



If Meat Could Tell Stories: A Tale of Assam during Coronavirus

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I can smell it, someone is cooking chicken, I screamed and ran to my sister.



I think it is the neighbours. Let us call them and find out where they got it from, she suggested.

It would seem that my sister and I are talking about something forbidden, something extraordinary. But we were just talking about literal meat.

The north-eastern state of Assam in India is an essentially non-vegetarian state with easy availability and [regular consumption of different types of meat, fish, and eggs](#). According to an [IndiaSpend report](#) of 2015-16, more than 80% of its population consumes meat. Non-vegetarian food is a part of the regular diet, of ceremonial feasts, and even religious festivals of most communities in the state.

But after the outbreak of the coronavirus and the subsequent imposition of the lockdown on 25th March 2020 in India, meat quickly became a 'rare' food item, especially in the urban areas of Assam. The lockdown affected the supply chain of meat, fruits, and vegetables - as they generally come from the villages to the cities. While the distribution of fruits and vegetables was re-started by local delivery channels soon, this was not the case with meat. It had become a 'scarce' and over-priced (when available) item.

People who eat fish and meat almost regularly had to spend days without them, and many were messaging each other and asking if someone had any luck procuring meat.

Suddenly, a food item that had been considered utterly regular had become rare. We, too, were part of this dynamic as we griped about the lack of meat on our dinner plates. No friends could guide us to stores where any was available; we checked if any online delivery service could help, but there were none.

This experience led us to question the value and meaning of meat in our lives in Assam. Of course, meat consumption has always been of great interest to sociologists and social anthropologists. It has been linked to social status and class positions, notions of masculinity, and ideas of purity and impurity. Our essay



echoes these concerns as well as unearths more specific meanings of meat. Take the case of the 2019 Assamese movie *Aamis*, a title that literally means *The Non-Vegetarian*. At first glance, its story can be understood as romantic – Suman, a young male student, falls in love with Nirmali, a married female doctor. Initially, their meetings are mostly about going out to eat, and together they explore different kinds of meat – rabbit, catfish, bat, and insects. Suman is a researcher working on the meat-eating habits of north-east India and introduces Nirmali to these different meat types.

Nirmali is shown as someone who juggles her time between her job and her household responsibilities. As her husband is away most of the time, she has been living a dreary life; and she soon starts looking forward to meeting Suman. As he introduces Nirmali to different forms of meat that are ‘new’ to her, she starts enjoying these novel tastes.

The director highlights the distinction between meat and vegetables, as ‘exciting’ and ‘boring’, respectively. One scene in the movie sums this up: Nirmali asks her household help what is there for dinner, to which the latter replies, ‘your favourite vegetable curry.’ Nirmali’s face falls. Before meeting Suman and exploring different kinds of meat, Nirmali might have been excited to eat ‘her favourite vegetable dish’, but that had changed.

However, the story slowly delves into darker spaces as Suman eventually cooks and feeds Nirmali his flesh. Although initially apprehensive, Nirmali soon craves it and Suman keeps providing it, again and again. Consuming Suman’s flesh, or rather human meat in general in this case, signifies their forbidden love and passion, becoming the way they communicate their love. Slowly this craving takes over Nirmali’s mind entirely, eventually leading Suman to kill another person to feed her. Meat becomes an ‘obsession’, a ‘craving’ that is never sated.

As mentioned above, most people in Assam are non-vegetarians and the common forms of meat are chicken, mutton, duck, pigeon, and pork.

Eating bat or rabbit meat is seen as adventurous and does not invite



condemnation. In Aamis, the meat that Suman and Nirmali eat when they go out is portrayed as different, yet tasty and edible. But as Nirmali starts craving human flesh, the movie reaches a turning point.

This shift is also visible in the way they eat: while their earlier dates had been in public spaces, human ‘meat’ was consumed clandestinely. The movie does not make any judgments on the practice of cannibalism, and viewers are free to make up their minds on this.

Aamis was screened at the MAMI Film Festival as well as at the Tribeca Film Festival, where it was critically acclaimed and praised for its fresh concept and ideas. But some sceptics thought that it was a dangerous movie and too dark. Questions were raised about its potential repercussions. In an interview, the director admitted that the older generation in Assam did [not particularly enjoy](#) the movie, as it highlighted how the obsession for meat can become a dangerous thing and can engender a drive to kill.

The coronavirus pandemic has raised similar questions about what meat is acceptable to eat. Allegedly, the crisis began in a wet market in Hubei, in the Wuhan province of China, where ‘bat meat’ was sold or consumed. Thus, the entire global coronavirus outbreak has been blamed on the consumption of bat meat, even as the WHO has not yet confirmed this claim. And while various kinds of (partly racist) criticisms were levied against Chinese food habits, it is interesting that bat meat is also consumed elsewhere: In Assam, it is believed that ‘bat meat’ can cure asthma, but bat consumption is not very popular; still, in *Aamis*, Nirmali and Suman once specifically go out to consume it. Whether bat meat is a food fit for consumption or not has been at the centre of discussions on this pandemic.

Advocates of vegetarianism have taken this as a chance to speak about the ‘benefit’ of eating vegetarian food and how eating meat is unhealthy. This is part of a larger debate on the benefits of vegetarianism versus non-vegetarianism, and [not just in Assam or India](#). There is however an association of vegetarianism with



notions of purity in India, although not so much in Assam, as in the state, even many ritually higher caste groups consume meat (Patgiri 2016).

But beyond bats, there is a difference in the kinds of meat that different groups consume on different occasions, and there is a gradation in terms of value and purity, with mutton at the top, followed by duck and pigeon, and chicken and pork at the bottom. Besides, traditionally, chicken was a prohibited item for caste Hindus because most chicken rearers were Muslims (Choudhury 1959), but today chicken is one of the preferred meats in Assam and easily available. But the severe decline of the poultry sector in India reveals how vulnerable 'meat' as a food item remains to cultural taboos and [crises](#).

During the pandemic, WhatsApp messages circulated that said that the virus could be transmitted from poultry to humans. Medical experts had to clear these rumours but despite that, many people are still apprehensive of eating meat, and the poultry sector suffered because of decreasing demand - so a meat that had once managed to escape cultural taboos became suspicious again.

One event played a particular role here: As Assam reeled with a rising number of coronavirus cases, most of them were attributed to an Islamic religious event - the Tablighi Jamaat - that was organized in New Delhi from 13th-15th March 2020, well before the lockdown had been enforced by the government. Many of its participants were from Assam and had returned to the state by 25th March. The Tablighi Jamaat event was identified as one of the hotspots of the outbreak in Assam and became the centre of debates on Islamophobia in India. As one of our neighbours casually commented, *'I am scared to eat chicken, most of the sellers are Muslims. What if they have come in contact with attendees of Tablighi Jamaat?'*

Some people became scared that eating meat, in general, would cause diseases, a sentiment aggravated by reports that in a few areas in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam, even rotten meat was sold [in certain shops](#). Others were apprehensive



about eating meat that was being sold in the coronavirus hotspot areas within the state and recently, the Assam state government even issued an order prohibiting people from eating pigs, as there was an [outbreak of swine flu](#) in the state. Pork is considered lower in the hierarchy of meat in Assam anyway, so both chicken and pork meat came to be endowed with new negative associations that were in fact quite old. Meat was once again viewed as potentially dangerous and polluting, but not by all:

While such rumours and fears might have impacted the supply chain as well, even when the lockdown was in force, many people [flocked to the markets](#) seeking meat, often violating the rules of physical distancing. According to Marvin Harris (1986), people in Poland did not mind queuing just for meat back in 1981 when the Polish government had cut down the supply of meat because of a shortage and set limits on each buyer. But the situation became such that martial law was needed to restore order and the government had to eventually give in to the demand of the public for more meat, even if that meant an increasing strain to the country's economy. Such was the obsession for meat. Similarly in Assam, despite the difference in socio-political contexts, once meat became available again after the first week of lockdown, the government had to make provisions for the [home delivery](#) of meat and fish through selected suppliers to prevent people from disrupting the markets.

While for some, meat became a thing to be 'avoided' and feared', many still craved and obsessed about it, an obsession seen as madness by others.

An elderly lady from our neighbourhood would react to news of people violating lockdown orders just for buying meat by commenting that '*what is this craze for meat? People cannot go a few weeks without meat?*' Craving meat as an 'obsession', a form of 'madness', has also found expression in *Aamis*. After all, even in the movie, it was a newfound 'taste' for different types of meat that had led Suman and Nirmali towards the path of eventually consuming human meat.

The meaning of meat in a meat-eating society is more than that just food. It



becomes a source of ethno-religious stereotype, as seen in the examples of pork and chicken, but also enough of a motivation to break the rules of a lockdown. For some, it is dangerous and can cause diseases; whereas for others, it is an obsession, an integral part of their lives. While the former group urges that all forms of meat need to be avoided, *Aamis* explores the boundaries of this obsession for meat.

Aamis' director [had stated](#) that he was trying to lower the consumption of meat because of its detrimental environmental effects, and due to the coronavirus pandemic, many people even in a non-vegetarian state like Assam now question the very idea of eating meat. In this sense, the pandemic with its associated general worries about disease and echoes of cultural taboos brings advocacy for vegetarianism to the fore: Questions on the acceptability of eating meat are back on the table.

References:

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Patgiri, Rituparna (2016), *The Social Nature of Food in India: A Review of Literature*. Unpublished MPhil dissertation.

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