

Bishakh Important Hoi (Trust Is Important): Masculinities, Trust, and the “Assamese” Pithas

Abstract: Men have never been absent from the arena of food preparation, although their participation has been primarily in the public sphere rather than the private domestic space. Men have also been involved in the preparation of traditional sweets and snacks in sweet shops and street stalls. On the other hand, women’s association with food preparation, especially traditional food preparation inside the household, still dominates the popular imagination in regions like South Asia. In Assam (India), pithas are an emblematic food item in the “Assamese” cultural landscape that is popularly perceived to be prepared by women. However, my ethnographic experience suggests that pitha preparation and sale can be studied in relation to performance of masculinities when it comes to the public urban space of Guwahati (Assam). As men have

entered the public spaces as pitha sellers and to a large extent prepare it themselves, it was observed that bishakh (trust) is a crucial part of the diverse performance of masculinities and “Assameseness.” The perceptions, negotiations, and enactment with the concept of trust is a pivotal aspect of men entering an otherwise popularly imagined feminized zone of pitha preparation. It is important to attract buyers, wherein the ideal image remains that of a woman preparing traditional food using her manual labor. Further, this article argues that bishakh, which is significant in infusing “Assameseness” in buying and selling pithas, can also be understood at the cusp of contemporary regional politics in Assam, class markers, caste hierarchy, and religious indicators along with gender performance.

ONE OF THE FIRST recipe books on “Assamese” food was *Randhani ba Randhan Pranali* (1930) by Dhanada Kumari Saikiani. She was awarded by the Assam Sahitya Sabha for this recipe book, which she wrote primarily for women.¹ In the preface of her recipe book, she explicitly mentions that she hopes that her recipes find a space among her community of sisters in Assam (Saikiani 1930: 5). She further adds that she compiled the recipes to make the young Assamese women familiar with cooking. Among all the “Assamese” recipes, a significant section is dedicated to various kinds of pithas. A popular recipe book in recent times is Jyoti Das’s *Ambrosia . . . From the Assamese Kitchen* (2008). The author recalls someone commenting that “Assamese identity is never complete without pithas” (Das 2008: 3). Many such recipe books on “Assamese” cuisine would inherently have recipes of pithas included. Hence, two significant points must be understood. First, food preparation, including pitha preparation, has been historically and popularly imagined as the domain of women. Second, pithas are an integral part of what is known as “Assamese” cuisine.

According to Chaudhury (2017), famous women’s magazines in Assam such as *Ghar-Jeuti* (1927–1931) published several cooking recipes especially meant to make women experts in the running of the domestic kitchen. This trend remains visible in current women’s magazines (Chaudhury 2017: 159).

Further, every year as the time for the festival of Bihu approaches in Assam, the visual domain of food in advertisements, news, and social media displays images that associate pitha preparation with women’s manual labor.² However, as I witnessed many men preparing and selling pithas in the public urban space of Guwahati, I was intrigued to inquire how a traditional “Assamese” preparation such as the pithas are accepted and popularized when it is not the women in charge. How is it that in spite of the association of women and food preparation, pithas have a huge market, although it is men who are preparing and selling them?

When I met one of the male managers of a ready-to-eat and ready-to-make “Assamese” food enterprise (which includes pithas), he uttered phrases like “Bishakh important Hoi” (Trust is important) and “Raize amaak bishakh kore” (The public trusts us). Such phrases around the notion of trust started to gain currency as I went around talking about pithas sold in the streets and stalls by men. Nonetheless, before delving into the relation of men and pithas, I would like to briefly point out the reason behind putting the word “Assamese” in quotation marks. To begin, there have always been anxieties and conflicts surrounding the act of defining what is “Assamese” or who is an “Assamese.”

It is not novel to ask who, what, and for whom authentic and real Assam and “Assamese” culture is. These questions

have lurked since the earliest traces of Assam history. Sharma (2011) argues that it was only the high-caste publicists during the twentieth century who “projected a purified Assamese social identity, which placed monolingual Asomiya-speaking elite Hindus at the apex of the Assamese nation” (Sharma 2011: 207). It never had a fixed definition. Nevertheless, the debates surrounding identity and citizenship are crucial discourses that have assumed extraordinary significance today in Assam. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have taken center stage in the state’s political discourse, causing the genesis of such debates in recent times with much more politico-cultural rigor than ever before.³ Both NRC and CAA attempted to define who can be regarded as “Assamese” and who should be excluded. While the NRC witnessed tragic tales of around 1.9 million people failing to prove their citizenship in Assam, the CAA appeared to exclusively target Muslims. Huge protests and demonstrations contesting this occurred on the streets of Assam, particularly during the month of December 2019.

Yet, as much as these concerns over defining “Assamese” or “Assameseness” have cast its shadow over the state of Assam, I cannot help but remember how much our notions of gender, food, and of being “Assamese” have been taken for granted. It remains rather common to associate femininity with food, especially in the South Asian imagination — and even more so when the particular food is regarded emblematic of a particular culture. Pithas are one such emblematic food item when it comes to “Assamese” culture. For readers unfamiliar with pithas, they are a popular variety of rice preparation. Broadly, pithas are steamed or fried rice cakes or roasted rice flour rolls. They fall within the category of both sweet and snack. Most pithas are sweet in taste and can be prepared with a variety of rice, along with other ingredients such as coconut, sesame, and jaggery among others. Although regarded as a special preparation during occasions such as the festival of Bihu in Assam, pithas today are not solely prepared or eaten during such occasions.

In an urban space like Guwahati, the advent of technology, the expansion of the market, and/or the availability of domestic help make it possible to have pithas throughout the year. Pithas come in a large variety, including Narikol-pitha (coconut-pitha), Tekeli-mukhot-diya/Tekeli/Ketli-pitha (pitcher-pitha), Til-pitha (sesame-pitha), Tel-Pitha (oil-pitha), and others. Although some varieties of pithas are found mostly in the states of Eastern India, such as Odisha and West Bengal, and similar rice flour crepes can be found in many parts of peninsular India, my focus here is exclusively on the city space of Guwahati in Assam. Again, this is because of the association of gender, food, and “Assameseness” mentioned earlier.



FIGURE 1: Ready-made packaged Narikol-pitha (coconut-pitha).

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Moreover, similar to many urban spaces in India, and also in Guwahati, streams of nostalgia are attached to women and food preparation. This nostalgia is related to the “good old days” when traditional food was prepared solely by women. There has been a sense of loss of traditional “Assamese” womanhood, which depicted women as the nurturing and ever-sacrificing figure of the household who cooked to feed her family with love and care. However, in contemporary times, what has been fascinating to observe are the forms of masculinities emerging when it comes to food. If, on one hand, women have resorted to buying pithas from the market, on the other, many men today are involved in pitha preparation and selling, though primarily in public spaces. This sets the stage for inquiry regarding the masculinities encountered in relation to pithas. When “encountering masculinities,” Chopra, Osella, and Osella (2004: 38) quite eloquently caution us that by “acknowledging the existence of segregated worlds, especially those that are gendered, it becomes fatally easy to fall into the trap of giving accounts of these worlds in opposition to one another.” Thus, Kannabiran and Swaminathan highlight that studying gender is not solely about fortifying the assumed binary between men and women. They report: “Much work remains to be done in India to actually dislodge gender from the captivity of binary frames that mask more than they explain” (2017: 3).

My ethnographic experience suggests that pitha preparation and sales can be studied in relation to the performance of



FIGURE 2: (Left) Tel-Pitha (Oil-pitha) and (Right) Tekeli-mukhot-diya/Tekeli/Ketli-pitha (pitcher-pitha) from a street stall. It is a common practice to serve them on loose sheets of paper as shown in the picture.

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masculinities when it comes to the public urban space of Guwahati (Assam). As men have entered the public spaces as pitha sellers, who to a large extent also prepare them, it was observed that bishakh (trust) is a crucial part of the diverse performance of masculinities and “Assameseness.” According to Simmel, the aspect of trust is a significant element in economic systems. For smooth money transaction, it is important to maintain trust among buyers and sellers (1978: 178–79). The perceptions, negotiations, and enactment with the concept of trust is a pivotal aspect of men entering the domain of pithas as sellers and makers. This trust is important to attract buyers because the ideal image remains that of a woman preparing traditional food using her manual labor. Hence, what is this notion of trust (bishakh) that is particular to men in a traditionally feminine domain?

Trust, as depicted in this article, is a multidimensional category that includes notions of care, reputation, reliability, familiarity, and more. Luhmann (1979, 1988) states that trust reduces complexity in society. It is a medium of interaction between social systems and the representatives of the systems. Trust, then, can be vested on institutions as well as individuals. “Being a collective attribute, trust is to be perceived as playing some important social functions. It is commonly assumed that trust contributes to the preservation of social order, increases group solidarity or social cohesion and reduces complexity” (Misztal 1992: 13). In this sense, as Misztal (1992) proposes, buyers and sellers of pithas work with the idea of trust that would indicate social cohesion and

preservation broadly. It can be a marker of social capital enjoyed by those who sell pithas. But certain sections of the population, such as the Miyas, are totally deprived of trust. The relationship of pithas, trust, and masculinities as understood in this article is a culmination of Assam’s historical legacy, contemporary politics, and social norms. Here I argue that bishakh, which is significant in infusing “Assameseness” into the buying and selling of pithas, is an interplay of regional politics, class markers, caste hierarchy, and religious indicators in Assam, along with gender performances.

Although my argument does not rest solely on ethnographic material, purposeful and snowball sampling were used for some of the data presented. The research participants consisted primarily of sellers, customers, managers, and workers involved in pitha selling and buying. In addition, domestic workers and their employers were included. While some participants, such as pitha sellers, were chosen deliberately for the study, many people became part of it based on situations or through the mere accident of meeting at a certain place (e.g., interactions with customers at street stalls). Many times, formal interviews were paused to give way to more informal forms of conversation. This happened more often in commercial pitha selling places, as the regular seller–buyer interactions would occur in-between my fieldwork. In addition, addas (forms of informal conversation) have had special importance in my study. Manpreet Janeja reveals the centrality of adda in her study concerning “normality” in food (Janeja 2018: 10). My engagement in addas and other conversations thus figured prominently in my

fieldwork. McDuire-Ra, in his study on Northeast migrants in Delhi, recalls that as “fieldwork went on, I had to be content with conversations rather than interviews. Conversations were invariably rich, insightful, and often very humorous” (McDuire-Ra 2012: 22–23). Further, as in most ethnographic studies, participant observation played a significant role in my study. Such observation was conducted both in the private spaces of people’s homes and kitchens and in the public sphere, such as restaurant kitchens. The interviews and observations presented here have been curated while keeping in mind the complex of issues it addresses: trust, gender, food, regional identity, hygiene, and communal tensions intertwined with the historical and contemporary reality of the state of Assam.

Including the introduction, this article is divided into six subsections. The second section, “Masculinity/ties and Being ‘Assamese’: The Trust Factor” looks into how masculinities are perceived and enacted popularly. The third section discusses two men—Anil Deka and Harish da—who sell pithas on the streets of Guwahati. The fourth section focuses on a high-end “Assamese” food store cum restaurant and a ready-to-eat and ready-to-make “Assamese” food enterprise. Both these commercial ventures were started by men. The fifth section is on Muslim men and women, especially the Miyas, who are seldom trusted with the preparation of “Assamese” pithas although their labor is indispensable to a large number of urban folks in Guwahati. The concluding section discusses how it can be perilous to be caged in conventional patriarchal definitions of masculinity and “Assamese,” especially in relation to food—and particularly pithas in this case.

Masculinity/Ties and Being “Assamese”: The Trust Factor

The urban space of Guwahati has been a hotbed of protests to preserve what is perceived to be “Assamese,” and men are popularly regarded as the leaders who are capable of dealing with this kind of “hard” politics in the public spaces. For instance, Barthakur and Goswami (1990) point out that women’s participation in the Assam Movement (1979–1985) against “illegal” immigrants paralyzed the administration to the extent that wives of bureaucrats picketed in their homes not to allow their husbands to go to work during the movement. They popularized the demands of the movement and contributed significantly, much like their male counterparts. Nonetheless, the new government of Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), with twenty-six-year-old Prafulla Kumar Mahanta as Chief Minister, brought no remarkable change for women in politics.

Women were given no important portfolios in the cabinet. Their political ambitions were dashed, and they were at best made chairpersons of some autonomous organization or given mostly honorary positions. Women received no decision-making positions in the new government (Barthakur and Goswami 1990). Hence, men have been the flag bearers of the movements claiming to preserve “Assamese” culture, acting as the protectors of the nation and its women. “She is the cultural emblem of the national, but he is the national” (Chaudhuri 2001: 379). Public spaces are often regarded as spaces that exist for men to prove their masculinity in a way that depicts them as worthy breadwinners and protectors of their families and nations.

According to Srivastava (2012), even though “under patriarchy all forms of masculinity are equally valorised, there is nevertheless an overwhelming consensus regarding the superiority of men over women” (15). He remarks that patriarchy makes men superior, “whereas masculinity is the process of producing superior men” (15). Connell’s (1995, 1987) work on hegemonic and multiple masculinities indicates that ideas regarding certain kinds of masculinity/ties exist depending on social location and that these “masculine” practices can be embodied by both men and women. Masculinity is “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality and culture” (Connell 1995: 71). The popular references to “Assamese” masculinity have been a legacy of Bir (brave) Chilarai and Lachit Barphukan. They have been held as images of the courageous Assamese men, the brave “sons of the soil” who would not hesitate to kill “outsider” enemies to protect their motherland. But the “outsider,” although hardly trusted and mostly detested, has been omnipresent in the city space of Guwahati. In fact, one reason for choosing the urban space of Guwahati as the focus of this article is not only that this city has been a hotbed for these struggles over “Assameseness” against the “outsider” but also that the historical legacy of this city and of Assam in general owes much to “outsiders.”

For instance, from around the start of the twentieth century, various streams of migrants arrived to toil in the land of Assam. The invention of railways was a bonus in this process. The tea coolies who came to Assam to work in the tea gardens submitted themselves to harsh conditions. Similarly, thousands of landless peasants from East Bengal also made Assam their home. “Today, several of these communities are considered to be settlers who came to Assam after Bangladesh was created in 1971 which is a historical misrepresentation” (Saikia 2017: 119). The local laborers of Assam were not keen on working under such circumstances. Furthermore, other

migrants were better off, such as traders from Rajasthan (popularly known as the Marwaris) and workers of various designations from places like Nepal, Sylhet, and Calcutta. In contrast to these incoming groups, “most Assamese travelers were sojourners who undertook secular urban pilgrimages into the Indic heartland and carried experiences of colonial modernity into Assam” (Sharma 2011: 6).

Hazarika (2016), in historically describing the urban space of Guwahati, clearly illustrates that this city has always had people from different parts of India. For instance, there have been the traders coming from Rajasthan known as the Marwaris, manual workers from Bihar, and people from the nearby state of Manipur. Another important volume highlighting the presence of “others” was published in 1988 by Bhattacharya, who writes that it was during the decade of the 1940s that the city began to expand.⁴

The freedom of India that came in the wake of partition accelerated its expansion. A suburban railway township was created in Maligaon to house the offices of the North Eastern Railway head-quarters and to accommodate those railways employees from East Pakistan who had opted to become citizens of India. Then the flow of illegal immigrants took place. Within Assam itself, a continuous movement of population to Guwahati from other areas in the state occurred. (1988: ix)

In terms of the Miya “others,” the community “comprises descendants of Muslim migrants from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to Assam. They came to be referred to as Miyas, often in a derogatory manner,” and lived in the Chor-Chapori (riverine) areas (Agarwal 2020).⁵ Saikia (2017) argues that the presence of the so-called Bangladeshis serving the Guwahatians’ urban lifestyle is by and large overlooked, except during election time (Saikia 2017: 112). Miya men are seen as dangerous and untrustworthy, more so in contemporary times with the anxieties around the citizenship question in Assam. Miya men and even Miya women have never been considered bishakhi (trustworthy) enough to be cooks, especially in relation to preparation of traditional items such as pithas. The Miya are regarded as unclean, which is a cumulation of caste and class factors that influence the definitions of “Assamese,” as noted by Sharma (2011).

The cases of “trustworthy” men preparing and selling pithas on the streets, the larger “Assamese” business enterprises, and the “untrustworthy” masculinities discussed in the following sections showcase that the act of trusting gets attached to ideas of familiarity, reputation, care, and what is perceived as “without any risks.” The next section focuses on two such “trustworthy” men—Anil Deka and Harish da—who sell pithas on the streets of Guwahati.

Trust on the Streets

Sharma (2021) discusses how the soundscape of the street that constitutes a large part of street vendors and hawkers came to be looked down upon as a form of urban life since the mid-nineteenth century. In a similar light, Bhaviskar (2021) argues that although street food vending is seen as an aberration against the modernist conception of urban order, vendors deploy their own strategies of survival. Gibbings’s (2016) study on street traders in urban Indonesia shows how they adopted the state’s concern for greenery, which otherwise perceived them as a blotch on the city’s order and cleanliness. Malasan’s (2019) work in Bandung (Indonesia) argues that street vendors form a kind of social infrastructure for their sustenance. This social infrastructure constitutes personal relationships and varied kinds of informal economic exchanges among vendors and buyers. Although street vendors are often associated with undesirability and dirt in most bureaucratic imaginations of a “modern” urban context, one cannot deny the essential functions they perform. Hayden (2021) eloquently elaborates on this essential function of serving the urban working-class poor performed by street vendors in Mexico City. The dynamics form a significant aspect of the urban infrastructure. In addition, as we will see, street vendors selling pithas perform a vital function of preserving “Assamese” food traditions in a manner that is accessible and affordable to people of all classes. Nevertheless, the “outside” world—the public space—is broadly perceived as a space for men to display their masculinity.

Being in public protects men from being called a “sissy” or feminine. A man is expected to carry the burden of demonstrating his masculine ability by constantly placing himself before the gaze of others; men should confront and face up to the outside world. Chowdhry’s (2014) study on rural Haryana demonstrates that men who spend more than “necessary” (i.e., the time needed to eat a meal) in the ghar (house) are called ghar-ghusnoo (homebound). Such a man would be taunted as “petticoat bound,” that is, under the influence/domination of females (Chowdhry 2014: 43). Studies, such as Nova’s in Tijuana, Mexico, in 2003, demonstrate how Indigenous women street vendors are trapped within the imagery of unwanted outsiders and often criminalized: the “exclusion of indigenous women from resources and opportunities is often framed as a form of protection and love for them and/or their children” (Nova 2003: 264). Although women street vendors are not always perceived as criminals by the larger public in Guwahati, narratives about protecting women by keeping them away from the public space are not uncommon.



FIGURE 3: A streetside tea stall in Guwahati run by a man who sells varieties of snacks and sweets including pithas.

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During my ethnographic experience, Anil Deka and Harish Kalita—or Harish da, as I would call him—did subscribe to the popular imagery of the male breadwinner and notions of what is seen as “manly.” But their involvement with pitha making and selling points toward the discursiveness of such activity. Anil Deka and Harish Kalita are among the number of men who sell pithas on the streets of Guwahati during special occasions like Bihu, some exhibitions, or as a regular business.

Anil Deka comes to Guwahati to sell pithas during the season of Bihu or whenever there is an exhibition here. His village is a couple of hours away from the city. He travels to and from his village to Guwahati in a bus about three times during the month of Bihu to get pithas from his home and give money to his family from his pitha sales in the city. Deka stays with his friend in his single room on the days he comes to Guwahati. The morning after his arrival in the city, he sets up his stall. His stall would be among all other stalls selling items from white and red gamochas to pithas on one of the popular streets of the city. These stalls are set up for a month before the main festival dates of Bihu. Deka neatly arranges various kinds of pithas and waits for customers to visit his stall.

The pithas that he brings to the city to sell are made by the women of his family back home. Many women would come to his stall to buy them. I thought to myself that the trust of his customers is not free of risks in terms of hygiene, taste, and preserving “Assameseness.” I asked Deka for the reason

behind this kind of sale of pithas in his stall. He initially referred to their taste, but then he moved on to refer to the authenticity and good hygiene that his products embody for mostly urban women.

One important element that Luhmann (2005) relates to the notion of trust is risk. One cannot call it trust if there is no risk involved. It is the ability to be vulnerable and risk oneself that makes trust possible when interacting with an institution or an individual. But how did Deka’s customers deal with the risks? I needed to understand how consumers navigated the risks involved in buying pithas from a man in cases when they never observed the production process. I again asked Deka: how do customers know that the pithas are authentic and hygienic? After all, none of his customers had ever seen how and by whom these pithas were prepared. With great pride, he replied, “These pithas are made by the women of my household—Maa (Mother), Bhonti (Younger Sister), wife in my village. We are Assamese people. People come to know when they speak to me. I have had some regular customers too for a long time. They never complain. If it was bad, why would they trust me?” As the day progressed, it was noticed that in addition to his regular customers, many women were coming to his stall for the first time. They enquired about his pithas—where they were made, who made them, how they were made, the price, and so on. Impressed by his replies to their questions, quite a few of them bought them. This would be a usual occurrence through the days that I visited the stall. Deka would close his stall around 9 or even 10 p.m., depending on the inflow of

customers. In some of my conversations with his female customers, they pointed out that he comes from a village in Assam and is a Hindu, which adds to the trust factor when buying his products. He is among “us,” they would state. According to Broch-Due, Vigdis, and Margit Ystanes (2016), in the Anglo-European Philosophy of trust, it is the linguistic jump from “I” to “We” that manifests trust. The indication by Deka’s customers that he is among them (“us”) underlies the trust they have for both him and his pithas. This formulation of “us” and “we” is based on shared religious and cultural affiliations, along with other factors like taste or hygiene.

During one of my visits to his stall, Deka stated that many times he also helps the women of his household to grind the rice, which is required for the pithas. In other words, as he puts it, he helps the women with the “heavy” tasks related to grinding and carrying the load of the pithas to Guwahati. He never brings the women of the household who make the pithas for business to Guwahati. It is difficult to arrange stays for them, and besides, there is always the safety factor. Although women pitha sellers are nothing unusual in Guwahati, women nonetheless must face the dangers of being subjected to the public gaze. Phadke, Khan, and Ranade (2011) demonstrate through their work on women and public spaces in Mumbai that women’s presence outside of the domestic sphere is never devoid of questions and concerns related to their safety and respectability within a patriarchal structure that continues to associate women’s space with the household.

Many men like Deka come from villages to the city to sell pithas. Deka’s customers, mostly women, equate his life in the village and his Hindu surname with a sign of bishakh (trustworthiness). The pithas made in a village are often equated with being authentic. The ingredients used and the manner of preparation by “our” women in an “Assamese” household is a factor that attains the trust of people who buy the eatables. Although caste was not evoked explicitly by either Deka or his customers, his Hindu surname was often correlated to what people perceive as being “Assamese” and hence trustworthy. This is how his customers navigate any risks and continue to trust him. It was also interesting that women’s menstruation was not evoked by anybody as unhygienic or impure in relation to food items. Although women are traditionally not allowed to cook and prepare any food during menstruation, this was not the case when it came to the pithas that Deka sold. Just being a Hindu “Assamese” man from the village where the women prepare them was sufficient for the sale.

Now, while on one hand Anil Deka visits Guwahati to sell pithas prepared by the women of his household in

Guwahati’s public spaces, on a daily basis at his street stall, Harish Kalita, or Harish da, sells pithas that he prepares himself. Harish da sells two types of Pitha: tekeli pitha (pitcher pitha) and khula sapori pitha (a pancake-like pitha prepared with rice flour).

Harish da runs his business with a one-burner gas stove near a Guwahati Street. During my visits to Harish da’s stall, I discovered his stall arose not because of any penchant for “Assamese” food and culture but due to the bomb blasts of 2008. He was in one of the sites and had a near-death experience. For Harish da, 2008 and the time that followed soon after was about redefining his masculinity and choosing a socially acceptable profession. Food became his refuge. I asked him if he’d had any interest in food-making before the 2008 incident. He replied that he had never given much thought to it nor shown any enthusiasm for learning any food considered integral to “Assamese” culture. His journey into setting up his stall was rather a survival need—the compulsion to survive the way society expected him to. He had to perform the role of an able male breadwinner, even if it meant learning to cook. For him, cooking is primarily a woman’s job. He also supports the distinction between the “male” public space and “female” private space of the household. According to Harish da, pithas are easier to make in comparison to other food items and don’t spoil as easily.

I asked for his thoughts on pithas and “Assamese” culture. He agreed they are intricately linked and that it is actually the women, according to him, who are apt at pitha making. He told me that his wife makes them in their village. He sometimes helps her grind the rice. But when he is home in his village, it is primarily his wife who takes care of cooking and preparing pithas. During Bihu, he closes his stall and takes a break from his usual activity of making pithas, leaving this chore to his wife.

He redefines his masculinity in relation to pithas in two distinct ways. He chooses to be the able male breadwinner of the family by preparing and selling pithas in the urban public space of Guwahati, although he leaves this chore to his wife at his home. Although he distinguishes between the public space belonging to men and the domestic space belonging to women, he negotiates the definition of masculinity that usually assumes men to be distant from cooking.

Harish da’s customers consist of both men and women. They come to his stall to have his pithas and tea because of the care and affection he shows. This is especially true for his long-term customers. His customers agree that Harish da displays love and care while he prepares and serves his pithas to them. There is also trust because he is an “Assamese” Hindu man (Luhmann 2005). In other words, Harish da and Anil

Deka both enjoy a trust based on their social capital as Hindu “Assamese” men, which supports a “durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1980: 2).

While Anil Deka and Harish da sell pithas on the streets of Guwahati through explicit interaction with their customers, in the next section I look into the domain of packaged food/pithas, which have gained huge popularity. This section brings to light a specific market that might not involve regular or direct seller–buyer interactions but that is nonetheless highly popular.

Packaged Trust

Men are involved in pitha preparation and sale as managers and entrepreneurs in business enterprises such as Jolpaan and Khadyo, the commercial ventures that formed part of my study. Unlike Anil Deka and Harish da, the customers who buy pithas from these kinds of business enterprises are mostly unaware of who prepares them. Their trust is based on a brand and how well these brands are able to capture the popular imagination of “Assameseness” through their advertisements and visuals. These kinds of business enterprises are not based solely on one person; the pithas are also relatively more expensive than those from the street stalls run by men like Deka and Harish da.

When one enters the interior Jolpaan, a restaurant cum store, the first thing one might notice is its visuality. Its “Assameseness” is emphasized by a couple of pictures of “Assamese” celebrities, the display and sale of traditional attire and materials, and red and white gamochas. Such visuality and promotions add to the popularity of the place and gain the trust of its customers, although the prices are not affordable for a large portion of Guwahati’s population. Jolpaan was founded by a well-known personality of Assam who overtly stated that his aim was to preserve the traditional cuisine of Assam, which he believes is extremely healthy. He deeply cares about the food habits of fast-paced urban folks.

As I checked the pitha section, I found different kinds of pithas on sale. The prices seemed pretty expensive to me, as with most restaurants and spaces selling “Assamese” cuisine. I was reminded of street food vendors toiling throughout the day like Harish da, whose pithas are priced from INR 5 to 10 (0.06–0.12 USD) per piece at the most. The price for a packet of ten pithas at Jolpaan ranges from 100 to 150 INR (1.20–1.80 USD). They look neatly packed and are not served on loose papers. They are packed in plastics with the help of some technology.

Jolpaan also creates a museum-like feeling similar to tourist attractions for the rich. In one of my visits to Jolpaan, I asked the polite-looking manager—Jayanta, an MBA degree holder—where they get their pithas. Jayanta replied, “I am not too sure but as far as I know, they are bought from Tinsukia, a town/district in northern Assam. I have not visited that place.” With an intention of assuring me, he added, “Ekdom Axomiya hoi” (it is a totally “Assamese” preparation). After that, he asked my permission to attend to some of the customers who had just entered. I bid him goodbye with the hope of continuing the conversation later.

I returned to Jolpaan a week later. I again met Jayanta, and after exchanging some pleasantries, I reminded him of his words “Ekdom Axomiya hoi.” I asked him what made him so sure. It turned out, his insistence on “Assameseness” lies in the fact that the owner of the business who sells the pithas is an “Assamese” Hindu woman. He said, “Although I am not entirely sure but as far as I know, most of the workers there are ‘Assamese’ Hindu women. I have never been to that place to investigate. I do not know how the pithas are prepared, with technology or with hands. These aspects do not matter much. It is also a business.” I understood through his words that Jolpaan is after all a business enterprise dedicated to the cycle of supply and demand of “Assamese” culture.

Other spaces, such as the business enterprise of Khadyo, is again based on the vision of preserving Assamese culture through its ready-to-make and ready-to-eat products. But they also do not shy away from innovation. Similar to Jolpaan, Khadyo was founded by a man who yearned for healthy “Assamese” food when he first came to the city of Guwahati. His is a huge business enterprise that sells packaged “Assamese” snacks and savories. It sells pithas made in a factory setting with the help of technology. They supply their products to various stores both within Assam and beyond. Unlike Jolpaan, their scale of production and sales is much larger and is not relegated to one space. They also lack any personal interaction with the consumers of their brands—but their long-term presence in the households of the Guwahati underlines their importance in this particular urban space.

While I was growing up, I vividly remember that Khadyo was the “it” thing. It was a breath of fresh air for the women who could get no respite from making pithas during the festivities of Bihu. Khadyo has gained a reputation for itself over the years and is well known. The business is based on two aims: first, to preserve Assamese culture and heritage through food, and second, to meet the demands of the consumers (mostly women) who might not have enough time to prepare pithas due to their busy schedules. It reminds me of Srinivas’s

(2006) work on two major cosmopolitan urban sites: Bangalore and Boston. He writes that the women in these two urban locations, rather than deal with the hassle of preparing “authentic” food, resort to packaged “authentic” food. They do so because they still want to meet the societal expectations of their gender identity, wherein cooking forms an important part. This feeling is shared among most women who have been loyal customers of Khadyo products.

When I spoke to Rajen Saikia, the manager of Khadyo, he narrated to me the edifice of care according to which Khadyo carries out its business and because of which it is an entrusted brand. He further pointed out that “today, we even outsource our products to not only different parts of Assam but also to various cities in India. We have come up with innovations like the chocolate flavored ready-to-eat ‘Assamese’ breakfast cereals along with many other varieties. Innovations are important to be popular among the younger generation. Otherwise, they will forget our pithas and our culture.” Although, according to Saikia, it is most ideal when mothers prepare them for their children. Since it is not possible in contemporary times, “Khadyo fills this gap,” he asserted. When I inquired about gender preference in terms of employing workers, he replied that he is willing to employ both men and women for their preparation but that he prefers “Assamese” women, by which he meant not Miya women and to a large extent only Hindu women.

These men, the managers of Jolpaan and Khadyo, often evoke the notion of reputation, which relates to the trust in the pithas they sell on the basis of authenticity, hygiene, and the people they employ to prepare pithas. Schwecke (2022) points out the importance of reputation in gaining trust within the ambit of extra-legal financial transaction. While his study does not directly pertain to the subject of this article (food), the importance of reputation that he highlights in gaining and vesting trust cannot be dismissed. In other words, it should be noted that the pithas sold in the business enterprises of Jolpaan and Khadyo are purchased because of a trust in their adherence to hygiene standards and quality of taste. It is the “quality” that matters and which adds to their good reputation.

It must be reiterated that the products of Khadyo and Jolpaan, and pithas in particular, are for a class-based clientele. Anyone who prefers to buy their pithas seeks out the dimensions of authenticity, hygiene, care, and trust closely bound to their class, which allows them to afford these “reputed” brands. This is similar to what Dewey discusses in the context of Mumbai: the “desire for so-called authenticity in food is not at all unique to a wealthy minority in Mumbai, as such discernment masks its deeper social

function as an agent of class stratification throughout most of the world” (2012: 129).

The trust bestowed on men, such as in the case of the manager of Jolpaan, who is engaged in the everyday activities and interaction with customers, is based on an appealing marketing strategy that evokes uncontaminated “Assameseness.” Although both Khadyo and Jolpaan were founded by men, the trust and reputation they enjoy among its customers is tied to this concept of uncontaminated “Assameseness”: what is cleanly prepared and packaged by Hindu “Assamese” people, away from the dirt and dust of the streets. The pricing is justified in this sense. As one of the female customers of Khadyo told me, “Dirt and dust of the streets do not touch the products. It is neatly prepared and packaged. There is an additional cost involved when food is made in such a process.” Ghatak and Chatterjee (2018), in their study on Chinese street vendors in Kolkata, spotlight how the concern toward food safety and hygiene translates into bureaucratic intervention. As such, vendors are often associated with dirt and undesirability. Although there might be some overlap in the customer base of Anil Deka, Harish da, Khadyo, and Jolpaan, it cannot be denied that for the latter two it is only a certain section of “Assamese” people who can afford it. It is a bishakh based on class and affordability.

In addition, the masculinities of the owners and managers of these business ventures are not perceived to be based on a dominance over or an aggression toward women but rather on the care that is attached to relieving urban women from the hardships of preparing pithas while yet preserving “Assamese” culture. As Rajen Saikia told me, “We just want to help the urban women who are keen on preserving the tradition of pithas but do not get time because of their busy schedule.”

Thus, as the identity of being Hindu and “Assamese” have been important forms of social capital for men to gain trust in the business of pithas, the next section brings to light how and why certain kinds of masculinity are devoid of it.

“Untrustworthy” Masculinity

Ever since the seventeenth century, when the Mughals failed to invade Assam (1662–1663), Muslims in Assam have been primarily perceived in a negative light through a narrative of violence. The origin of such a narrative can be credited to the British official and self-styled historian Edward Gait and Assamese historians such as S. K. Bhuyan. The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and his general Mir Jumla became representations of bigoted and dangerous Muslim men. Although we have examples of Muslim men like Azan Fakir and Shah

Miran who have contributed immensely to “Assamese” cultural life, the contemporary Hindutva politics of Assam has turned all Muslim men into the “other”: a threat to the Assamese nation and its women.

However, according to Guha (1974), the immigration of poor peasants from East Bengal to Assam was initially rather welcomed. Assam was short of labor, so immigrant laborers were welcomed for their economic benefit. The local Assamese were not keen on working on the difficult wastelands under dire conditions. But the mosquito-infested, waterlogged riverine malarial areas did not deter the spirits of the hard-working immigrant cultivators: “Local Marwari and even Assamese moneylenders financed the immigrants to reclaim land and expand the cultivation of jute, ahu rice, pulses and vegetables” (Guha 1974: 348). It is rather sad that, today, “they become easily represented as Miya or ‘Bangladeshi’ and are further distanced from the Muslim of Assam” (Saikia 2017: 118). Such narratives of hate, disgust, and anxiety against Miya men have enveloped all spheres of life, including the kitchen space. This can be attributed to their religious identity and their perception as “illegal immigrants” from Bangladesh to the state of Assam. They have become objects of constant mistrust and disgust.

In terms of tracing the notions of trust and gender in the kitchen space, we can go back to Pragyasundari Devi, who in her cookbook *Amish o Niramish Ahar* (1902) touches on this issue. In her book, sometimes regarded as the first cookbook written in Bengali, one of her concerns was housewives leaving the responsibility of cooking to the servants. While lamenting the decreased role of women in the kitchen, she writes:

They have, in a way, bidden farewell to cooking. However, they cook once in a while only if the fancy strikes them. This is why we do not get good food to eat . . . Expecting the same sort of clean and hygienic but delectable food that can be provided by the women of the family, from the hands of salaried cooks is expecting too much. These draw their salaries and thus do their work. Their fundamental effort is to complete their work as quickly as possible and in whatever manner affordable. It is not for them to think about good or bad . . . But if the women of the family do the cooking, then just as the food produced is quite appetizing, so is it also quite clean and hygienic. (Dutta 2016: 266)

Similar to Pragyasundari Devi’s (1902) observation, during my fieldwork it was observed that most “Assamese” families privileged by their caste and class position perceive domestic helpers as “untrustworthy servants.” I would like to bring in an excerpt from one of the interviews I conducted with an elderly upper-caste woman, who I refer to as Usha Aunty (UA):

Do you employ any part-time domestic help?

UA: Yes, I do.

Why? What work do they do? Do they cook?

UA: I need help. It is not physically possible to do all household chores by either me or any other family member. My children also do not have time. Sweeping, mopping, washing clothes and utensils are the major tasks that our helper does. They do not do the cooking.

Why not cooking?

UA: No, no, we do the cooking ourselves. My part-time helper is a Miya woman. Although she works well, you can’t trust a Miya person to cook in a Hindu household. I do not trust their hygiene standards. Besides, nowadays there is so much news about domestic helpers looting and killing their employees by mixing something in the food. I am not saying our part-timer would do that, but one has to be careful.

Do you think the trust factor would be different if it was a Hindu woman or an Assamese Hindu Woman?

UA: One cannot be sure, but perhaps it would be better because we are from the same culture. But still, I would say trusting someone with cooking is a big deal.

Usha Aunty later added that as pitha preparation involves the use of hands in an intricate manner in terms of grinding, mixing, and shaping the pithas, it is important to ensure hygiene standards. As she views it, this cannot be expected from a domestic helper, especially those not acquainted with the cultural milieu of Assam, such as the Miyas. This untrustworthiness relates to foreseeing physical violence by the domestic helpers and also a lack of trust related to maintaining cleanliness, hygiene, and purity.

Similar to what Gupta (2018) mentions about colonial times in India, in Assam too “Muslim male servants in Hindu households came to be increasingly perceived as ‘unnatural’, with an ‘intrusive’ presence in private spaces, also posing a threat to Hindu patriarchy with a constant fear of ‘contamination’ of the Hindu mistress via sexual interaction which implicitly hinted at transgressive sites of intimacy and desire” (Gupta 2018: 163). Again, due to the negative stereotypes attached to the Miya community, the men of this community are further perceived as the dangerous “other” men. Being Muslim and Miya is a double burden for them. In one of my addas with an “Assamese” Hindu married couple in their late thirties, I asked them if they would be comfortable employing Miya men as part-time help since

they have already employed a Miya woman who is allowed to enter the kitchen and even cook occasionally. As they noted, “See, we don’t have much issue with someone being Miya, but Miya men are not meant for this. They are also less trustworthy than the woman.”

I need to underline that it has also been unthinkable for both my “Assamese” and Miya research participants, irrespective of their gender, that Miyas could ever enter the arena of pitha preparation and sale for “Assamese” buyers: “Quite a few Hindu households do not even let us enter their kitchen,” said one of the Miya women who works as a domestic part-time helper. Women buyers of pithas, as it turned out, are even more cautious of maintaining these boundaries when it comes to food. This can be attributed to the fact that women have always been held responsible for running the household, and particularly the kitchen, smoothly, with no form of contamination—be it from people or cooking ingredients and utensils.

Miya men are preferred for work at construction sites, as rickshaw pullers, and for other manual labor. Their masculinity is perceived as fit for these kinds of jobs. Although patriarchal notions of men not being good at domestic work prevails, in the case of Miya men it is primarily their “othering” that is the reason for their not being employed as domestic help. Some employers further consider that employing men would be much more expensive than employing women. In general, not only are male domestic cooks difficult to find for household cooking, but they are also perceived as “threats” and “criminals” not to be allowed inside the house. “Nuclear families, especially with daughters around, see the presence of young or adult male servants as a threat, which has made female servants desirable” (Sinha, Varma, and Jha 2019: 32). Although it has been observed that some men see it as a loss of masculinity to be employed as domestic help, employers view them as a threat to the women inside the households.

One of the Miya men who is a rickshaw puller, while taking me to one of my field sites, told me that he works outside (of the house) and his wife inside the house, including the households of a few “Assamese” Hindu families. When I asked him why he does not want to work as a domestic help, he seemed a little irritated and uttered, “I told you earlier also that I work outside and she works inside the houses. Anyway, they (the employers) trust the women of our community a little more than the men when it comes to domestic work.” The larger public discourse in contemporary India illustrates that Muslim masculinity is often perceived in violent terms and within the larger ambit of untrustworthiness.

A Conclusion toward Unfixed Definitions

Trust is a concept often overlooked and taken for granted, especially in the context of performing masculinity, food preparation, and sale in South Asia. Traditionally, as mentioned above, women are entrusted with cooking in the household because of the stereotypes attached to femininity, that is, of being caring, nurturing, sacrificing. Women are trusted with food preparation, especially items such as the pithas in the context of Assam. However, it has been interesting to witness men venturing into this arena of pitha preparation at different levels in the urban space of Guwahati, from street vendors to the owners and managers of business enterprises selling pithas. Although the ideal image is still that of a woman preparing pithas, the men involved in preparing and selling pithas are not perceived to be devoid of care and affection. Harish da’s customers are a case in point: they think of him as a caring and affectionate man. One of his regular customers, a young man of twenty-five years old, hinted to me that he comes to this stall for tea and pithas because he finds Harish da affectionate: “In any case, a man needs to have a softer side if he wants to run a food business,” asserted this customer.

The care to preserve “Assamese” culture through food while at the same time relieving women from bearing this responsibility alone is a primary reason why business enterprises like Khadyo and Jolpaan are trusted and have gained popularity and reputation among those who can afford to buy their products. Nonetheless, it was widely observed that men who prepared and sold pithas in their small street stalls or who established larger business ventures seemed acceptable because of patriarchal stereotypes about men being stronger than women and better suited for the market space. It should be noted that despite gaining some respite from pitha preparation, a certain population of urban women still have to bear the responsibility of meeting societal expectations of being “good” wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law who try to preserve “Assamese” culture by serving pithas to family and guests, if not entirely preparing them. Moreover, patriarchal norms based on Brahminical ideas of cleanliness and hygiene, informed by class-based discrimination, maintains rigid categories of “us” and “others.”

Although the correlation of men being more suitable to prepare and sell food in the public space exists, not all kinds of male bodies and masculinities associated with it are trusted. The “trustworthy” masculinities in the kitchens (both in public and private) are those that can be fitted into the notion of “Assameseness.” Muslims in general and Miyas in particular rarely fit into it. The buyers of pithas in the market, their trust, or bishakh, of men who subscribe to the ideas of authenticity,

hygiene, “us,” and “others” fall under the broader paradigm of Brahminical Hinduism. It is within the ambit of the larger political agenda of a state that reserves the category of “Assamese” for only a privileged few based on caste privileges, class markers, religious indicators, and other factors. Hygiene, cleanliness, and authenticity associated with food are mere manifestations of this. It was observed that when people evoke the notion of “Assamese” and trust while buying pithas from men, it is primarily to sustain a particular sense of identity tied up with the current political situation where “Assamese” identity is perceived to be under threat. As Misztal indicates, such trust “contributes to the preservation of social order” (1992: 13). The “Assamese” men who want to preserve “Assamese” culture while preparing traditional food items like the pithas, along with their customers, manifest the notion of trust at the intersection of identity, class, caste, religion, gender, and race. The social capital of being an “Assamese” Hindu also plays an important role in gaining trust of customers.

However, one must consider that if men can enter a rather feminized zone of pitha preparation and sale and if innovations are welcomed (as in the case of some Khadyo products), shouldn't cultural identities also be seen as unfixed, multilayered, and ever-changing (Dimitrova 2017: 1)? “Assameseness,” the manner in which one understands and manifests being “Assamese,” has never been about subscribing to a static and homogenous notion. It is similar to Dimitrova's conceptualization of “Indianness,” wherein she argues that “Indianness” is neither a scientific nor a “real” category. It is rather a perceived, fluid, and ideologically colored discourse that constantly changes over time and is being conditioned by the ideological orientations and positions of the specific period discussed (Dimitrova 2017: 1). “Assameseness,” like “Indianness,” is “imagined” and acted out depending on one's ideological positions within a historical milieu. Identity creation, be it of gender, ethnicity, or nationality, is similar to what Abarca writes in relation to food: “Through the process of incorporating differences, people create their own gastronomical chistes, making their distinctive meals original to them at the time of their invention” (2004: 10). ©

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NOTES

1. Established in 1917, the Assam Sahitya Sabha is the oldest literary and cultural organization in Assam.
2. Bihu is an important cultural festival for the people of Assam. Feasting, merry-making, and visiting friends and relatives are the usual characteristics of Bihu festivities. This is especially true during Magh/Bhogali Bihu or Bohag/Rongali Bihu. Magh/Bhogali Bihu is celebrated in mid-January, and Bohag/Rongali Bihu is celebrated in mid-April.
3. The NRC in Assam is a list of Indian citizens living in the state. The citizens' register sets out to identify foreign nationals in the state that borders Bangladesh. The process to update the register began following a Supreme Court order in 2013, with the state's nearly thirty-three million people having to prove they were Indian nationals prior to March 24, 1971. The updated final NRC was released on August 31, 2019, with over 1.9 million applicants failing to make it to the list. www.business-standard.com/about/what-is-nrc (accessed September 12, 2021).
The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA) is an act passed in the Parliament on December 11, 2019. The 2019 CAA amended the Citizenship Act of 1955 allowing Indian citizenship for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian religious minorities who fled from the neighbouring Muslim majority countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan before December 2014 due to “religious persecution or fear of religious persecution.” However, the Act excludes Muslims. There have been protests against the act all over Assam, which have turned violent at times.
4. The preface by the editor, Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, mentions that the volume was an outcome of a seminar on “Save Guwahati.” He applauded it as being a very timely intervention. He further adds that he first came to Guwahati in the year 1941 when it was a small town.
5. “Explained: The Miyas of Assam, and Their Char-Chapori Culture” <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-the-miyas-of-assam-and-their-char-chapori-culture-6943279> (accessed December 27, 2023).

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