

Through Feminist Eyes: Production, Selling, and Consumption of Fish and *Thangjing Laphu* in Manipur and the impact of COVID-19



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Raja mirch (king chilli), bamboo shoot, and *hawaijar/axone* have caught mainstream imagination as far as food from Manipur and neighbouring states is concerned though this is largely eroticised. During the COVID-19 pandemic, videos and articles claiming immunity boosting properties of Northeast's fermented food including *hawaijar* (fermented soybean) and *ngari* (fermented fish) became popular, thereby directly or indirectly impacting the ways it is consumed. But there is a lot more than bamboo shoot and *raja mirch* in Manipur's food culture. Fish and banana stem are two essential food items that have found a vibrant market and different methods of cooking and consumption among the people of Manipur, especially the Meitei community. This article explores the processes of production, selling, and consumption of fish and *Thangjing laphu* (a banana variety grown in and around Thangjing hill area) in Manipur. The article also documents the impact of COVID-19 on cultivators and vendors/sellers.

The fishing community of Loktak Lake

Fish is a staple food of the valley people in Manipur, in particular the Meitei and Meitei Pangal communities. Fishing and consumption of fish both as staple and cultural food are inevitable given that a large chunk of the valley's area is covered by water bodies/wetlands including Loktak Lake which is rich in different

varieties of fish. Fishing has been a primary occupation of the inhabitants of Loktak Lake and its vicinity and women's participation in rearing fish, all the way to post-harvest activities is huge though undocumented. While fishing has been an intrinsic occupation of the valley's people, especially those living in the vicinity of water bodies, the dependency on fishing for livelihood increased for erstwhile farmers whose cultivable land was largely submerged in the 1980s due to the construction of the Loktak Hydro Electric Project and Ithai barrage.¹ With the Loktak lake ecosystem altered as a result of these projects, fishing became an even more indispensable occupation for those living in the vicinity of the lake. Amuyaima, a resident of Karang island in Loktak Lake says:

Karang village produced rice in paddy fields on the periphery of the island. We had sufficient rice produce every year. After the construction of Loktak Project and Ithai barrage, the paddy fields got completely submerged and we were left with fishing as the only means of livelihood. Migration in search of work started then and fishing activities in the lake increased as well. It impacted our way of life and livelihood. The flow of water and the ecosystem of the lake have been altered so much so that fish varieties have declined over the years.

In the localities, both men and women are involved in rearing of fish to post harvesting activities wherein their roles are demarcated. However, smoke-drying fish especially the small varieties, is primarily or exclusively done by women. This can be a tedious process especially since it is slow and time consuming. It involves hours of slow heating and further drying may be done by keeping the fish in the sun.

Fermentation of fish too has been a traditional practice motivated by preservation. *Ngari* is used in almost every dish especially in *eromba*, *kangsoi*, and *singju*. The *ngari* industry is different. People in the vicinity of the lake are hardly involved in it. The industry is spread across other parts of the state, especially Imphal and its adjoining areas, because of the large scale nature of work, capital involvement, infrastructure, and skill sets required. People in the vicinity of Loktak Lake are primarily engaged in fishing and smoke-drying fish and selling it. Selling fish

¹Accessed at <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.%202022%20Issue11/Version-1/B2211011117.pdf>



Readyng tunghanbi (tilapia) fish for smoke-drying



A fireplace is carved in different ways. This one is made from a used barrel.

across the state also involves transportation, supply chains, trading, and drying tasks that are primarily or exclusively done by women. Most of the fish reaches major fish markets especially Nupi Keithel in Imphal at dawn where *unjas* (middle women) buy it in bulk from the fisherwomen and take it to different places across the state selling for small or big margins by themselves or selling their fish to small vendors. The fish then reaches every household especially those in the Meitei community. Smoked fish, fried fish, and fish curry of different kinds are served as side dishes. *Nga toithong* and *nga ataoba thongba* are special dishes both for daily meals and for special occasions/festivals among the Meiteis. Meitei Pangal have more or less similar methods of cooking the fish but the tribals prefer boiled fish curry without spices imported from “mainland India” such as *coriander power*, meat *masala*, and *jeera*. This is a major difference in the way fish is cooked among the Meitei and Meitei Pangal and the way the tribals cook it. All in all, fried and smoked fish have remained common dishes while curries have taken different textures and styles in different communities and tribes.



Different varieties of fried fish.

Besides fish, Loktak is also home to numerous vegetables such as *polygonum barbatum* (*yelang*), *Ipomea aquatica* (*komlamni*), *Oenanthe javanica* (*komprek*), *Neptunia oleracea* (*ekaithabi*), *Euryale ferox* (*thangjing*), *Hedychium coronarium* (*loklei*), *Alpinia nigra* (*pullei*), and *Trapa natans* (*heikak*).² These vegetables are often cooked as *eromba*, *singju*, and *kangsoi* except *heikak* which is eaten fresh or boiled (a delicacy of Loktak sought after by tourists); these dishes form a part of the everyday food culture of the valley people and, to some extent, of the hill people as well.

However, cooking and the cooking space have cultural, moral, and gendered underpinnings. It is a well-known practice in India that menstruating women are barred from cooking and at times entering the kitchen, and menstruating married women have to bathe before they cook. The Meitei community follows these practices and Bamon (Brahmin) families even more so. In an essay which forms part of the book, *The Seven Sisters: Kitchen Tales from the North East*, Manipuri gender activist Nandini Thokchom asserts:

I am now rediscovering my religion through my kitchen – defending my rights and dignity as a woman, my right to enter the kitchen during menstruation and also the politics of food within and outside the realm of existence. When our cook used to be absent during those six days in a month, it was my menopausal grannies who took over the kitchen. We were denied entry until we had bathed and worn washed clothes. In fact, one has to wear a raw woven silk phanek while cooking in a Meitei kitchen (p. 49).

² Accessed from: [https://www.journalcra.com/article/traditional-vegetables-medicinal-value-loktak-lake-shore-and-threats-community-around#:~:text=Some%20wetland%20vegetables%20which%20are,\)%20Nelumbo%20nucifera%20\(Thambal\)%20Nymphaea](https://www.journalcra.com/article/traditional-vegetables-medicinal-value-loktak-lake-shore-and-threats-community-around#:~:text=Some%20wetland%20vegetables%20which%20are,)%20Nelumbo%20nucifera%20(Thambal)%20Nymphaea)

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the fish industry, especially small-time vendors because of sudden lockdowns without a sufficient window, unreliable public transport, unavailability of cold storage facilities and rising prices of equipment. Meanwhile, the number of women fish vendors increased in every locality. Sixty-five year old Ibemhal, a widow, fisherwoman, and fish vendor from Thanga-Loktak who sells her catch weekly or twice a week in Ningthoukhong market, Bishnupur district said:

The price of fishing nets almost doubled during the lockdown. So, I have not been able to buy big nets to catch big fish. I am still selling the smallest fish varieties that fetch less money in the market. But poor people like us do not have many options, so we continue to catch and sell fish for small margins while numerous women have in fact started fish trading and selling everywhere. What else can they do in any case! So, the prices of fish still remain the same or are sometimes lower than before though fishing nets and transportation costs are fast increasing. This is the situation of the fishing community and women fish vendors and sellers today.

During this time, work avenues for men also shrank, and this could be one of the factors that contributed to more women taking to fish and vegetable trading. Buyers now have more options and profit margins are likely to be thin and that too at the cost of COVID-19 risks. During the lockdown women fish vendors and sellers sprung up in uncountable numbers.



Ibemhal in her house in Thanga Oinam, Bishnupur, Manipur.



A middle-aged woman selling fish in Moirang Lamkhai.

The fish are procured from unjas.

Changpi/Thangjing laphu/Banana stem

Banana stem is a staple food in Manipur. It is a very common and much-sought-after vegetable and is abundantly found in the hills of Manipur. The Gangte villagers of Nalon, Churachandpur district classify three attributes of banana stems—*changphai* (the flowers and fruits are edible), *changkel* (the flowers are edible), and the most famous *changpi* (only the stems are edible and are sought after across the state) also popularly known as *Thangjing laphu* in Meiteilon. This variety grows in the streamlines in the hills and hence the stems are extremely juicy and soft. For years, on Meitei Cheiraoba (Meitei New Year) when Meitei people from all over the state climbed the *Thangjing* hills for annual prayers, exhausted and thirsty climbers cut the stems and drank the juicy water believing it to be nourishing and tasty. Climbers refer to it as *Thangjing laphu*. When the hill tribes realised the demand for it, they brought it to the local markets in the valley. Today, *Thangjing laphu* has carved a name for itself. However, this entire process of getting it to the market is very tiring and tedious. Len, a 35-year-old from Nalon hill village, Churachandpur district said:

The hill villagers go to the streams where this variety grows in abundance, chop it down and then cut it into small parts usually 30–40 cm long. Each one of us carries a basket filled with 10–15 pieces which we ferry across hills and streams, that takes up to two hours to reach the village.

Moirang being the nearest commercially vibrant town near Thangjing hills, we bring the banana stems cut in different sizes, packed in sturdy plastic bags, and drop them in Moirang markets where women vendors fight for the best ones. Even though the profit margins for us (suppliers) and women vendors of the town are little, the demand for it stays round the year. Banana stems are bought by women vendors at Rs 13-18 per piece and later sold at Rs 20 or Rs 30 per piece. It is also the tourists' favourite. *Thangjing laphu* has become so popular and even though demand is very high, the prices remain quite low. Women vendors also complain that it is getting expensive because customers ask for discounts especially since there are sellers in every corner of the market. But then what options do we have but to do business so that it continues even if it means selling for small profit margins?

Besides the pricing issue, there is another major problem: banana stems in general and *Thangjing laphu* in particular rot very fast. They cannot be kept for more than a few days after being chopped from the banana plants. It usually takes two days to reach the markets from the time they are cut, so it has to be sold in another two days before it rots and that is a huge challenge for women vendors given the competition among vendors, unpredictable lockdowns, drop in sales, and non-availability of cold storage.



Thangjing laphu stacked by roadside vendors in Moirang Lamkhai.



During the lockdown sales dropped with Thangjing laphu rotting more frequently.

Despite the challenges in procuring and selling it, *Thangjing laphu* has become a very popular dish in Meitei households. It is cooked in different ways including *laphu eromba*, *laphu thongba*, *laphu kangsoi*, and *laphu kangsu*. While cooking continues to be done mostly by women, meat dishes are usually cooked by men in many Meitei households, if not all. For *laphu eromba*, the *Thangjing laphu* is sliced into thin pieces; the innermost parts are thrown away and the remaining parts are boiled/pressure-cooked along with potatoes and soaked dried white peas. When cooked, it is mashed and mixed with fermented fish (*ngari*), salt, and chillies. For added garnish and aroma, *toningkhok* (chameleon plant) is sprinkled over the cooked dish. Onions, spring onions, basil leaves, and coriander leaves are also used. It is served not only for daily meals but also during feasts. *Laphu thongba* is served to pregnant women solely for its nutritive value. It is rich in potassium, vitamin B6, and fibre.

“Among the Rongmei tribe *ngaek gan* and *ngaek tam* meaning *ngaek curry* and *ngaek chutney/chilli salad* are made from *laphu*, though instead of fermented fish, meat is often used,” says Juliana Paomei, a researcher and artist based in Imphal. Likewise, in other tribes *laphu* is mostly cooked with meat instead of fermented fish while some tribal communities or families still prefer fermented fish.

COVID-19 and the frequent lockdowns impacted the demand-supply chain for banana stems and this meant more costs for both suppliers and women vendors. While huge wastage because of sudden lockdowns became a pattern, the prices also fluctuated quite a lot. Women vendors in Moirang are of the opinion that,



Laphu eromba of the Meitei.

‘Tribal people now know the intricacies of demand and pricing because of the lockdown. They know when to set the price higher or decrease the size of the banana stems to maximize their profits.’ While this may be true, the tribal people have something different to say. Given the time and efforts required in such a process of procuring and selling, the profit margins are very little. In any case, *Thangjing laphu* has become an integral item of commerce between the hill tribes and the valley people, especially the Meiteis and a fairly new but elemental cultural food in the state.

Postscript: *Laphu* (banana stem) is also served to poultry and livestock such as ducks, chicken, and pigs and *laphu mana* (banana leaves) commonly known as *la* are used in cooking and for rituals especially by the Meiteis.



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