**On Women Eating and Men Cooking in Public Spaces**

***Pooja Kalita***
***Colombo Institute***

**(Talk delivered at BCIS library on 4th April 2025)**

Thank you everyone for coming to this talk and I am extremely grateful to BCIS and Colombo Institute for giving me this opportunity. My talk in primarily based in the urban space of Guwahati in the Indian state of Assam located in what is popularly referred to as the Northeast of India. My keenness for having this talk in the BCIS library is also because I would like to hear from you all about your take on gender in public spaces in Sri Lanka or elsewhere; especially related to food. I am sure we would have a lot of similarities but also the differences would be interesting to learn and navigate.

Actually, my interest in this topic of women eating and men cooking in public spaces has been for two primary reasons – Firstly, because it is rarely that sociological and anthropological research has been conducted beyond the usual tropes of being 'far-off', 'disturbed', 'conflict-ridden', 'distant' and so on when it comes to Assam and broadly the Northeast of India. Secondly, my interest was to look at gender beyond the conventional white feminist lens that, as feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues and I quote – "... a homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an "average third world woman". This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: Sexually constrained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, et cetra)" (Mohanty 1984: 337). Avakian and Haber (2005) while commenting on the relation between feminism and food, further cautions about the danger of a Euro-American bias while studying experiences of women from different parts of the world. While a number of women's studies scholars write about food, often they look at gender in isolation from other social formations, "sometimes entirely omitting women who are defined as "other", or "including" them while keeping white, EuroAmerican women at the centre" (Avakian and Haber 2005: viii). Similarly, I wanted to look into both womanhood and manhood in a more nuanced manner rather than simple stereotypes and how patriarchal conditioning can be a burden for everyone and not just women. My intention has been to understand how both these groups that I have studied i.e. women who eat-out at public spaces and men who cook are negotiating with patriarchy in their daily lives. For instance, as much as the domestic spaces is considered the place for women in traditional understanding, the public has been relegated as where men go to and fulfil their manly duties such as being bread-winners. Nonetheless, this spatial difference is unkind to both women and men. As Chowdhury (2014) underlines in her work that a man who spend more than the "necessary" time (generally spent in eating a meal) in the

ghar (house) are called ghar-ghusnoo (home bound). He would be taunted as "petticoat bound", i.e., a male under the influence/domination of females (Chowdhry 2014: 43).

For my study, I conducted ethnography in various spaces of public food consumption, from street stalls, cafes, restaurants etc. and also in domestic spaces. Now, whenever the relationship between women and food is evoked, especially in a South Asian context, the popular imagery is that of the 'motherly' women who cooks and feeds her family within the domestic sphere of the household. She is an embodiment of sacrifice and thus perceived as more of a food provider than a consumer. However, contrary to this popular imagery, my research has looked into women as consumers of food in public spaces and the various constraints she faces in her pursuit of buying and having food in a public space. Similarly, men have never been absent from the arena of food preparation, although their participation has been primarily been perceived 'normal' in the public sphere rather than the private domestic space. But we also know that when it comes to traditional cooking including traditional sweets and snacks, the popular imagination is that of women preparing it, although it is men who cook in public spaces like restaurant kitchens. My talk is divided into two parts – the first part is about women's experiences at public spaces of food consumption and the second part is about men cooking or preparing traditional sweets and snacks in these spaces.

Many eating out joints advertise themselves with images of young, smart, glamourous women enjoying eating and dining out. The city of Guwahati like cities across the globe is bustling with eating-out spaces. From the restaurants selling cuisines from different parts of India to the 'international' fast food joints like KFCs and Domino's - the city has it all. This is a trend that has marked most cities across the globe and often associated with ideas of what a neo liberal city ought to be. Yet, with the coming in of each new brand in food, we are moving towards forgetting and ignoring the complex meanings of food in social life. The barrage of media images on food, the new eating out joints, their personalized advertisements are the stuff of fantasies. They invisibilize realities related to food such as - hunger, safety, exploitation and layers of inequalities. There is an urgent need to move away from the glossy fantasies of 'empowered' urban women to realities that still haunts us.

Now, any discussion on women in public spaces brings to light the notion of 'safety'. We women want to be safe. But what is this safety all about?

This concept of safety is not a one - dimensional concept. It is not only inter-wined with the notions of physical safety, that is, protecting oneself from getting raped or harassed but also includes issues of social and emotional safety. Social safety here would refer to women trying to refrain from portrayal of negative image about oneself to the world. As for most

women, ‘What would people think?’ forms an important part of their day-to-day lives. Having and maintaining a positive image of a ‘good’ woman is very important. In terms of emotional safety, it is about not suffering from the guilt of eating out alone or eating something good alone without one’s family members. Patriarchal conditioning teaches us that a good daughter and especially a good mother/daughter-in-law/grandmother would never think of enjoying a meal alone. In the broader schema of her life, it is more important for her that her family is well fed and happy rather than being concerned with her own needs and desires. If she ever gives more priority to herself rather than her family, she would be deemed selfish, egotistic and a ‘bad’ woman. Again, women eating alone in public spaces is still am unusual proposition. The issue of various kinds of safety never fails to haunt any ‘empowered’ or ‘free’ women in public spaces of food-consumption.

From my own fieldwork experience, after the first few days of my fieldwork, one particular evening I decided to go out for dinner at a restaurant which was also part of my research. I noticed that the ratio of women to men were getting less with the passing time. I felt unsafe. While returning after dinner, I could not find a bus. The autos/tuk-tuks or the cabs were not only way expensive than a public bus but also buses were getting lesser. I realized that the planning to go-out and eat-out is clearly not the same for both men and women. For men, social and emotional safety do not impact their planning as much as it does for women. It has been quite clear that for men, the general concerns would revolve around tangible physical-material necessities such as – which place would be the best to eat out depending on one’s physical and financial abilities and with whom one goes out with? How would one reach the restaurant or cafe etc? how much can one spend on a meal? Women too think of these concerns and questions. But in addition to that, for women this going out is actually like a journey fraught with uncertainties and anxieties about their safety that are so many times beyond their control. There is an endless list of specificities that women have to think off before going out - What is the safest mode of transportation to go and come back because news about women being raped or sexually harassed is a daily phenomenon in India? Will it be safe to go this place or that? Can I go to this street stall which sells excellent biryani at 10 o clock at night without a man accompanying me? Isn’t it better to take a cab after 9 at night rather any public transport, even though it will be more expensive? Will I get harassed wearing this dress in public? For married women or women with extended families there are several other additional questions to be reckoned with. These questions would range from ‘Who would cook for the family when I am not there?’ to ‘Who will take care of the house and children?’ etc. One can of course argue that there are still many women spotted in spaces of commercial food consumption every day. Well, women do go out. Still, these going-out and eating-out ventures are not devoid of concerns which depends on one’s socio-cultural and economic locations too. For instance, although the issue of physical safety on the streets would be common to all woman, but a

burqa-clad Muslim woman is more prone to becoming a spectacle of ridicule and uncomfortable stares in the city space of Guwahati.

While trying to understand the experiences of eating-out of women, during my fieldwork, a particular image caught my attention. It was a picture inside the Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) outlet which has a close up of a girl licking her finger assumedly while having KFC chicken alone with a halo above her head. Moreover, the amount of space that this particular picture at KFC occupied was rather an unusual site for me. Women in general are depicted as serving or preparing food than enjoying food themselves. However, being aware of the 'liberal' culture that American fast-food chains symbolise, I understood that the image at KFC might not be an uncommon thing in this 'foreign' or 'international' context, even though the relation between women and food might not be imagined in the same sense in a traditional scenario in the city space of Guwahati. However, I realized that I was not completely correct. I thought that only 'Un-traditional' spaces like KFCs could somehow afford to acknowledge women having fun while having food. This realisation that my perception was not fully correct occurred to me when I went to *Paakghor, A* restaurant claiming to sell traditional Assamese food. There was however one picture which showed a woman as having a piece of chicken from a bowl of chicken curry herself rather than offering it or serving it. The women appeared to relish her desire for chicken instead of simply fulfilling her nutritional needs. I realized that the idea that women could desire food, if not a common idea is however not altogether absent. However, the crucial fact was not the presence of such imagery but rather one also needs to question how such images are interpreted by customers and non-customers of these spaces, be it American food spaces or the traditional ones. During my latter visit to *Paakghor,* I realized that the widowed owner of this restaurant is the same woman who has modelled for the pictures that adorn the walls of the restaurant. I spoke about it to one of my research participants whom I refer to as CB about the pictures.

*CB said: Oh… she is those model types only. Putting loads of make-up, going around with men is her only job. I mean these kinds of pictures are so indecent. How can any woman, especially a widow belonging to a respectable family get clicked in such a way? Who eats likes this anyway?*

Hence, CB was completely dismissive of not only the fact that women, especially married or widowed women can have food that explicitly shows them relishing it publicly. I asked some workers and customers of KFC, if they have ever experienced or has seen a woman eating as the first picture I was referring to. Most of them replied with a *No*. Some of them said that they can expect this from young girls. But the young girls who saw this picture told me that they usually do not eat like that. Even if they do, it would be only when nobody is watching or with the people they are extremely comfortable with. When I asked the

reason for it, some of them had the opinion that it degrades their status and class. Some related it to 'being a woman', the idea of modesty attached to it and also marital status and age. For instance, they cannot expect a married elderly woman of a 'decent' family to eat like that. The variety of responses I got pointed out to the broader fact that it is not even a socially approved idea for women to relish food explicitly even with family members inside the households. It is an uncomfortable proposition for women, especially married and older daughters to explicitly show their love for food. If they simply come into these spaces as desiring beings who want to satisfy their desire for food, it is seen as an aberration. Women are not free to choose just any and every public space to satisfy their wishes or desires related to food.

However, just because most women are always under the feeling of disapproval or being judged in a negative light does not translate into them not going out to eat and resort to need-based reasons. They do go out. I asked this woman around 45 years of age, who works as a part-time domestic help at a few households. I asked her about her favourite food, she said that she likes to have egg curry with rice. I asked her if she goes to eat outside. She replied that she goes out with her family on occasions or festivals. Her husband works as a daily wage labourer. She, like most of other married women I spoke to does not prefer to go out to eat without her family. However, she does eat or have tea alone every day in a tea stall when she comes out for work.

She perceives it as more of a necessity to have tea outside as she has to leave her home quite early in the morning. She feels the need to have tea outside during the day. She told me that she also likes to have a cup of tea outside because it is prepared by someone else. When she takes this tea break daily during her hectic schedule, it serves to meet that particular desire of her to be served tea by someone else. They do not have tea to have fun but rather as they have to survive a long tiring day of working at various households, they have to keep themselves energetic and tea being one of the cheapest mediums of that energy. Thus, for people like her, since they are economically viable for the family and makes a significant contribution to the family income, consuming food outside is accepted as far as it is perceived as their 'need'.

All of these points out that when talking about spaces and especially women in public spaces, we also need to rethink the dichotomy between the public and private. Can we actually say that these boundaries are rigid and one does not spill over the other? Isn't it that when it comes to public spaces of food consumption and gender, there appears a fuzzy boundary between the public and the private? For instance, even when some people find the food of *Paakghor* as highly priced, given the fact that it is just like home-made food, it is still mostly preferred by the 'good' Assamese women. It shows that they are not corrupted by 'foreign' tastes. But some women still do not prefer to have food there on the

basis of the fact that they would be regarded as lazy wives and mothers who cannot cook a decent homely meal for their family. Mazurkiewicz (1983) too views that gender norms have always dictated terms to women consumers in public eating spaces. Women's defined location in the private sphere at home, their prescribed roles and expected behaviour patterns and so on, combine to generate social barriers which exclude unaccompanied women from public spaces. These patterns are reinforced by the managerial strategies of hotels and public houses which respond to female customers in terms of such stereotypes (Mazurkiewicz 1983: 118). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, I have never come across any of my research participants who have spoken positively of such going out experiences, particularly at late evenings. There is a perpetual fear of getting unwanted stares, being questioned either implicitly or explicitly of one's character or being harassed on the street. Many of my women research participants too assessed the character of other women negatively who go out to enjoy in the evenings without any essential purpose or the 'need' to go out. This 'need' to go out is primarily defined as, when a male member is not available in the house to meet the need, or the urgency of this need should be such that one cannot wait for the next morning. For instance, it is perfectly understood if someone's husband is suffering from a serious health condition and there is no other capable male member in the house to get the essentials. Other than this kind of an exceptional situation women going out at night is neither perceived to be necessary nor is seen in a positive light.

Moreover, before my fieldwork, I had a sense that women, especially elderly women were not fond of 'foreign' foods like pizzas, burgers, etc. In my assumption, I thought that it is the nature and taste of such food that seemed alien to them which resulted in mere repulsion toward these kinds of food by this elderly women population. In other words, it seemed alien to their 'traditional' outlook as I prematurely assumed. Later I found out that for these elderly women, it is not always the materiality of 'foreign' food that they are repulsive to but because they lack company or they have never had the experience of eating alone outside at a commercial space. They are afraid to go out in the absence of any company for various reason. There was an unease surrounding the question — 'What would people say?' In addition to that there was a fear of being harassed and meeting with an accident. Hence, the elderly women were not always completely averse to the idea of tasting 'foreign' food. They did have it whenever their children would bring such food home or order for a home delivery.

This indicates that it can be absolutely naive to assume that it is always the 'foreignness' of food that the elderly population are repulsive to or because they are always bound to some ideas of 'authentic' and 'traditional' food. They avoid going out to such spaces because there are myriads of reasons which goes much beyond the alien nature of these 'foreign' food. In other words, one can sense the unfriendly nature of the city space of Guwahati which clearly indicates that the elderly population of the city is an easily

forgotten category that is not taken into account while thinking about the 'modern', 'cosmopolitan', 'developed' city of Guwahati. Their concern for safety might not be always to be safe from sexual harassment. It can be also about protecting oneself from other kinds of harm such as physical hurt caused by an accident on the city streets. It is not only about elderly women who find such spaces uncomfortable for them. These spaces implicitly exclude people such as elderly men, the differently abled and the lower class. All these categories of people find these places inaccessible or uncomfortable for reasons ranging from uncomfortable stairs, that is, hindrance to physically accessibility as there are no lifts and ramps most of the times to the fear of being mocked based on one's class or not having the cultural capital to behave appropriately.

Herein, I would like to bring in the 'issue' of alcohol consumption by women. Although alcohol consumption by both men and women in pre-colonial Assam was not an uncommon phenomenon, in contemporary times women consuming alcohol is rather seen in a negative light, even when it is not uncommon. Nonetheless, it is also not uncommon for women to have alcohol in contemporary times in Guwahati city. Some women also, have it, the low-priced local variety of alcohol to quench both their thirst and hunger due to reasons of poverty. For a economically better-off population, often, it is only in certain kinds of spaces that it is possible for a woman to have alcohol, and enjoy it too. In my research, there were people for whom women and men consuming alcohol was not a complete aberration if not always common. This had a lot to do with class and age primarily. According to a few college going students belonging to both male and female sex, similar in age and class, consumption of alcohol both by women and men was common. They also had the knowledge about things like wine being more expensive than rum. However, their responses showed that a woman having 'hard' drinks especially in the presence of elders is not fine even in parties. For them, it does not look good and our society still has not become that 'modern'. For a lot of participants with class-based privileges, wine was a more favourable option for women than other drinks. After all, it is a 'classy' drink. More so, because not only wine costs higher than other drink but also the knowledge of wine is a rare quality to find among the masses. It is only the people with adequate cultural capital along with economic capital that can show off their status and class through consumption of wine.

I have to mention here that as I used to sit at a KFC for my fieldwork, after a couple of days, I noticed that a middle-aged woman walked in with her daughter who must have been around 12-15 years old. As I saw them entering the KFC, I quickly took note of it. I assumed that the mother must have accompanied her young daughter who perhaps wanted to have something from that place and did not have company. But I was soon proved wrong. They walked straight into the washroom which also has a toilet. I still thought that they have come to eat in there but they immediately went out after using the toilet. I noticed this

phenomenon quite a number of times in the following days of my field work. I also noticed a group of school boys once who just came to use the toilet and left immediately after using it. However, this sight has been more frequent with women. I could understand that for men to use the corner of the roads in the city of Guwahati as 'convenient' spaces is still common. Men attending to call of nature in open spaces in Guwahati are not an unusual site. But for women, the city has not been able to provide women these kinds of spaces to attend to their needs which are safe, hygienic and convenient. The moment, I noticed this mother and daughter who came to KFC only to use the toilet, I was reminded of the number of times I have used toilets in spaces like restaurants as there were hardly any convenient places nearby. At times, even when it was there, it would be extremely dirty and unhygienic. I remembered, I myself have searched for spaces which would be crowded in the restaurant area so that nobody notices me; that I have just come to use the clean toilet. The reason that so many women would use the toilet at the KFC I was conducting fieldwork was primarily this; it would be crowded mostly in the evenings, the space is large so that nobody notices and the toilets are very clean. Yes, we are in a city where we do not have accessible toilet facilities for women. To sum it up, all the 'eating-out' research sites were only a small prism to look into the larger concerns of inequality and exclusivity practiced in our society and so called 'modern' urban spaces broadly. Experiences of food consumption in relation to women in public spaces have indicated that 'stories' about food consumption are not only about amusement, pleasure or delight. These stories are equally about anxieties, resentment and at times resistance, even in the most subtle ways.

Now let me come to the second part of Men preparing traditional food at public spaces. Coming to men and food, during my conversations with my male research participants, men were not all together absent from stories emanating from the kitchen space. Some fathers too have known to cook or still do it frequently. Even if they cook daily, for men to do so was seen as a rarity and an exception. Men cook in extraordinary situations such as—no female member in the family, staying away from family because of various reasons, wife's income is necessary to run the family and so on. If these exceptional situations are not present and men still prefer to cook, then they are either termed as 'hen- peck husbands', 'girly' or raised to a level of a great human soul who is considerate enough to cook. Furthermore, 'In all other cases, men entered into foodie memories with traditionally masculine performances as cooking professionals, intrepid explorers, and culinary artists' (Johnston and Baumann 2009: 188).

I asked the manager of a restaurant claiming to sell traditional Assamese once about the kind of food he likes. Not to my surprise, he narrated about the dishes prepared at home in his village by the women; mother and grandmother mostly. I then asked him about how he perceives a restaurant specializing in traditional Assamese cuisine not employing women; even though images of women adorn the walls of such restaurant. He told me that

employing women has a lot of ‘problems’. Firstly, there is the ‘safety’ issue. Initially I thought he was talking about the difficulty women face travelling at night from their place of work; which the restaurant business demands. But as he proceeded with his narrative, it emerged that he was more concerned with the negative impact that women’s presence in the restaurant kitchen would have on men. He said that men working in the restaurant kitchen as helpers and waiters would feel uncomfortable as they would have to be very careful about how they talk to the women and what kind of jokes they crack. According to him, women might become uncomfortable. In addition to that, I asked him about the kind of men they employ in their restaurant. He revealed that he was employed as the manager by the owner of the restaurant because he was their relative. They needed someone who she could trustworthy. The cooks, waiters and helpers do not have any special criteria for getting employed. They simply get employed based on their initial skill. Some become cooks, some are employed as helpers and some become waiters. They learn the rest ‘on the go’, especially the cooking. In fact, the cooks who were employed had previous specialty in Chinese food. Besides, helpers and waiters who show interest are always given a chance to be cooks. They can be from any part of Assam or India. Their ethnic background or place of origin does not matter to the restaurant.

I was reminded that a kitchen, which is otherwise seen as a domain of women with all the romantic imageries and memories of cooking done by women, most employers even if they are women do not prefer women. Men are seen as much more physically capable of ‘taking the heat’. ‘Issues’ specific to women such as menstruation, pregnancy and so on not only make them unattractive employees but also the ‘fear’ that the men would be judged harshly for their ‘joking’ behaviour. At the same time, I was intrigued that how is it that men still get into traditional cooking especially, especially when it is related to traditional sweets and snacks that we call Pithas. How is it that in spite of the association of women and food preparation, pithas have a huge market, although it is men who are preparing and selling them? Making pithas is still considered a women’s job as it requires the use of ‘nimble’ fingers and patience and care; qualities that are commonly perceived to be embodied by women. For clarification, pithas are steamed rice cakes, roasted rice flour rolls or can resemble fried fritters. They fall within the category of both as a sweet and a snack. Most pithas are sweet in taste and can be prepared with a variety of rice, along with other ingredients such as coconut, sesame, and jaggery among others. While going around the streets of Guwahati, it is not uncommon to see men preparing and selling pithas. The question that I wanted to pursue then is, what is it that makes people accept men in this domain? It was found that the notion of Trust from buyers or *Bisshakh* in the Assamese language played a crucial part. Trust, turned out to be a multidimensional category that includes notions of care, reputation, reliability, familiarity, and more. I would like to cite two instances here –

> During my ethnographic experience, two men Anil Deka and Harish Kalita—or Harish da, as I would call him — subscribed to the popular imagery of the male breadwinner and notions of what is seen as ‘‘manly.’’ But their involvement with pitha making and selling points toward the discursiveness of such an activity. Anil Deka and Harish Kalita are among the number of men who sell pithas on the streets of Guwahati during festivals, exhibitions, or as regular business. Anil Deka comes to Guwahati to sell pithas during the season of Bihu ( an important cultural festival in Assam) or whenever there is an exhibition here. His village is a couple of hours away from the city. He travels to and from his village to Guwahati in a bus about three times during the month of Bihu to get pithas from his home and give money to his family from his pitha sales in the city. Deka stays with his friend in his single room on the days he comes to Guwahati. The morning after his arrival in the city, he sets up his stall. His stall would be set up at one of the popular streets of the city. Deka would neatly arrange various kinds of pithas and waits for customers to visit his stall.

The pithas that he brings to the city to sell are made by the women of his family back home or so he claims. Now, nobody has seen who prepares it; men, women, what are their identities but everything is based on what Anil Deka is claiming. Many women would come to his stall to buy his pithas. I thought to myself that the trust of his customers is not free of risks in terms of hygiene, taste, and preserving ‘Assamese’ identity. I asked Deka for the reason behind the high sale of pithas in his stall. He initially referred to the word Bissakh, i.e. trust of his customers followed by the appealing taste of his pithas, but then he moved on to refer to the authenticity and good hygiene that his products embody for mostly urban women. I needed to understand how consumers navigated the risks involved in buying pithas from a man when they have never observed the production process. I again asked Deka: how do customers know that the pithas are authentic and hygienic? After all, none of his customers had ever seen how and by whom these pithas were prepared. With great pride, he replied, ‘‘These pithas are made by the women of my household—Maa (Mother), Bhonti (Younger Sister), wife in my village. We are Assamese people. People come to know when they speak to me. I have had some regular customers too for a long time. They never complain. If it was bad, why would they trust me?’’ As the day progressed, it was noticed that in addition to his regular customers, many women were coming to his stall for the first time. They enquired about his pithas—where they were made, who made them, how they were made, the price, and so on. Impressed by his replies to their questions, quite a few of them bought packets of pithas. This would be a usual occurrence through the days that I visited the stall. Deka would close his stall around 9 or even 10 p.m., depending on the inflow of customers. In some of my conversations with his female customers, they pointed out that he comes from a village in Assam and is a Hindu, which adds to the trust factor when buying his products. He is among ‘‘us,’’ they would state. The indication by Deka’s customers that he is among them (‘‘us’’) underlies the trust they have for both him and his pithas. This formulation of ‘‘us’’ and ‘‘we’’ is based on shared religious and cultural affiliations, along with other factors like taste or hygiene.

Deka stated later that many times he also helps the women of his household to grind the rice, which is required for the pithas. In other words, as he puts it, he helps the women with the ‘‘heavy’’ tasks related to grinding and carrying the load of the pithas to Guwahati. So, his involvement in the entire pitha preparing process is about doing the ‘heavy’ stuff. He never brings the women of the household who make the pithas for business to Guwahati. It is difficult to arrange stays for them, and besides, there is always the safety factor. Although women pitha sellers are nothing unusual in Guwahati, women nonetheless must face the dangers of being subjected to the public gaze and the usual problems like lack of good public toilets to shouldering domestic responsibilities of childcare, cooking etc.

Many men like Deka come from villages to the city to sell pithas. Deka’s customers, mostly women, equate his life in the village and his Hindu surname with a sign of bisshakh (trustworthiness). The pithas made in a village are often equated with being authentic. The ingredients used and the manner of preparation by ‘‘our’’ women in an ‘‘Assamese’’ household is a factor that attains the trust of people who buy the eatables. Although caste was not evoked explicitly by either Deka or his customers, his Hindu surname was often correlated to what people perceive as being ‘‘Assamese’’ and hence trustworthy. This is how his customers navigate any risks and continue to trust him.

Now, while on one hand Anil Deka visits Guwahati to sell pithas prepared by the women of his household in Guwahati’s public spaces, on a daily basis at his street stall, Harish Kalita, or Harish da, sells pithas that he prepares himself. Harish da sells two types of Pitha: tekeli pitha (pitcher pitha) and khula sapori pitha (a pancake-like pitha prepared with rice flour). Harish da runs his business with a one-burner gas stove near a Guwahati Street. During my visits to Harish da’s stall, I discovered his stall arose not because of any penchant for ‘‘Assamese’’ food and culture but due to the bomb blasts of 2008. He was in one of the sites and had a near-death experience. For Harish da, 2008 and the time that followed soon after was about redefining his masculinity and choosing a socially acceptable profession. Food became his refuge. I asked him if he’d had any interest in food-making before the 2008 incident. He replied that he had never given much thought to it nor shown any enthusiasm for learning any food considered integral to ‘‘Assamese’’ culture. His journey into setting up his stall was rather a survival need—the compulsion to survive the way society expected him to. He had to perform the role of an able male breadwinner, even if it meant learning to cook. For him, cooking is primarily a woman’s job. He also supports the distinction between the ‘‘male’’ public space and ‘‘female’’ private space of the household. According to Harish da, pithas are easier to make in comparison to other food items and don’t spoil as easily. I asked for his thoughts on pithas and ‘‘Assamese’’ culture. He agreed they are intricately linked and that it is actually the women, according to him, who are apt at pitha making. He told me that his wife makes them in their village. He sometimes helps her grind the rice. But when he is home in his village, it is primarily his wife who takes care of cooking and preparing pithas. During Bihu,

he closes his stall and takes a break from his usual activity of making pithas, leaving this chore to his wife. He redefines his masculinity. He chooses to be the able male breadwinner of the family by preparing and selling pithas in the urban public space of Guwahati, although he leaves this chore to his wife at is home. Although he distinguishes between the public space belonging to men and the domestic space belonging to women, he negotiates the definition of masculinity that usually assumes men to be distant from cooking. Harish da's customers consist of both men and women. They come to his stall to have his pithas and tea because of the care and affection he shows. This is especially true for his long-term customers. His customers agree that Harish da displays love and care while he prepares and serves his pithas to them. There is also trust because he is an ''Assamese'' Hindu man. In other words, Harish da and Anil Deka both enjoy a trust based on their social capital as Hindu ''Assamese'' men. Although the ideal image is still that of a woman preparing pithas, the men involved in preparing and selling pithas are not perceived to be devoid of care and affection. Harish da's customers are a case in point: they think of him as a caring and affectionate man. One of his regular customers, a young man of twenty-five years old, hinted to me that he comes to this stall for tea and pithas because he finds Harish da affectionate: ''In any case, a man needs to have a softer side if he wants to run a food business,'' asserted this customer. Harish da and Anil Deka are perceived to care for preserving ''Assamese'' culture through food while at the same time relieving women from bearing this responsibility alone. It should be noted that despite gaining some respite from pitha preparation, a certain population of urban women still have to bear the responsibility of meeting societal expectations of being ''good'' wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law who try to preserve ''Assamese'' culture by serving pithas to family and guests, if not entirely preparing them. Moreover, patriarchal norms based on Brahminical ideas of cleanliness and hygiene, informed by class-based discrimination, maintains rigid categories of ''us'' and ''others.'' Hygiene, cleanliness, and authenticity associated with food are mere manifestations of this. Hence, one must consider that if men can enter a rather feminized zone of pitha preparation and sale, shouldn't identities, be it if gender or nay other be seen as shouldn't cultural identities also be seen as unfixed, multilayered, and ever-changing. As such, negotiations and re-negotiations with patriarchal norms are daily occurrences when it comes to women eating in public spaces or men cooking in such spaces.