

Changing Food Habits under Modernization: A Study of Dietary Patterns in Barpeta Town, Assam

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Abstract

Food consumption patterns across the world have undergone major changes due to the influence of modernization, globalization, urbanization, migration, and new market forces. These shifts are increasingly visible in small towns of India, including Barpeta in Assam, where traditional dietary practices have long been shaped by local ecology, culture, availability of indigenous foods, and community-based food knowledge. The present study examines the changing pattern of food items among residents of Barpeta town, based on primary data collected from 200 respondents (100 males and 100 females). The study explores the consumption of traditional and modern foods across different meals—breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks, across five different age groups. The results show a noticeable shift from traditional food items such as rice-based breakfast items, locally prepared pithas, and vegetable-and-fish-based meals toward modern food items including noodles, pizzas, fried chicken, and packaged snacks. Younger age groups (15–24 and 25–34 years) show the highest preference for modern food items, particularly during breakfast and snacks, whereas older groups largely adhere to traditional dietary patterns. The findings indicate that modernization, exposure to global food culture, fast-food availability, lifestyle changes, and time constraints have contributed significantly to dietary transitions in Barpeta. This shift raises concerns regarding nutrition, cultural erosion, and future food security. Based on the findings, the study recommends nutritional awareness, revival of traditional food practices, promotion of local foods, and community-level interventions to ensure healthier food transitions. The study contributes to anthropological literature by documenting respondent-based, age- and gender-specific variations in food habits in a rapidly changing semi-urban setting.

Keywords: Modernization; Dietary change; Traditional food; Barpeta; Food habits; Assam

Introduction

Food is deeply intertwined with culture, identity, social relations, and ecological surroundings. In Assam, traditional food systems evolved over centuries through intimate relationships with land, rivers, climate, and locally available resources (Gogoi, 2013). Barpeta town, the Headquarter of the Barpeta district, Assam, India with its rich cultural history and agrarian background, has long depended on rice, fish, leafy vegetables, pithas, homemade snacks, and locally processed items for everyday consumption. However, in recent decades, modernization and lifestyle changes have significantly altered people's food choices, especially among younger populations. These transformations include greater access to packaged foods, fast-food restaurants, instant meals, and industrially prepared products. Studies across India have shown similar trends, where traditional foods are being replaced by modern, energy-dense, processed foods due to convenience and changing tastes (Popkin, 2017). In Barpeta, these trends are becoming increasingly visible in the shift toward noodles, pizza, burgers, fried chicken, and packaged snacks.

The present paper aims to examine the extent of these changes across age and gender groups in Barpeta town. By analysing respondent-based primary data, the study provides an anthropological understanding of how modernization shapes food choices at the household and individual levels.

Review of Literature

Modernization and dietary change have been widely studied across disciplines. Popkin (1993, 2017) describes this global shift as the “nutrition transition,” characterized by the move from traditional, home-prepared meals to processed, high-calorie modern foods. Modernization also alters perceptions of taste, status, and convenience, contributing to the popularity of fast foods (Kearney, 2010). Anthropological studies recognize food as a dynamic cultural system that changes with social transformation. Claude Levi-Strauss emphasized that cooking practices reflect cultural structures and symbolic meanings (Levi-Strauss, 1969). Similarly, Goody (1982) argued that food modernization is intertwined with socio-economic developments, global markets, and technological change.

In the Indian context, several studies highlight the rapid shift in food habits due to lifestyle changes, increased income, and market penetration of packaged foods (Tandon et al., 2018). Khare (1992) noted that modernization influences regional food practices through migration, education, market integration, and changing aspirations. Mintz (1996) highlighted how global food commodities reshape local diets and cultural identities. Studies from Northeast India (Kikon & Karlsson, 2019) documented how traditional food habits are increasingly influenced by urban lifestyles, packaged foods, and fast-food markets.

Research from Assam indicates a gradual transition from traditional rice-based diets to modern ready-made foods due to globalization, improved transportation, and changing work rhythms (Saikia, 2014). Youth groups are particularly receptive to modern foods like noodles, momos, and fast snacks, as found in studies on urban Assam (Baruah, 2016). Traditional Assamese diets are known for being nutritionally balanced, comprising rice, fish, vegetables, herbs, and fermented or preserved items (Sharma & Devi, 2015). However, urban and semi-urban regions are increasingly adopting fast foods due to convenience and peer influence. This literature suggests that Barpeta, like many other towns undergoing modernization, is likely experiencing rapid dietary transitions. The present study adds to the literature by providing micro-level, respondent-based data on Barpeta town.

Aims and Objectives

1. To examine the current pattern of food consumption among males and females in Barpeta town.
2. To analyse the difference between traditional and modern food consumption across age groups.
3. To identify the impact of modernization on dietary practices.
4. To understand meal-wise preferences for traditional and modern food items.
5. To recommend measures for promoting healthy and culturally rooted food habits.

Methods and Materials

The study is based on primary data collected from Barpeta town of Assam. A total of 200 respondents were selected using simple random sampling, consisting of 100 males and 100 females. Data were collected using structured schedules. Respondents were grouped into five age categories: 15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, and 55–64 years (Table -1). Information was gathered regarding food items consumed for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks, categorized into traditional and modern food items. The data have been presented using tables, and qualitative interpretation is provided through anthropological analysis.

Results and Discussion

Age and Sex Composition of Respondents

Table-1: Distribution of Respondents by Age and Sex

Age of the respondents (in years)	Category of the respondents	
	Male	Female
15-24	26	24
25-34	27	26
35-44	21	25
45-54	16	13
55-64	10	12
Total	100	100

Table-1 shows the composition of respondents. The respondents represent a balanced group, and a large portion belongs to younger and middle age groups. Since modernization strongly affects youth, this composition is useful for understanding the pattern of change.

Traditional and Modern Food Items Consumed

Table-2: Food Items Consumed by the Respondents

Meal type	Traditional Food Items	Modern Food Items
Breakfast	Rice, tekeli Pitha (steamed rice cake), khalachapori pitha (fried cake made from rice flour), luchi-sobji, roti-sobji, chira (flattened rice), singra, tea etc.	Different types of foods made from noodles, momos, poha, pizzas, French fries, Instant noodles, idli etc.
Lunch	Rice with different types of curry made from locally available vegetables, meat and fish.	Different types of foods made from noodles, fried rice, French fries, pulao, biryani, burgers, fried chicken etc.
Dinner	Rice with different types of curry made from locally available vegetables, meat and fish.	Different types of foods made from noodles, fried rice, French fries, pulao, biryani, burgers, fried chicken etc.
Snacks	Tea, different types of locally made cake, biscuits, singra, sweets etc.	Potato chips, pani-puri, burgers, cookies and cakes, coffee

Table-2 highlights the contrast between traditional and modern food items consumed by the respondents across different meals, showing a clear shift in dietary preferences influenced by modernization. Traditional meals predominantly feature rice-based items, pithas, locally made snacks, and vegetable or fish-based curries, reflecting the cultural food habits of the region. In contrast, modern food choices include noodles, momos, pizzas, fried rice, French fries, burgers, and other fast foods that are increasingly popular, especially among younger individuals. The presence of modern items across all meal types—breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks—indicates a growing inclination toward convenience

foods and urban food trends, suggesting an ongoing transition from locally prepared, culturally rooted dishes to commercially available, fast-food-oriented diets.

Meal Pattern by Age and Sex

Table-3: Meal Pattern Consumed by the Respondents by Sex and Age

Age of the respondents (in years)	Meal type	Male		Female	
		Type of food		Type of food	
		Traditional food	Modern food	Traditional food	Modern food
15-24	Breakfast	10 (38.46)	16 (61.54)	7 (29.17)	17 (70.83)
	Lunch	22 (84.62)	4 (15.38)	21 (87.50)	3 (12.50)
	Dinner	22 (84.62)	4 (15.38)	21 (87.50)	3 (12.50)
	Snacks	19 (73.08)	7 (26.92)	22 (91.67)	2 (8.33)
25-34	Breakfast	12 (44.44)	15 (55.56)	5 (19.23)	21 (80.77)
	Lunch	24 (88.89)	3 (11.11)	24 (92.31)	2 (7.69)
	Dinner	24 (88.89)	3 (11.11)	24 (92.31)	2 (7.69)
	Snacks	14 (51.85)	13 (48.15)	5 (19.23)	21 (80.77)
35-44	Breakfast	15 (71.43)	6 (28.57)	20 (80.00)	5 (20.00)
	Lunch	19 (90.48)	2 (9.52)	23 (92.00)	2 (8.00)
	Dinner	19 (90.48)	2 (9.52)	22 (88.00)	3 (12.00)
	Snacks	17 (80.95)	4 (19.05)	22 (88.00)	3 (12.00)
45-54	Breakfast	15 (93.75)	1 (6.25)	11 (84.62)	2 (15.38)
	Lunch	15 (93.75)	1 (6.25)	12 (92.31)	1 (7.69)
	Dinner	15 (93.75)	1 (6.25)	12 (92.31)	1 (7.69)
	Snacks	16 (100)	-	12 (92.31)	1 (7.69)
55-64	Breakfast	9 (90.00)	1 (10.00)	12 (100)	-
	Lunch	10 (100)	-	12 (100)	-
	Dinner	10 (100)	-	12 (100)	-
	Snacks	10 (100)	-	12 (100)	-

(The percentages of the figures are indicated within brackets)

The data shows in the table-3 reveal a profound impact of modernization on the dietary patterns in Barpeta. Several significant observations can be derived:

1. Breakfast Shows the Highest Degree of Modernization: Across age groups, breakfast is the meal with the highest rate of modern food consumption. Among males aged 15–24, 61.54% consume modern breakfast items as well as among females of the same age, the percentage is even higher at 70.83%. This reflects national trends where younger people prefer fast and convenient breakfast options (Kearney, 2010). Instant noodles, pizzas, and French fries are commonly chosen due to convenience, faster preparation, and peer influence.

2. Lunch and Dinner Remain Mostly Traditional: Despite modernization, lunch and dinner are still dominated by traditional Assamese foods. Over 85–95% in most age groups prefers traditional rice-with-curry meals. This demonstrates that core meals remain culturally preserved.

3. Snacks Are Becoming Highly Westernized: Snacking shows one of the strongest shifts. 48.15% males of age group (25–34) consume modern snacks and 80.77% females of age group (25–34) prefer

modern snacks. Packaged foods, pani-puri, and burgers have replaced homemade snacks, reflecting global snacking trends (Popkin, 2017).

4. Age Is the Strongest Predictor of Dietary Modernization: The data clearly show that younger groups prefer modern foods, especially for breakfast and snacks. Older groups remain predominantly traditional, with nearly 100% traditional food consumption for all meals among the 55–64 age group.

5. Gender Differences: Females in younger age groups consume more modern breakfast and snacks than males. This may be influenced by:

- Exposure to social media food trends
- Peer influence
- Changing lifestyles and mobility

However, both genders maintain traditional food practices for major meals.

6. Cultural Implications: Traditional Assamese foods such as pithas, rice with fish curry, and homemade snacks are integral to identity. Their gradual displacement signals cultural dilution (Baruah, 2020).

7. Health Implications: Modern foods are associated with high calories, fats, and additives. Transitioning to such foods may increase risks of non-communicable diseases, as noted by global nutrition studies (Popkin, 2017).

8. Market Forces and Media Influence: Easy availability of fast food outlets, increased packaged food marketing, and online delivery services have accelerated the dietary transition.

Findings

1. Younger respondents (15–34 years) show a strong inclination toward modern foods.
2. Breakfast and snacks are the most influenced meal categories.
3. Lunch and dinner remain largely traditional.
4. Females in younger age groups consume more modern foods than males.
5. Modernization, social influence, and convenience drive dietary shifts.
6. Older age groups maintain loyalty to traditional foods, showing resistance to modernization.

Recommendations

- Promote traditional foods through community events, food festivals, and awareness programs.
- Include nutrition education in schools to reduce reliance on fast foods.
- Encourage households to revive traditional recipes.
- Policy-level interventions to promote local food production and discourage excessive fast-food advertising.
- Support local food markets to ensure availability of traditional ingredients.
- Media campaigns emphasizing the health value of traditional Assamese foods.

Conclusion

The study reveals that modernization has significantly affected food consumption patterns in Barpeta town, particularly among younger age groups. While breakfast and snacks show a strong shift toward modern foods, lunch and dinner continue to reflect traditional dietary practices. The influence of market forces, lifestyle changes, convenience, and cultural exposure has transformed food preferences. Although traditional foods remain central to identity, the growing popularity of fast foods indicates a gradual nutrition transition. There is a need for conscious measures to preserve traditional food culture while promoting healthy eating habits. From an anthropological perspective, food is not merely a source of nutrition but a cultural symbol that reflects social identity, community values, and the relationship between people and their environment. Changes in food habits therefore represent broader cultural transformations. In Barpeta, modernization has created new patterns of consumption that challenge

traditional food practices. Exposure to global food trends, wider market networks, rising aspirations, migration, and digital media have brought new food preferences, especially among the younger population. These shifts reflect processes of cultural adaptation, negotiation of modern identity, and redefinition of everyday practices, making food an important lens through which modernization and cultural change can be understood.

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(ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: The author expresses profound gratitude to all the informants who generously shared their insights regarding their dietary practices. I would also like to extend my thanks to the students of the Department of Anthropology at Madhab Choudhury College, Barpeta, for their assistance in gathering the essential data).