

What We Pickle



Roshni Chetri





ZUBAAN
128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor
New Delhi 110 049
Email: contact@zubaanprojects.org
Website: www.zubaanprojects.org

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Zubaan's work in the past few years has been to achieve this goal through the publication of books and pamphlets, creation of archives (www.posterwomen.org), organizing literary festivals, and encouraging the exchange of authors from under-represented regions and communities, meetings and workshops to bring together multiple feminist perspectives. Zubaan has often brought forward the voices of marginalized communities through its publishing work, focusing on women, queer and trans experiences and in the recent past, has also shifted its focus to research and action work. Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd, an offshoot and sister organisation of Zubaan, continues the publishing tradition in the areas of humanities and social sciences, as well as fiction, general non-fiction, and books for children and young adults under its Young Zubaan imprint.

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Autumn-winter

There is something very special about *Dasain ko Ghaam* (autumn sun) in Gangtok. After a long monsoon—a month-after-month period that sees 3,000 mm of rainfall annually—this ideal time becomes the only period of the year when the weather doesn't feel extreme. Before the long and chilly winter months, the terrace clotheslines carry double the load. Hibernating fur jackets, boots, and knitted socks hang against the deep blue sky, and a row of pickle jars line up, soaking the sun against the mountain ranges that mark the horizon. Instagram feeds show that the average Gangtokian likes to travel, relax, trek, and eat throughout this beautiful period of food, sunshine, and leisure that stretches till *Tihar* (Diwali). So, while the neighbouring state of West Bengal may see this period as one for pandal-hopping, shopping, and street food, Gangtok and its Nepalese people spend this holiday season at home—or in their ancestral homes—eating what is curated by the women.

On Hajur Ama's terrace in Tadong, there is *mula* (julienned radish) getting sun-dried on a bright yellow *nanglo* (woven tray used to sift grain). It has been the duty of the eldest brother's wife to make the arrangements for *Dasain ko Tika*, year after year. With *saag* (leafy greens), *kaalo daal* (black lentils), *kobi* (cabbage), *peero alu* (hot potatoes), and *mutton pakku* (dry mutton) decided for the big day, she makes the pickles in advance. This special ritual on *Dashami* (the

tenth day of the lunar fortnight in the Hindu calendar) is for those who belong to her husband's family; the responsibility of keeping everyone well-fed and joyous is hers. The julienned radish pieces dehydrate next to the washed grains of rice for *selroti* (ring-shaped rice bread) that the pigeons eye. Taking the *nanglo* into her kitchen, she transfers the radish into a bowl and adds mustard oil, roasted fenugreek, and ground *panchphoran* (Indian five-spices' blend) with slit green chillies, letting her granddaughters check the seasoning before putting it into a big mason jar. The transferred concoction is pushed down deep to ensure that there are no air bubbles. This jar of pickle joins her *dalle* (local round chillies) and *lapsi* (hogweed) pickles. Admiring her creations, she jokes that her pickles are humble. Mixed in two to three spices and simply dunked in oil, they are different from the elaborately-spiced mango pickles that her tenant, Mrs Jain, brings for her with a variety of stuffed parathas. 'Our pickles,' she says, 'go more with our simple *dal-bhaat*.' Roughly slit, the pickles shine perfectly in their unrefined and unkempt look. Could this perhaps be a testimony to our humble history, migration, culture, and occupation?



Mula Dalle, radish and red chilly pepper (Courtesy: letslocalnow)

The autumn-winter seasons in Gangtok take most of its residents to their bastis, from where they return with fruits and vegetables. It is the season for cauliflower, edible bitter orchid, hog plum, guava, orange, pink radish, and lush mustard leaves. With a strong sentimental attachment to all that is homegrown

and locally procured, vegetables and fruits make gifts for neighbours and friends in Gangtok. A garden-grown pumpkin brings greater joy to Hajur Ama than a shiny wrapped packet containing *mithai* (Indian sweets) and nuts. It is people like her who create a demand for the freshest, best-quality vegetables in the state. In 2016, her state Sikkim declared itself as the first fully organic state in the country, and in 2018, the state became the world's first organic state and was awarded the United Nations' Future Policy Gold Award, also known as the 'Oscar for best policies.' The word 'organic' is everyday parlance for vegetable sellers in the town as well as in the outskirts. While the party in power later challenged the organic status of the state set during the old government, what is *basti ko* (produce from the village) holds much more value than what is *Siliguri ko* (produce from Siliguri) in the town.

Hajur Ama's younger *buhari* (daughter-in-law) says that she has been eating her mother-in-law's pickles for the last seven autumns, leaving aside one year when she delivered her baby girl in October. The Nepalese postpartum diet is a specialised one. With Sikkim located at a strategic distance from Nepal, Bhutan, and the Tibetan Plateau in the north, the food in Sikkim—also its postpartum diet—is a potpourri of diverse cuisines revamped to suit the tastes of its varied ethnicities. In Hajur Ama's Chhetri home, her daughter-in-law was fed rice gruel and *kukhra ko* (country chicken) soups. After nine months of satisfying all her pregnancy cravings, the food culture at this stage disallowed her from eating anything *peero-amilo* (hot and sour) because the focus shifted to her recovery as well as her baby's comfort. It is believed that the mother's breast milk carries nutrition as well as vices to the baby. Anything too sour, spicy, or hot may hurt a new-born's stomach. So, while the red-hot cherry peppers plumped with salt stared at her that year, Hajur Ama's *buhari* resisted.

However, the approach was the exact opposite when her family found out that she was pregnant. Assumed to be a pregnant woman's classic food craving in many cultures, including in Gangtok, well-wishers brought her little containers with *titiri ko achaar* (tamarind pickle). They cooked sour tamarind with sweet jaggery, dried red chillies, and black cumin, creating a sweet-sour sticky paste to be relished now and then by her. Her husband, whom she calls 'a fairly progressive man,' has been an equal parent after the birth of their child. Yet, she admits that he never made her any pickles. Perhaps, it is fair to joke that though the gender roles have started blurring in parts of the town, there are some jobs that remain with one gender alone; pickling is one of them.

However, it is not only the making of pickles, but also their consumption, that weighs heavily on women. Though both genders enjoy their condiments, hot, sour, and spicy foods are believed to be enjoyed by women. A woman's consumption of pickles is controlled during pregnancy, postpartum, and menstruation. Touching pickles during one's periods is considered a taboo and has been frowned upon in many cultures. Considered pollutants, there is an ironic belief that a pickle may spoil a woman's fertility, and a fertile woman (menstruating woman) may spoil the pickle. If you ask some younger pickle-makers if this is true, they say that they refuse to abide by these norms anymore. The Nepalese society in Gangtok is an ever-evolving one where most refuse to be bracketed in the simplistic definition of 'being Nepali'. There is a withdrawal from the larger definition, therefore, not all taboos and rules apply to everyone in the town of Gangtok. While there are families in which menstruating women sleep in separate rooms, in some they make pickles and package them.

The *achaars* (preserved pickle) of Sikkim are as distinct as its people. In most Indian languages, there is a clear distinction between a *chutney* (freshly ground sauce) and an *achaar*. However, in Gangtok these terminologies blur. What is cooked or ground is just as much an *achaar* as what is bottled. Here, legumes and milk products are fermented and cooked as fresh *achaars* as well.

One example is the famous, or infamous, *kinema ko achaar*. Common among the non-Brahmin Nepalese as well as the Bhutia and Lepcha communities, it is an acquired taste for many. A soybean-based, sticky, alkaline product, it is an inexpensive, high protein food, cooked fresh as well as pickled. Called *axone* in Nagaland, a movie of the same name was released on Netflix in 2020. The film sought to be a representation of many North-Easterners who live in Delhi, facing age-old racism and biases, yet replicating the smell and taste of home so far away from it. The main recipe for conflict in the movie was *axone*, a dish so pungent that it takes the cast on an adventure in the lanes of the capital. But even in that group of North-Easterners, there is one person who is showcased as being less North-Eastern. Upasana Rai, who gags at the smell of *axone* in the first half of the film, later rises to the occasion and cooks it in a Delhi terrace. This is a perfect example of how Nepalese ethnic food is misunderstood, even in an art form and space intentioned to represent those from the periphery. A woman eager to be accepted and loved, Rai carries a triple burden in the movie: being a woman, a North-easterner, and a Nepali. For a Nepali Rai woman, *kinema* is ethnic food, close to the heart. Derived from the word *kinamba* in the Nepali

Limboo language, *ki* means ‘fermented,’ and *namba* meaning ‘taste.’ *Kinema* is relished by the Rais, Tamangs, Gurungs, Mangars, Sunwars, and the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim.



Shrimp and soya (Courtesy: letslocalnow)

It is believed that the pickles of Nepalese origin were necessitated by geographical circumstances. As food that was easy to carry during migration and harsh weather conditions, the pickles were not only about taste. It is said that the *gundruk* (fermented greens) and *mulako chana* (julienned radish) can be traced to the time when King Prithvi Narayan Shah was trying to conquer the Kirtipur fields of Nepal destroying crops and vegetation. In a situation as adverse as this, it was the Newari women who saved the community. Food scarcity led the women to dry the vegetables, which then started the process of their preservation. This method travelled with the people to newer settlements and evolved into some of the most distinct tasting soups and pickles in the community. Under the Autumn sun on Hajur Ama’s terrace, sit many bottles—the sour, the hot, the pungent, and the bitter swimming in golden oil. It will be winter soon and the pickles will bring some heat in the chill. For now, they sit still, each bottle representing experience, technique, and wisdom that belong solely to women.

Spring-summer

In an essay entitled ‘How Pickles Help Me Survive the Horrible, Wonderful Life of a Writer’ Danya Kukafka compares pickles to art. It has always been believed that pickles mean pure pleasure. So, when the internet started streaming information on the benefits of home-made pickles, terms like ‘gut healthy,’ ‘probiotics’, and ‘antioxidants’ gave consumers all over the world more reasons to devour them. With the demand for pickles increasing, pickle-making also changed hands.

To imagine that a mother or grandmother makes pickles perhaps brings home many good feelings. This has always served as a great insight for advertisers across the world. Branding factory-made pickles as Grandma’s Pickles or Mother’s Recipe is just a reflection of where the consumer comfortably places the pickle-maker. Closer home, there is a pickle named *Aama ko*. It is almost as if the burden of pickling lies only with seasoned women. However, 2020 brought to the surface a new generation of pickle makers in Gangtok.

In the midst of the universal COVID-19 pandemic, the small town of Gangtok saw a boom in e-commerce. During mid-May 2020, the fear of COVID-19 created a scarcity of food in the town. Suddenly there were logistical challenges: a lot of organic and non-organic vegetables weren’t coming into town from Siliguri or the basti anymore. Eggs and poultry were feared as carriers of the virus till local delivery web pages came to the rescue. Like the Newari women in the Kirtipur fields who ideated the preservation of food, women in town ideated newer pickles to be sold through the new portals.

Nepalese pickles, once created by women for survival and preservation, evolved in a newer space, created by women again. With creative logos, typography-led packaging, and innovative designs, the e-commerce site ‘Let’s Local’ sells 12 pickle brands to a population of one lakh in the town. All the pickle brands, it says, are managed and run by women.

There seems to have been a huge change in the objective of pickling over the years. Today, pickling has also become a form of escape and a reason for empowerment. It is this inner journey that some women have gone through with pickles that is worth writing about. Making pickles has evolved from the purpose of serving them to others, to becoming something that serves one’s inner self.

A great example is the story of Pratistha, the owner of ‘The Pickle Nation’. Walking into her home was like walking into a world of strong aromas. This was in direct contrast to Hajur Ama’s terrace where the pickles were mixed with intuition and experience. Here, she was fast-paced, measuring her ingredients

and trying to make the product meet market demands. Her motive is growing her brand, started in 2018 with a seed amount of Rs 10,000 only, into an empire. Rather than out of necessity, she revealed that she had formed the brand to carve her own niche that would separate her identity from the men in her home. While she started with traditional Nepali pickles, she is now working on marinades, sauces, and bringing in meat options. The evolution of her pickles, from the traditional to the new, provides evidence of the direction women are taking in pickle-making in Gangtok.



Dalle- Bamboo shoot Pickle (Courtesy: The Pickle Nation)

Seeing Pratishta in her own space, enjoying what Woolf called ‘a room of her own’, and as a mother of two kids, also showcases the fact that nowadays women in town make pickles to reflect and maintain their inner life purpose.

Calling pickle-making therapeutic, 22-year-old Yojna has found freedom in them. In a dimly-lit kitchen, she meticulously fries soybeans till they are golden and crisp, to be mixed and spiced with prawns. The shift in roles from daughter to home-maker, migration to Gangtok, and the gender disparities in marriage weighed heavily on her. She believes that she was locked-down in marriage, and COVID-19 set her free. Once isolated in a new town, pickle-making introduced her to distributors, vendors, and buyers.

These younger women of Gangtok are not just the protagonist in the preservation of ethnic identities through food, but also the ones who welcome and introduce cultural exchange. Naga meat pickles are now created in Gangtok, which tells us about the new hybridity that women are bringing to society. Sikkim's famously fiery chillies, known to set the tongue ablaze, are now distributed across the country. What women once created for food and survival during migration, is now travelling to meet new cultures.

Pickles have not only been helping women in the town of Gangtok, but also places around it. Bottivilla, a home-stay in Okhrey, West Sikkim, has an NGO where women from various walks of village life come and make pickles. *Tusa* (bamboo shoot), *macha* (fish), *nakeema* (bitter orchids), and *lapsi* (hogweed) are traditional variants of Nepalese pickles in Sikkim.



Meat pickles in Gangtok (Courtesy: letslocalnow)

Roshni Chetri

With as many as 12 new pickle-makers, the variants are diverse and still growing. It is like Spring: something fresh created by so many young women, which is strong, distinct, and innovative. From pork, beef, buff, and fish to *mula nakeema*, and *ruktamatar* (tree tomato), the pickles from Gangtok are moving far. With signature new remixes of the traditional recipes, pickles are embracing both the traditional and the new. These pickles tell us of a long journey, which has evolved through the seasons of time. They remain delicious, and so do their stories.



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