Food Politics

Food Politics: Studying Food, Identity and Difference among the Garos

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by Queenbala Marak

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For my father

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PREFACE

At the outset, the term "Food Politics" means different things to different people. It could mean politicizing food at one level, while at another it could mean tensions over control of food and its sources. It could also mean government policies over food, leading to a discussion of different food policies or agricultural policies. Here, the term "Food Politics" is ethnographic in nature, for it looks at the internal web that exists in a tribal community vis-à-vis a non-tribal and "greater" culture.

This book is the story of two Garo villages living across a political divide – the Indo-Bangladesh border – and away from the majority of their kind. They live with and amidst a dominant group that is not their own. In interacting among themselves and with the other group(s), they try and continue to hold on to their past traditions, customs, and beliefs. In doing so, they have been able successfully to create and innovate the concept of being a "Garo". This story of identity creation is looked at in this book through the microcosm of food.

This book is a product of many forces, some active, some latent. My colleague and PhD supervisor Prof. T. B. Subba has been the most instrumental in pushing me not only towards the completion of the degree but also towards this publication with his habitual enquiry about its progress. Two of the constants in my life throughout the "rollercoaster" that I experienced preceding the writing of this book and while writing it, and to whom I remain obliged, are my sister Jessie and my friend Utpala. The abiding emotional support, for which I am ever thankful, that I received from my parents Jessie*pa* and Jessie*ma*, is priceless. For the patient hearings and the constant reminder to finish the draft, I am forever grateful to Simon.

Without the "actors" the script could not have been written at all! My sincere thanks to all the actors – the people of Achiksong and Mandisong. Thank you for letting me into your homes, your hearths and your lives! I thank my key informants, the two *ambi*s and the two *atchu*s in the village(s), the headmen, my guides, and many more. I cannot give back what you had given me, all I can do is maintain your anonymity. For this purpose alone, I have replaced the original names of the villages by Achiksong and Mandisong, which literally means "Garo village". Additionally, I have changed all the names of my informants.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING FOOD

"Go on! Eat it!
Only when you eat, will you grow big and strong!
Look at the neighbour's child! How big he's grown!
Look at your uncle's daughter! How good she is in school!
Go on! Eat it!"[1]

As a child, food was an insignificant part of my life. I was a small eater, fastidious about eating different kinds of food, and with anything that was "green" in colour. Instead I had to be coaxed to eat two square meals a day. All my waking hours were spent in playing with friends, both real and imaginary, and in the world of books and fairytales. My earliest interest in anything connected to food began when I was in my early twenties and in my first job. I had to shift base to Shillong, the picturesque capital of Meghalaya, one of the smallest states of India, where I joined as a faculty member in the Department of Anthropology at North-Eastern Hill University. Besides the complications of setting up a kitchen alone, my interest in food grew as I began to interact with colleagues and students and realized how different aspects of culture are revealed through one's food habits. The shock of coming face to face with slaughtered heads of pigs[2] hanging from the top of meat stalls along the National

[1] Garos discipline children in many different ways – through mild rebuke, comparison with other "good" children, through rewards, and by instilling fear in them. Comparing a "naughty" child with a neighbour's child, who is well-behaved and well-spoken of, is very common. In the present context, whenever Frani's three year son refused to eat food, his grandmother would cajole him, failing which she would tell him about other children who have grown up big and strong or are studying in school.

[2] My first sight of the displayed meat in Shillong, Khasi Hills, Meghalaya (India) was long fat-looking purplish engorged intestines, dead pig heads dangled from posts looking at every passer-by, big chunks of bloodied red meat dumped on the counter, and big chunks of cow-legs sprawled on the next counter. My relationship with the meat stalls of Shillong has since been temper down to a great extent, but questions still remain why meat, especially in its sensory details, was so openly

Highway 37 as one enters Shillong from Guwahati, the capital of Assam, was one in a million experiences. Food could, therefore, be more meaningful than merely the biological aspect of ingesting food.

Food, the term itself, has various connotations. According to the online version of *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, food refers to "(any) material consisting essentially of protein, carbohydrate, and fat used in the body of an organism to sustain growth, repair, and vital processes and to furnish energy; *also*: such food together with supplementary substances (as minerals, vitamins, and condiments)." However, food also includes such other non-solid substances as water, milk, liquor, and other alcoholic drinks, together with gases like smoking tobacco or *hookah*, as well as chewing tobacco, areca nut, and betel leaf. In essence, food means different items to different people in different cultures.

The consumption of food, like other biologically-supportive activities, is an aspect of cultural behaviour. In no society do people eat everything, everywhere, with everyone, and in all situations. Most cultures have a recognizable cuisine: a specific set of cooking traditions, preferences, and practices. Almost every form of life, whether plant or animal, has been used as food for nutritive or ritual purposes by one or more human societies at some time in the past or present. The choice of food is a cultural decision. People do not accept all possible substances as edible but make choices. Culture defines how possible nutrition is coded into acceptable food (Lévi-Strauss 1966). Ecological, biological, and economic conditions affect our choice of food too but it is the cultural understanding and categorization that structures food as edible or inedible and as part of the world. The consumption of food is governed by rules and usages that cut across each other at different levels of symbolization. These symbolizations define the social contexts and groupings within which food is consumed, and prohibits or taboos the consumption of other foods.

One of the earliest papers I read that had a profound impact on me and pushed me toward taking up food as a phenomenon that could be studied was Mary Douglas's article 'Deciphering a Meal', which first appeared in 1971.[3] She writes:

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displayed. This is a question that I attempted to answer in a paper that I presented at the ASA (Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth) Conference held at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India) from April 3 to 6, 2012.

3Mary Douglas (1921–2007) first published her seminal piece 'Deciphering a Meal' in 1971. In this highly original paper, she uses her own family as a nucleus for research on the meal as (social) object, extending outward its possible resonance to greater society.

> If food is a code, where is the precoded message? Here, on the anthropologist's home ground, we are able to improve the posing of the question. A code affords a general set of possibilities for sending particular messages. If food is treated as a code the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. (Douglas [1971]1997:36)

Food, therefore, is one of the most visible and important symbols of identity and difference, uniting the members of a community and segregating them from other communities. This inclusion and exclusion can be observed not only in what they eat or what they are known to eat, but also how they eat, how they prepare and serve their food, and what happens after food is taken. If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed both within and outside a community. The decoded message is about hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries, and transactions across the boundaries (Douglas 1997).

Consequently, in all cultures, a closer look at what and how people eat takes one directly to the core issue of identity or who they are. The more their eating habits and practices are understood, the more clear their political, religious, economic, and social systems become. It ultimately helps in understanding them as people, seeing why they make many of the food choices and why they do not make other choices. The study of food politics and questions of identity and difference can, therefore, be a means of understanding the underlying social relations in any culture and its quiescent philosophy.

Anthropology of Food

Anthropologists are uniquelyplaced to study different phenomena of life, including food. Food has emerged only recently from the peripheries of academic inquiry to take a more central position within the discipline of anthropology. As early as the 1900s, anthropological writings briefly mentioned food within the context of a culture's diet,tending to favour lists rather than analysis. From 1950s to the early 1970s the anthropology of food moved toward a biological orientation with nutritive studies becoming popular. On the other hand, there were those anthropologists who were interested in tracing the origins of particular foods. In the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists began to move toward conceptualizing food as a symbolic substance that was embedded and invested with meaning.

Current studies on food emphasize the cultural and social aspects of food, rather than its nutritive qualities.

While early anthropologists mentioned food because of its central role in many cultures, a few wrote pointed pieces on foodways, most notably Audrey Richards (1932, 1939), Raymond Firth (1934), and Meyer Fortes and S. L. Fortes (1936). Most of these early studies on food and culture were outgrowths of the traditional ethnographic method and were both labour- and time-intensive.

Audrey Richards' *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* (1932) examines the cultural aspects of food and eating among the southern Bantu, taking as its starting point the bold statement that "nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex". When it was first published, with a preface by her mentor Bronislaw Malinowski, it laid the groundwork for a sociological theory of nutrition. This ethnography is one of the earliest and most influential anthropological accounts of food and diet, looking at how food and its consumption satisfy an entire system of needs through institutional and social processes. It had a twofold interest. It is, as Malinowski says in a highly laudatory preface, the first systematic study of the subject in anthropological literature; and it is an originally conceived and at the same time instructive example of the application of the conception of "function" to the study of the part played by certain biological needs of man in knitting together and determining the form and relations of economic and social units in a given society. Her 1939 survey of the diet of the Bemba describes the living conditions of the Bemba with special reference to the effects of migrant labour on the social and economic life of a mainly agricultural society.

Firth (1934) was the first attempt at a methodological study of food. He laid out a scheme of research on four aspects: consideration of natural resources available, study of extractive methods for obtaining food, preparation of food for consumption, and the consumption of food. This was more on the lines of a nutritive study, rather than a cultural one. However, Firth (1973) focuses more on the logical and systematic patterning of symbolic analogies and reversals than on actual diet.

Another of the earliest works on food (Fortes and Fortes 1936) described the place of food in the domestic economy of the Tallensi tribe of the Sudanese zone, focusing on the relation of the household and the "units of food production" to the various food activities. Food is a major practical issue in Tallensi social life. It is also a fundamental constituent of innumerable social situations not directly connected with nutrition –for instance, sacrifices to ancestral spirits or funeral ceremonies.

Anthropology continues to make important contributions – both ethnographic and theoretical – to the field today. Key works over the last few years illustrate the range of symbolic, materialist, and ecological perspectives used to explain the patterns of food selection and their nutritional consequences. Some influential books today include Goody (1982), Meigs (1984), Mintz (1985, 1996), Kahn (1986), Pollock (1992), Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), Watson (1997), Fink (1998), Weismantel (1998), Counihan (1999, 2004), Nichter (2000), Anderson (2005), Kulick and Meneley (2005) and Wilk (2006).

Food, Structure, and Meaning

Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1968, and 1970) made one of the most thoughtful analyses of the structure of food, which has induced several other anthropologists to pursue their analytical works along the lines shown by him. He sought to understand food as a cultural system, recognizing that taste was culturally shaped and socially controlled. His approach treated food as analogous to language, and examined the ways in which its meanings could be grasped from an understanding of symbols and metaphors associated with food. His tri-polar gastronomic model (the raw, the cooked, and the rotten) was a classic structuralist statement in which he saw basic structures represented by two polarities: nature/culture and elaborated/unelaborated, and this constituted the study of the borderline between nature and culture and of the "progressive" and "regressive" movement across this border.

Roland Barthes (1997) employed a linguistic analogy in the understanding of food, searching for a code or grammar. Unlike Levi-Strauss who made generalizations from myths of tribal people but failed to analyse the foodways of advanced societies, Barthes related concepts like capitalism and imperialism to his analysis of food. Mary Douglas (1997), influenced by both Levi-Strauss and Barthes, showed how an ordinary, everyday meal revealed much about the cultural beliefs surrounding food as well as the social and metaphysical logic that underlies these beliefs.

The problem of the Lévi-Straussian triangle was that it focused mainly on the progressive "civilizing" movement from nature to culture; whereas it was the regressive "fall" back on nature which constituted the moral dilemma of the modern eater. This point has been elaborated recently by Mäkelä and Arppe (2005) while studying the "living foods" diet of foodists and dieticians. Lévi-Strauss' culinary triangle has been looked at again by Clark (2004) too; he studied punk cuisine and saw it as a way of

favouring the less anarchist food over the commodified products – the "raw" or "rotten" over the "cooked".

Jack Goody (1982) also criticizes the Lévi-Straussian approach for its emphasis on culture, and for failing to consider social relations and individual differences; he takes issue with Douglas for neglecting internal social differentiation as well as external socio-cultural influences, historical factors, and material elements. Goody acknowledges the importance of culture, but he argues that a study of food and eating must involve political economy at the microlevel, such as the household, through to the macrolevel, such as states and their formation and structure.

Even though Lévi-Strauss' culinary triangle seems to be culture-specific and the movements between the poles not universal, the symbolic and semiotic nature of food cannot be doubted. Like any language, food has rules of exclusion, signifying opposites (such as savoury/sweet), rules of association for how individual dishes and menus should be assembled, and rituals of use. Food not only acts as an indicator of a society's beliefs and idioms, but if properly decoded can tell much about the latent norms and values of a society.

Food, Identity, and Difference

In a community's search for identity, food acquires an essential role. For instance, traditional breads, farmhouse cheeses, and local wines in France, Spain, or Italy, village-made couscous in Algeria or Morocco, or pampas meat in Argentina (Muchnik *et al*. 2005) all acquire an essential role. At times, particular foods, at the level of the community, acquire a new dimension and they become an integral part of their life. Medina (2001) confirms that among the Basque diaspora in Barcelona "wine is not just wine" but an integral part of the socialization process.

Food and food practices reflect and shape gender identity, roles, and relationships in a family as well as at the community levels. Provisioning and food preparation still remain largely the work of women, who are responsible not only for feeding the family but also for doing so in a manner which accords with the preferences of its members, remains within budgetary constraints, and is as healthy as possible. "Entitlement" to food differs between men and women, as pointed out by Caplan (1997), in terms of the type of food or alcohol as well as the quantity itself. Again, "real men" are thought to need meat, particularly red meat, while women were much more likely to be vegetarians. Some conclude that men adopt unhealthy behaviours and beliefs in order to demonstrate their masculinity (Moynihan 1998, Courtenay 2000, Watson 2000). However, most of these

studies on food and gender have been carried out by women on women respondents alone, and not cross-culturally. On the other hand, a study on male carpenters, drivers, and engineers in Oslo revealed that there was no homogeneous pattern in male food choices; rather social class played a role in the selection or rejection of food (Roos and Wandel 2005).

Food is linked to class, status, and ethnicity as well. Even a simple meal at the table shows a social structure. This point has been proved by Cantarero and Stacconi(2001) while discussing the sitting position of child diners in Juan de Lanuza, a rehabilitation centre in Zaragoza, Spain. In Peru, modern perceptions of class, ethnicity, and social identity dictate whether the guinea pig is a delicacy or an unpalatable indigenous food item (deFrance 2006). Many societies categorize food into "our" and "their" food. The Inuit of the Canadian Arctic (Searles 2002) as well as Punjabi women in Glasgow (Bradby 1997) draw such distinctions in food to express cultural differences as well as personal and collective identity.

Food, thus, is seen to be a marker of difference as well as identity. Though national, ethnic, and religious distinctions are often marked in culinary patterns or details, these have not received due attention.

Food, Change, and Continuity

Marvin Harris (1985, 1992), taking a materialist view, tries to see how the cow became "sacred" in India. He points out that in the *Rig Veda* the slaughter and sacrifice of cattle were central to religious performances and that during Rig Vedic times the consumption of the cow was widely prevalent. He argues that with a rapidly rising population made possible by the spread of agriculture using the ox-drawn plough, cattle slaughter could no longer be sustained. However, such a link is tenuous and the role of culture in the selection or rejection of food items cannot be bypassed. Douglas (1966), Beardsworth and Bryman (1999), and Curtis and Biran (2001) point to a huge range of potentiallyedible items that are ignored in every culture for cultural reasons alone.

Dietary patterns have undergone many changes due to market economy. Mintz (1985) was one of the first anthropologists to examine the change in eating habits due to economic development. He describes the history of sugar consumption in England, the Netherlands, and the United States. He links its popularity with the increase in sugar supply in Europe via sugarcane plantations in the New World.

In a study among Glaswegian Punjabi women, it was found that the first changes in food habits at the family level occur in the "least" important meal, the breakfast (Bradby 1997). The interviewed Punjabi

women ate “Scottish/English food” for breakfast, and “Punjabi food” for lunch, dinner, and celebrations, thus emphasizing that the “least” important meal was most prone to changes.

In recent times, changes in diet have arisen due to increasing health consciousness, hectic and demanding work schedules, and rising tendencies to eat outside. A few scholars have touched on the above topics. Beardsworth and Bryman (1999), in their study among young adults in Britain, found that red meat consumption was on the decline for perceived health reasons. Murcott (1997) addresses the frequent complaints about the decline in eating meals at home in Britain due to emerging tendencies to eat out. Williams (1997), while studying the increase in eating outside the home, found that many people on holiday deliberately sought out food that was “nostalgic”, while Martens and Warde(1997) suggest that there were significant conceptual links between eating in a restaurant and notions of private hospitality.

Migration, contrary to general opinion, affected food rituals less in its form and content and actually reinforced its traditional operation. This was seen among the Igbo diaspora community in Belgium where the “kola nut” rite is still followed in its traditional form. The “kola nut” is a symbol of social interaction and presented in marriage ceremonies and social gatherings by men to men in accordance of social status and never to women. By contrast, in Nigeria, Igbo women now are challenging male authority and male privilege in carrying out this rite (Duru 2005). Migration also seems to integrate two different cultures as seen among the Glaswegian women of Punjabi origin, who in their diet adopted both the allopathic discourse and the age-old ayurvedic system handed down from their elders (Bradby 1997).

From the literature cited in this section, it is obvious that anthropology of food is a promising but much less explored field of research, especially in India. There is hardly any data, leave alone analysis, on production, distribution, and consumption of food in the various societies we deal with. Nor has there been any full-length empirical and analytical work on the role of food in bringing about solidarity within a community and drawing the boundaries with other communities. Again, the research on food among Garos is minimal as seen in the following.

Literature on Food among the Garos

Scholars of Garo culture have treated food almost exclusively from an economic perspective, that is, as a basic need (Playfair [1909]1975, Burling [1963]1997a, Sangma 1981), and as a material resource that is a

key component of a subsistence mode of production adapted to ecosystems (Majumdar 1980).

One of the foremost mentions of Garo food items is by Alan Playfair in his monograph *The Garos* first published in 1909, wherein he talks about different strategies for getting food.Subsequent works give a list of food items consumed by the Garos (Burling [1963]1997a, Sangma 1981). Robbins Burling, on the basis of fieldwork conducted from 1954 to 1956 in Rengsanggri, describes the Rongram weekly market in West Garo Hills District, Meghalaya (India). Among the food items, Garos were seen buying dry fish from the dealers and selling rice beer, snacks like boiled sweet potatoes or manioc, uncooked beef, and less frequently uncooked pork (1997a). Majumdar, while studying the Garos of Matchakolgiri of West Garo Hills District, Meghalaya (India), makes a list of jobs connected to food and gender. Cooking, fetching water, and preparing rice beer were women's jobs while fishing and hunting were men's jobs (1980). These works, as clearly illustrated, have merely listed types of food consumed and activities connected to food.

In 2007, Ellen Bal made an interesting statement in her study on social boundaries and ethnic categorization of the Garos of Bangladesh. She talked about how Bengalis still think of Garos as "frog eaters", i.e., being people of a very primitive stage. This statement itself reiterates that food symbolizes much more than the mere physical aspect. Recently, Erik de Maaker (2006), while discussing traditional funerary practices among the Garos of Garo Hills (India), gave details of the meals involved in a funeral and food exchange between families. However, all these works on Garos lack systematic and analytical study of food as central.

Strategizing Food

The term "Food Politics" refers to many things. At one level it refers to gastro-politics within society and at another level it refers to gastro-politics outside society. This book is an attempt to specifically discuss the relationship between food, identity, and difference that is found among the Garos. In such an endeavour, it will discuss the production, distribution, and consumption of food among the Garos; food as a marker of Garo identity; food as a medium of differentiation within the Garo community, chiefly along gender differences; and will discuss change and continuity in Garo food, and how gender boundaries within Garos and ethnic boundaries between Garos and non-Garos are negotiated.

In order to achieve the above objectives of this book, some research questions were initially framed. These included, but were not limited to,

what foods are selected, offered, and eaten, and how. What foods are preferred and what are avoided and why? What food and food practices are termed as “Garo food” or “non-Garo food” and why? What are the processes of food production, distribution, and consumption among the Garos? How do traditional knowledge, customs, rituals, ideas, and beliefs influence these processes? How does food differentiate men and women in Garo society? How does food act as a binding or segregating force? Has the introduction of new food into Garo culture through market economy and globalization challenged their identity or blurred their boundaries with the non-Garos?

Besides the objectives, this book starts with two hypotheses, and whether they are validated or not remains to be seen. The first statement that I make is that the spatial distance between two Garo groups plays little or no role in the formation of separate concepts of food. I say this since in common parlance, Garos frequently refer to “Garo food”. “Today I had Garo food” is a common utterance by Garos. What constitutes such a food, and do they really have a concrete entity called Garo food? Is this an entity that is intact despite the geographical distance and the political divide?

The second statement that I make is that the non-beef and non-pork environments in Assam (India) and Bangladesh respectively make an impact on Garo food preferences in the two locations. Garos eat both beef (cow meat) and pork (swine meat). In Assam (India), Garos live in a predominantly Assamese Hindu non-beef environment. In Bangladesh, they live with the dominant Bengali Muslims who observe a taboo on pork consumption. I therefore wanted to find out whether these specific social environments would have any impact on the Garo choice of food.

The present study could have been deliberated in any culture and in any geographical location. Why did I select the Garos living in particular areas? Besides being a part of the Garo tribal world, which I expected would help me in collection of data in the Garo language, I had a few observations which prompted me toward the selection of this community for empirical study. First, food occupies a very important part in Garo daily discourse. After preliminary greetings, the first question invariably is, “Have you eaten?” or if visiting, “What have you cooked?” Secondly, Garos are a matrilineal group of people. Therefore it is interesting to find out if gender plays a role in Garo cuisine. Thirdly, Garos universally talk of Garo food. Even in the city of Shillong, where I presently reside, a local market has sprung up in the vicinity of Polo market under the name of “Garomarket”. This in itself is a novelty, for nowhere in the city does any market exist that is named after a community: there is no Khasi market, Assamese market, or Nepali market. The Garo market is temporary, where

farmers from Garo villages of West Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya, come and sell their vegetables on a daily basis. These vegetables generally consist of Garo pumpkin, green coconut, green papaya, Garo arum, and other seasonal vegetables like *galda* (sorrel), *mekha* (jute), wild plants such as *mecheng*, and aquatic faunal delicacies like crabs, cockles, and eels.

Locating the Garos of the Book

Playfair ([1909]1975), on his very first introductory page, divides Garos into those inhabiting the Garo Hills District and those inhabiting the other districts in the low-lying plains area.The Garos inhabiting the erstwhile Garo Hills District (now in Meghalaya, India) have been much studied (Nakane 1967, Burling [1963]1997a, Majumdar 1980, de Maaker 2006) whereas there exists hardly any known literature about the Garos living in the plains areas. I therefore planned to study those inhabiting the low-lying plains areas, namely Assam (India) and, across the political divide, Bangladesh. Moreover, the study of identity and difference would be more meaningful if the Garos are studied in such situations where they live within a greater non-Garo culture as those in Assam (India) and Bangladesh, and where they live alongside and with substantial non-Garo people.

There are over a thousand villages each in Assam (India) and Bangladesh where Garos live. To overcome the dilemma in village selection, I approached two organizations working at the grassroots level, viz., the All Assam Garo Union (AAGU),a voluntary organization of Garos of Assam (India), and the Indigenous Peoples' Development Services (IPDS), an NGO working in Bangladesh. The former gave me figures of 1400 Garo villages in Assam and the latter gave figures of over 1000 Garo villages in Bangladesh.

The disquieting figure came down drastically because I had three overriding considerations for village selection. It had to be one of the oldest and largest Garo villages, with substantial non-Garo populations as well.

The AAGU had, in the year 2005, undertaken an independent population census of Garo villages in Assam and, therefore, Levingstone Kongkal Sangma, the President of AAGU, gave me two names – Achiksong and Nishangram, two of the oldest, largest, and best known villages in Assam. Achiksong is a village in Kamrup District, whereas Nishangram is in Goalpara District. I chose the former in spite of its relative communication and transport inaccessibility (during the days of

my fieldwork 2006–2008), because it had a 80:20 ratio of Garo: non-Garo populations, while the latter had only a couple of non-Garo families living in the village.

In Bangladesh, Mandisong was the first Garo village, after a few Bengali villages, that I set foot in when I crossed over the border at Nakugaon International Check Post in Haluaghat Upazila from Dalu in Garo Hills, Meghalaya. From written records checked previously (Rahman 2006), I knew that Haluaghat Thana was one of the most densely Garo-populated areas. From field visits and personal information collected from the area on my first visit to Bangladesh, I realized Mandisong village had the largest Garo population in Haluaghat Thana with a 50:50 ratio of Garo: non-Garo people.

Collecting Data on Food

When it came to data collection on food, surprisingly, it was rather complex and difficult. Many times, it was hard to make the respondent comprehend the question, and since at times it would be answered jokingly it was difficult to gauge the correctness or authenticity of the answer given.Again, on many occasions, the questions put were answered with a shy smile "*Naa masiaba*," meaning "You know the answer." It was a rather unfair statement for in reality my "native world"[4] was totally different from theirs. This, I realize, is one of the greatest drawbacks of being a researcher of the "same" culture.

I started my first few days in the village with a household survey of the village, through which preliminary data on socio-economic background of each household was collected. The data collected included age, sex, marital status, clan affiliation, religion, educational qualification, occupation (both primary and secondary), and income. Moreover data on property owned – communal and individual (land and livestock) – was also collected.This helped me later in checking the socio-economic background of the people, but more than that, this helped me in familiarizing myself with the village and its people and in identifying the individuals for in-depth interviews to follow.

Initially, and in many situations, I did not use any structured interview schedule for data collection on food. However, I followed an interview guide which had a wide-ranging set of questions covering methods and

[4] I was born in the city of Guwahati in the state of Assam (India), and lived with Assamese neighbours and played with Assamese friends. I was a Garo by birth, but I lived and grew amidst non-Garos. Thus my "Garo world" was substantially different from my informants'.

types of food acquisition, places where food was acquired and the socio-cultural reasons for choosing them, consumption and distribution activities, different cooking techniques and politics of the kitchen, food dynamics within and across groups – Garos and non-Garos, and also new food and foodways. However, for data collection on some aspects, a semi-structured schedule prepared in the field itself was used. For instance, while collecting data on gender roles in food acquisition activities, whenever I carried along the interview guide and inquired, "What jobs in a *jhum* field do you do?" I would get what I thought were vague answers like "I do everything." A second question to qualify "everything" would give a still vaguer answer like "We all do everything." Therefore, I prepared a schedule covering different activities includingclearing jungles, cutting down trees, setting fire to dried undergrowth, hoeing, sowing seeds, weeding, harvesting, carrying the crops, chasing birds away, etc. I used this interview schedule to understand the roles expected of a man and a woman.

In fact, this was the second most problematic situation I faced (the first being that they assumed I knew the answer to all queries). Garos are very general in their descriptions or answers. Many times, I had to prod for a precise answer, and at times it would take a lot of prodding to get a clear answer. When I asked informants about recognizable tastes, the answers I received was either a "*toa*" or "*toja*," meaning "tasty" or "not tasty". However, my consistent prodding bore fruit when I received answers like "sour," "sweet," "salty," "bitter," "burningness," etc.

Interviews were informal or conversational to begin with, followed by more formal interviews covering some objectives of my study. The focus of the research for ideal rules on patterns of eating, for example, was on what is eaten for typical meals, on typical days, for special events, or about food preferences and avoidances. Many times, when the informant would continue to speak even after the question was answered, I preferred not to interrupt but rather to listen to what he or she had to say, and in what way he/she connected his/her discourse or his/her memory to the question. In fact, some of the most useful insights emerged from casual conversations in an unstructured situation rather than from a pre-structured question.

Another tool which I used in ample measure was group discussion. In fact, as I was to realize later, my prodding (for a distinct answer) would not have been required if I had put a question to a group. Most of the animated group discussions took place around the *waltim*, the bonfire, in the courtyard during winter months, around which men and women sit after their evening meal. In fact, some of the participants were so much taken up with the group discussions that in Achiksong, almost all my

evenings were taken up with such conversations. Some of the past strategies adopted for hunting were narrated around the bonfire, since it was not a strategy used often. Again, it was also an opportunity to study the existing norms in Garo society, for example who sat where around the bonfire, who sat with whom, who sat away from whom, what was the most common greeting, etc.

In fact, observation was one of the tools I used the most. I was also a participant observer of sorts. For instance, while collecting data on wild food, I accompanied Silme and her friends; I accompanied and helped Frani*ma* in gathering tapioca and sorrel leaves from her slash-and-burn plot. Many of my interviews were also conducted in the kitchen while the woman of the house was preparing food.

I collected innumerable case studies, some in full narration, others as jottings. These were cases pertaining to everyday situations as well as out-of-the-ordinary situations. However, the everyday situations helped project the everyday life of the Garos regarding food. In all, I noted 76 cases, some of which find space in this book, in the form of quotations and anecdotes.

As anticipated, I had a wide-ranging group of informants, both men and women, young and old. However, they were mostly adult women, who not only had a richer repertoire of knowledge related to food but actually engaged more in activities related to food than their male counterparts. But since the present study also sought to explore the gender dimension of food among the Garos, interviews were also conducted with males, invariably the *nokgipa* (head of household).Again, men were the ones who could give information regarding hunting, some aspects of slash-and-burn, wet paddy, and cash crop cultivation. Since the data collected are wide-ranging and the informants for specific data were not the same, there were many informants and their number varied from subject to subject.

One of my key informants in Achiksong was Frani*ambi,* who was a mine of knowledge, helped by introducing me to many respondents and making the interviews easier. Many times, she corroborated or negated some of the responses given by other respondents. In Mandisong, Juellina Chisim was one of my most helpful and smiling key informants. She would scold or cajole in Bangla and *Habeng*[5] when answers were not forthcoming from informants, especially from the men.

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[5] The dialect spoken in Mandisong is *Habeng*, very similar to *Ambeng* dialect of the Garo language of Garo Hills, Meghalaya, India. However, *Habeng* is a pidgin of *Ambeng* and Bangla (the language spoken by the nontribal community in Bangladesh).

My guides were more than mere interpreters. Since I had a working knowledge of the language including its dialectical variations, I understood and could follow every conversation. However my field guides helped me contextualize the answers whenever an informant referred to some incident in the past, or to some individual in the village.

One of the mechanical devices I had with me and which in the first few days of field work I always carried was a voice recorder. However because informants tended to clam up and give standard answers I stopped using it. Again, almost always I kept my notebook hidden, and mentally jotted the points as the interview-cum-conversation flowed. Just like the tape recorder, every time I took out a pen or a notebook, the natural flow of the conversation halted. I had also with me a measuring tape and sketching materials which I used often to sketch some of the material cultural artefacts.

In theorizing and shaping the arguments of my book, I made generous use of secondary data in the form of available literature – books, papers, articles in magazines, INFLIBNET, the web consortium of university libraries in India, etc.

Testing Hypotheses

In qualitative research, testing hypotheses is rather difficult. In order to test my two hypotheses I designed a set of questions.

For hypothesis 1, I sought to answer the following questions:
Is the concept of "Garo" food opposed to "non-Garo" food? If the answer is yes, then
Are the markers of difference same or different?
Are there any universal festivals related to food?

Corroboration of the answers was sought by classifying food into core, secondary, peripheral, and marginal, studying the concept of "Garo" food vis-à-vis "non-Garo food," the markers of difference between the two, and the festivals related to food.

For hypothesis 2, the question posed was whether beef-eating by Garos in Assam (India) or pork-eating in Bangladesh is influenced by the social environment of the Garos. The answer would be substantiated by a list of food items consumed, a list of comfort-inducing food items, and a list of preferred food items

If the answers to the above questions posed were in the affirmative, the hypothesis would be taken as validated. If the answers were negative, the hypothesis would be taken as disproved.

Outlining the Book

This book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces food and food politics, along with a brief review of relevant anthropological literature, objectives of the study, methods used in data collection, etc. The second chapter deals with a brief outline of the Garos and the villages studied. The third chapter studies different food acquisition methods prevalent among the Garos. Food is seen to be generally acquired through hunting, fishing, collection, shifting cultivation, and permanent cultivation. Therefore different strategies involved are discussed. The role of the market is also described in this chapter.

Chapter Four deals with different food practices, and looks at how Garos traditionally classify food and the difference between indigenous and non-indigenous foods. It also looks into the question of prestige food. The processing, preparation, and serving of food are described and analysed here. The last part of the chapter deals with regular and ceremonial meals: the former stresses daily meal cycles, and the latter stresses festive foods.

Food, identity, and difference, the crux of the book, is discussed in the fifth chapter. Certain questions like how and in what manner food assumes an ethnic identity, the importance of Garo food, the reasons behind listing certain food items as comfort food, etc. are answered here. The section on food and gender stresses on the subtle differences in food procuring activities and in male-female responses as to why they eat what they eat. How age and different life cycle stages also affect food cuisine is also examined. The final section in this chapter deals with gastro-politics and rules of commensality in Garo society in Assam (India) and Bangladesh.

The sixth chapter discusses new food and food habits among Garos, change from subsistence to cash crops and reasons for entry and resistance to new foods. One vital question engaged in this chapter is whether the boundaries within Garos and ethnic boundaries with non-Garos have been redrawn. The last chapter highlights the conclusions of the book.