Longing for a Plate of Food in Kalimpong

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Longing for a Plate of Food in Kalimpong[1]

My amala (mother) has gone out for fresh food shopping at the Kalimpong haat—the bi-weekly open-air market. After all, her daughter has come home after 14 months. The past few months have been scary and uncertain. I was abroad, and was supposed to come back to India after my fellowship, submit my PhD thesis, and start searching for a job. But little did we all know that COVID-19 had some other plans for the world. Amala would tell me how some people in the haat kept asking her, 'Didi sanchai cha? Kailey auncha?' (How is sister doing? When is she visiting?) All this time, she had no answer, as we had no clue when flight services would resume. During the many inter-continental phone calls, which became our lifeline, food was always a central part of our conversation. I would recount to amala how the happiness of stumbling on rayo ko saag (mustard greens) in America, so far away from home, almost made me cry. Or the joy of being able to make momos successfully with my own makeshift moktu (steamer) and the utensils available in my rented house. These conversations gave us hope and happiness amidst the pandemic. They were conversations between a mother and a daughter and our longing to meet and share a plate of food in our hometown, Kalimpong.

Throughout history, Kalimpong has witnessed a flow of goods, people, and ideas. It has never continuously been under one political regime, constantly

[1] Some portions of this essay have been adapted from my PhD thesis.

shifting between Sikkim, Bhutan, the British Raj, and now India. Even scholarly works refer to this town as the 'contact zone' (Viehbeck 2017), 'one of the important junctions for the modernisation of the Himalayas' (Toffin and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2014), and a 'border cosmopolitan town' (Martin 2017; Mazumdar 1994). The town lies on the Indo-Bhutan borderland, two hours by road from Siliguri. Its interactions with different regions brought with it different people and their various food habits, which shaped the present everyday life of the people in this hill town. Kalimpong offers a plethora of options for food-lovers—cheese, noodles, phing (glass noodles), momo (dumplings), phambi (by-product of the glass noodles), Chinese sausages, kinema (fermented soybean), and local agricultural produce like simrayo (watercress), rayo ko saag (mustard greens) and duku (a well-grown mustard green with shoots).

This is a short piece, and it cannot capture all the intricacies of the different foods of Kalimpong. Here I focus on cheese, phing, and phambi. I briefly look at their history, elaborate on their making processes and share stories of their being cooked in our kitchen. Food plays an integral part in one's home and making dishes is the culmination of women sharing lives, spaces, and stories with each other.

The story of two different cheeses in Kalimpong

'Do you have Kalimpong cheese?' asked a tourist. She was excited to see the shopkeeper nod. She had read about Kalimpong cheese on the *Lonely Planet* website and was looking forward to trying it. She evaluated the cheese, bought it, and went her way. This encounter was during my fieldwork in 2019 at Larks Provision Store in Kalimpong. Larks is one of the few stores that sells Kalimpong cheese. According to the *Lonely Planet* website, the local cheese of Kalimpong is like 'Edam Cheese and costs Rs 600 per kg'.[2]

Cheese at Larks Store

[2] Along with Lonely Planet, Larks also featured on the 'Highway on a Plate' programme on NDTV, a travel and food show, which aired from 2007 to 2013.

Around 1945, clergyman Father Andreas Butty established the Swiss Welfare Dairy in Kalimpong. The Welfare was started with the mission of employing people in Kalimpong (Pradhan 2004). The owner of Larks Store, Prem,[3] says, 'I saw the potential of this cheese and started marketing it to Kolkata, especially in the New Market Area', an enclosed market, where it was largely consumed by the Anglo-Indian community. This cheese has travelled far and wide; former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, who bought a block of the cheese on his first visit to Kalimpong in 1975.

Having grown up in Kalimpong, what confused me about the cheese named after my hometown was the fact that it was not widely consumed in the town itself. At least in my social circle, I know of no one who eats it. It seems that people who know about it and those who can afford it are its only local consumers. When I bring this point up with Prem, he says that you need to develop a palate for such a cheese. 'It has not happened here yet,' he says. In other words, Kalimpong cheese has not reached the local, general public; it has not reached local kitchens. After all, it is in the kitchen that women (typically) cook different dishes using ingredients bought from the haat, and it is in their subtle cooking styles and family recipes that possibilities exist of certain products being excluded or included in the local food culture.

Churpi in the haat

[3] Pseudonyms have been used for my respondents.

This does not mean that cheese is not cooked at home in Kalimpong. It is just not Kalimpong cheese, but a local soft cheese called churpi, which is almost like goat cheese. There are two types of churpi, one soft and the other hard. For cooking, one uses soft churpi. This cheese can be made with yak or cow milk. In Kalimpong, it is mostly made with the latter. 'Soft chhurpi is formed when the buttermilk is boiled for about 15 minutes and is collected by sieving out using a cloth, which is hung by a string to drain out the remaining whey' (Rai et al. 2016).

Churpi is a key ingredient in some of the favourite side dishes cooked in my home—churpi and radish, churpi and tomato, onion, and chili/dalle.[4] Unlike the European style of eating cheese, where there is a separate course at the end of the meal, churpi is rarely enjoyed on its own. It is always cooked with other things and eaten with rice, meat, or vegetables. This kind of churpi is not available in permanent shops but mostly in the haats and is sold by local women vendors who make it in their homes.

Women in the big haat of Saturday selling churpi

[4] Dalle khursani is a locally grown variety of chilli grown in Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Nepal. It can be translated as 'round chillis'.

Kalimpong cheese, however, is found mainly in the stores. It has its own customers, an already established image, and a niche market that promotes the product. The story of the two cheeses of Kalimpong makes us rethink the different links that a product sustains with its place of origin. While both support local economies and are made with local ingredients, one is consumed widely in its place of production. It also brings to attention the different kinds of gendered labour roles and legacies involved in their production.

Do not face the mountains: Phing and Phambi

'What is the one thing that you get only in Kalimpong?' 'Phambi,' answered many of my respondents. Phambi, which is unique to Kalimpong, is a by-product of phing (glass noodles). Since the days of the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route, the town has a significant Tibetan population. While phing were produced predominantly by the Tibetans, with time the skilful art of making these food items got transferred to those who worked for the Tibetans. As years passed, erstwhile employees opened their own businesses making noodles.

'Making phing is an arduous job,' says Bikash, a Nepali producer of phing in Tirpai. He makes them on the terrace of his residential building. His father worked for the Tibetans, and while working there, he learnt the process of making phing, which he shared with his son. Bikash tells me that to make them 'you require clean water and the right climate. The best time to make phing is October-May.' He adds that 'good' phing are made from mung daal (mung beans), as it is tastier and healthier but is quick to mention that nowadays everyone is making them from matar (dry green peas), as they are cheap.

First, the mung daal is made into a paste and drained using a cotton cloth. The paste is collected in separate barrels in the morning around 7-8 am. The water and the paste get separated in the barrel, and the residue is collected at 3 pm. This residue is again strained in a thick cloth and left overnight. Once the paste is ready, it is passed through a mechanical sieve and made into finely thin glass noodles. Once the phing are ready, they are first put in boiling water and then in cold water to remove excess dough, if any. Then the noodles are left to dry along poles. 'You have to be very careful that the phing does not face the mountains,' Bikash says. This is done to avoid the cold wind from breaking the fragile noodles.

It is through the curdled water, collected in the second step of making phing and left to be hardened, that one gets phambi. People buy the residual water from the producers who make phing and make fresh phambi and sell it in the haat. Bindu does that.

Plain phambi is also sold in blocks

Whenever my amala visited the haat, she often asked my mother about my well-being. In her mid 20's Bindu often helps her own ageing mother in the stall. Most times, she is the only one managing the stall. Along with phambi, she also sells alu thukpa (noodles and potato), the two local delicacies of Kalimpong at ten rupees a plate.

Her day starts at 4 am, when a person delivers the liquid container at her house. She is very particular about the quality of the phing water that she uses for her phambi. She only uses water residue of mung daal and not the cheaper matar. Bindu's daily routine involves her setting up the stall—a table full of prepared food items and ingredients.

Shoppers at the haat stop for a quick treat of phambi, or have it packed if they are in a hurry and gobble it on their way home. It is all quick, convenient, easy on the pocket, and nutritious. A perfect street food, phambi is very popular and is consumed and loved by the different ethnic groups in town. By contrast, phing, of which phambi is but a by-product, is largely considered a Tibetan food item. However, such an ethnic classification of food is porous. In my mixed Tibetan-Nepali household, we enjoy phing with vegetables like cabbage. By marrying into a Tibetan household, my amala made phing her own, just as churpi has found a place in her kitchen.

Phambi, after it is cut into cubes and red chilli paste is added

Conclusion

Everyone in Kalimpong waits for the haat on Wednesdays and Saturdays where local villagers sell their produce of green vegetables—rayo ko saag, duku, and simrayo. The haat is where you get fresh bamboo shoot, churpi, and kinema. Whenever I accompanied amala to the haat, we would take a round of the market and always stop by the ladies selling kinema. They make it at home on Thursday and sell it in the haat on Saturday. As a buyer, one could choose between pre-wrapped kinema or a fresh parcel that the lady would make in front of you from

the doko (basket). Kinema is popular with the Nepali community in Kalimpong and in the Eastern Himalayas.

These food stories that I have presented in this essay might find resonance in the neighbouring regions of Sikkim and other North-Eastern states as well.

The produce brought from the haat forms a major ingredient in the dishes cooked in my home. The recipes we use have been passed down generations, but have also been improvised through the generations by women—from my two momolas (grandmothers) to my amala, and now me. The transmission has not happened through written notes or cookbooks but through conversations, observations, patience, and sharing space and the kitchen, stories, and their lives.

Kinema being sold in the haat

After her marriage, amala picked up cooking processes and recipes from my momola (paternal grandmother) but did her own experiments too. Amala observed momola mixing vegetables in meat, and tried to introduce rayo ko saag with meat to see how it tasted. The experiment worked and the perfected recipe became one of her signature dishes in our house. It was also through momola that my mother learnt to put phing in vegetables. However, it was through her experience at her maternal home that she was familiar with the use and smell of kinema. Therefore, my mother's cuisine is a synthesis of different styles and traditions but with a distinct identity of her own. In any case, cooking was her way of paying respect to both my grandmothers and their memory.

When my mother cooks, the food has a gendered history served on a plate, an accretion of centuries of continuity and change, stories of solidarity and struggles of adaptation by women who moved between regions, communities, and households. In the process, they learnt, observed, invented, and shared. These exchanges were not just restricted to kinship networks but extended to female friends and neighbours. Time and again, family friends have got us fresh produce from their small land, sharing tips and recipes on their visits, and these exchanges have been reciprocated. Amala often says that the effort of cooking mostly goes unnoticed in the momentariness of the taste. I have grown up enjoying churpi, rayo ko saag, and kinema. I value not just the taste, but also the time and effort that goes into preparing them and have grown to acknowledge their historical (and political) value.

It is almost dinnertime as I finish writing this essay. I can't wait for a plate that binds together a deeply personal history of Kalimpong through food and my mother's cooking.

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