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CHANGES IN FOOD CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AMONG THE HAJONGS COMMUNITY IN THE CHANGLANG DISTRICT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Preferences and availability are closely linked to different community food cultures and choices. This study aims to investigate the food consumption habits of the Hajongs community in the Changlang District of, Arunachal Pradesh. A total of 200 adult Hajong members were selected, and their food intake patterns were analysed using a semi-structured food frequency questionnaire. Rice emerged as the staple cereal for all Hajongs, while wheat was consumed two to three times in monthly. Pulses are negligible consume in their diet because mostly they depends on green leafy vegetables. Green leafy vegetables including Malabar spinach, creeping wood sorrel, palak, and cabbage etc. were commonly consumed twice a week by the Hajong peoples in the study area. Vegetables like cauliflower, ladies finger, cluster beans, cucumber, various gourds, brinjal, and drumstick were consumed twice or thrice weekly depending on availability. Approximately 49.5% of the Hajongs population consumed tapioca, yam, and sweet potato twice weekly, subject to availability. Ginger is used by a majority (97.5%) of the selected Hajong individuals. Fruits such as banana, guava, and papaya were regularly part of their diet. Around 60% milk consuming daily. Mustard oil was the primary and widely used cooking oil in the Hajong community in the study area. Eggs, fish, crab, poultry, and mutton were preferred by 40% on an average of the Hajong populations, typically on an occasional basis, while the remaining 60% did not consume these items as they were not staple foods. Around 70% consumed biscuits daily, and 5% consumed fast foods such as Maggie, Chowmein, Thukpha (Chinese dish) popular in the study area, and chat items once a month. Nearly 1% preferred purchasing instant food products such as, masala powders, and pickles etc. Only one percent reported eating outside food once or twice a week, usually when they away from their resident for occupational reasons. This study highlights an ongoing nutritional transition characterized by a shift from nutrient-rich traditional diets to energy-dense market foods, a trend observed not only among the Hajongs community but also across indigenous populations in India and worldwide.

Keywords: Food Frequency, Food Culture, Food Consumption, Hajongs Community, Nutrition Transition, Traditional to Modern Diet Shifts

1. INTRODUCTION

The term Hajongs is originate from the Kachari tribes. The word Hajo, meaning "people of the high hills," though alternate etymologies suggest derivation from Hojai Kachari or the Garo phrase Ha-Jong—Ha meaning land and Jong meaning insect, metaphorically "insect of the Earth" (Hajong 2000; Khema S. 2014). Linguistically, Hajongs speak a Tibeto-Burman dialect, written in Assamese script. Historically, the Hajongs trace their ancestral roots to Hojai in Assam, later migrating to the fertile northern slopes of the Garo Hills in Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. Oral histories recount their displacement during the 1600–1700s due to Muslim invasions in western Assam, prompting refuges in the Garo Hills and surrounding regions. Prior to India's independence, Hajongs were concentrated in distinct borderland zones—Suwarkona (Goalpara), Jongkona (Sherpur), and Morkona (South Dhubri) (Census 2011). Post-Partition, religious persecution in East Pakistan, particularly targeting Hindu tribal minorities, led to mass migration. In 1964,

escalating violence and systemic discrimination forced many Hajongs to permanently abandon their ancestral lands and resettle in Northeast India (Chakraborty 2002; Feidman 2016) and presently they settled down in different district of Arunachal Pradesh. Alongside the Chakmas, Hajongs entered India via the Lushai Hills of Mizoram, eventually receiving shelter in Tirap, Lohit, and Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Now, majority of Hajongs reside in Arunachal Pradesh, with smaller populations in Assam and West Bengal.

The Hajong community faces several health challenges largely due to their traditional lifestyle and limited access to modern healthcare facilities. While the Hajongs have preserved much of their rich cultural heritage, there remains a gap in knowledge regarding nutrition and contemporary health practices. This gap has contributed to various health issues, including malnutrition and emerging lifestyle-related diseases. A significant portion of the Hajong populations suffers from nutritional disorders, partly because their traditional diets have not evolved to meet modern nutritional requirements. Although the Hajong peoples possess deep knowledge of their natural environment and traditional skills, these do not always align with current nutritional guidelines. The initiatives aimed at improving healthcare access and integrating modern nutritional education within traditional practices are essential steps toward enhancing the health and well-being of the different tribes communities (Tribal Health Report, 2023).

Cultural sustainability plays a crucial role in the sustainable development of tribal communities like Hajongs. It emphasizes the importance of preserving and revitalizing customs, languages, and indigenous knowledge systems that constitute the core of their identity and resilience. Development efforts that respect and incorporate cultural heritage can strengthen social cohesion and foster a sense of pride within the community (Throsby, 2008). One of the major challenges hindering sustainable development among tribal populations is the lack of awareness and understanding of government policies and programs. Improving literacy rates—currently at 59% among indigenous populations—is vital to strengthening these initiatives. Government focus on tribal development must include preserving cultural heritage, traditional lifestyles, and unique languages. Additionally, combating corruption and enhancing transparency are key to protecting the true identity of scheduled tribes and enabling their sustainable growth (Yoganandham, 2023).

The Hajong community's religious rituals are closely intertwined with their agricultural and animal husbandry practices, particularly the care of cattle and buffaloes, which hold great cultural and spiritual significance. Men traditionally tend to these sacred animals, and daily dairy activities often take on a religious character. Significant events in the lives of these animals are marked by ceremonial rites, reinforcing their importance within the community's social and spiritual life (Preetha and Dharmaraj, 2018).

Recent studies highlight how the dietary patterns of the Hajong community are deeply connected to their cultural values and ecological knowledge. Their food traditions not only provide nourishment but also play a vital role in social and religious practices. The Hajongs' approach to food reflects a harmonious relationship with their natural environment, particularly the forest and hills, mountains reserve where they reside. Their consumption practices can be viewed as sustainable, balancing their nutritional needs with the conservation of natural resources (Gowri Priya & Bhat, 2023).

Nutrition and dietary habits significantly influence life expectancy, quality of aging, and the prevalence of diseases. Therefore, this study was undertaken to explore the current food consumption patterns within the Hajongs community in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

2. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted with the formal and ethical approval of Gaon Buras and villages headman. Nonetheless, ethical clearance was obtained prior to the commencement of the study. A cross-sectional population-based study was carried out between January 2023 and February 2024. The research focused on the Hajongs community, residing primarily in parts of north-eastern India, especially Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Participants were selected from regions where the Hajong populations is concentrated. Inclusion criteria comprised Hajong individuals aged 25 years and above, regardless of gender, who expressed a willingness to participate in the study. Individuals from non-Hajong communities or those unwilling to participate were excluded.

Based on projections of Special survey done by the Arunachal Government 2015-16 (special survey only for Chakmas and Hajongs) and also considering the 2011 Population Census, a sample size of 200 was targeted. A semi-structured food frequency questionnaire was employed, and data were collected through a house-to-house survey using the interview method. Participants were selected using random sampling across identified Hajongs settlements. The data

were compiled and statistically analysed using SPSS (IBM) software, allowing for frequency distribution and pattern recognition in dietary intake.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

The analysis of food frequency patterns among the selected Hajong participants highlights the dynamic interplay between cultural heritage, environmental resources, and dietary behaviour. The traditional Hajongs diet is deeply rooted in their agrarian lifestyle, with a strong reliance on plant-based foods, local crops, and seasonal produce. Rice and milk continue to be dietary staples, forming the foundation of most meals. Vegetables, while consumed less frequently, still hold nutritional and cultural importance. The inclusion of forest products, wild greens, and seasonal fruits reflects a strong dependence on local biodiversity, contributing to the diversity and resilience of the diet. Although plant-based foods and dairy dominate the diet, the Hajongs community is not strictly vegetarian. Meat is consumed, albeit infrequently, and is typically reserved for special occasions or ceremonial events. This selective consumption underscores the cultural nuances that influence food choices and dietary frequency.

The transition toward modernization and increased market access has introduced processed and packaged foods into the community, particularly under the category of snacks and miscellaneous items. This shift marks a nutritional transition—a move from traditional, nutrient-dense diets toward more energy-dense, market-driven foods—a trend consistent with changes observed among other indigenous communities both in India and globally. The frequency of consumption across various food groups by the selected Hajong participants is detailed in the following table, providing insights into both traditional and evolving dietary trends.

Food groups	Food items	Daily		Weekly twice/thrice		Monthly once/twice		occasionally		Never	
Cereal, Millets and products	Rice Parboiled	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
		200	100	-	-	-	-				-
	Raw Rice	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Rice Flakes	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	wheat	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
	Maida	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
	Finger Millet	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Italian millets	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Kodo Millet	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Little Millet	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Barley	-	-	-	-	-		200	100	-	-
Pulse Consumption	Red gramdhal	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Green gramdhal	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
	Wholegreen gram	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Urad dal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Bengalgram dhal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Horse gram	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Cow pea			200	100	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Meal makers	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-

Green Leafy Vegetables	Malabar Spinach	70	35	30	15	100	50	-	-	-	-
	Cabbage	20	10	50	25	130	65	-	-	-	-
	Creeping Wood Sorrel	30	15	-	-	170	85	-	-	-	-
	Manathakali	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Amaranthus	-	-	90	45	110	55	-	-	-	-
	Palak	-	-	33	16.5	167	83.5	-	-	-	-
	Ponnaganni	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Agathi	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Drumstick leaves	20	10	40	20	140	70	-	-	-	-
Roots and Tubers	Tapioca	-	-	99	49.5	101	50.5	-	-	-	-
	Yam	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
	Sweet Potato	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Radish	-	-	80	40	120	60	-	-	-	-
	Beetroot	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Potato	190	95	-	-	10	5	-	-	-	-

	Carrot	60	30	30	15	110	55	-	-	-	-
	Ginger	195	97.5	5	2.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Cucumber	30	15	45	22.5	125	62.5	-	-	-	-
Fruits	Plums	-	-	70	35	130	65	-	-	-	-
	Mulberries	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Pine Apple	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
	Orange	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
	Avocado	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Pears	20	10	45	22.5	135	67.5	-	-	-	-
	Wild Mangoes	-	-	-		-		-	-	200	100
	Figs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Banana	45	22.5	62	31	45	22.5	-	-	-	-
	Guava	36	18	65	32.5	99	49.5	-	-	-	-
	Papaya	50	25	32	16	118	59	-	-	-	-
	Sapota	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Custard Apple	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Apple	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Grapes	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Pomegranate	-	-	50	25	150	75	-	-	-	-
-Milk and Milk Products	Cow/ Buffalo's Milk	60	30	40	20	100	50	-	-	-	-
	Curd	40	20	-	-	160	80	-	-	-	-
	Buttermilk	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Butter	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Ghee	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Cheese	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Paneer	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	others	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Oils and Fats	Mustard oil	200	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Coconut oil	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Groundnut oil	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
	Sunflower oil	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
Sugar and Sugar Products	Refined Sugar	200	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Jaggery	-	-	60	30	140	70	-	-	-	-
	Honey	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Palm Sugar	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
Non –Veg Consumptions	Egg	60	30	70	35	70	35	-	-	-	-
	Fish	70	35	50	25	80	40	-	-	-	-
	Crab	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Poultry Chicken	80	40	60	30	60	30	-	-	-	-
	Mutton	-	-	70	35	130	65	-	-	-	-
	Beef	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100
	Pork,	40	20	60	30	100	50				
Snacks/ Miscellaneous foods	Biscuits	140	70	60	30	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Fried food	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Groundnuts	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Fast food	-	-	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-
	Proprietary drinks	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-
	Sweets/ Ice creams	-	-	-	-	200	100	-	-	-	-

- **Dietary Patterns among the Hajongs Community of Changlang District**

1) Cereals, and Related Products

Rice has emerged as the predominant staple cereal in the diet of the Hajongs community, particularly in recent years. This shift is largely attributed to its widespread cultivation and easily availability in the local area market. Wheat is occasionally adding their diet during their festive season like making different kinds of items to welcome their guest.

2) Pulse Consumption

In additions to the green vegetables pulses is also an essential component of the Hajongs community diet, serving as a major protein source, particularly given the community's historically minimal reliance on meat. Moong dal and toor dal are not consume and not aware by the community they basically depends on green leaf vegetable which is easily available in the surrounding. Additionally, meal maker (textured vegetable protein) is consume occasionally by all the selected participants as a supplementary protein source in dishes like curries, stir-fries, and mixed rice preparations.

3) Green Leafy Vegetables

Green leafy vegetables play a significant role in the Hajongs people's diet. Commonly consumed greens include Malabar spinach (Basella), creeping wood sorrel, amaranthus, palak (spinach), and cabbage—all of which are eaten approximately twice a week. Less frequently consumed greens such as, drumstick leaves, and other seasonal green leaves are included in meals once or twice a month, contingent on local availability.

4) Other Vegetables

Traditionally, the Hajongs people were pastoralists, with a diet rich in dairy products and limited in vegetables. However, over time, their vegetable intake has diversified. Vegetables such as cauliflower, ladies finger (okra), cluster beans, cucumber, various gourds, brinjal (eggplant), and drumstick are now consumed two to three times per week, based on availability. Pumpkin is consumed two to three times a month, while sundakai (turkey berry) is eaten occasionally.

5) Roots and Tubers

Historically, roots and tubers constituted a major portion of the Hajongs people's diet, with dairy products and grains taking precedence. However, evolving agricultural practices have increased the availability and incorporation of these food groups. Currently, vegetables such as radish, beetroot, potato, and carrot are consumed on a regularly basis based on their willingness to cook. Approximately 49.5% of the community consumes tapioca, yam, and sweet potato twice a week, depending on accessibility. Ginger is widely used, with 97.5% of the participants reporting its inclusion in their regular cooking.

6) Fruits

Fruits have always been an integral part of the Hajongs people's diet, owing to the rich natural biodiversity of the study area. Locally available fruits such as banana, guava, and papaya are consumed regularly and are considered dietary staples by many Hajongs families. In contrast, seasonal fruits such as pineapples, oranges, and pomegranate are consumed occasionally during their respective harvest periods. Bananas hold a particularly prominent place in the Hajongs diet due to their availability, nutritional value, and versatility. About 22.5% of the surveyed Hajongs population consume bananas daily, while 53.5% consume them weekly, underlining their importance as a key source of energy,.

Dietary Practices among the Hajong Community: A Nutritional and Cultural Perspective

7) Milk and Milk Products

Dairy continues to hold a central place in the traditional dietary practices of the Hajongs community. Data from the selected 200 Hajong participants revealed 30% daily consumption of milk, highlighting its foundational role in providing essential nutrients such as proteins, fats, and vitamins. Typically sourced from cows or buffaloes, milk is consumed directly and also serves as the base for other important dairy derivatives.

Curd is another staple, consumed daily by the participants, underlining its cultural and nutritional importance. In contrast, products like buttermilk, butter, and ghee are consumed less frequently—about twice a month by all individuals—and are often prepared using the residual liquid from churning curd. Interestingly, paneer and cheese do not feature in the Hajongs people diet. Traditional practices favour curd and ghee over these fresh cheeses, emphasizing continuity in cultural food preferences.

8) Fats and Oils

Mustard oil emerged as the most widely used cooking medium among the Hajongs community, with 100% of participants reporting its daily use. Its dominance is likely due to affordability and widespread availability through the nearby bazars, making it a regular feature in household cooking and frying. Meanwhile, groundnut oil, and sunflower oil are also utilized, albeit less frequently. These oils are perceived as healthier alternatives and are typically reserved for special dishes or specific occasions.

9) Sweeteners: Sugar and Traditional Alternatives

Refined sugar is universally consumed daily by all 200 surveyed members of the Hajongs community, signifying its ingrained role in everyday food and beverages. In contrast, very less percentages used jaggery and few of the percentages are found they used—once or twice in a month—usually during festivals or traditional preparations due to its perceived health benefits.

Other traditional sweeteners, such as honey and palm sugar, are consumed occasionally, often for medicinal purposes or as natural alternatives in specific dishes. Their selective use reflects both cultural tradition and awareness of health-conscious practices.

10) Non-Vegetarian Foods

More or less peoples are non-vegetarian food is consumed within the Hajongs community. The population reported eating eggs, fish, poultry, or mutton, overwhelming 40% on an average consuming these items entirely, reflecting cultural, but sometimes due to religious beliefs that discourage consumption of meat as per their special occasion.

The community completely avoids beef, with 100% abstaining due to cultural reverence and ethical considerations and 100% of Hajongs follows Hinduism. Additionally, there is no recorded consumption of other animals such as, rodents, rabbits, snails, squirrels, or crabs etc.

11) Snacks and Miscellaneous Foods

Modern snack consumption in the Hajongs community remains relatively limited. While 70% consume biscuits daily, a larger majority enjoy them daily as well as weekly, positioning them as a common yet non-essential snack. Traditional fried snacks like aloo shop and piyazee etc, along with corn (roasted/boiled) and groundnuts, are enjoyed at least twice a week by all community members, highlighting the enduring popularity of culturally significant, homemade snacks.

Fast food consumption is notably low. Just 5% consume items such as Maggie, Thukpha, Chowmein, or chaat once a month, and only 3% consume them occasionally, indicating limited exposure or preference for modern fast food. A resounding 92% do not consume any fast food, demonstrating a strong adherence to traditional, home-prepared meals.

The consumption of proprietary nutritional drinks such as Boost, Bournvita, or Horlicks is also rare reported monthly consumption or they consume occasionally, typically during illness or for nutritional supplementation. An even smaller fraction (2%) consume these drinks occasionally, while 92% abstain entirely, favouring natural or traditional beverages.

Commercial sweets and ice creams are enjoyed only by once or twice in a month depends on availability on nearby shop, and majority of the portion are enjoyed occasionally, likely during celebrations or special events.

Impact of Modernization on the Food Culture of the Selected Hajongs Community

The dietary practices of tribal societies, including the Hajongs community, are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural traditions, environmental factors, social structures, economic conditions, and health considerations. However, with increasing exposure to mainstream society, the traditional food culture of the Hajongs is gradually undergoing transformation.

As members of the Hajongs community interact more frequently with other indigenous populations—whether through urban migration, education, or local trade—there has been a notable shift in food habits. The introduction of processed foods, fast food items, and non-indigenous ingredients has led to a gradual departure from some traditional dietary patterns. These interactions have also facilitated the adoption of new crops, cooking techniques, and food preparation methods, reflecting a broader assimilation of globalized food practices.

One of the significant indicators of this cultural shift is the increasing use of gas stoves or other electronic cooker in the households. While not yet universal, the availability of LPG through government initiatives and improved infrastructure has made modern cooking methods more accessible in many areas. This transition represents a move towards convenience and efficiency in food preparation, particularly in semi-urban or accessible rural regions.

Nevertheless, traditional cooking practices—such as the use of firewood, charcoal, and other biomass fuels—continue to be widely observed, especially in remote areas. These methods persist due to deep-rooted cultural traditions, economic limitations, and in some cases, inadequate infrastructure to support a full shift to modern alternatives.

While the adoption of cleaner cooking technologies like gas stoves offers substantial health and environmental benefits, the path to widespread change is complex. Sustained support from government programs, along with awareness-building and infrastructural development, is essential to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

In summary, modernization is reshaping the food culture of the Hajongs community—introducing both opportunities and challenges. Balancing these evolving dietary trends with the preservation of traditional food heritage will be critical for ensuring both cultural continuity and improved quality of life.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings from the 24-hour dietary recall and food frequency analysis reveal a noticeable shift in the dietary habits of the Hajongs community. Processed and packaged foods, fast foods, and instant snacks—categorized under snacks and miscellaneous foods—are increasingly being incorporated into their daily diets. This shift reflects growing market access and exposure to non-traditional food items, many of which are high in fat, sugar, and salt.

The gradual move away from nutrient-dense traditional foods towards energy-dense, commercially available products signifies an ongoing nutritional transition within the community. This pattern mirrors a broader global trend observed among indigenous populations, where modernization and increased connectivity to mainstream markets contribute to significant changes in food culture and nutrition profiles.

Such transitions raise important concerns related to long-term health, food security, and cultural preservation. As the Hajongs community continues to adapt to modern influences, it is essential to balance these changes with efforts to retain and promote their traditional dietary practices, which are often more aligned with sustainable and health-promoting food systems.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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