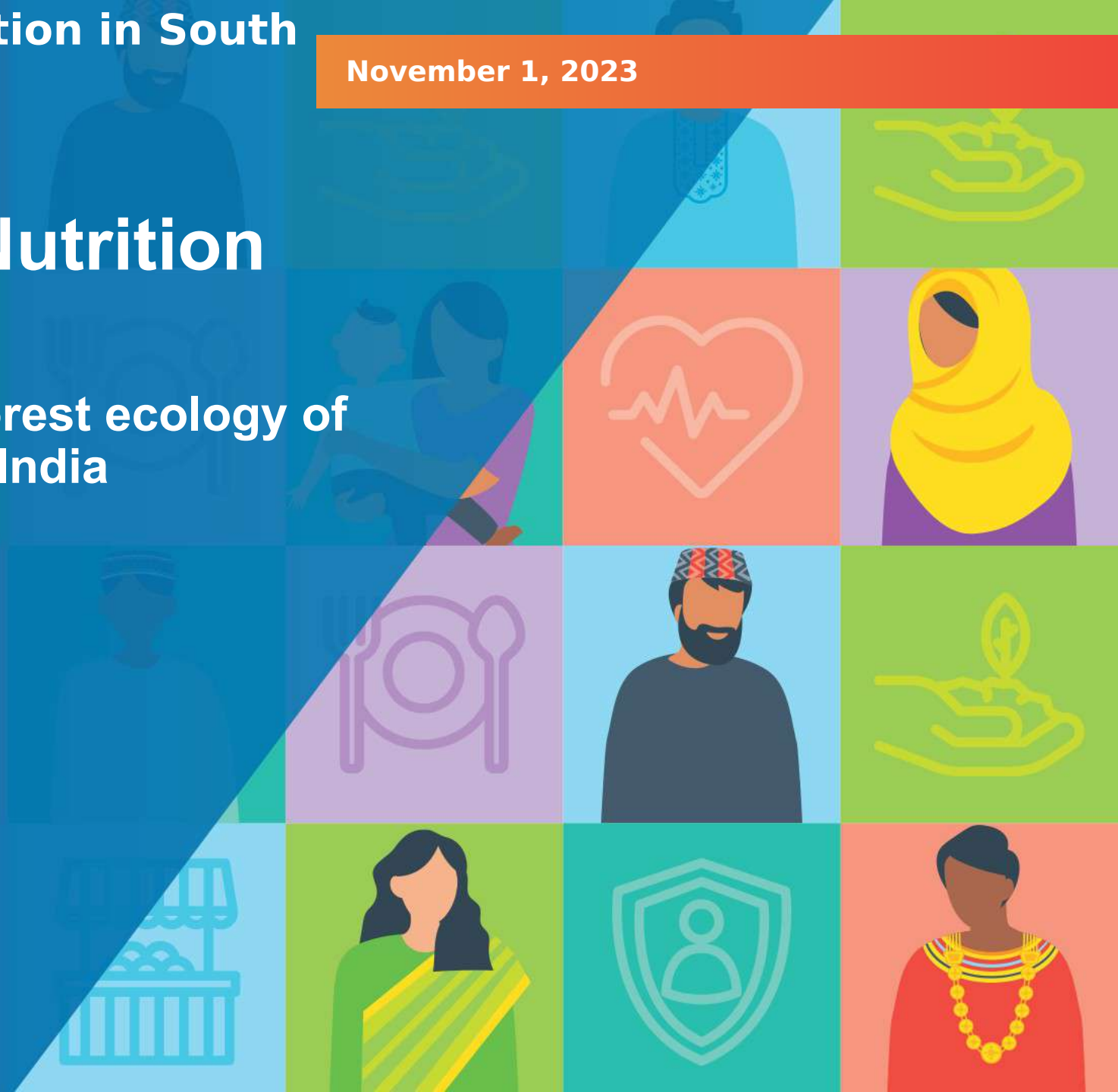


Foraging our way to Nutrition Security

Indigenous Food System and Forest ecology of the Bodo community, in Assam, India

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About the Bodos

- Largest tribe of Assam, Northeast India
- Population is 13,61,735, which was 35.06 percent of the total scheduled tribal population of Assam. (2011 census)
- Traditionally Bodos are agriculturists.
- Major religion: Bathaouism (Hinduism) and Christianity
- Sixth Scheduled administered (Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) – 4 districts under Assam)
- Bodo food culture and food habits play an important part of culinary culture of Assam



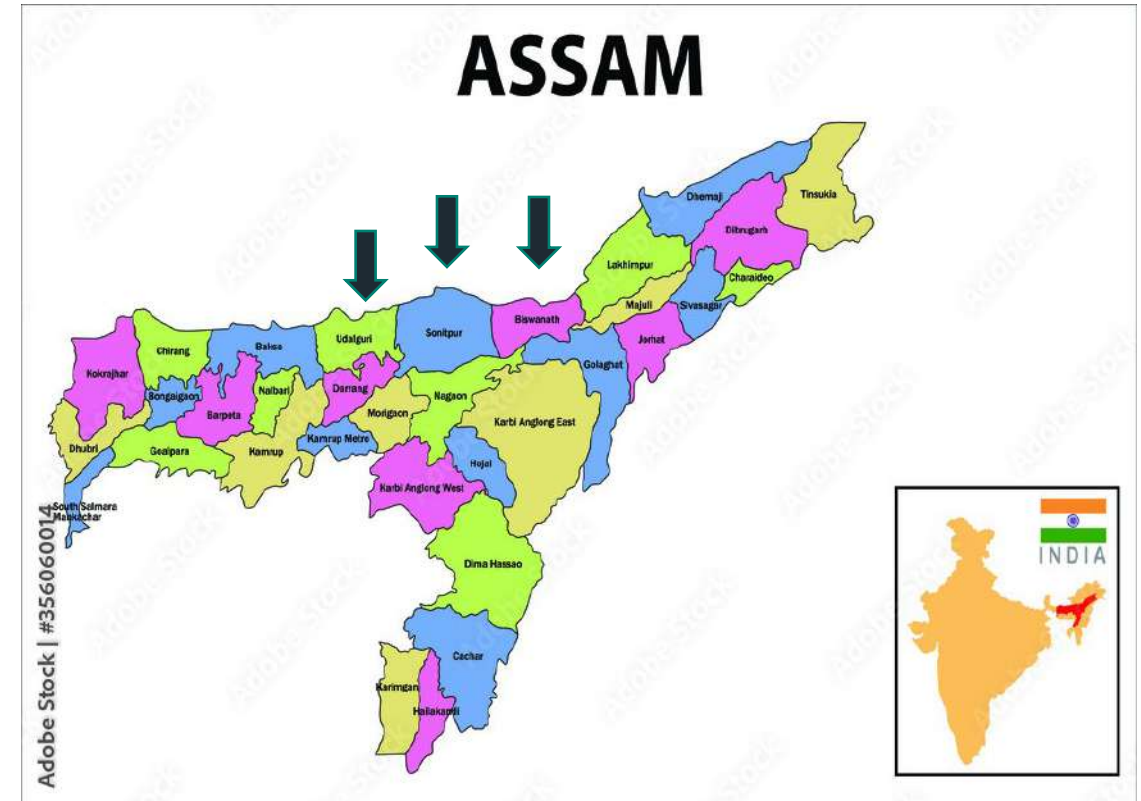
Pic: Bodo women and men fishing near a village pond during monsoon, Baksa district

Objectives

- To build an understanding about the local food system and nutrition security
- Role of Foraging in Bodo epistemology
- Documentation of non-cultivated (wild) and easily grown foods
- Changing trends in diet and food habits and factors enabling them

Methods

- Ethnography as the primary method of Field work
- Content and thematic analysis
- Focused group Discussions – women groups, mix groups (men & women), adolescents
- Participant observation
- In-depth interviews – Elders, Key Resource persons in the community, Govt. service providers (FLWs)
- Local market surveys and documentation
- Secondary research
- The duration of the research was from **March –July 2023**



Geography

Biswanath, Sonitpur, Udalguri districts

Foraging as an integral part of Indigenous Food systems

- Foraging for **wild edibles in forests** constitutes a significant portion of their overall food consumption
- Food items comprised of majorly meats and fishes, edible forms of flowers, fruits, snails, insects, roots, tubers, leaves, stems, seed, and wild mushrooms etc..
- Food and nutrition practices are deeply intertwined with the culture and the local ecology.
- Indigenous knowledge about food systems play a crucial role among the Bodos in their Nutrition security

“We rarely buy vegetables We only buy Mustard oil, pulses, meat and salt. Most of the vegetables we eat are foraged and gathered from the wild or cultivated in the kitchen garden, that was enough for us”- Research participant during FGD



Pic: Different foraged foods

Oral history as knowledge system

- Food wisdom comes from the tacit knowledge of the Bodos in their ecology
- Knowledge on wild edibles and its health and nutrition benefits are passed down orally through recipes
- Knowledge sharing is often observed in traditional customs and rituals
- Practice of Commensality enables and preserve the local knowledge on food, ingredients and their use

“The knowledge on identifying the wild edibles are being thought to us by our elders and parents. When we were young children, we use to go for foraging with our parents, and it is our responsibility to teach and pass down the knowledge to the next generation, or we will lose our culture, tradition and identity”- **Research participants during FGD**



**Pic: Preparation during a Bodo wedding ,
Baksa district**

Foraging and Livelihood

Foraged foods (wild greens, mushrooms, smoked and dried fish, bamboo shoots etc.) are often sold in the local market by women, in the village weekly markets



Pic: Selling foraged produce in Sunday weekly market, in Beltola, Guwahati, Assam



Pic: Selling produce in Tuesday market, in Tezpur, Sonitpur district



Women selling produce in Wednesday market, in Gohpur (Assam – Arunachal border town), Biswanath district

A knowledge system slowly dying

- Intergenerational shift in knowledge on foraging and non cultivated foods
- Climate change and changing patterns of the weather-some of the wild plant species are decreasing due to habitat lost.
- Less interest by the younger generation in agricultural activities and learning about foraged foods
- Migration for livelihoods, education
- Infrastructure
- The market
- Displacement from their habitats
- These factors are impacting their traditional practices related to **pregnancy care**, nutritional intake, and infant and young child feeding (**IYCF**) practices.

“Earlier most of the vegetables and wild edibles, we used to forage from the jungles nearby in Arunachal Pradesh side. But since 2017 -18, when the construction of airport began, our movements and access to the forests were restricted, thus a shift has happened in availing many wild non cultivated food produce”- Research participant during interview. Rajpur village, Assam- Arunachal Pradesh border



Pic: Donyi -Polo airport boundary wall- Arunachal Pradesh







Policy implications

- Enhancement of Mid Day Meal (MDM) programmes in schools
- Enhancement of supplementary nutrition in Anganwadi centre (AWCs)
- Knowledge sharing sessions in Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSNDs)
- Value added products from foraged foods as a means of livelihood. Linking through SHG platforms

The larger question?

- Indigenous knowledge systems are intertwined within the community ethos and principles, therefore, studying the relationship between these practices, the ecology, and traditions becomes imperative for better community nutrition
- Acknowledge Indigenous Food and Knowledge systems
- Localisation of Food and Nutrition policies
- Democratisation of food system



Pic: Foraging of wild fiddle head ferns

thank you



A Bodo woman selling foraged wild bitter berries (*bhekuri*) in a Sunday weekly bazaar in Bhalukpong, Sonitpur district