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How Assamese Pithas are Going Mainstream

A new crop of entrepreneurs are serving up these traditional rice flour-based delicacies at scale — and, in turn, bringing them from the kitchen to homes outside Assam.

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Dressed in the traditional mekhela chadar, a woman sells tekeli pithas at a roadside stall in Guwahati (Arundhati Nath)

In the early hours in Assam, women in saris or cotton mekhela sadors start mixing rice flour with grated coconut, jaggery flakes, or sugar at makeshift stalls near bus stops, railway stations, and local markets. They pat down the mixture into a thick oval on a piece of muslin cloth and tie the ends of the muslin to the lid of a kettle, filled with boiling water and placed over a hot stove.

Within minutes, piping hot ketli or tekeli pithas — referring to the kettle they are cooked with — are ready to be served, usually ₹5-10 each, to the waiting queue of customers.

Whether eaten with a steaming cup of tea, stuffed with coconut-jaggery paste, served with sweet and sour condiments, or savored with curry, pithas are an integral part of Assamese identity and culture. The earliest mention of the word pitha is likely from children’s folk tales in *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, or *Old Mother’s Wise Tales*, by Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaruah, originally published in 1911. Since then, Assam has birthed several varieties of pitha, which also feature prominently in the state’s Bihu festivals and jolpan, or traditional snack platter.

But, despite their ubiquity in Assam and their diversity in taste and texture, you won’t find them on the menus of most restaurants, even those featuring northeastern cuisines. And Assamese restaurants serving dishes made at home or as street snacks are rare, even in Assam. A new crop of entrepreneurs and restaurateurs, however, are investing in making and serving pithas at scale — and, in turn, moving the delicacy from the kitchen to the mainstream.



Packaged til pithas (sesame rice cakes) sold at Tholgiri (Arundhati Nath)

Manorom Gogoi is the founder of Tholgiri, a Guwahati-based marketplace and eatery for local food and produce, dresses, and other crafts and accessories. “It hasn’t been 200 years and we’ve

become mostly dependent on other states or cultures for our food,” he shared. “If we go outside today, we will find South Indian, North Indian restaurants, and others, so why can’t we have a restaurant entirely with our Assamese food? Why don’t we have a proper restaurant serving Assamese food in our own state?”

He believes that it’s worth investing in the potential for Assamese food, particularly pithas, which Tholgiri serves. In an [interview](#) in 2019, Gogoi noted that the growing success of the pitha market in Guwahati has created so much demand that it was hard for his company to keep up.

Other businesses, marketers, and restaurateurs have also seen this opportunity. In recent years, there has been a rise in packagers and companies such as Tholgiri and Hollong that sell packaged pithas lovingly made by locals. Satyen Mahanta of Hollong started the earliest version of his company, which sells pithas not only in Assam but throughout India and in other countries, in 2018. Tholgiri and Hollong join companies like Bhogali Jalpan, established in 1997, one of the oldest food manufacturers in the state. Bhogali Jalpan is known for selling Assamese delicacies; a set of two pithas [cost](#) Rs 175 (a little over \$2) on its site.



Bamboo Rice Cakes or Sunga pitha served with curd and sura (Arundhati Nath)

“Before the lockdown, we had visitors from different parts of the world including Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia,” Gogoi said. He founded Tholgiri in 2018. “We are not just trying to modify the way the pitha is made, or accompaniments served, but will be in talks with research institutes like [RRL](#) [Regional Research Laboratory, Jorhat, Assam] to study the nutrient

content and make slight innovations to attract the younger generation while keeping the nutrition intact,” he added.

While several parts of India make pithas, some varieties are more prevalent in Assam and have evolved with celebrations — such as that of the national harvest, Bhogali or Magh Bihu, in mid-January, and spring festival, Rongali Bihu, in mid-April — and from where in Assam they hail. Black sesame seeds, coarse jaggery, freshly grated coconut, ripe bananas, and jackfruit pulp are common ingredients. The Assamese pitha can be baked, steamed, roasted, deep-fried in oil (phula pitha, for example, puff up when they hit hot oil). They come in a variety of sizes, shapes, and textures: the soft, crumbly banana pitha is steamed in a cozy wrap of banana leaves or deep-fried; the papery dosa-like kholasapori pitha gets its name from the earthen plate or khol in which it is made; the coconut-filled [jon pitha](#), shaped like a half-moon, can be fried or steamed.

“I love pitha,” S. Mitra Kalita, who is based in New York and is the co-founder of URL Media, shared. “[I have] memories from our summer visits to Assam. My aunt would make til (sesame) pitha for us. And the night before we would return to America, my relatives would come and drop off sealed bags of pitha. By the time we arrived home, they would be a crumbly mess, but we ate them nonetheless.” Kalita’s favorite type of pitha is malpoa, “the one shallow fried with banana.” Her mom, to this day, makes pitha for her. When the right flour wasn’t available once, her mom used Cafe Du Monde beignet mix.



An Assamese woman making sesame rice cakes (til pitha) during Magh Bihu (Creative Commons)

Meenakshi Barooah Arumugam also has fond memories of her mother making pithas while growing up in Assam. Now, Arumugam lives in Delhi and has fewer opportunities to eat them. “After we moved to Delhi, we would get to taste pithas during Bihu when Assamese people in Delhi would prepare and sell them,” she shared. But this is a comparatively new trend in the last couple of years, she noted. Before, pitha enthusiasts would have to get their stock from Assam directly. “When we visit[ed] Assam we would purchase large quantities of pithas and distribute them among relatives in Delhi.”

Pithas are thought to have come from the Bengal region, where rice was a staple grain. “Bora saul or sticky rice is indigenous to India’s northeast and parts of Southeast Asia,” shared Jyoti Das, Assamese culinary expert and author of [*Ambrosia from the Assamese Kitchen*](#). The Assamese tradition of jolpan also made pitha a popular choice. Jolpan are light snack meals, and often feature simple, steamed pithas alongside jaggery, sugar, or dollops of curd or milk. Pitha also became associated with new rice harvests, thus cementing itself as a food of celebration; more complex pithas are saved for celebrations.



Tel pithas are deep fried (Arundhati Nath)

Such is the versatility of pitha; it can go from being an everyday snack to a festive specialty dish with a few tweaks. “As children, we would wait for the advent of Bihu each year when our mother and grandmother would prepare pithas for us in the village,” said Das. “Some pithas, like

the tekeli pitha, however, [are] made throughout the year.” The quintessential Assamese rice cake is the til (sesame) or narikolor (coconut) pithas, which are filled with a paste of jaggery and sesame or coconut, and then rolled in a coating of sticky rice flour. This elongated and sometimes moon-shaped pitha is crispy on the outside and soft on the inside.

Assamese communities, however, each created their own versions and, as a result, several varieties of pitha recipes exist today — a culmination of the cultures of the Ahoms, Bodo, Rabha, Karbi, Dimasa, Mising, Hajong, Deuri, and Tiwa people, among others. The Bodo community, for example, prepares tekeli pitha and calls it laodum pitha or thengheli pitha in their language. Assamese Muslims prepare the meshy [jeng pitha](#) or jali pitha; the texture is like a hash brown crossed with a jalebi.



Steamed jaggery and coconut rice cakes, Tekeli Pitha and Ketli Pitha (Creative Commons)

Maitrayee Patar, research scholar at the Sociology department at Tezpur University, who belongs to the Tiwa community, told me that Tiwas make their urohi pithas — usually a wedding specialty — by filling small balls of sticky rice flour dough with black sesame and jaggery paste and boiling them in a vat of water until they are cooked and float to the surface. Nirada Devi, a homemaker from Solpam village who has been making pithas for decades, said it takes several days to make sunga (bamboo) pithas. Bamboo pithas end up taking on the markings of the

insides of the bamboo, and are served with fresh cream, curd, and sugar, or sura, a semi-liquid form of jaggery.

Taking these beloved — and sometimes difficult — recipes and producing them at scale is no easy feat. Hollong’s Mahanta started his business by first delivering pithas to homes in 2018. He now sells, through the Hollong brand, a coconut and black rice pitha, an unconventional twist on the dish. “We initially promoted it via social media. Apart from customers in Assam, we get frequent bulk orders from people living in other Indian states as well as countries like the U.S., Australia, and the U.A.E.” Mahanta shared that customers love the taste and crispiness of the pithas and the nutritional qualities of the black rice. As the company started selling more, he pointed out that he has been able to hire more people from local communities, including people who prepare the pithas for Hollong.



Bhogali Bihu delicacies, including pitha (NabaJyoti, Wikimedia Commons)

Mahanta isn’t the only one who has launched a pitha business to help bring the dish into more homes. Gitika Saikia prepares Assamese food for home delivery in Mumbai. Similarly, in New Delhi, Susmita Deb Dutta, originally from Guwahati, runs food kitchen Greet n Treats and

delivers [baskets](#) of Assamese treats, which feature coconut and sesame pithas, during Bihu. “The demand has been great and I have even received orders from Pune and Bangalore,” she shared.

Beyond individual entrepreneurs, the state has also gotten involved in making pithas more accessible outside the home. Bipanan Khetra is an Assam project that includes supermarkets, restaurants, and a department store in Guwahati’s Panjabari area. One of the eateries there is Aromica Tea, which serves not only several varieties of Assamese tea, but also Assamese pitha, said Nayanjyoti Bhattacharyya, the CEO of Anjaybee Green. During Bihu, the state also hosts bhogali melas at [NEDFI Haat](#), where visitors can buy several varieties of pithas including sunga pitha.

These businesses are showing that pithas are slowly inching their way into the mainstream. Pithas have come a long way from Assamese kitchens and dedicated street stalls to being packaged and served for the consumption of tourists and locals alike. You don’t have to make pithas at home to satisfy your daily cravings, and can reserve your love and labor for festivities, when pitha preparation is half the charm.

[Arundhati Nath](#) is a Guwahati-based freelance journalist and children's author. She has been published in *The Guardian*, *BBC News*, *Al Jazeera*, and several other publications.