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Original article

# A study on indigenous fermented foods and beverages of Kokrajhar, Assam, India

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The Kokrajhar district of Assam in India is a region with rich cultural diversity and ethnic groups. Each ethnic group has its own method of fermenting food materials for the purpose of preservation, taste, and nutritional enhancement and has been carrying this tradition from time immemorial. Due to impact of globalization, these lesser known fermented foods and beverages are at the risk of extinction and its documentation is a very essential part before its further application in food processing industry. Through this paper, a small effort has been made in providing written record about the fermented foods and alcoholic beverages along with its sociocultural significance of the region.

**Methods:** Using the questionnaire and survey method, diverse types of fermented foods and their sociocultural significance were documented.

**Results:** It is observed that diverse ethnic groups of Kokrajhar district have their own traditional food habits associated with their customs and ethos. In total, 12 fermented foods and 3 fermented beverages have been documented in this paper.

**Conclusion:** The application of scientific methodology in the processing of such fermented foods and beverages would contribute to sustainability of regional economy by boosting the livelihood of the rural people.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of human civilization, fermented foods have occupied an integral part in the culture and traditions of many ethnic communities throughout the world [1]. Fermented food is very significant to human diet especially in developing countries as it is an inexpensive technique used by world communities across the globe for food preservation along with enhancement of nutritional and sensory values of the food [2,3]. Fermentation is brought about by microorganisms that transform the raw materials into biochemically and organoleptically useful products with the harmful products like phytales, tannins, and polyphenols being destroyed or detoxified [4]. Every single fermented food is in synergy with distinctive group of microflora which increases the level of proteins, vitamins, essential amino acids, fatty acids, and other nutritional constituents [5]. Fermented foods are not exactly

human inventions, but through keen observation, our ancestors learned to cultivate it. The distinctness of fermented food in ethnic culture arises due to availability of bio resources and the microorganisms associated with it [6]. The North Eastern Region of Indian subcontinent consisting of eight states, namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim has a huge reserve of traditional fermented foods owing to its rich ethnic diversity and also due to the availability of surplus bio resources in the region. A variety of region-specific fermented food products and beverages have been documented from the North Eastern region [1,7–12]. The Kokrajhar district of Assam is also inhabited by different ethnic communities, such as Garo, Rajbanshi, Lalung Kochari, Rabha, Sonwal, and Nepali, with dominant group being the Bodo tribe. Although all the ethnic tribes and other communities residing within this district and adjoining areas consume fermented foods and alcoholic beverages, their names, ingredients, uses, and method of preparation varies. Some of the common ethnic fermented foods and beverages of Kokrajhar district are *napham* (Bodo), *nakkam* (Garo), *nichaow* (Rabha), *miya mecheng* (Garo), *jim tenga* (Rabha), *jou* (Bodo), *chako* (Rabha), and

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chu (Garo). Thus, the paper aims to document the various practices followed by different indigenous ethnic communities of Kokrajhar district and its adjoining areas in the production of their respective fermented products.

## 2. Materials and methods

The Kokrajhar district (Fig. 1) is an administrative district in the state of Assam in the North East India. It lies between 89° 46' East to 90° 38' East and 26° 19' North to 26° 54' North Latitude covering an area of 3,169.22 km<sup>2</sup>. It is bounded by Bhutan on the North, the Sonkosh River, Cooch Bihar, and Jalpaiguri district of the West Bengal on the West, and the riverine tract of Brahmaputra valley on the South along with Chirang district. The tribal population consists of Bodo, Rabha, and Garo communities, and the nontribal

population consists of Rajbongshi, Santhal, Assamese, Bengali, and Nepali along with other minority communities. The people of this region possess a great knowledge of wild edible plants along with food processing and conservation techniques [14]. The present study was conducted from November to January in remote villages of Kokrajhar district covering Debagaoon, Balajan Tinali, Magurmari, Harinaguri, Jornagri, Nayekgaon, and Kachugaon areas. Information was gathered from various households involved in the preparation of fermented foods. During the survey, it was found that women folks were mostly engaged in the preparation of fermented foods; therefore, our interview and questionnaire focused on them. In the course of field visit, the raw materials, mode of consumption, and its sociocultural significance were documented, and the plants used were collected and identified following standard procedures, as described by Bentham and Hooker [14]. The

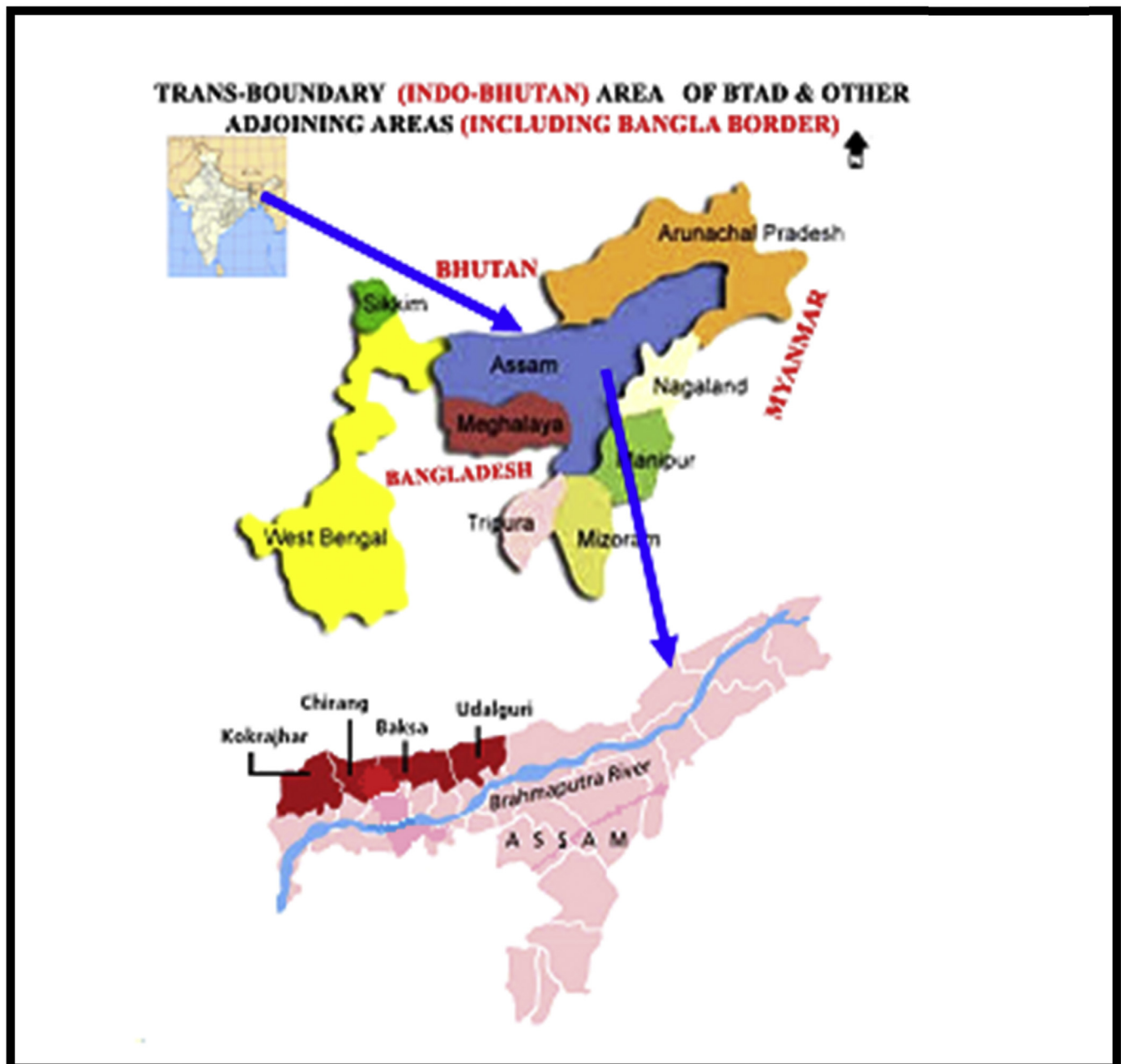


Fig. 1. Map of Kokrajhar district of Assam, India.

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