The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal. September-October, 2026. Vol. 4. Issue 5. 251-254

Published by: Pather Dabi Educational Trust, (Regn No: IV-1402-00064/2023), Under Govt. of West Bengal, India

The Social Science Review
A Multidisciplinary Journal
ISSN: 2584-0789
(Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International e-Journal)
Homepage: www.tssreview.in

SCENT, STRUCTURE AND SOCIETY : A CASE STUDY UPON THE IMPLICATIONS OF FERMENTED FISH (*NAPHLANG*) THROUGH SCENT, NOSTALGIA AND PERCEPTION AMONG THE PLAIN TIWAS OF ASSAM

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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DOI:
https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260405060

Abstract

Ethnic Food can be inclusive of attributes that reflects the socio – cultural structure of an ethnic tribe. The existence of fermented dishes is widespread among various tribes of North–East India. The preparation and consumption of the fermented fish hold significant value, reflecting the culinary traditions of the tribe, and are regarded as an essential part of their diet. The inclusion of fermented fish in the meal structure of the Tiwa tribe highlights the unique aspects of the tribe. Fermented fish can be implicitly categorised through the its conceptual attributes such as scent and this attribution frames ethnic identification of the members of ethnic group. This framework of identification can be evaluated through structure of nostalgia and perception from the scent of fermented fish and the inclusive identification realised from these structures. The objectives of this paper are to evaluate the realisation of Tiwa members about their inclusiveness with their tribe through nostalgia attained from the scent of fermented fish and to analyse their perception of affinity with that distinctive scent of fermented fish. This ethnographic study also analyses the reconsideration of realisation of ethnic inclusiveness and perception forged by fermented fish of the Plain Tiwas of Assam.

Keywords: *Fermented Fish, Smell, Nostalgia, Plain Tiwas, Perception, Ethnic Identity*

Introduction

Fermented food is being categorises ethnically prominent as well as appropriated cultural marker across variegated ethnic culinary structure of ethnic tribes concentrated across North Eastern region of India. When somebody ask, "what is fermentation ?" It might be perceived as changing the qualitative apparatus of food such as taste, scent, texture etc of different items such as fish, meat, vegetables etc. and add those for structural elevation of any curries. To be precise, we can add the concept of microbial fermentation as, "a process in which microorganisms produce a series of effects on substances, thereby completing material processing and treatment." (Lan, 2025). Can a more abstract approach be associated with fermentation ? In the Northeastern region of India, consumption of fermented food is ubiquitous. Almost all the ethnic tribes incorporate fermented dishes in their ethnic culinary constructs. We can say that fermentation subsequently integrate people. Consumption of fermented food can be defined as existential and established patterns of culinary practices particularly in North East India. "Fermented foods are the typical characteristic of Northeastern states." (Das et al. 2024). The aspect of integration is being evolved through the process of fermentation across different ethnic tribes concentrated across different regions of North East India. But these aspect of integration are evolved through the practices of consuming and preparing fermented dishes pertained by different ethnic culinary practices. Fermentation can be defined as cojoined efforts applied in diverse frameworks such as consumption of fermented ethnic dishes by diverse ethnic tribes through variations of patterns of preparation and consumption.

Fermentation entails multivariate forms of vegetables, fish as well as meat that are applied as effective ingredients for fermentation. "Soybeans, bamboo shoots, local vegetables, meat, fish, and alcoholic beverages are fermented traditionally to prepare more palatable and tangy food at home." (ibid., 2). Different ethnic tribes of broader Naga society are observed in matters of consuming *Anishi* (prepared from *Colocasia leaf*), *Axone* (*Fermented soyabean*), bamboo shoot, crab, fish etc. (Mao & Odyuo, 2006), '*Godak*' (prepared from fermented fish) and the fermented fish is also known as '*Shidal*' is mainly ingested by different communities of Tripura (Dhar et al. 2012), *Ngari* and *Hentak* in Manipur (Jeyaram et al. 2009) etc. are considered to be analogy

in tis regard. This analogy portrays an assertive construction of consumption of fermented dishes across different communities of North east India. The process of fermentation, preparation and consumption of fermented dish is considered to be implicit initiative for ethnic integration across north east India.

The Plain Tiwa community of Assam is one of the prominent ethnic community concentrated prominently in, "Marigaon and Nagaon district of Assam." (Goswami, 2022). The Tiwas are conceptually divided into Hill and Plain Tiwas. "Tiwas belong to Indo – Mongloid group and speak a language of their own with the same nomenclature." (Goswami, 2022). "The meaning of the word Tiwa is the people who have the relation with water ; because in Tiwa language the term Ti represents water." (Dewri & Saikia, 2022).

The Plain Tiwa community of Assam are being integrated into these coherent initiatives for ethnic identity assertions through arranging fermented fish into their ethnic culinary practice. The fermented fish of Tiwa community (termed as *Naphlang*) has a pronounce positionality in the ethnic culinary practices of the Plain Tiwas. *Naphlang* can be added with almost all the ethnic dishes that has been ingested by the Plain Tiwas. This qualitative integration defines its form both as a favoured spice as well as independently consumed dish with rice. The sundried small fish are being preserved in a constricted bamboo cylinder (with banana leaf) after blending with chopped raw taro and pounded turmeric. This ethnic dish exclusively reflects the distinctive structure of ethnic cuisine of the Plain Tiwas of Assam.

The Apparatus of Aroma and Symbolising Ethnic Identity

We often get variations of smell in our lifetime. After enters into the nostrils of our nose, we can be expressive about the smell in two ways, whether a 'familiar' or an 'unpredicted' one. Some of the familiar smell emanated by some of the dishes instigated the childhood nostalgia of us. Every familiar smell has a story to be told about life and about home. This conceptualisations of smell can be inferred from the quotes about Smell that Dolly Kikon mentioned, "invokes feelings of comfort or memories of home." (2018 : 84). Smell can be determined as deliberate aspect of reflection about socio -cultural expression of the members of Plain Tiwa community. This determined aspect can be analogous of the process of ethnic identity assertions although in a more implicit way. Scent of fermented fish symbolises the expression of existence and convenience about inclusiveness. The structure of this distinctive aroma at the same time maintains a path of functioning. The nature of those functions towards convincing about the inclusiveness of Tiwa members is cognitive. The apparatus of cognition has been affected by smell. The structure of scent can be defined as from the viewpoint of members of Tiwa community. The scent from the fermented fish invokes the nostalgia from variations of phases of life among the members of the Tiwa community and that nostalgia is induced by experiences in the concerned period of life. The nostalgia has induced the convinced aspect of mind of the members about ethnic inclusiveness of Tiwa community. The The Tiwa members are being convinced with the sense of belongingness with that community. Existence of nostalgia are effectively mentioned mentioned by Holtzman as, " "nostalgia" has several different senses, generally and in respect to food." (2006 : 367). Jennifer L. Holm mentioned about the portrayal of nostalgia in a film as a, "product not only of food, but also of culinary space." (Holm, 2015). The concept of aroma is being perceived as socio – culturally inclusive but the nature of concept is cognitive in this regard. The convincing expression of the members of Tiwa community can be categorised as assertive aspect of identification. In this regard Dolly Kikon mentioned about the smell of the bamboo shoot is that it, "invokes an emotional attachment to home and community." (2021 : S377). The expressiveness of the Tiwas is assertiveness about socio – cultural identity. The symbolic and cognitive interrelationships between ethnic identity of the Plain Tiwas, subjective assertions from the members of the Plain Tiwas through scent of fermented fish and nostalgia are being defined as structure of aroma for categorical expression about their identity. Gustatory nostalgia can be regarded as implicitly applicable aspect in the process of collective recognition.

Scent entails the aspect of expansion as it cannot be restricted to both spatially and cognitively. Dolly Kikon mentioned, "Smell crosses borders." (2018 : 83). The presuppositions associated with smell can be considered as symbolic for socio – cultural mobilisations. Applied implicitly, but smell can be categorised as an abstract norm that helps Tiwas to efficiently recognise their identity without the need of visual corroboration. Scent of ferment fishes defines the Tiwas but this definition is reasonable only from subjective terms. Tiwa members are cognitively efficient about defining scent which is an implicit constituent of fermented fish. The efficiency about defining and evaluating smell is exclusively pertained to Tiwa members. The identification of smell and identification of their existence are composite process but identification of themselves is subsequent to the process of recognition of smell.

The Scent of Cognition : Evaluating Aroma with Perception and the Existence of Plain Tiwas

Scent can be subjective as Barwich and Smith mentioned, "smell is a purely subjective phenomenon." (2022 : 2) and "the only way to characterise a smell is via a subject's experience of that smell." (2022 : 2). It can be evaluated through phenomenological interpretation. For the purpose of interpretation of smell through phenomenology. Psychologically perceptive concept of scent can also be socio – culturally evaluated. Perception for socio – cultural existence can be evaluated both through 'favoured' as well as 'disgusted' approach. Smell can be categorised as aroma and odor but these contextualisations can be patterned with perceptions. Aromas are favoured and odors are usually disgusted.

Fermented fish entails can be arranged with indispensable existence with smell and smell also help to evolves this dish with variable definitions but these definitions are subjective, subjective aspect can be considered as adaptation of people with that smell, fermented fish are not only consumed, they are also perceived through smell as Boesveldt and Graaf mentioned, "In the

presence of food, sensory cues such as sight and smell are perceived before any intake and may stimulate appetite in anticipation of food consumption." (2017 : 308), and the perceptions are integrated with subjective experiences, adoptions etc with that dish. Plain Tiwas have been proximately associated with fermented fish. The proximity can be defined as their adaptation with that ethnic dish from the past. The affinities of the Plain Tiwas with all the processual part such as preparation, fermentation and consumption of *Naphlang* determines their evolved favoured approaches with the smell of fermented fish. Their emotive conditions are a component of their construction of fermented fish as an indicator of identification for them. While defining about smell, Dolly Kikon evaluated smell and its binary aspect of favoured and disgusted integration as, "some become lifelong connoisseurs, while others develop a long – lasting repulsion, and detest it." (2018 : 83). But the affinity of the Plain Tiwas with the smell of fermented fish is reinforced through their correlation with identification. The scent of fermented fish is not only favoured but also integral for them as it invokes the implicit integration among them.

The fermented fish also interrelates itself with odor. The form of smell is subjected to abstract notion of people. The notions are affected by perception, adaptation, experiences etc. Apart from favoured notion fermented fish also entails subjectively detested notions which is perceived through smell.

Odor can also be evaluated through its perpetual effects upon subjective realm. The act of repulsion from any food are also conditioned by odor. It abstractly instigated repulsive intention from the food. This analogy is applicable only in matters of fermented fish. Li et al mentioned about odor, "food odor exposure could also contribute to subsequent eating behaviors, such as food choice and food intake." (2025). Presumed interpretation about odor which conclusively effected the intention of consumption of fermented fish. Usually the cause of repulsion can be seen as extrinsic to Tiwa ethnic tribe in some cases which is not in the same manner in case of the members of the Tiwa community. The extrinsic causes can be interpreted as deficiency in adoption as well as experience with the fermentation, preparation and consumption with *Naphlang* that can be applied to people both from inside the Tiwa society or from outside the Tiwa society.

From all of this elucidation, it can be inferred that olfactory perceptions are needed for precise reframing of the structure of ethnic culinary constructs and societal order of ethnic society. Tiwa ethnic society and its distinctive ethnic culinary practices are being reflected through the framed patterns of gustatory and visual paradigms. But olfactory reflections are credible and efficient for both concrete and abstract definition of ethnic dishes such as ethnic fermented fish of the Plain Tiwas and its coherent implications for solidification of ethnic identity of the Plain Tiwas.

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the realisation of Tiwa members about their inclusiveness with their tribe through nostalgia which is attained from the scent of fermented fish.
2. To analyse their perception of affinity with the distinctive scent of fermented fish.

Methodology: This study has been conducted on ethnographic account. Primary data has been collected from 5 villages of Morigaon district which are inhibited by Plain Tiwas. Secondary data has been collected from variegated forms of articles published in international and national journals, books etc. Interviews (unstructured), Focus group discussions, field notes and Participant observations are the methods to collect the Primary data, which are conceptually associated with their experiences as well perceptions.

Discussions: From the precise response provided to the researcher, observations of the process of fermentation, preparation and consumption of the fermented fish, their nostalgia and perception towards fermented fish, this paper finds that consumption of the fermented fish is integral for them and it has been positioned in a prominent and in a perpetual place in their ethnic culinary practices. There are many nostalgic anecdotes associated with the process of fermentation, preparation and consumption of fermented fish in matters of the Tiwa members. These anecdotes are categorically but implicitly reflecting their inclusiveness and from the perceptions of the members of the Tiwa community, it can be deciphered that fermented fish is essential for the members of the Tiwa community. The Plain Tiwa community of Assam has been arduously associated with the recognition of their aspired identity and the olfactory experiences from fermented fish is cognitively efficient for them in this regard.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be inferred that scent is not only a biological component of our physiological apparatus, it also upheld the cognitive articulation of our expression. We can describe scent as more 'presumed' as we donot have any scope of viewing the source of the smell sometimes unlike visual or gustatory experiences. Smell can also be the pattern to reflect the ethnic expression of the members of an ethnic group. This analogy can be applied to Plain Tiwa community of Assam. The distinctive smell of fermented fish of the Plain Tiwas can be more imperative to instigate their nostalgia and at the same time articulate about their identity in an implicit way. Scent of fermented fish in that manner can be intrinsically associated with the structure of Tiwa society and the aspired Tiwa identity.

Acknowledgment: No
Author's Contribution: *Debalina Debbarma* : Data Collection, Literature Review, Referencing, Methodology, Analysis and Drafting ; *Dr. Himasnata Dutta Sarkar* : Methodology, Analysis, Literature Review and Referencing
Funding: No
Declaration: The author/s has/have given consent for the publication.
Competing Interest: No

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