

# Foods and Food Habits of Rajbanshi Community of Indo-Bangladesh Border Area in Cooch Behar: A Brief Historical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Rajbanshi is the only majority indigenous community in Cooch Behar and Northern part of West Bengal popularly known as 'North Bengal'. The Northern Part of Bengal is bounded by the Indo- Bangladesh border line. Most of the people of this study area belong to the Rajbanshi community including Naisya shekh. Generally it is believed that the people of the Rajbanshi community belong from a mixed Mongoloid and Dravidian community. They have their own society and culture which is different from other communities. With the use of multitudinous wild plants they prepared their foods and traditional delicious food items which are Chhyaka, Pelka, Sidal, Shukta, Shukati, Foktani, Panta Bhat, Horpa etc. These traditional and delicious food items are biologically beneficial for the human body. But nowadays, it has been found that under the affect of modernity and globalization process, the own and basic culture of the Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar is losing its identity and moving towards changes. In this paper I have highlighted some basic major foods, traditional foods, the process of preparation of the food items and their biological significance.

**Key words:** Rajbanshi, Indigenous people, Culture, foods, Chhyaka, Pelka, Sidal.

## INTRODUCTION

The study area of this research paper is bounded by the Indo-Bangladesh border area in Cooch Behar and most the people belong to the Rajbanshis community. Rajbanshis are generally considered the most significant indigenous people of the Northern part of West Bengal. This community particularly comprises the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda and the plain areas of Darjeeling district. Other than North Bengal, Rajbanshis had been living in the other portions of South Bengal (West Bengal), lower Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Bihar (Purnia, Kathihar, Kishanganj), some part of Bangladesh (basically Rangpur, Pabna, Rajshahi) and Nepal. (Karmakar, 2011,142-43) Actually, they were the leading indigenous community in North-East India. They were also third largest Hindu Caste of North Bengal (Basu, 2003, 62). 'Rajbanshi' means the community and peoples who belong from 'Rajbansh' whom literally means Royal Community (Karmakar, 2011, 142-43). According to Census Report 1981, the Rajbanshis constitute 19% of total of Scheduled Caste population of West Bengal. Out of the total Rajbanshis of North Bengal, about 74% lives in Cooch Behar, 32% in Jalpaiguri, 13% in North and South Dinajpur and 8% in Darjeeling and Malda districts. Therefore, the major concentration of the Rajbanshis is in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. Agriculture is the main base of economy in Cooch Behar district. Majority people of Cooch Behar are Rajbanshi community and mostly they lived in village areas and they are popularly known for their own flourishing culture (Adhikary, 2015, 68-69). People of Rajbanshi community loved all family members. Generally, food habits are a basic important element of culture. The part of food habits is very significant in the Rajbanshi society and culture of Cooch Behar.

In the present study we have used historical, qualitative as well as analytical methods for discussing on the foods and traditional food habits of the Rajbanshi community in Cooch Behar. For the writing of this article we have used both primary and secondary sources. The present study highlights the foods and food habits of Rajbanshi society in the Indo-Bangladesh border area of Cooch Behar district as well as Northern part of West Bengal. The main aim of the study is to investigate the distinctive features of the social structure of the community in terms of traditional foods and food habits of the Rajbanshi people. However, the culture,

customs and food habits of the Rajbanshi peoples are not the same in different areas. The lifestyle of Cooch Behar or North Bengal Rajbanshis with the Rajbansi people of Assam, Rangpur, and Meghalaya was different. These changes can be seen in culture, food habits, dress, and language also. The people of Cooch Behar mainly depend on wild plants as food sources for nourishment even recent day. Actually, food habits of Rajbanshis are mostly depending on nature and geographical location. However, in course of time, they cultivate many crop plants including paddy. The people in this region also like to eat fish, meat and vegetables. The process of preparation, taste and aroma of their traditionally prepared food items are unique. The people of Cooch Behar can cook a good number of food items in their kitchen. They learnt the method of cooking long back. A food must be nutritive, delicious, tasty and with a good colour and flavour. The Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar always likes their food with leaf, stem, rhizome, fruit, bulb and corm of different local plants, which they collect from the nearby plants and from their kitchen gardens. However, ingredients also contain chilly, onion, garlic, mustard and drum-stick. It is interesting to note that all these plants are cultivated in the neighborhood. Sometimes they purchase some of these raw materials from the resident markets.

## MAJOR FOODS AND TRADITIONAL FOODS OF THE RAJBANSHIS IN COOCH BEHAR

The Rajbanshi people of Indo-Bangladesh border area in Cooch Behar district is mainly eaten rice. Khan Chowdhuri Amanatullah Ahmed in his famous book 'Cooch Behar-er Itihas' pointed out that, the principal food item of Cooch Behar was rice, though Chinar, Kaun grist were also common. They usually eat three major meals a day. They ordinarily take fermented rice (locally called 'Ponta bhat') in the morning. For lunch and dinner, they take fresh cooked rice and they eat cooked vegetables, fish, meats and milk products. Milk is preferred by them. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal in his remarkable work 'The Rajbanshis of North Bengal' has written about the foods of Rajbanshis people that "The Rajbanshis are rice eating people. They usually take three big meals in a day, firstly, in the morning usually puffed (Muri) or flattened rice (Tsurra) or previous night's cooked rice 'Khokora bhat' or 'Pontha bhat', after coming back from the early morning ploughing work and before going out with the plough for the second time, secondly, at noon usually freshly cooked rice and carry and thirdly, at night the same food as in the noon. Wheat and millet are not generally taken. They are cooked vegetables, pulses, fish and goat's meat. Hindu does not eat fowl, beef or meat of buffaloes nor pork of domesticated animals. They take milk and milk products of which curd is the main item. They rarely take clarified butter (ghee) on account of its high cost nor do they like it. They used mustard oil for cooking and smearing on the head and body after bathing." (Sannyal, 1965, 42) Rice is the main foods of Rajbanshi people of Cooch Behar. There are several kinds of rice—"Aloa rice", it prepared from sun dried and un-boiled paddy. It locally called 'Atab chal.' 'Usha rice', it made from boiled paddy. 'Bhadoi rice' prepared from winter paddy. This kind of rice is difficult to digest and is usually taken by the cultivators who hard manual work so that they do not feel hungry. 'Heuti rice' prepared from rain paddy. (Sannyal, 1965, 42). There are several kinds of Pulses which are Musur, Motor, But, Khesari, Kalai. Khan Chowdhuri, Amanatullah Ahmed in his famous work 'Cooch Beharer Itihas' pointed out that, the main food of Rajbanshis people of this region was rice. A. Claude Campbell remarks, Fish and rice are the staple foods of the people of Cooch Behar. The people of Cooch Behar, especially Rajbanshis also eat Goat, duck, hen, wild boar, wild fowl, sheep, crank, and dove. (Sannyal, 1965, 42) Pork meat is also a common food for some persons of Rajbanshi and Non-Rajbanshi of this region. Curries, green Chillies, Onion, and garlic are also used for preparing of food.

As the Rajbanshis people became Hindus, so they eat everything in accordance with the Hindu religion, but some special food items are different from non-Rajbanshi Bengali people. Food habits of people of Cooch Behar can be developed depending on the geographical and natural conditions. Environment also influences the food culture of this region. The people of Rajbanshi community used local plants for their prepared delicious and traditional food items or any household work. Health of the indigenous peoples was indicating the nutritional sides of their food. The indigenous peoples of this region are much stronger than the other peoples (Roy, 2015, 472) Now a days we see in the rural or village areas either any person or children of Rajbanshi community hazard in common flu like fever, cold, cough etc they used their home medicines (Ali Mondal & 2018,180). For this reason, food habits of Cooch Behar district have some specialties among the people of Cooch Behar. The people of Cooch Behar use numerous wild plants as food and have some endemic recipes for their own traditional food items. The traditional foods of Cooch Behar are Sidal, Chheka, Pelka,

Sukta, Sidal, shukati etc which is one of the most popular delicious foods of the Rajbanshi community. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal in his books 'The Rajbansis of North Bengal' stated that Pelka, Sukta, Sidal, Shukati, Kachu Shak etc were the important delicious food of this region. Some other traditional and delicious food item is Kolar Mocha, Jhinuk, Shamuk, Takoya, Atiya Kola, Sajna Pata, Lafa Shak, Patashak, Dheki Shak, Fokdoi, Pata Khaoa etc (Ali Mondal & 2018,180). We have tried to highlight briefly about the way of preparation and biological significance of some delicious and traditional Rajbanshi foods.

### **Choba, Sidza, Bhatta Sana and Bhadzi**

As the Rajbanshis people became Hindu, so they eat everything in accordance with the Hindu religion. Choba, Sidza, Bhatta, Sana and Bhadzi are the most popular foods of the Rajbanshi community in Cooch Behar. Choba' is a roast. There are some kinds of choba or roast like Baigon or Bengon choba (brinjal roast), Alu choba (potato roast), Mach choba (Fish roast) and Mosom choba (meat roast) etc are most popular taste foods of Rajbanshi people in Indo-Bangladesh Border area in Cooch Behar district. (Personal Interview, 08.06.2024)

The uncut entire brinjal fruit is burnt in the smoldering fire of the oven. As soon as the skin is burnt and turns black the brinjal is taken out of the fire. The peeled off and eaten with a little mustard oil, green chillies, onion or garlic and salt. Alu choba or potato roast is also prepared and eaten in the same way. Fish roast or much choba and Mosom choba or roast is also almost the same way prepared and these are most tasty to eat. Bahadzi is a fry. Alu bhadzi, potol bhadzi, Sola kochu or Baksho kochu are fried in the same way but without preliminary boiling. Mach bhadzi (Fish fry) is prepared after cleaning the fish of the fins and scales with a knife and washing. A little mustard oil is poured into a pan and heated on the oven.

### **Macher pora or Macher Sana**

Mach (fish) is one of the famous food items not only for indigenous people but also all the Bangali peoples. There was a very common line popular among the Bengali peoples 'mache vate bangali'. Although this is another issue, the women of the village's burn a whole fish with scaly in the oven, then when it is well burned, it is cleaned without water. Because they believed that burned items should never be washed with water. Then the burn fish smeared well with mustard oil, salt, and burn chili. In this way, they prepared delicious Macher pora (Personal Interview, 04.07.2023). The national Nutrient Database clearly mentioned the benefits of eating fish. It is filled with vitamin D and B2, also with iron, zinc, iodine, calcium, phosphorus, potassium etc. According to the American Heart Association for a healthy diet eating fish at least two times per week is needed. This Rajbanshi traditional dish Macher pora is heal there for its way of processing. It is made without using any oil.



*Macher Pora*

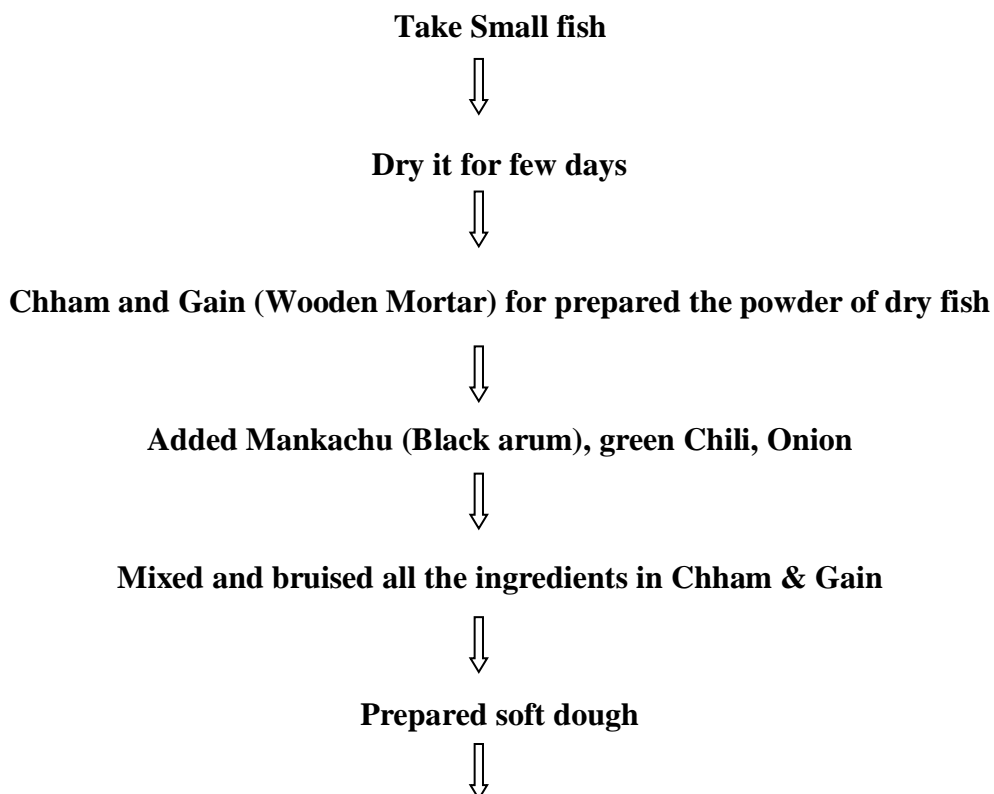
## Sidal and Sukti

Another important delicious food of the Rajbanshis of the study area is Sidal and Sukta. Sidal is also the most popular traditional food which is commonly consumed in many states of India like Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, West Bengal etc. specially north-east India. Basically, it is prepared from the ‘Shukti Mach’ (dry fish) and ‘Mankachu’ (Black arum). (Sannyal, 1965, 45-46) Presently, this food is very popular among the tribal and Bengali speaking people of Northern part of West Bengal. The main ingredients of this product are small fishes, Mankachu (one type of black arum), spices (Green Chilis, Garlics), turmeric powder, mustard oil, ashes etc. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal in his text “The Rajbanshis of North Bengal” mentions that, an art of the Rajbanshi women is made of Sidal. Small dry fishes (Shukti mach), turmeric powder, spices (green Chilis, Garlics) arum, mustard oil mixtures are crushed in a husk locally called ‘Chham’ and ‘Gain’ for making Sidal. (Sannyal, 1965, 45-46) The Rajbanshi women have made various Sidal recipes such as Chheka, Sidal Chutney, Sidal Curry, which is considered very popular in Cooch Behar. It is believed that Sidal increases appetite, controls blood pressure, strengthens the heart and also prevents Malaria (Ali Mondal, & Barman, 2018, 180-181).



### Sidol

The following Chart indicates the process of preparation of Sidal-



**Made it into small balls**



**Mixed turmeric & mustard oil on balls**



**Dry it sun for some days**



**Stored into the dry place and preserves more than one year, which is called the ‘sidal’**

### **Sukti Mach**

Now we are talking about Sutkimach or Suktamach in our language. It is actually a type of dry fish, which can also be with any small or large fish. We should look the nutrition part of that. A huge amount of calcium presents in dry fish, which is help to increase normal growth and strength of teeth and increase, to prevent the normal growth of fertilizers and to prevent the Growth Retarding (low weight) and Fatal Death (Embryonic Death) and helping the development of led Milestones and development. There are also important elements, iron, magnesium, sodium and potassium. Iron prevents anemia and various symptoms like, weaknesses, smoothness, and child brain development etc. Sodium and potassium is dangerous if those elements were increased. Otherwise if those elements were decreased from normal levels, it is also be dangerous for our body. Their work is to manage different complex processes from the management of nerves, muscles and heart. Therefore, it is possible to protect all these problems by eating sukti or sutki mach. Also found in Vitamin B<sub>6</sub>, B<sub>12</sub>, Vitamin C and A, each of them separate nutritional fiber, and also had some diet fiber. Which prevent constipation, helps to clean up the closet. And finally, sutki mach (especially marine fish) presents saturated fatty acid which helps to keep heart healthy.(Adhikary, Barman,and Brman, 2021,164)



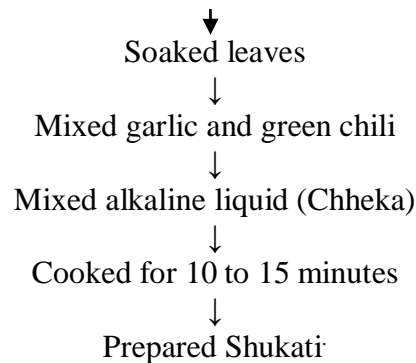
### **Sukti Machh**

### **Shukati**

Another important item of traditional foods is Shukati. It is made from the Jute leaves (pat shakpata). After bringing the leaf of jute, it is sprinkled with some salt and it is dried in the sun. After that the dried leaves (Shukati) are preserved. Shukati is an oil-free food. Here one thing is mentioned that the Rajbanshi people not only used Shukati as food item, in many religious rituals it's very essential. In the sraddho ceremony of this

community it must be needed. The flowing chart indicates the process of preparation of Shukati.( Adhikary, Barman,and Brman, 2021,157)

The dried leaves(Shukati) are soaked in water for 10 minutes



**Sukati**

As Shukati is an oil-free food item and any kind of rich spices are not mixed here, it helps to eliminate gas, acidity and indigestion. (Adhikary, Barman,and Brman, 2021,158) If the Shukati is soaked in water before night and the soaked water can be eaten on an empty stomach in the next morning; it helps to increase digestive energy and climate gas. (Adhikary, Barman,and Brman, 2021,158)

### **Atiya Kala Gach**

Atiya Kala Gach is a type of Banana tree. Atiya Kala is generally known as seedy banana or the banana with many seeds. (Adhikary, Barman,and Brman, 2021,158) We all know about the benefits of bananas. This fruit is full of vitamin C, A, B<sub>6</sub> and B<sub>12</sub>. Banana stems are also rich with vitamins. Even every part of the banana tree is useful. A 2017 meta-analysis published by prilozi section of medical science highlight about the biological significance of banana plant.(Adhikary, Barman,and Brman, 2021,158) 'Atiya Kala Gach' or the banana stems cut away, the upper layers are not used. Only the inner stems are used. After cleaning the inner tender stem it was cut into small bits and cooked. This part of the banana stem is rich in Vitamin B<sub>6</sub> and potassium, which helps to control Anemia, produced of Insulin and Hemoglobin. (Adhikary, Barman,and Brman, 2021,158) It also benefits weight loss. They eat of Atiya Kala Gach once a week control high blood sugar. It is also very much beneficial for kidney stones; it helps to detoxify the human body. (Jones, Warjri ,May 27, 2019)



**Atiya Kala Gach**

### **Chhyaka**

‘Chhyaka’ is one of the most important traditional foods among the Rajbanshi people of this region. Recently it is also the most popular of Non Rajbanshi people in Cooch Behar. It is actually an alkaline liquid.( Ali Mondal, & Barman, 2018, 180-181). It is worked as baking powder. The main ingredients of Chhyaka are the small pieces of rhizomes and Pseudostem of *Musa balbisiana*.(Interview,09.06.2024) The pieces are dried under the sun and burnt to produce ash. Some amount of water is added to the ash and stirred thoroughly and then strained through jute in a perforated coconut shell. Finally, bamboo basket and rice straw are used to make the filtrate substituting coconut shell and jute fiber. The filtrate this alkaline is the Chhyaka.(Adhikary, Barman,and Brman, 2021,160) They sometimes use this liquid as a substitute of washing powder too.



**Prepared Chhyaka**



**Collection of Alkaline liquid**

The flowing figure indicates the process of preparation of Chhyaka-

**Take some Rhizome & Pseudostem of Musabalbisiana > Cut into small pieces and dry it > Burnt to ash > Water added to ash & stirred thoroughly > Filtered through jute fiber in a perforated coconut shell > Filtered this alkaline or Chhyaka.**

This Chhyaka liquid was used to prepare Sidoler Aota, Pelka (Specially Lapa Shaker Pelka), Maskalai, Chhyaka, Shukatir Chhyaka, Velka, Foktani etc.(Personal Interview ,07.09.2024.) It helped to control Acidity, gas and constipation. Finally it worked to clear the stomach. This kind of alkaline ordinarily was used for washing clothes as substitute of soda. It was also used for cleaning the hair, especially women's hair as substitute of soap.

## Pelka

Pelka is one of the most important traditional delicious foods in Rajbanshi Community in North-east India. It is prepared in almost the same way as Chhyaka. It prepared from the different leaves of green vegetables. There are different types of Pelka, such as Sajnapater pelka, Napa shaker pelka, Kochu pater pelka etc. (Personal Interview, 15.09.2024.) The principal ingredients of pelka are drumstick leaves (Sajna pata) garlic, chilli, small fishes and chhyaka. Pelka is a preparation of leaves of different species of plant including tender leaves of drumstick and arum. It is one of the most important foods and they used to eat Pelka after illness to regain the taste. It is very useful in curing acidity.

The following chart indicates the process for preparation of Pelka-

**Take little Water > boiled it for 2-3 minutes > Added with Garlic, green chilly & Chhyaka (alkaline liquid) > Boiled for just 2 minutes > Added also Drumstick leaves and salt > Boiled it for 5-10 minutes > Fried small fishes > Cooked for just 2-4 minutes > Pelka.**



**Pui Shaker Pelka**

## Dohi or Doi

The people of Cooch Behar prepared several varieties of Doi like Goleya dohi, Tenga dohi, Nalua Dohi, Garosti dohi, Chatsi dohi, Chatsi katsa dohi, Katsa dohi, Phok doi etc.( Personal Interview, 09.10.2024) The Rajbanshi and Non-Rajbanshi people of Cooch Behar are favour **Fokdoi**. The main ingredients of Fokdoi are powdered rice-grains, ginger and garlic paste, split-up green chilli, leaves of black arum and Chhyaka. (Sanyal, 1965,43).

The total mixture is boiled and stirred until a gelatenous soft paste is formed. It is eaten with rice.

## Doi – Chira

One of the most essential traditional food items among the Rajbanshi people is Doi (Curd) and Chira (Flattened rice). It is also used as 'Prasad' in every religious festival like Mashan Puja, Kali Puja, Durga Puja, even in marriage, Rice ceremony also. Generally we have known the biological benefits of Doi Chira. (Sanyal, 1965,47). It made from milk and paddy. The Rajbanshi peoples lived in village areas and agriculture was the



main based of economy. Cow was common animals of every Rajbanshi family. Doi or curd and flattened rice are full of essential nutrients like Vitamin B-complex, Magnesium, Calcium and Potassium. Curd or Doi with Chira were healthy for the human body.(Adhikary, 2015, 38-39).

It enhances appetite, controls gas and acidity.

## TRADITIONAL SWEETMEATS AND DRINKS

Rosogolla, Chomchom, Sandesh, Kalakand, Misti Doi etc. are the most important sweets in Cooch Behar. Sour milk is drunk by adults, and sweets by children. (Personal Interview,09.10.24.) The 'batasa' and 'mola' are chief and most commonly used in Cooch Behar. 'Batasa' is a preparation of sugar or molasses. 'Mola' is prepared by mixing 'moori', 'Chira', 'til' etc with boiled molasses and then making the compound into balls. 'Chira' locally known as 'Goora' is generally eaten in the morning. (Sannyal, Charu 1965, 44-48).

Generally, the people do not drink intoxicating liquors, although in the towns the habit of taking liquors becomes unfortunately common, but water is the staple drink of this region. Smoking the 'hookka' or the 'Chhilim' is universal. Men and women both used this habit to take it from their infancy. Tobacco is smoked mostly in 'alwa'. The use of betel and nut is extensive, especially among the women. After Independence, people connected to their cultural or ethnic group following a similar food pattern. Traditional food habits do exist but the people changed their food habits in course of time.

## CHANGES IN THE FOOD HABITS OF RAJBANSHI SOCIETY IN COOCH BEHAR

Under the influence of urbanization, modernization above all under the impact of globalization, the Rajbanshi culture of Cooch Behar has changed today. Presently Rajbanshi society of Cooch Behar is assimilated by Bengali culture in many ways. So, not to state that, during the partition of India and after many people East Bengal (Now Bangladesh) came to this region and they settled permanently. As a result, a composite culture was created in this region. Paulami Bhawal in his Article "Evolution of Rajbanshi Society: A Historical Assessment" mention that "after huge number of people migrated in North Bengal, many indigenous foods were taken as the food of the migrated people; on the other hand the indigenous people were habituated with the food habit of the migrated people. Not only that the indigenous people accepted the process of cooking and spices from the migrated people. Beside these, after independence and partition, the spread of education accelerated, many schools, colleges, institutions were established, as a result of which many indigenous people came under the education system. They became educated and many of them got services and the number of employees increased day after day. These educated people went out of the house, settled into different places, started to live in different places of the country, as a result of which they gradually became habituated with the food habit of multi-character dishes. The food habit of the educated people automatically influenced the other people of the villages."( Bhawal, 2015, p- 58.)Globalization, Modernization and cultural assimilation with upper caste non- Rajbanshi communities or Hindus transformed the traditional stage among the young generation of Rajbanshi communities. In Cooch Behar as well as Northern part of West Bengal, due to the significances of modernization the people (both Rajbanshi and non-Rajbanshi) of this region forgot to eat Sidal, Chyaka, Sukta (Dry fish), Pelka, Fokdoi, Shukati, etc. In many cases it is seen that the people of non-Rajbanshi have adopted the food habits of the Rajbanshi people and one the other hand, Rajbanshi people accepted the culture of non-Rajbanshi. Recently, the peoples Both Rajbansh and non-Rajbanshi of Cooch Behar as well as people of North Bengal, they used to eat different types of modern and foreign foods Which popularly known as 'Fast foods' like fry rice, Biryani, Momo, Egg roll, Chili Chicken, Luchi-Puri, Fuska etc and different type of chocolates, biscuits and sweets. This fast food eating has to often make it inevitable for young people to crush with older members of the Rajbanshi society. Sitangshu Prosad Chakrabarty in his book 'Parivartanshil Jiboner Shurute Jalpaigurir Rajbanshi Samaj' mentions that "relating food habits they also habited with modern food habits at present, particularly, the educational Rajbanshi and the Rajbanshi's of urban areas use modern food instead of taking their traditional food habit such Pelka, Chhyaka, Sidal, Sukti". In fact, in this age of modernization and globalization the foods and food habits of the Rajbanshi society of Cooch Behar has undergone great changes.

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## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be stated that a healthy foods and diet food habit is adopted by the peoples of Rajbanshi community of Indo-Bangladesh Border area of Cooch Behar district. This nutrition of their suitable foods and diet is illustrated through formation of their strong healthy body shape. Therefore, it is no doubly stated that by keeping their traditional norms, the Rajbanshi community of this study area are also capable of adopting the culture, habits and rituals of Hindu society. In spite of the influence of modernization and globalization the people of Rajbanshi society in this study area of Cooch Behar district are not losing their own cultural identity but they organize various cultural movements to protect their tradition, culture, habits and social rituals throughout the world.

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## Interviews

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12. Personal Interview with Fanibhushan Barman (81 year old), date- 07.07.2024
13. Personal Interview with Tilswari Barman (79 years old) date- 15.09.2024
14. Personal Interview, With Nirmala Barman (85 years old) dated 09.10.2024.
15. Personal Interview with Tileswari Barman (79 years old), date- 15.09.2024
16. Personal Interview with Nirmala Barman (85 years old), date- 09.10.24
17. Personal Interview with Fanibhushan Barman (81 years old) date- 07.07.2024
18. Personal Interview with Harendra Nath Barman (76 year old) date- 09.06.2024