans. The dish is mainly influenced by the Chinese cold noodles *Liang Fen,* which are spicy in flavour and slippery in texture and are usually eaten with soy sauce. When it reached Tibet, it became *laphing,* which is also sold in Delhi as a popular Tibetan street food. *Phambi* is somewhat similar to *laphing* in one aspect, as both dishes were supposedly introduced to the town by Tibetans.

The lady who ran the *phambi* shop was confident that it was the Tibetans who should be credited for its origins. She narrated a story from her schooldays, when *phambi* hadn't yet become the popular Kalimpong street snack it is today. According to her, there were very few shops that sold *phambi* back then, and it was mostly the Tibetans who owned them.

In many parts of the world, lentils or bean paste are often used to make fritters or *pakoras*. But *phambi's* speciality lies in the fact that it is made out of the accumulated lump in the starch water of moong dal, which is then made into a thin paste and cooked until the consistency is thick. The cooked product is then stored in a refrigerator, and is later cut into cubes.

Over time, *phambi's* popularity has grown so much that it hasn't remained an exclusively Tibetan dish in Kalimpong. Therefore, the ladies who sell it in Haat Bazaar do not necessarily belong to the Tibetan community, but have successfully imbibed its food culture and have made it their own. *Phambi* has become a quintessential street snack of Kalimpong.

As Katrin Marcal says, 'Men have always been allowed to act out of self-interest—as in economics, so in sex. For women, this freedom has been taboo' (Marcal, 2016, p. 29).

Hence, the street vendors in Kalimpong's Haat Bazaar, who are often women, are successful in breaking this taboo by 'maximising [their] gain' (Marcal, 2016, p. 10), even if society often tells them that women are not entitled to go beyond the kitchen or aim further than marriage and childbirth.

The exclusion of women from public spaces continues in today's "progressive" era. Women are still tied down to private spheres and limited to activities that do not let them step outside of the "home".

However, it is quite different for the ladies of Kalimpong's Haat Bazaar, who seemingly spend as much time in the private as they do in the public spaces.

MAIN COURSE

> *Bhaat khane? Bhaat khaeu? Bhaat khaera jau!*
> (Do you want to eat rice? Did you eat rice? Eat rice and go!)

Dal bhaat tarkari (lentils, rice, and curry) are a staple diet of every household in Kalimpong. *Bhaat* is often a way of life that binds people together as a community of rice-eaters. For the Nepali diaspora, and according to the Nepali calendar, *Ashar Pandra* is officially marked as a rice-planting festival. It falls in the month of June-July. Men are usually responsible for ploughing the fields, while the women plant the rice saplings in muddy water. A special dish called *dahi-chiura,* curd with beaten rice and sugar, is eaten on this day to keep hunger at bay.

Sisnu ko Jhol

In the social demographic of Kalimpong, *bhaat* is preferred by the majority of diasporic communities in their daily diet. Though dal is usually preferred with *bhaat,* some people also substitute it with *sisnu ko jhol,* nettle soup, when it's in season. Also, *sisnu* gives a visual

representation of the rich flora of the region. It is not appealing to the eyes, dark green with tiny thorns which look like bristles, and when touched, it stings and burns the skin. The embedded culinary history of *sisnu ko jhol* is that of the Lepchas, as it is one of their traditional dishes and also shows their interconnectedness with the forests, jungles, and rivers, rather than the green lush paddy and corn fields. Lepchas are considered to be the early inhabitants of Kalimpong, and “Kalimpong” is the Anglicised version of the original Ka-lem-pung, which is believed to be a Lepcha word. As A.R. Foning writes in his book *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, Ka means ‘we’ or ‘our’, Lem- means ‘play’, and Pun,o-means ‘ridge’, which then becomes “the ridge where we play”.

Foning goes on to write that events or organised sports would take place in the vast Lepcha Land and, on the ridge, camps would be set up and games would be organised. According to mythology, the Lepchas refer to their tribal homeland as Mayal Lyang, a Garden of Eden, created by Itbu-mo, the mother creator herself. And it was the patriarch Ajyo Rengay who left the hearth and first came down to the Rumtek-Song area of Renjyong, in Sikkim, and settled down in Chibo Kyong, a village in Kalimpong. At the same time, the Lepchas are an indigenous tribe. Hence, as Foning writes, ‘hunting and fishing are our traditional way of living’ (Foning, 1987). The concept of “primitive communism” is also not new to the Lepchas, whose way of eating and culinary practices aid the distressed and also focus on creating a life using a minimum of nature’s offerings.

Sisnu ko jhol has now gained wider acceptance as it is even served in one of the popular restaurants in Kalimpong. At the same time, it also carries with it tales of women whose performative bodies freed themselves from their shackles to become like wandering fireflies. This is because *sisnu* is considered to be a forager’s superfood, and the tales of mothers and grandmothers often reveal their acclaimed freedom in the wild in contrast with the confined spaces of their homes. By foraging for *sisnu,* they could discard the masks demanded by the norms of patriarchy. They could be free to express themselves in the most absolute and authentic way by running across the valleys

yelling and shouting into an endless void, as if reclaiming their power as opposed to feeling restricted by society's gaze in their daily life.

Khasi ko Masu

The kitchen sounds most active when a pressure cooker lets out several shrill whistles; spices are pounded, crushed, or ground with the use of modern appliances or through traditional methods. Spices play a central role in any Indian kitchen, and in the culinary practices of South Asia as a whole. In general, spices contribute to adding soul to the Indian kitchen. The role of spices in any kind of dish is to add flavour and aroma, so that even the most basic of dishes are scintillating to the palate. The deliciousness of the food is closely aligned with the way spices are used when cooking a particular dish. Thus, the transition of a dish from ordinariness to excellence depends upon the skills of the hands that handle the spices in the kitchen. In other words, spices add colour, flavour, and pleasure to food. A dish without the right amount of spices will taste bland and will not look appealing to the eyes of a consumer.

Though women share an intricate relationship with spices, this all changes if a woman is a widow. The eating habits of my Bari gradually changed when my Bara (her husband), my father's elder brother, passed away tragically. Mutton curry is the most favoured dish in any Chhetri household within the Nepali community. *Khasi ko masu,* which translates in English as goat's meat, is what every Chhetri family revels in during *Dashain* or *Dusshera,* a common Hindu festival hugely celebrated in India. The upper-caste Chhetri clan's tradition of eating only goat meat asserts their caste supremacy, as they are often placed next to the Brahmins. They also trace their lineage from the Khas Arya, who belonged to the Indo-Aryan linguistic group that is considered to be native to the Himalayan region of South Asia.

Spices play an active role in preparing *khasi ko masu.* This fiery traditional curry is cooked with a combination of spices like cardamom pods, cloves, bay leaves, and cinnamon sticks. The delectable aroma

that comes out of the dish is what I often call the 'scent of heaven'. In my family, our collective "sensory evaluation" identifies this particular meat curry as one that can easily evoke gustatory pleasure.

My Bari stopped eating and cooking meat after her husband's death. I then began to notice an array of changes in her lifestyle and eating habits. Her colourful world suddenly became colourless as she began to dress in softer tones. White substituted for red, just like how she began to lean more towards the *sattvic* diet as opposed to the *tamasic* or *rajasic* one. She was also not given a choice by the customary laws that a widow is expected to follow in a traditional Hindu upper-caste household. Her husband's death signalled a new beginning in her life, where she had to lose sight of who she was and enter into a life where vibrant colours were not allowed, just like the spices in her food.

While she readily agreed to this new lifestyle, I often wondered whether she ever thought about her older self. The kind of life she led when her husband was alive where she could fully embrace her youth, beauty, desire, and food choices. It is because when she entered her widowhood, her life lacked lustre. One could only imagine the grief that she had to endure along with her restricted lifestyle, where her very existence was still attached to her dead husband.

She mourned the loss by shunning food that could hurt her consciousness. Perhaps she felt safe consuming and cooking a sattvic diet which would make her 'calm' as opposed to the over-stimulating energy that rajasic food is said to carry, or the tiredness or sluggishness that is said to result from the tamasic diet.

Khasi ko masu, which is cooked in a combination of spices, also has a strong taste of ginger and garlic. It's not just spices—a widow within an orthodox Hindu family that follows strict customs (often laid down by the patriarchy) can't eat or cook with garlic.

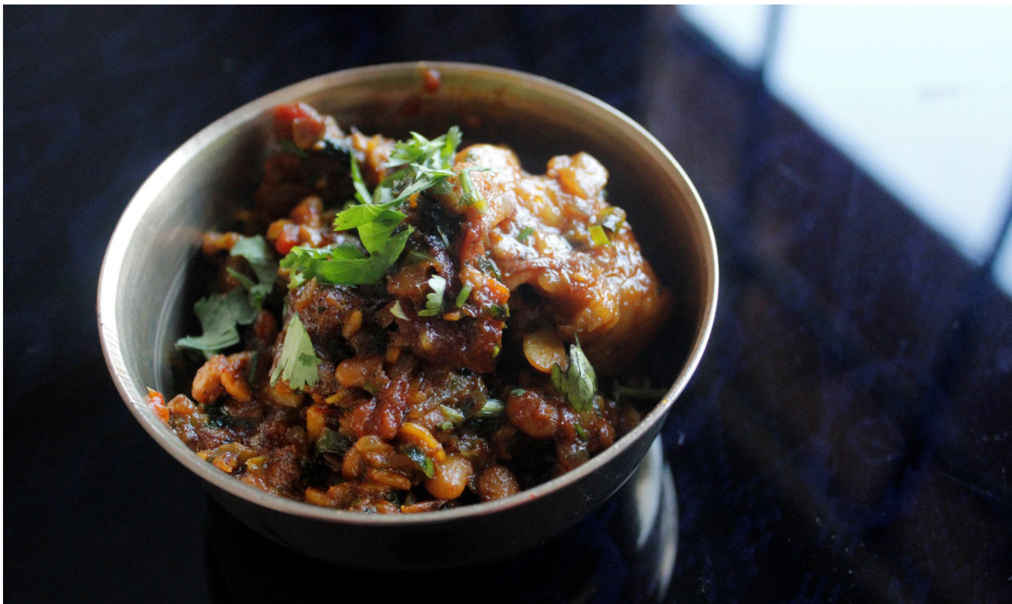
Since my Bari too was committed to being loyal to her deceased husband, she abstained from meat, spices, and garlic. Did she not allow herself to desire or were they forbidden? Desire is something that a widow is told to curb so that her commitment to her husband is not

in jeopardy, and it is often food that is seen to be able to stimulate changes in her consciousness.

Should one consider it a mark of her misfortune? Or is she an epitome of bravery and resilience in an otherwise patriarchal world?

The strong aroma of *khasi ko masu* is always a museum of memories every time it is cooked and it evokes mixed emotions of both laughter and sadness when one realises how food can serve as a gustatory pleasure, but can also draw a boundary in the life of a woman who is barely given a chance to enjoy herself, especially if she is an upper-caste widow.

Sungur ra Kinema



Photograph 8: *Sungur ra kinema*, pork with fermented soybean, served in Cloud9, Kalimpong, by Ishita Dewan.

Sungur ra kinema, pork with fermented soybean, was another dish that revived old memories related to the subjugation that my mother faced in the family because her tastes did not quite align with how the rest of the family ate. It was served to me at one of Kalimpong's popular restaurants, and came in a thali dish alongside other delicacies.

More than *sungur* (pork), *kinema* (fermented soybean) excited my palate because of its rich umami flavour. The gustatory nostalgia was strong as it took me back to my mother's kitchen where she cooked it with her instinctual culinary understanding, often with freshly picked spring onions, tomatoes, green chillies, and garlic cloves. But it wouldn't sit well with my grandfather and my aunt, as they couldn't tolerate the smell that the fermented soybean exuded. Their aversion to the smell also indicated their lack of an understanding of dishes that did not have a place inside the kitchen of a Khas-Chhetri household.

On the other hand, even if my mother was a pure Brahmin/Bahun from the Khas-Brahmin clan, she was accustomed to the rancid smell that *kinema* filled the air with every time it was cooked. The smell transformed into an aroma in her sensory experience. It was an adopted cultural food practice, as *kinema* is considered a quintessential ethnic food of the Kirata community, mostly the Rais and the Limbus. I always grew conflicted when witnessing my mother's easy adaptation of a different culture on her plate, which contrasted with my grandfather's denial of the same. However, it was easy to notice that if food could connect and bring together differing cultures, it also easily divided cultures and gave rise to further divisions.

My mother prepares a dish out of *kinema* in her unique way. But in the process of cooking it, she also travels back to the ancient history of the Kirata community by embracing a more than fifteen-year-old food tradition that differs from her upbringing in a non-indigenous Hindu household. In the kitchen, she forges new alliances with *kinema,* a word which is said to be derived from the Limbu word *kinambaa,* in which *ki* stands for fermentation and *nambaa* means flavour. To her, this difference is as palatable as it is to me.

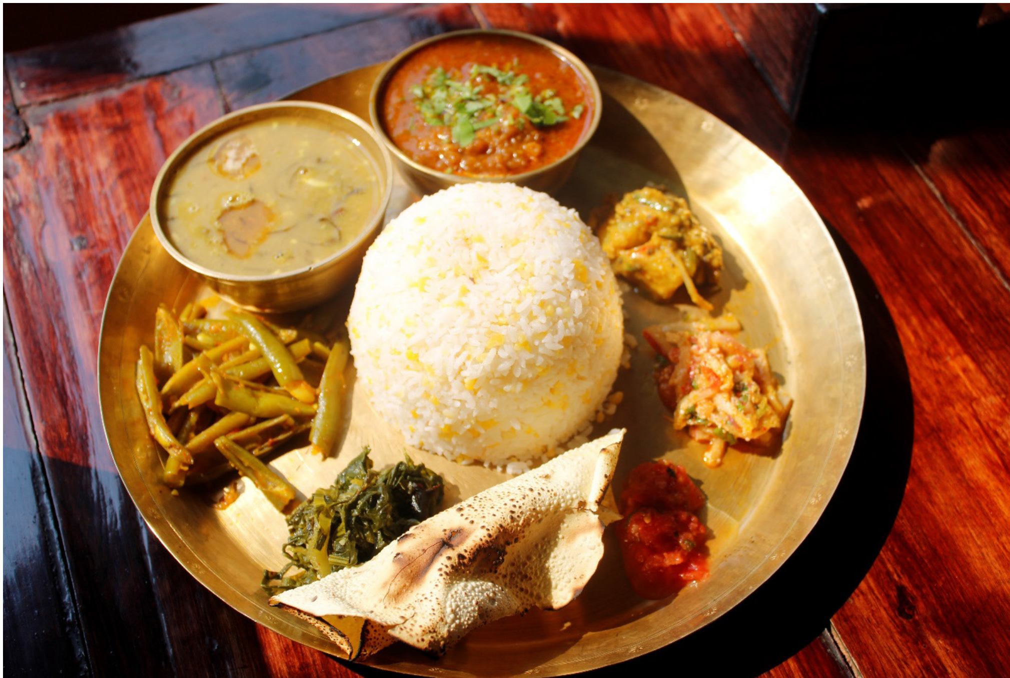
Sungur ra kinema goes best with white rice in any season of the year. When mixed with the flavourful gravy of kinema, the fatty chunks of pork create an explosion of imaginary firecrackers inside one's mouth. It is also with an umami flavour that the Japanese would describe as a "pleasant savoury taste" that each bite of *kinema* leaves the taste buds dancing. There is no doubt that it has a lasting aftertaste that

drives a hunger for more. When my mother cooks *kinema* at home, I always consider it a celebration of two cultures coming together and thus paying homage to the Kirata community's age-old tradition of fermentation. It is a tribute to the successful multiculturalism in my house, where even our awareness of cultural and caste differences manages to connect with the sameness of my mother's and my taste in food. Though *sungur* has never been a preferred meat in my house, *kinema* manages to transgress caste and cultural boundaries, thus defying all kinds of snobbery related to food. The intolerance towards its smell transforms into an aroma for me and my mother, and even when the rest of my family resists it, we both embrace it by making it one of the choicest dishes on our plate. It is also a known fact that the more intense the smell of *kinema,* the deeper its flavour.

Aloo Phing Shya

Photograph 9: A thali dish which incorporates the tastes and flavours of both Kalimpong and Nepal at Cloud9, Kalimpong.

Locating identity in Kalimpong is often difficult for people. In such cultural diversification, the place stands as a flower garden of all castes and ethnic groups, which thus reflects Kalimpong's social, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity. But if food could bridge these differences and connect everyone to oneness, I bring before my eyes an imaginary thali where a wholesome meal is put together by taking into consideration the tastes of the people of Kalimpong. After all, a thali reflects food memories; it is a platter offering the choicest dishes specific to a region, a representation of how people eat.



Photograph 10: A thali dish which represents a traditional Nepali home-cooked meal served at Chula, The Himalayan Kitchen by Yachna Rizal.

However, the town, being a palimpsest, offers multi-narratives of history to its people. In my "imaginary" thali, I aim to shed light on Tibetan culture and bring before my eyes a locally loved dish called *aloo phing shya*. I find it on the menu of a Tibetan restaurant whose owner claimed to be a Tibetan refugee, but is now well settled in Kalimpong. As much as I was intrigued by and interested in the name,

I especially tried to find out more about *phing,* a soybean thread noodle that is easily available and manufactured in Kalimpong, and is exported on a global scale. A lady in a shop that I visited readily started to share her own stories related to *phing* and the dishes made out of it. She confirms that it was the Tibetans who first introduced it to the town and its people. Her eyes light up as she starts to teach me the way a *phing* dish could be made. I am told that the dried noodles need to first be soaked in water, and once they acquire the needed slippery texture, they can be mixed with potatoes, vegetables, wood ear mushrooms, and even meats of one's choice. She doesn't belong to the Tibetan community but is a Khas-Chhetri by birth. But her love for *phing* seems so profound that she encourages me to try it too.

Aloo phing shya, however, is a dish of another kind that carries the nostalgia of a Tibetan kitchen in a host land outside of Tibet. As I entered the restaurant and found myself a place to sit, I noticed a huge poster of the Potala Palace pasted on the adjacent wall. I gazed at it for a while as if trying to understand its history. Soon, Tibetan rap music filled the silence of the room (I was the only visitor at the time), and around me was a group of men who were ready to serve me. When the owner confidently identified himself as a Tibetan refugee who first came to Dharmshala in Himachal Pradesh and later to Kalimpong, I didn't fail to recognise the love for his homeland which he brought with him and now shared with others through food such as *aloo phing shya.* Perhaps a kitchen can become a space that can reproduce culture and national identity. And this is why the picture of the Potala Palace stood as a reminder of the lost homeland of the Tibetans. It did not matter to the exiled community which part of the planet they were on; they carried fragmented memories of the past, especially through their cuisine. Food indeed reflects one's identity, and it inevitably interacts with the world.

In the little restaurant, which skillfully incorporated minute details from Tibetan culture and tradition, I did not notice the presence of any women around. *Aloo phing shya,* in this particular restaurant, was a grandmother's recipe, as I was told by her grandson, but her

contribution did not occupy much space on the menu card. The kitchen in a restaurant is different from what one finds at home. Here, a man positioned himself as a chef, and his “domestic labour” did not stay unpaid. Nobody considered his culinary practices as something that held no meaning. Perhaps because cooking and cleaning, in society’s general understanding of the terms, are always considered “feminine virtues” and this is why when a woman cooks, it is not a matter of surprise. But when a man holds a crucial position in the culinary world, why is he often glorified and celebrated?

Iskus ko Jara

Photograph 11: An abandoned house in Kalimpong covered with the dried leaves and trails of iskus (chayote). This is a common sight during the late winter months.

As I further navigated the culinary landscape of Kalimpong, I noticed the close affinity of people from almost all classes, castes, colours, creeds, ethnicities, and religions with *iskus*. It is a pear-shaped, mild-flavoured green vegetable, found on a plant that is also known all over the world for its delicious seeds, roots, shoots, flowers, leaves, and fruit. The dish that was pleasant to my taste was *iskus ko jara*, which I couldn’t stop asking for more of. In the backyard of the houses that I visited, I never failed to see the trails of *iskus* hanging everywhere. I considered them to be natural party streamers assigned by nature to

add more to the pristine beauty of Kalimpong. Walking around the town, it was a sight to witness the old, dilapidated buildings getting covered by the dried, trailing plant, as if it were a pair of unwashed curtains that dated back centuries. In the middle of the road, I saw them coiling with electric wires. It added an almost imperfect beauty to the town which made me realise that *iskus* in some way represented the peculiarity of the place.

A little serving of *iskus ko jara* on my plate reminded me of the tradition of the people of the Hills' of eating tubers and roots. The chef credited her ancestors for passing down indigenous knowledge within her family. According to her, *iskus ko jara* was tastier than *iskus ko tarkari* or curry, as the former almost tasted like starchy cassava. We both agreed that it was a gustatory treat, for it did not demand many spices and seasonings and hence did not require women to labour hard in the kitchen in the otherwise arduous preparation of a meal in a day-to-day lifestyle that a woman is often expected to "perform". However, this was not the case when making *iskus ko momo* or *momo* filled with *iskus,* which required arduous labour in the kitchen where women were expected to showcase their culinary skills as a demonstration of their feminine virtues.

DESSERTS

Etymologically, the meaning of the word dessert comes from the French word *desservir,* which means "to clear the table". It can be said that to the people of Kalimpong, there is hardly any ritual for concluding a hearty meal with dessert. *Mithai* is a mostly alien concept at the dining table. Hence, there is no exception to consuming something at the end of a meal.

If looked at from the historical perspective of colonialism, Kalimpong as a town carries with it the histories of several diasporic communities who were either traders or labourers who left home

in pursuit of a better life. Kalimpong was annexed into British India after the Bhutan War of 1865 (Dash 2011). And it came under the control of British India. The ruling British Raj had already selected Darjeeling as a suitable site for a sanatorium, and it was enamoured by Kalimpong's picturesque beauty. Thus, under the aegis of British rule, the Darjeeling district experienced an increase in its population, with inflow from bordering nations, especially Nepal. Dash writes that,

> … the main causes of the rapid increase of population have been the development of [the] Tea Industry and the influx of settlers to cultivate the wasteland of the District. The steady improvement in communications due to the building of railways and roads also facilitated the development generally and made possible seasonal tourist traffic, encouraged the Provincial Government to stay longer and more often in the town, and made Darjeeling a centre of educational activity for Europeans. (Dash 2011 pg.107)

In this context, most of the 'unskilled Nepalese labourers' (Subba and Sinha 2017) who migrated to India were engaged in low-paying jobs, which led them to live a deprived life. Hence, can it be concluded that the colonial subjugation of the British era experienced by the people of the Darjeeling Hills thus led them to romance the finer things in life, one of which was food or, in particular, sweets, dessert, or *mithai*?

In the Indian subcontinent, *mithai* is said to have been influenced by the arrival of the Mughals in the early sixteenth century, which played a central role in the evolution of sweets in India. Therefore, *mithai* was a luxurious item that could mostly only be afforded by the upper classes. It is said that the British rule later luxuriated in its desserts, post the increase in its territorial expansion across the region. Kalimpong's history too has strong Anglophilic culinary customs. Some examples that could be the uniquely popular Kalimpong cheese, which carries and also the famous Kalimpong lollipops, which were introduced to Kalimpong by the Swiss Father Andre Butty.

Kheer

One common dish that is considered to connect most of the inhabitants of the town is the sweet rice pudding *kheer*. Even in the deepening ethnic and cultural divide which comes to the surface especially during political clashes, people still eat kheer once in a while. The dish mainly originates from the Nepali diaspora, especially from the Sanatan Vedic civilisation. *Kheer* is often offered as *Prasad* or an offering to gods and goddesses in upper-caste Nepali households, and is eaten during special occasions, festivals, and family gatherings, often off *duna-tapari* or leaf plates.

My Hajurama, grandmother, was skilled at making *duna-tapari* from sal leaves, stitching them together with *sinka*, thin bamboo sticks. This craft is popular and represents the culture of the Chhetri-Bahun clan, where only women participate in the art of making leaf plates of various shapes and sizes out of sal leaves. The entire process involves women who see the craft as an occasion for the celebration of their culture. It also reflects their closeness with nature, as the use of *duna-tapari* is an innovative way to combat the continuous attack of plastic on nature in modern times. At the same time, whether the art of making *duna-tapari* is considered to have value as a marker of community identity in the public eye comprising both men and women in general is still a question to ponder.

Undoubtedly, the craft of *duna-tapari* is the domain of upper-caste Nepali women who are seen stitching the leaves together during religious festivals of any kind and weddings with timely waves of laughter and gossip. But in today's world of capitalism and commercialism, it is slowly changing from being female-centric to male-centric due to entrepreneurship and local businesses run by men to make a profit from this ancient craft. However, these machine-made leaf plates stand nowhere near the skills of the women steeped in culture and traditions.

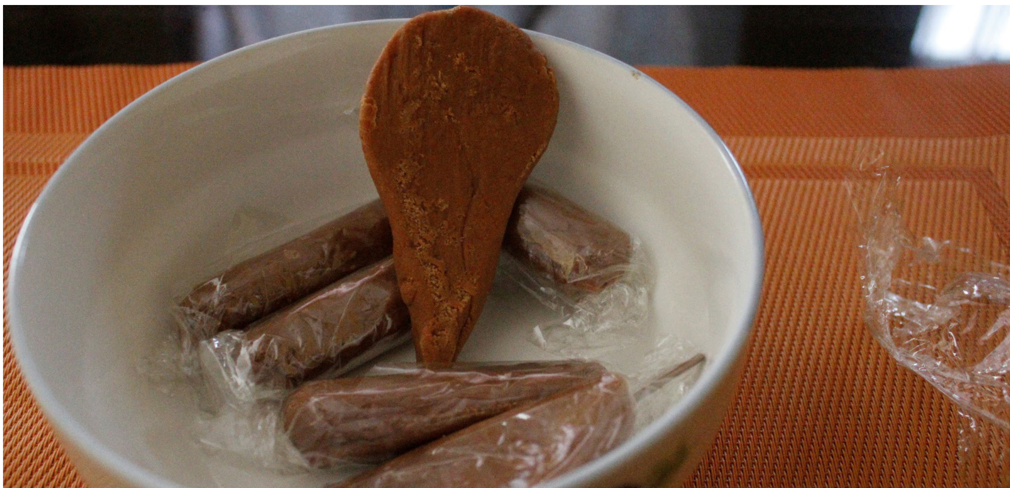
Therefore, according to custom, if *kheer* is eaten either in a *duna,* a container made of leaves, or on a *tapari,* plate, it is said to enhance

the flavour of the sweet rice pudding. The recipe of *kheer* may have gone through some changes in Kalimpong according to the taste of the locals, but it has remained a dish that reflects the regional identity of the Nepali community and assimilates with the culture of the town. *Kheer* isn't always eaten in the form of a dessert or at the end of a meal. Thus*, kheer* is locally recognised by all communities, satisfies the sweet tooth of the people in the small hill town.

A preference for kheer is mostly found in the households of Hindu upper-caste Nepali communities who are locally known as the *tagadharis* or the wearers of the sacred thread – this refers to the thread, *janai,* worn by men around their torsos for ritualistic purposes in Hinduism. *Tagadharis* are said to eat more milk-based food than *matwalis,* or liquour drinkers, who are considered to have a taste for more meat-based foods.

Thus, in the culturally diverse Kalimpong, the consumption of *kheer* and its cultural assimilation could occur for various reasons. One possible reason could be the so-called cultural hegemony of the *tagadharis.* Or could it be because of the simplicity of kheer as a dish, which is not very difficult to prepare?

Kalimpong Lollipops



Photograph 12: Kalimpong lollipops.

Another milk-based sweet that is widely known in the town is the famous Kalimpong lollipop. These sweets not only represent the town, but also provide a glimpse into the history of the missionaries who entered the Darjeeling Hills to spread Christianity.

In a book titled *On the Threshold of Three Closed Lands,* Rev. J.A. Graham writes,

> There was then nothing but jungle, none of those fine buildings had been thought of. One of the two was Sukhman, himself baptized in Darjeeling the previous year and soon thereafter sent as the first native preacher to the east of the Teesta. The other was Jungabir, the teacher of the Little Mission School, the first fruits at Kalimpong who had given himself to Christ on the last of St. Andrew's day. (Graham 1897, pg.50)

The missionaries considered it their duty not only to educate the "natives" of the hills but to spread the word of Christ. They also introduced new ways of living as they introduced innovative ideas like dairy farming, cheese-making, and animal husbandry (among others) to the region, and these traditions continue to this day.

The origin of Kalimpong lollipops can be traced back to a Swiss Jesuit named Father Andre Butty, who, when denied entry into Tibet to spread Christianity, stayed in Kalimpong and soon after began the Swiss Welfare Dairy. Though the dairy has stopped functioning now, the locals are skilled in replicating the original lollipops introduced by this Swiss missionary.

According to the locals, there are only two essential ingredients that go into making Kalimpong lollipops, which are also a perfect souvenir to take away from the town. Milk is boiled in large cauldrons with sugar until it is reduced to a dark condensed form. Once ready, the condensed mass is hand rolled into either long, elongated shapes or a heart-like shape, the only two lollipop shapes traditionally available.

It is hard to define Kalimpong as a town that consumes milk in large quantities. And milk cannot be an essential part of the diet of people from the region. Thus, while they may not be labeled a "precious

food", the lollipops find their place in the food history of the town and are still celebrated as a sweet that attracts both locals and tourists and is still in high demand in Kalimpong.

There is a central church in town named MacFarlane Memorial Church, which is mainly known for its architectural features and is considered the pride of the district. But more than that, it stands as an edifice of the impact of British and European missionaries as it was specially built in memory of Sir William MacFarlane, a Scottish Missionary with the help of the locals. Thus, if the church is a constant and significant reminder to those around it of the first missionary who came to the town, Sir William MacFarlane, Kalimpong lollipops are a tribute to the memory of Father Andre Butty, who helped uplift the culinary history of the town with his ideas and contributions.

Batare or Damlo Mithai

Photograph 13: Renu Pradhan at her shop, Gorkhey Koseli, Kalimpong.

A distinctive variety of food, especially sweets and pickles, can also be found in Renu Pradhan's tiny shop in Kalimpong. She is a beautiful middle-aged woman who happily welcomes her visitors with a vibrant smile. Her shop offers a wide range of eatables that carry the town's cultural history, and mainly that of its indigenous communities.

Batare or *damlo mithai* is popular all around the town. The literal translation of the Nepali word *batare* is to turn something or to turn, while *damlo* means rope, and *mithai* stands for sweet. More than a sweet, batare is also eaten as a local biscuit, accompanied by milk tea. Since its shape is like that of a twisted rope, it is fondly given the name *damlo mithai* in Nepal, whereas in Kalimpong the locals call it *batare.*

On close observation, Renu Pradhan's shop is an assimilation of cultures and she has named it Gorkhey Koseli or the Gift of the Gorkhas. She sells multicultural foods like Tibetan *khapse,* traditional Tibetan cookies in various shapes and sizes, *teel ko laddu,* small balls made out of sesame mainly prepared and eaten by the Nepali-speaking Hindu community in India during the festival of *Maghe Sankranti* or *Makar Sankranti*. It looks as if her offerings are similar to fusion cuisine, where different culinary practices can be understood with just one glimpse. Fusion cuisine is often defined as a cuisine that mixes elements of different culinary traditions that have their origin in different countries, regions, or cultures. Renu Pradhan's shop successfully blends various cultures and their food histories under one roof. It also provides a whole new experience to her visitors, as she opens a window into a completely new world where cultural and ethnic diversity is celebrated under one collective Gorkha identity. Perhaps, this is why she has named her shop Gorkhey Koseli.

Whatever the reason, her shop with its array of different food items makes one travel to different countries and understand their cultures by crossing boundaries. It helps detangle the rigidity of communalism and encourages flexibility towards other communities and cultures. Thus, as Anita Mannur writes, 'Differences are rendered palatable, easily consumed and digested' (Mannur, 2010).

Renu Pradhan's Gorkhey Koseli has now become a thriving shop in the culinary landscape of Kalimpong, where customers are mesmerised by her easy nature and her hand-made pickles where one can witness the cultural diversity through food.

Chhurpi

Photograph 14: A Khas-Chhetri woman in her shop selling titaura, battare, and chhurpi.

While not exactly a dessert or a sweet meat, *chhurpi* can be eaten as a substitute for betel nut anytime, including right after a heavy meal. It is important to understand that there are two varieties of *chhurpi,* a soft variety and a harder one. It is the latter that is used as a replacement for a betel nut.

In Kalimpong, *chhurpi* is sold in almost all the major traditional wholesale shops and is considered to be a traditional cheese consumed in the Himalayan region. *Chhurpi* is directly influenced by the eating

habits practised in the high mountainous regions of Nepal and Tibet, especially by pastoralists in high-altitude areas.

Strolling around town for even a brisk walk, one can observe several shops selling either garlands of hardened cheese cubes or chhurpi scattered in a box like candies on display.

Photograph 15: Sticks of chhurpi hanging in a shop named Tibetan Sisters on the way to Haat Bazaar, Kalimpong.

On the way to Haat Bazaar in Kalimpong, there are two shops run by two Tibetan ladies who look like the matriarchs of their households, and the other one belongs to a Khas-Chhetri clan. When asked about their life history, the Tibetan ladies asserted that they belonged to Kalimpong and refused to share much information about their past, which could open discourse about the Tibetan displacement. It is from them that I bought incense sticks with the name Potala Palace. I could see the long, smoked sticks of hard chhurpi hanging above and a huge jar filled from top to bottom with small cubes of the same.

It is indeed hard to track down a detailed history of *chhurpi*, as not much information on it can be found. In Kalimpong, it is a common sight to see ladies selling the indigenous fermented pale-yellow milk-based cheese just like betel nuts are sold in most northeastern states. The tradition of eating betel nut is greater in northeastern states where, according to Hoinu Hauzel in the article *Betel Nuts: What Makes it so Popular in the Northeast?* It is known by many names. 'In Meghalaya, the Khasis call it kwai. As for the Garos, it is gue. Also in Assam and Nagaland, it is known as Tamul, and in Manipur and Mizoram, it becomes kua and kuhva respectively' (2017, p. 1).

For the people of Kalimpong, hard textured chhurpi could be thought of as a Himalayan chewing gum or a substitute for betel nut that one can consume and gain health benefits from. As it is made solely out of milk, it is considered to be both natural and nutritious, and was prepared especially in high mountainous regions to make maximum use of the daily production of milk and also to find a way to stay warm in the winters by keeping their mouths busy due to its hard texture.

CONCLUSION

On exploring the culinary history of Kalimpong, the food and the food habits of its people make the town receptive and heterogeneous. Every diasporic community that has found a sense of belonging in the town has representational recipes which could also be identified as a food that represents the place as a whole. If *Chhurpi* is linked with Tibet and the Tibetan immigration then perhaps *Kalimpong Lollipops* remind the bygone days of the Swiss missionaries in the town. Similarly, *Sungur ra Kinema* pays homage to the Kiratas whereas *Khasi ko Masu* is served as the main dish amongst the Khas-Chhetris. These are just few examples. Thus food also serves as a medium to restore undocumented history, as by sharing food one also shares information about oneself.

In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* Gloria Anzaldúa, an American scholar of Chicana origin famously writes, 'Forget the room of one's own—write in the kitchen' (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983 p. 320). Here, she is contesting the work of the renowned English writer Virginia Woolf, who talks elaborately about the necessity for women to have a room of their own to acquire a sense of liberation and power. However, as Anzaldúa says, women can write in the kitchen too, which may mean that in the very process of cooking, eating, and sharing food, a lot of cultural history could be well expressed. The kitchen narratives discussed in this paper give voice to the cultural diversity of Kalimpong, as every dish helps in retrieving the past. At the same time, though the kitchen is usually considered a space predominantly for women, through certain dishes this idea has been transgressed and challenged as well.

It has also been observed that the culinary history of a small hill town like Kalimpong offers an insight into the confluence of the cultures of several diasporic communities. Thus, food also carries a sense of nostalgia wherein recipes from the past manage to procure an identity in the present. For example, *Sadeko Gundruk* though is an age-old dish has helped the Nepali community in identifying with it.

Hence, in the chain of its migratory history, it is widely consumed and has become one of the town's representative dishes. *Aloo phing shya* on the other hand is a symbolic Tibetan dish, but is also much loved by non-Tibetans. Therefore, food becomes a meeting point for people from several cultural backgrounds to celebrate multiculturalism. In the words of Anita Mannur, 'When one thinks of food, there is an expectation of happiness – food brings people together; food allows people to "experience" other cultures' (Mannur, 2010, p. 225).

The practice of 'multicultural eating' (Mannur, 2010, p. 225) in the town is revelatory against a backdrop of political bickering over divisions and differences amongst the communities. From its culinary space, could Kalimpong be home to a happy multiculturalism instead of viewing the place from a political lens where the ethnic divide is said to be deeply rooted? In this age of growing divisions, could it be

said that food manages to forge connections and solidify relationships through food exchanges?

The incredible versatility of the place and the active contribution of both women and men to keeping the diverse food culture of the town alive can be seen through the establishment of several new eateries, and the continued patronage of old ones. For instance, Renu Pradhan's Gorkhey Koseli preserves her knowledge of pickling as well as that of the Nepali community that she belongs to through the array of pickles available at her shop. Chula, The Himalayan Kitchen by Yachna Rizal on the other hand attempts to re-introduce the often undocumented culinary practices of the town, keeping both nutrition and health in mind. The uniqueness of Chula, The Himalayan Kitchen lies in the fact that it is an experimental kitchen as well, where Yachna Rizal provides a space for other like-minded chefs to get creative with local produce. *Gundruk-rasam* is an example of this creativity, where a chef from Pondicherry, Vijhay Ganesham, was invited to experiment with a local ingredient like *gundruk*—Ganesham found that *gundruk* could easily be used as a substitute for the tangy taste of tamarind, an integral part of South Indian cuisine, and thus *gundruk-rasam* was born. Thus in this practice of embracing multiculturalism, Yachna Rizal has continued to curate her menu in a manner that allows her to evoke the taste of the Himalayas while at the same time interweaving the cultural diversity of India through her food. Hence, her food becomes the perfect blend of traditional and modern, rustic and urban, and is cultural and multicultural at the same time.

It would be wrong not to mention Ishita Rai Dewan and her exemplary work with her restaurant Cloud9, which specialises in serving traditional Nepali thali, also infused with the local tastes of the town. *Sungur ra kinema,* pork with fermented soybean, is one such dish on her menu, and it is a dish that she first tried making with the leftovers in her fridge. But most importantly, it is through her food label Isheez Kitchen2.0 that she stays connected to her roots. She specialises in meat-based products and also offers pickles like *tama dalle*—bamboo shoot paired with dalle, the typical round chillies

Photograph 16: The vivacious Tshering Kipa at her shop in Haat Bazaar, Kalimpong.

of Kalimpong. She wants to carry the same spirit as the well-known American cook Julia Child who was said to be joyful, determined and effortlessly confident.

On considering some of the women entrepreneurs of Kalimpong who I interviewed as part of this research, women like Tshering Kipa of Haat Bazar, Renu Pradhan of Gorkhey Koseli, Yachna Rizal of Chula, The Himalayan Kitchen and Art Café, and Ishita Rai Dewan of Cloud9 and Isheez Kitchen2.0, it is clear that they have successfully paved ways for the future generation of women to come who would share similar interests. Their contribution to emboldening the food economy of the place cannot be taken lightheartedly in the context of a society that often tends to consider women's work as inferior to men's. Could these ladies have successfully set an example and shown that it is no longer taboo for women to want more for themselves?

Also, generally, women experience less autonomy than men in public spaces. The primary role assigned to a woman is often within the "private" space of the home, as she is given the role of a mother,

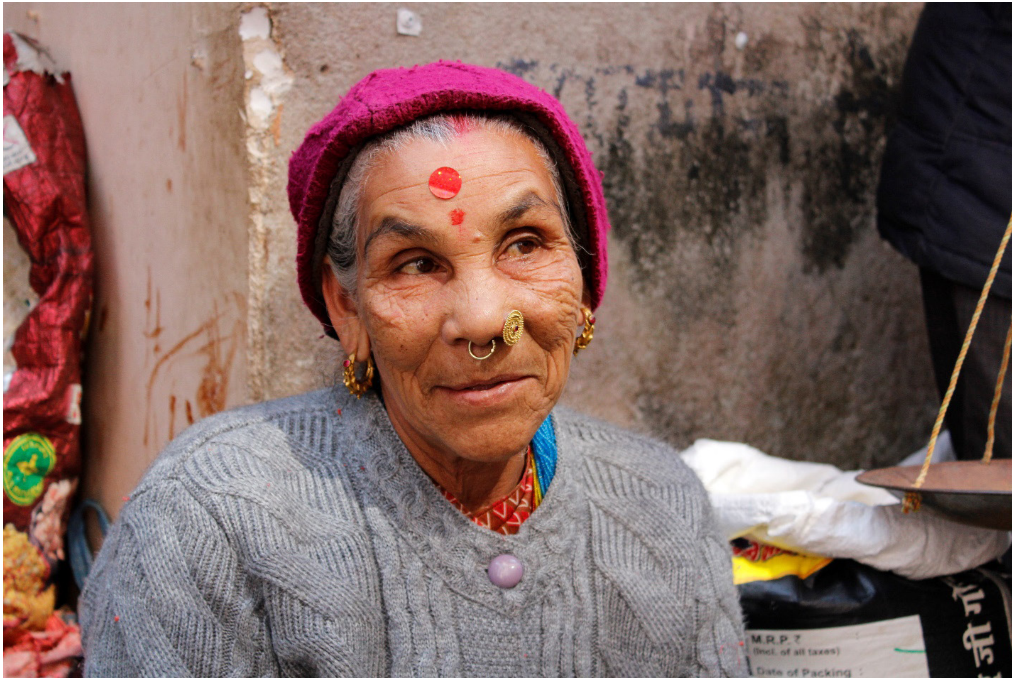
Photograph 17: Ishita Dewan, an extremely hardworking and passionate chef, talking about her love for food, cooking, and feeding people at her restaurant Cloud9.

nurturer, and caretaker. Women who are seen transgressing the boundaries created by society are usually subjected to hostility and bitterness. Put simply, could the women entrepreneurs of Kalimpong be changing the dynamics of how women can be seen in public spaces?

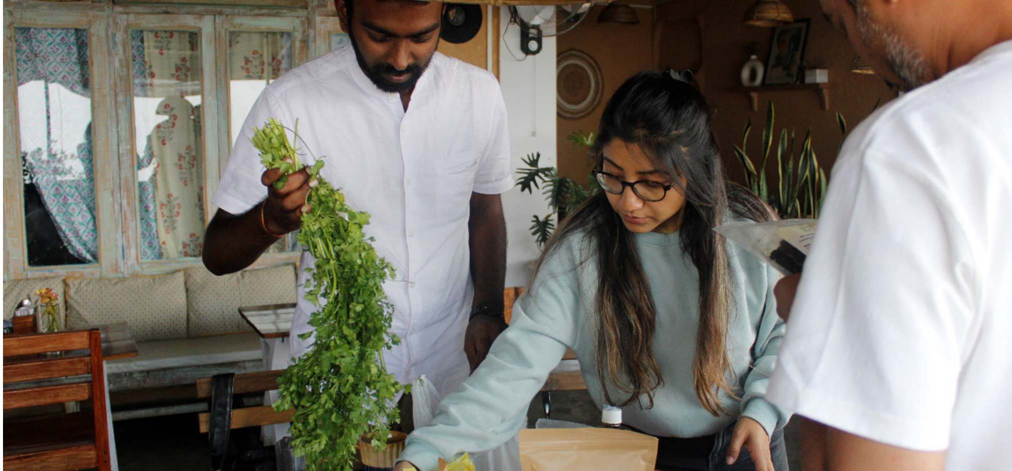
The authors of a book titled *Why Loiter?* write, 'Risk-taking is often considered acceptable, even desirable masculine behaviour. For women, on the other hand, it is not only seen as unfeminine but as potentially the behaviour of a "loose" woman' (Phadke, Khan and Ranade, 2011, p. 58).

Thus, to maintain a social order largely rigged by patriarchy, it becomes important for both genders to perform the respective roles of man and woman.

However, the irony related to food is that, even if the kitchen is largely taken as a "feminine" space, cooking as an act is not just limited to a woman But it becomes problematic when a woman is continually made to experience marginality by claiming that staying indoors and handling the kitchen with its pots and utensils is one of her "feminine" virtues, and that she is to stick to it lest she threaten a man with her



Photograph 18: A woman in her shop wearing traditional ornaments.



Photograph 19: Yachna Rizal at her very popular Art Café in Kalimpong assisting a chef and her friend.

"masculine" qualities, which to a man are both unattractive and unappealing.

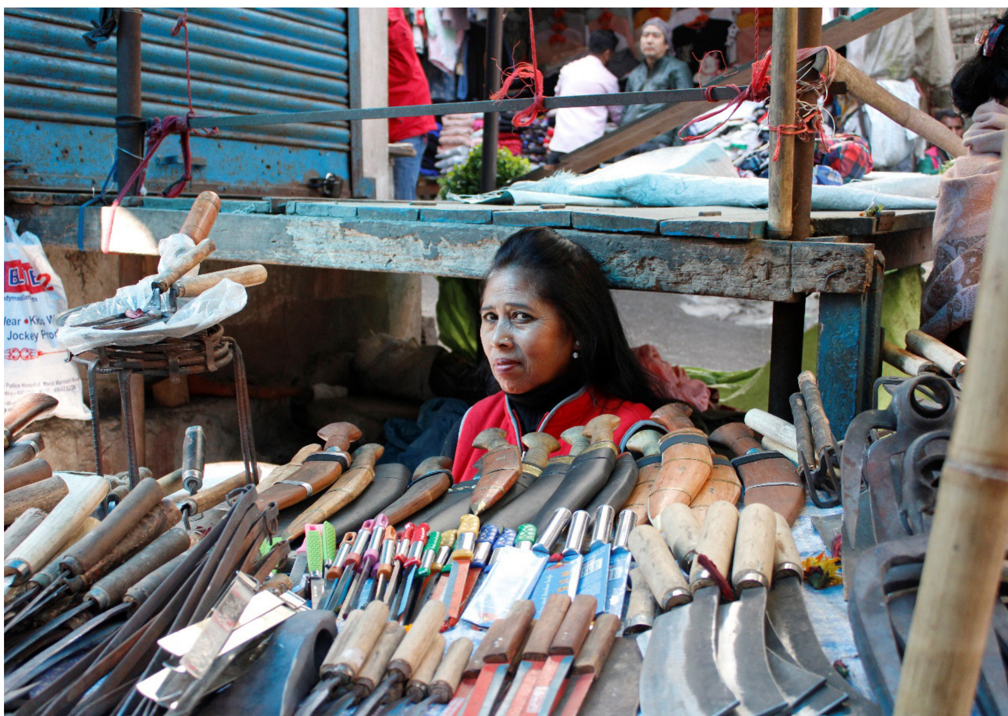
It can rightly be said that the segregation of gender is a social construct. Since it is often the society that attributes gender roles to a

person which is again influenced by biased judgements and prejudices. Hence, it helps in maintaining the patriarchal social order which rightly serves men. And if not, then why are women not allowed to think rationally and logically? They are rarely allowed to act on their self-interest. Why are these considered as masculine traits?

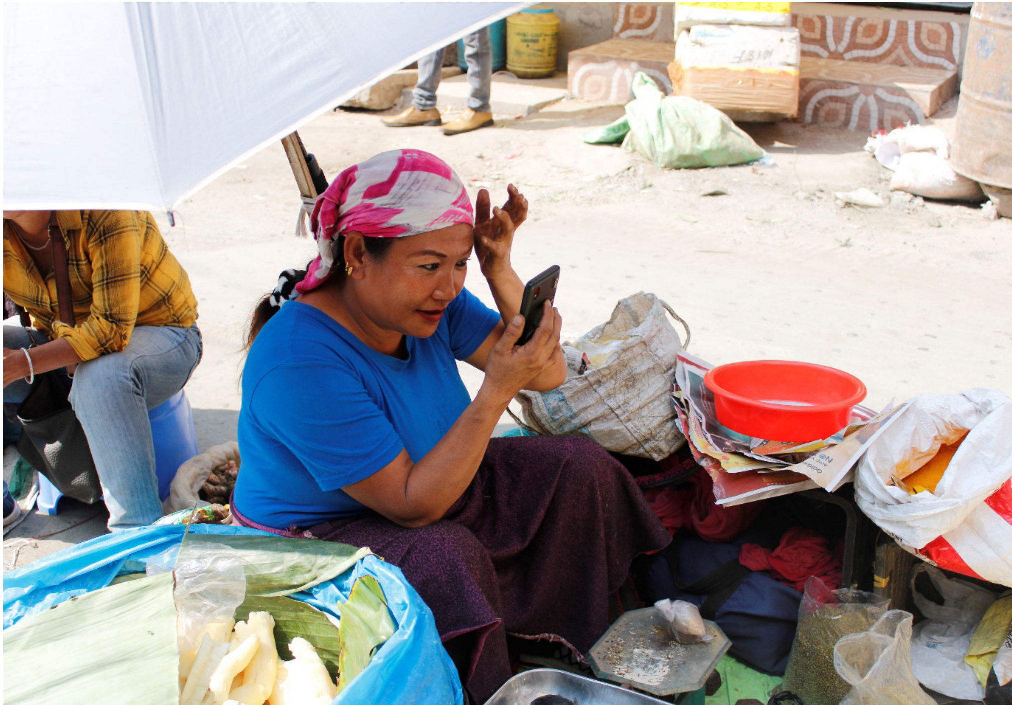
As rightly stated by A.K. Ramanujan in his *Speaking of Siva,* 'If they see breasts and long hair coming, they call it woman, If beard and whiskers they call it man. But look, the self that hovers in between is neither man nor woman…' (Ramanujan, 2015, p. 110).

When a portion of food is served on a plate, is it only important to ask who cooked it or is it time to also question the reason it was cooked.

More than gender parity, it is the self that needs greater understanding. After all, as the aforementioned poem states, "the self that hovers in between is neither man nor woman…" (Ramanujan, 2015).



Photograph 20: A woman and her weapons.



Photograph 21: Look of the day.

Photograph 22: A quick nap.

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