

FAALGEE – SHERPA COMMUNITY'S CEREAL BASED ETHNIC DISH: A NON-FERMENTED FOODMingma Thundu Sherpa¹ and Sayak Das^{2*}¹⁻² Department of Microbiology, School of Life Sciences, Sikkim University, 6th Mile, Samdur, Tadong, Gangtok, Sikkim, India - 737102

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ABSTRACT

Faalgee is an ethno traditional dish of Sherpa community. It is predominantly prepared and consumed by the traditionally enriched people residing in the Himalayan region of Sikkim. Thus only few members of the old tribes of Sherpa community residing in this Himalayan region have this traditional knowledge to prepare this cereal based non-fermented dish, *Faalgee*. Our emphasis in this paper is to document this indigenous knowledge of preparation of this ethnic dish of Sherpa communities. It is basically prepared from maize seeds during August to October as it is grown abundantly during this period. Partially ripe maize cones are placed in a perforated container called *Jaygha* (copper pot) with water and boiled in a *chula* until maize is properly cooked. The cooked maize is removed from container and the seeds of maize are separated from the cones. The separated seeds are sun dried in *Gundrey* (mat) for 2-3 days. These dried seeds of maize are called *Faalgee*. *Faalgee* dish is prepared by grinding these dried seeds of maize, in *Gatay* (grinder). This grinded maize seeds are cooked in a container with water until it gets swollen and this swollen *Faalgee* is cooked in edible oil or ghee. A *Faalgee* dish is generally prepared during winter seasons by the Sherpa community. It's generally believed that *Faalgee* soup keeps the body warm during the extreme cold winter at the higher altitudes.

Key Words: Traditional dish, non-fermented, *Faalgee*, Sherpa, *Aarmang*, Sikkim**INTRODUCTION**

Faalgee is a cereal based non-fermented food prepared from maize (*Zea mays* L.) by the old Sherpa community residing at Ribdi-Bhareng and Okhery village of West Sikkim, India. These villages holds some of the many ancient tribes of Sherpa communities who has themselves confined to this western part of Sikkim at an altitude between 8,000-15,000 feet in the corridor of Singalila range of West Bengal, near the international border of eastern Nepal and around the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary. Sherpas are the ethnic Himalayan population whose roots might belong to Mongolia [1]. The

word Sherpa is combination of two words - "Shyar" (East) and "Pa" (people) meaning "People of the East" and the words are coined from the Tibetan language [2, 3, 4]. Their religious beliefs came through the oldest sect of Tibetan Buddhism [5]. According to the different literatures, the Sherpa's migrated from Kham area of Eastern Tibet to various other Himalayan and non-Himalayan areas after crossing the Nang-pa-la pass [1]. The ancestral land of the Sherpa's lies in the northern side of the Solu khumbu district along the Dudh Koshi River and its tributary at Solu Khola [4]. Therefore, Solukhumbu region is known as "Land of Sherpa's" or "Shyar khumbu" [4].

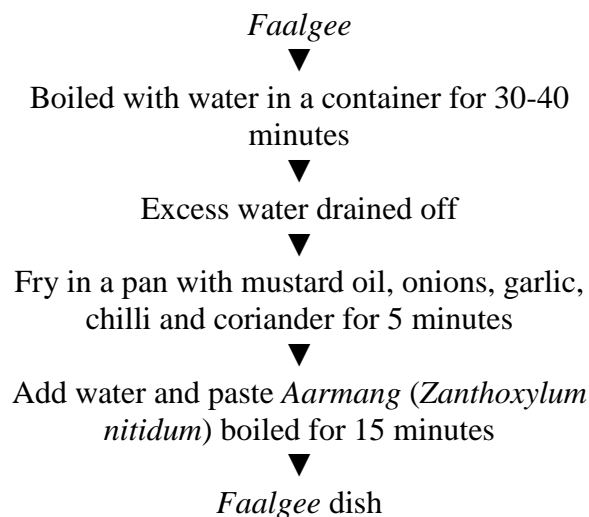
The Sherpa community like any other ethnic groups is divided into many clan groups (*Ru*) [6]. There are mainly four main clans such as *Timi*, *Thakdopa*, *Chawa* and *Lama*. Each clan give rises to several brother clans [7]. Agriculture, animal husbandry and trade are the traditional Sherpa occupations. Yak, Nak, Zhum and Zopkio are the Sherpa's traditionally domesticated animals. Yak and Zopkio are used by the porters to carry the necessary goods from one place to another. However, Nak and Zhum are kept for milk [7]. Before 1954, the business with Tibet was usually for salt and wool [1-7]. Sherpa women were traditionally enriched and are known for their profession of potato cultivation and carpet weaving. Sherpa's are known for their acumen in mountaineering, trekking expertise and very close to the mountains. In Sikkim, Sherpa communities, resides at higher altitudes and practices potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) cultivation.

The cultivation of potato starts from January-February in Ribdi-Bhareng and Okhery West Sikkim. They also sow maize, cow pea and mustard as mixed crops during February-March. The harvesting season of maize starts from August-October. As maize grows abundantly during this period, it is preserved in the form of *Faalgee* by the Sherpa's so as to help them during the winters and cold seasons.

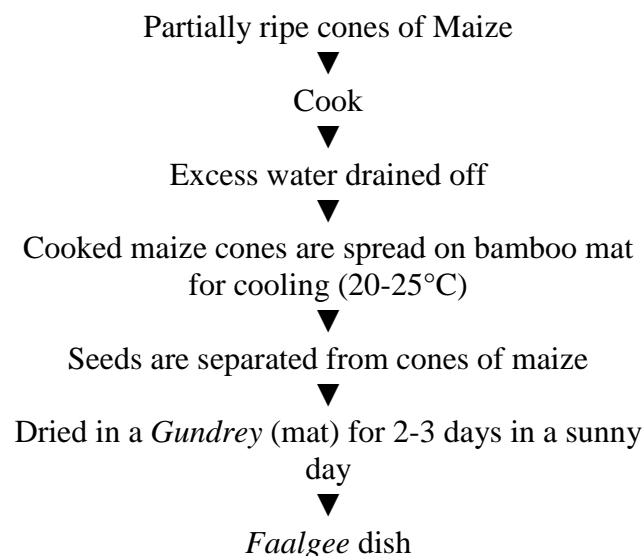
Traditional method of *Faalgee* preparation:

The partially ripe cones of maize (*Zea mays*) are placed in a container and boiled for at least 30 minutes to one hour depending on the quantity of cone. Then water is removed and the seeds are separated from cone and are sun dried in a bamboo mat (*Gundrey*) for 2-3 days. Now the *Faalgee* is keep in a sack or Copper pot locally called *Jaygha* or *Kasako battuka* for preservation. The shelf life of *Faalgee* is 1-2 year. The *Faalgee* dish can be prepared by two methods; one of the dishes is prepared by boiling the dry maize seeds in a container at least 30-40 minutes until they are swollen. *Faalgee* is removed from container and fried with mustard oil along with onions, chilli, garlic, coriander and radish in a *Battuka* (cast-iron fraying pan) for 5 minutes followed by addition of water and paste of *Aarmang* (*Zanthoxylum nitidum*). Then

it is boiled again for about 15 minutes. Finally the *Faalgee* dish is ready to serve. Another method of preparing the dish is to grind the *Faalgee* seeds and then cook and fry it as similar to the earlier method by adding the onion and spices and for flavouring *Aarmang* can be added.



Flowchart No. 1- Flow chart of traditional knowledge of *Faalgee* dish preparation



Flowchart No. 2- Flow chart of indigenous method of *Faalgee* preparation in Ribdi-Bhareng, West Sikkim.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted in randomly selected 205 houses of Ribdi-Bhareng and Okhery village of the major ethnic Sherpa tribes. It was

unstructured and personal interview pattern of methodology was implemented to collect information on the history of Sherpa's, their ethnic food preparation, importance of *Faalgee*, its consumption and recent status of this culture among the new generation. This research on the indigenous knowledge on traditional processing of *Faalgee*, its mode of consumption and ethical important of the product was documented based on the information gathered.

Equipments used during *Faalgee* preparation:

Many traditional types of equipment are used during preparation of *Faalgee* as documented during survey. *Jatay* (grinder) - it is made up of Stones which is used to grind the *Faalgee*. *Naanglo* - is made up of bamboo strips woven tray used to separate husk. *Daaru*- is a metallic serving spoon used to serve the *Faalgee*. *Battuka* - is a cast-iron fraying pan used to frying *Faalgee*.

Mode of Consumption:

Faalgee is directly consumed with the addition

of *Aarmang* (*Zanthoxyluma nitidum*) along with fried beef and radish. It is mostly consumed in the form of soup as it provides warmth to the body. *Faalgee* can be stored at room temperature for two years.

Sociological importance:

The preparation of *Faalgee* is an art of technology and is a family secret passed from generation to generation (mother to daughter). Basically women are involved in the preparation of *Faalgee*. In Sikkim *Faalgee* is mostly prepared at home and it is also sold in canteens, local food stall during social gathering (*Maghay mela* and *Lossar*). *Faalgee* reflects the culture identity as well as the ethnicity of Sherpa community. This is one of best preservation technique practised by the Sherpa community of Ribdi-Bhareng and Okhery village, West Sikkim. It's basically consumed in the social gathering like *Lossar* (New Year of Sherpa) which falls within February. During the winters, most of the nearby and higher altitude regions are covered by the snow during December-February and during heavy rainfall from May-

Faalgee preparation Method (Pictorial documentation)



Fig. 1: Boiling of maize cone in battuka



Fig. 2: Separation of Boiled maize seed from cone



Fig. 3: Sun drying in Gundrey



Fig. 4: Dried *Faalgee*



Fig. 5: Grinding *Faalgee* in *Jatay*



Fig. 6: Air drying



Fig. 7: *Faalgee* boiling in *battuka*



Fig. 8: Frying *Faalgee* in *battuka*



Fig. 9: *Aarmang* (*Zanthoxyluma nitidum*)



Fig. 10: *Aarmang* added to *Faalgee* dish to produce a characteristic flavor and aroma



Fig. 11: *Faalgee* dish with a Sherpa

August, most of the seasonal vegetables and crops get lost and a dire food shortage occurs. So to meet the food shortage this ethnic and traditional knowledge comes to their rescue as Sherpa peoples have been preparing *Faalgee* since ages. In local market in Sikkim, it is sold at the average of Rs. 200/kg.

DISCUSSION

Information on the indigenous knowledge of *Faalgee* preparation was sought from village elders and old men and women. “*Faal*” is a Nepali word for “fruit” and “*Gee*” for “butter”. Sherpa community after migration has mostly been settled at Nepali language spoken areas hence the word “*Faalgee*” might be of Nepali origin word. It was learned during the interview that in old days, a local variety of maize called *Kukhrey makai* (short sized cone variety of maize) was cultivated in the hills of Sikkim, which had a short cone, and looked like *faal* (fruit) and this was fried in oil. Thus the product prepared from *Kukhrey makai* might have been called *Faalgee*. The antiquity of *Faalgee* remains a myth as there are no historical documents available on this product. Documentation of ethnical information on antiquity of *Faalgee* during our survey provided important information regarding the food, history and culture of the Sherpa community. In the old days, *Faalgee* dish did not include the use of oil and spices but nowadays due to the globalization and the development of diversified taste, people prefer to fry in oil and add spices during *Faalgee* dish preparation.

Faalgee has an ethnic importance of Sherpa community residing in the hilly terrain of Sikkim. It is served during festival, Lossar (New Year of Sherpa) along with the other traditional food items. It is customary in Sherpa community to hand over a packet of *Faalgee* to the visitors as a gift. *Faalgee* is traditionally served along with other traditional food items during chilling winter to keep the body warm. The dried *Faalgee* can be preserved for about 1-2 year without refrigeration and *Faalgee* dish can be preserved for about 1-2 days in hills without refrigeration and consumed. Carrying dried

Faalgee as a gift to their relatives is a traditional practice among Sherpa community.

CONCLUSION

Faalgee is an important ethnic dish of Sherpa residing in the hilly terrain of Sikkim, India. Indigenous knowledge of the Sherpa community on the preparation of *Faalgee* and preservation technique of the ethnic dish is a dying art. There are many types of undocumented non-fermented food of various tribes of North-east India. With the advent of modern food style and life style changes, the ethnic food preparation requires immediate attention and documentation of these culinary practices are essential.

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