

Akhadya

By Hiranya Borah

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AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)

PREFACE

All we know that human being is the only animal in the visible world, who can eat even when his belly is full. He can go for sex when the female is not in a state of 'heat' nor for any intention for reproduction. He can kill any animal, not necessarily for eating, just for fun. No, I am not going to make analysis on human characters.

My theme for my book is on AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE) how those are prepared and under what circumstances those can be eaten despite of some reservation due to different reasons, from taste of food to timing of taking those meals/snacks, mental block about some food etc.

I started my cooking expedition from an early age of 4(four). I would not have believed this, but my only sister, who is seven year younger than I, when she was born, my mother did not go to kitchen for a month or so, as a custom prevalent in those days in rural part of Assam, I could prepare meals for all the family members without any help or instruction from any corner. With a corollary to this fact, clearly in my own memory, I think, my mother might be truthful, that I had started my cooking journey at the tender age of 4. I still wonder how my family used to eat those akhadya (no food), cooked by this lesser mortal. Remember that in those days, we did not have any gas stove etc in our family. We had to cook with wooden and bamboo sticks only.

You may be pondering why I had to burn my little fingers at an early age when other children were not even able to serve a glass of water to a guest. The answer lies in between social customs, economic reasons and encouragement of elderly ladies to the male folk (in this case advice came from my grandma to my father) not to do any household chores. In those days, during menstrual period a lady(in this case my mother) did not go to kitchen and servants were not allowed to cook any food(only tea was allowed) in my family. During that period, my father was also in a transition period of becoming a full-fledged family man from a hot headed bachelor(the situation was encouraged by his mother, my grand mother). Again, please do not infer that my family was monstrous or something like that, because of those weird social behaviour! In our villages the fate of most of the children was no different from mine. Anyhow, because of learning of few cooking skills, life of my wife becomes very cosy(no she does not admit it, contrary to that, she is very sad that I was used by my mother for her own good!).

Sometimes I think, I should have tried my hands in 'Master chef competition' aired by different TV channels. But, on the next moment, I use to tell myself, that those competitions are meant for those aspiring cooks, who are accustomed with kaju, kismis, badam etc.-not with ahu rice, kasu, mani-mooni saag (all the items are only available in rural India normally for poor people except the last one) etc. like me. So the idea has been dropped like a hot potato!!!!

Therefore, my beloved readers, some are friends and some are friends of friends , be ready to read something on cuisine prepared by my poor fellow Indians and poor people from other part of the world (which I have the opportunity to taste) with all respect and humility from core of my heart. Some of the articles are funny, some are heart-breaking but most of them are based on my own experiences or based on experiences of someone very close to me.

I have no intention to criticise food habits of any person or group of persons, intentionally or un-intentionally. If however, someone is hurt, I would like to place my sincere apology to all of them. Akhadya(food with bad taste or no taste or prohibited food) vis a vis Khadya (food) is

nothing but perception orientation on the part of who is taking and if anyone is not taking, then why is to be found. An Akhadya for someone may be good/excellent food for someone else. Therefore, nothing is akhadya in the world par se, as long as it is digestible, tasty for at least to a person or to a group of persons. So far I am concerned, I like all types of food as long as I can digest!!!!!! But still I am not taking many types of food due to many reasons, ranges from religious to personal taste. Taking food is always a personal and essential issue to survive.

Most of the articles presented in this book are already in the public domain through Face Book posts. To publish these articles as a book, I got the encouragement from the fact that, all my earlier books published by smashwords are within 100 most downloaded books in their respective categories. I do not know whether, I am writing any good for the readers or not, but I know, this is possible only because of love shown by my esteemed readers. I shall always remain grateful to them.

I am able to write these articles because of constant encouragement from my wife (Mrs. Monalisha), my children, (Ms. Anusuya, Mr. Ayusman Vikramjeet and Ms. Anwesha) including two of my spiritual daughters (Ms. Avneet and Ms. Deepika). Further, I would like to mention the name of youngest daughter, Anwesha, in particular for giving the idea of writing face book posts on food with bad taste, which I always prepare for her Tiffin and breakfast. I take this opportunity to thank her for giving such a beautiful idea to write on food with bad taste. Moreover, I am also thankful to her for inspiring me for writing articles on different topics. Inspiration on day to day basis always comes from my youngest little devil. Never the less, she is also very vocal in criticising any shortfall in my writing.

But for bad eatables I provided to my elder daughter and son, Anusuya and Ayusman respectively, during their school and college days, I tender my apology to them from core of my heart.

By criticising and praising my posts in FB, many of my friends, directly or indirectly encouraged me to write more on different topics and to a corollary to that, publishing of my e-books, for which, I shall be always thankful to them. Similarly I feel, without constant encouragement from many of my friends, I could not have written a single chapter of any of the books. Therefore, it is my bounden duty to place my sincere thanks to all my friends, particularly, Sarbashri/Shrimati A. K. Mishra, Ramanamurthy, late Hazra sir, Basu sir, Unni Sir, Guha sir, Satya Narayan Sir, Tusar, Abhijit, RR Deb, Praveen, Prabin, Rupali, Manikankana, Nilakshi, Sunitha, Anuja, Richa, Kajal, Nitika, Tapati, Roonjoon, Moolchand Bhaskar, Hema madam, Kulpreet, Amresh, Mukesh, Jaisingh, Navaneel, Manimoy, Mudgil saab, all ISS officers, Officers from Directorate of Economic and Statistics, Professors from different universities and FB friends who not only read my articles but sometimes give comments also. I also place my special thanks to my foreign friends Ms. Irani madam, Ms. Anna, Ms. Lu, Ms. Jeliang et al who dare to read some of my articles of my book, 'Random Thoughts through a coloured prism', 'Serious Statisticians: Funny Statistics' and 'Priyanashu's Melody of Fragrance'. They also gave me few encouraging comments for which I am very much delighted. Comments of the Australian Author, Mr. A. R. Dent is and will be always revered for me.

My elder daughter always offers financial assistance to printout my books, which gives me lot of mental support. But I am still could not able to acquire the necessary courage to go for publishing my books in hard copies! My son even goes one step further-no I do not want to divulge that now.

As usual, in the whole exercise, Ms. Avneet took leading role in e-publishing the book for which I shall remain thankful to her.

I shall be an ungrateful stooge, if I do not express my gratitude to my parents, brothers, sisters, friends, foes and teachers for their unequivocal support for developing my personalities, good or bad.

Finally I am thankful to Smashwords for publishing my articles as e-book.

Author

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE) EPISODE-1

First Taste of Ahu Rice

Once upon a time, in good old days, I was also a teenager (this very first sentence is for my children who see me as an evergreen middle aged person with wrinkled face, bald head, big tummy and flabby muscles). When I was in class eight, I was both physically and mentally fit enough to travel miles together on my bicycle. During that summer vacation, alongwith my elder brother and a common friend, I went to visit Biswanath Temple of Biswanath Charali. The temple was situated at the picturesque bank of mighty Brahmaputra river, life line of Assam and adjoining states of North Eastern Region of India. From my home it was eighteen Kilometre away and the road was smooth with recently laid metal. Though we started our journey from home in the early morning, while coming back from the temple, it was already half past eleven. The road between Biswanath town and the temple was straight eight kilometre and under hot sunshine appeared like a black snake lying on the ground. During those days, taking water from any source was not a taboo nor a health hazard and therefore we did not carry any water bottle etc. All of us became very thirsty but saw no viable drinking water source within the proximity. At this, my friend, who had a relative's house on the way, proposed to visit his relative's place for taking water and some rest. We readily agreed as we were tired of cycling on hot and humid condition which is common in Assam during summer.

When we disembarked in front of a house as indicated by friend, I understood that except water, we might not get anything there to eat. As my friend called out by his cousin's name, 'Reena, Reena'(name changed), a young girl came out. He introduced the girl as his cousin and introduced us as the boys from the 'large house of the village' as our home was popularly referred in those days by the neighbours. However as of now, the house my friend had referred is nothing but a depleted 2000 sqft house without any modern facility. She was little hesitant to call us to inside the hut, but we entered her house, virtually pushing her aside. She was alone as her parents were out of the village for some work. After occupying a cane stool, I glanced at the girl from head to toe. Considering her residence, she was quite healthy and beautiful. She was around three year older than I, so I addressed her as 'Baidew' (elder sister) and asked her for a glass of water. After providing water to all of us, she invited my friend to the next(the only other) room and whispered something confidentially. My friend said loudly, 'Do not worry, they are my good friends and from the family who would not tell anybody about bad food or good food like other persons of our village.'

Yes, normally we never criticise any hospitality provided by any person as our parents had taught us in that way: 'Respect any food given by any person as per their convenience and capability. When you take food from any lady, you always consider her as Annapurna(Goddess of food and prosperity)'. According to our neighbours, our parents were rich at that time. However, as all of us know that, richness is a relative concept. We were rich compared to our village people but that richness was much poorer than middle class of any city/ megacity. But yes, my parents were that much solvent that all the siblings of mine were sent to the best college of Assam after our tenth examination and I was also sent to Delhi for my masters and post masters.

After completing his talk with his cousin, he asked us, 'Have you ever tasted Ahu rice?' We replied in unison, 'No, but we would like to have it.' We were aware that Ahu is a special kind of rice and grown with other a rabi crops, normally taken by poor people in those days.

I was so excited that I told Reenaba to teach me how it could be prepared. She, with a smile told me that preparation of Ahu rice is same except one has to give more water as the rice is relatively harder. We were taught that normally, one has to put water in such a way that rice is to be fully submerged by half inch of water- if draining of extra water is not to be resorted. But in those days, at our home we used give much more water than needed and we drained out the extra water after rice was ninety percent cooked. However, this process was discontinued after introduction of pressure cooker into our family.

For the first time I saw Ahu rice, colour of which is like 'bora rice(a kind of sticky rice, used for preparing Assamese cakes and also used as boiled rice taken as daily breakfast in rural Assam during our childhood days). Now a days, production of this rice is also coming down due to commercial consideration.

After half an hour, we were served our meal, ahu rice with salt and green chilli. The taste was different, but we liked it-probably due to excitement or due to overwhelming hunger which was very powerful at that time than for all of us, may not be because of actual taste of the rice. When, I told Reenaba that, I like the meal very much, she laughed a lot and told us not to tell our parents that taste of Ahu had been good. However, I must confess taht still I do not know whether taste of ahu was good or bad, because that was the first and last time I had taken Ahu rice as a meal in my life.

Before our departure, I gave Rs.5/-, entire pocket money for that journey, to Reenaba as a gift. She did not want to take the money but for my insistence, she took the five rupee note as a token of love from a younger brother.

Time passed. I went to college and occasionally remember Reenaba, her dimpled cheeks and her giggles. Sometimes, I asked my friend about her and felt sorry hearing that their economic condition had not improved. Finally, one day I got the good news that Reenaba got married.

During one of my visits to my home during college vacation, I met Reenaba after seven years, after her marriage alongwith her husband who was not only caring husband but also reasonably solvent person. While introducing me to her husband, she told our Ahu-meal episode to him and finished by saying, 'Do you remember a few days back, I showed the note that he had given to me, which is still kept in my ornament box?' I was really astonished at her statement. I almost fainted to hear about the fate of my five rupee note. After, gaining my composure, I told her, 'Reenaba, the value of five rupee has gone down drastically. Spend the amount without further delay, otherwise, it will be remain as a piece of paper only.'

Her answer, further touched my heart, 'I know, when you gave me that five rupees, I could have purchased 4 KG of finest rice. Now I can buy only 2KG of rice. After ten years, even half KG of rice will not be available with that amount. But its value in terms of love shown by a younger brother grows manifold during this period. The meal offered by me to you, would have cost you hardly half a rupee in the open market, but you had given me Rupees 5/-. So how can I spend that money!'

I do not know, whether still she kept that five rupee note or not, but my friend told me recently, that his cousin(Reenaba) became very rich by now and her children are also settled handsomely. God bless her!

I forgot the taste of that meal, but I still feel the fragrance of her body soaked with sweat that can be comparable only with the divine fragrance of 'Maa Annapurna'. Still I miss the aroma of her sweat mixed with love, hospitality and honesty, when I take a five star meal with plastic smile of the attendants. One can say, meal of Ahu rice with salt and green chilly is nothing but a akhadya for a young boy who hails from a relatively solvent family, but for me, the meal given by Reenaba was one of the best meal I have ever had in my life. I feel that the meal had ingredients of true love of an elder sister, hospitality of an iconic queen and honesty of a monk. I am always trying to find those qualities in a meal, when I am served a meal by someone somewhere. I love you Reenaba.

Yes, I am blessed with some meals with those qualities. Stories and under what circumstances I got those meals, I shall try to share with you in the following chapters in this book.

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE) EPISODE-2

How about a Python curry

In the late eighties of previous century, I was posted at a remote area of the country to open a new office when I was considered a very young and energetic officer (in my opinion-opinion of responsible officer for my posting may be diametrically opposite-huh!!!!). As a matter of fact, I joined Central service resigning my permanent lecturer job at Cotton College, Guwahati with the very intention to live in a large city like New Delhi or Mumbai. Unfortunately, my first posting was at backward district of erstwhile Bihar where 'light jata nahi-light ata hai' (a place with extremely heavy load-shedding). After, one year I was transferred to this remote place.

As a part of my duties, I had to do lot of field visits to the interior places of my jurisdiction. In one of the visits, I had to go with one of my officers who happened to be extremely finicky about taking food. He always used to advise me not to take any food provided by the locals as they use to eat anything to everything. Though, now I am a fishitarian {a person who does not take flesh of anything moving on land, from chicken to buffalo etc. but eats everything who moves exclusively in water from fish to octopus (except the mammals, like Dolphins, whales etc.) is a fishitarian!!!} since 14th of February, 1992 coinciding with Valentine day (though I could not be valentine at the right time for the right girl), I used to take all sorts of non-vegetarian food permitted as per Hindu religion. I always counter advised the officer that being posted in that particular area, he should take taste of everything as old proverb says: 'Sugar tastes sweet when it is tasted'. But my advice probably passes through one ear to the other ear comfortably without much deviation upward.

In one occasion, that particular officer had accompanied me to a remote village for a field visit jointly to be conducted. We reached the village around 5 o' clock in the evening after a long strenuous journey from the Head Quarters. By the time darkness descended on the village of the hilly terrain. As we had already informed the village headman about our visit, he was waiting for us at the outskirts of the village to welcome us. After preliminary introduction he escorted us to the government guest house. After refreshing ourselves, we saw that our tea with snacks were ready. Over the tea, he informed that he had arranged our dinner at his residence as food of the guesthouse was not up to the mark.

After some official talks, we proceeded to his residence which was not far off from the guest house, might be half a kilometre or so. On our arrival, they offered us red (we normally call it black tea) tea with some crispy fried eatables. I liked the new food item and asked, 'It is very nice! How it is prepared?'

'It is fried -flower (sorry, I forgot the name)' He told me with a grin. My junior, till then he did not touch those fried flower leaves, thinking some prohibited food for him. After knowing that those were flower leaves only, he started munching those like a hungry lion eats the flesh of a deer.

After one hour or so, the beautiful daughter of the village headman called us for dinner. The dining hall was neatly designed which gave us the impression of high quality taste of the family, particularly, ladies of the house. The plates were placed with small handmade towels and glasses were filled with clean water. In two big bowls rice and curry were kept so that one can take according to one's appetite. In the deem light, I understood the curry might be a mutton

curry which was one of the most favourite dishes of mine during those days. They normally do not use turmeric in curry preparation, but for us they used turmeric, we were told.

The taste of the curry was marvellous and we cherished fully and my junior who is always sceptical about local food, took several helpings. After our dinner, the village headman dropped us at our guesthouse. To see him off, I came out upto the gate. I praised his hospitality and particularly I mentioned the curry which his wife had prepared. I asked him being a born cook, I would like to know how it was prepared.

With a grin, he told me that, first he had removed the head and pulled the skin from the tail. Then he removed the main bones, which need special technique, for which he was a master. So far cooking is concerned, the preparation was just like mutton preparation. As light was deemed, he could not see my perplexed face. Bringing my composure to a normal mode, I asked him, 'if it was not mutton, what was it?'

'Oh, sorry sir, please pardon me, I did not tell you about the meat we have served. It was a lovely python caught one week before. When I came to know that special guests are coming, so I reared it for last one week feeding best of the food available and I killed today afternoon only, so that fresh meat can be served to you. It was a real big one, sir, we have kept the major portion for future. But we have served you the best part of it. Hope you have enjoyed.'

I told him, 'Yes, I have really enjoyed it, This is the first time I have taken python curry. I did not know, it might be so delicious. My friend has also enjoyed it. In fact, he might have enjoyed more, as he had taken so many helpings!'

After returning to my room, I called my junior and told him that the curry was not a mutton curry, but it was a python curry.

He immediately went to his bath room and forcefully vomited by putting his fingers deeper into his throat. He continued his forceful vomiting till the next morning(as he told me afterwards).

However, I did not do such foolish things like my junior and I can assure you that, shall never do it in future also. I must say that actually I relished the curry as the curry was real tasty and, even after knowing that it was a python curry I did not feel anything bad about it.

In the morning, at the time of leaving the village, the headman whispered in my ear, 'Sir, I may kindly be pardoned as yesterday, I made a joke about the python curry. Actually, the curry served by my wife was not a python curry, it was a simple mutton curry. Though, initially I was thinking to serve something like that, but, my wife objected the idea citing that it would be immoral on our part to provide food which you might be a prohibitive food for you and you may not like the food.' Then he laughed mysteriously.

I did not have any means to know the true version of the story, whether morning statement was correct or---.

While returning from the village I told my junior, 'Do you know, despite of repeated vomiting one cannot flush out everything from ones stomach, even doctor cannot flush out. Therefore, some portion of python meat is still in your stomach.'

'Sir, I am already in a shock, why you are still poking me!' he pleaded.

'I am not poking you, I am just talking scientific part of digestive system. Even, at the mouth itself some portion has gone to your blood, which you cannot remove till your death!!! Ha Ha!!'

On the hindsight, I was little upset, I missed an opportunity to taste a python curry with a whisker! I have never got another chance to taste python and shall not get any more again as I become a fishitarian and probably now python killing has also been banned. But still I hope that

the first version of the headman was correct as the curry was real tasty. Thanks to headman for both that version!!!!!! I also salute the wife of the headman for her high moral stand (assuming the second version was correct) on not providing a food which was an akhadya for her guests.

Next time is the best time to relish another Akhadya!!!!!!!!!!

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)

EPISODE-3

Left over of rice beer

Have you ever tasted lao pani(Assamese rice beer)?Do you have any idea about the preparation of lao pani(country rice beer)? How is it prepared? What are the ingredients?

During my school days when we were passing through phaltu labour line (colony for sacked labourers of tea garden), we used to get extremely pungent smell of rice beer. For a person who lives in the vicinity of phaltu labour line, he may aware of the situation prevailing over there. But who has never visited those areas, I am explain the situation in a nutshell. In the evening, hordes of drunkards were seen zooming in those areas and that is why we were barred from going to those areas after dusk. I knew many of these drunkards who used to work as casual workers in our paddy fields. When any of the known drunkard would see me, he used to salute me as if I was military commander or used to place a kiss on my forehead with the request not to tell my parents, particularly mother about their uncontrolled behaviour as seen by me. Actually these poor chaps were large hearted people and I always admire their honesty and friendly behaviour.

As time passed, I went to college and then I was able to get a Government job. During one of my visits to my hometown, a drunkard named Babuli, invited me for a dinner with him. Though my parents advised me not to go for the dinner, I could not resist my temptation to have a dinner with him. Before I narrate about my dinner at Babuli kakaideo's house, let me apprise about him.

Babuli, we fondly called him Babuli kakaideo (Kakaideo means older brother), a confirmed bachelor, was a real connoisseur of wine, beer and any alcoholic substance. He normally did not wash his mouth with water in the morning. He used to have any sundry drinks as his breakfast (in real sense, breaking fast after sleep). We used to say, if his vein would be punctured, instead of blood local made alcoholic substance would ooze out. At the age of 50, he looked like an eighty year old man with little movement ability.

At the designated time, I reached his home, a thatched hut without any facility. Except, Babuli Kakaideo nobody lives with him in his house. However, on that day, his niece(his elder brother's daughter) was cooking something for us. She, on seeing me, told, 'Dada (older brother) why you have accepted Khura's (my uncle's) invitation, at the first place? Nothing eatable is here to cook!'

I did not respond.

As meal was apparently not ready, we gossiped for an hour or so, on many topics ranging from political to economics to human relations. During that period, the niece was preparing something with a distinct unhappy expression on her face.

Finally, when I was served the meal, the pungent smell of laopani engulfed the whole dining area-- sorry whole hut. I asked the niece, 'Are you serving laopani also?'

'No.' She replied vaguely to my question looking to the ground and scratching the ground using her nails. I smelled something rotten, but I was not sure what was the origin of the pungent rotten odour.

I tried to eat the meal comprising rice and some vegetables. However, despite of my repeated attempts, I could not put the rice in my mouth. I washed my hands and left Kakaideo's

place. Babuli Kakaideo murmured, 'Sorry, bhaity(my nick name), I could not arrange any good food for you!' I felt sorry for him, probably he also felt bad for me.

When I reached home, my mother asked me to take dinner as motherly instinct perhaps told her about my empty stomach after the dinner party at Babuli Kakaideo's place.

Next morning when I met one of my friends, I told him about the previous night's experience. To my surprise, he did not utter a single word of astonishment but asked me, 'Why did you accept his dinner invitation? That rascal had invited me also once and did the same thing to me as well.'

Tapping on his shoulders to cool him down, I inquired from him, 'Ok, Ok, cool down and tell me, what type of rice was served to me? As you are very much aware that, I am a very robust eater; despite of that, I could not eat a single munch of that meal!'

He then told me the process of preparation of laopani. Any rice, preferably, however, Borachaul(a sticky rice) is used for laopani. First the rice is boiled and kept in an earthen pot mixing with some toxic material (popularly known as laopani guti) for two to three days. Once the fermentation is complete, the rice beer is ready to be served. The rice used for preparation for rice beer is normally used for cattle feeding. On that day, the rice served to me was probably fried cattle feed!

In the next time when I visited my home town, I was told that Babuli Kakaideo had died few days back. I felt an unknown pain on my chest! I prayed to God, 'Give him a better life in the next birth(if any)!'

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE) EPISODE-4

Preparation of SUBA-ATMA-KALU Parantha

Student life is the best part of the entire life if there is no examination. In our college days, we had come across such a beautiful/ un-enviable(?) phase when number of classes had been reduced, number of terminal examinations had been reduced considerably and final examinations were postponed indefinitely. As a youngster, unaware of future consequence I along with others enjoyed those forced holidays. I had developed a bad habit of gossiping with girls during that period only.

Well, this time I am not writing anything which can be termed as such Akhadya, but try to tell you how beautifully one can prepare a wonderful dish when nothing special is available at home as and when a guest arrives without prior information.

During the anti- foreigner agitation in Assam(1979-1985), I had to visit a village with my friend due to some personal work (less personal work –more social visit). Due to picketing in oil refinery, oil was scarce and therefore, we decided to visit the village by bi-cycle. The village was about fifty KM from our home. On the way, we have some relatives' homes and they used to invite me in many occasions. But as I was studying outside the hometown it was not possible to visit their homes quite frequently. However, due to the forced holidays on account of Assam agitation, I was taking the opportunity to visit many places during that period.

As we started our journey early in the morning after taking breakfast of 'Karkara Bhat'(plain rice prepared previous night, if however, water is added, it is called paita bhat) with omelette, we could travel almost 10-15 KM without taking any rest. As there were a host of relatives on that route, we visited a relative's house where we were provided with tea and snacks. After, covering another 10-15 KM, we took rest in another relative's house. As usual, there also we got some snacks to eat along with tea.

Finally when we reached our destination, it was half past twelve. My aunt, whom house we were visiting was alone at that time as my uncle was on a tour to the district head quarters and my cousin (male), who was of my equal age also went to another uncle's place. The two daughters of my aunt were also not at home as they had gone for a marriage party of a local friend of both of them.

On seeing me, she was very happy and hugged me tightly and asked welfare of my parents. But in the next moment she became little unhappy, 'You have come to this poor aunt(actually they were not so poor, as my uncle was a school teacher of Government high school) after so many years and nobody except me is here to look after you with proper hospitality.'

I assured her that whatever is available she can offer as lunch as we had come there to see her not to eat something special. At my assurance she got some relief and told us to be fresh. After refreshing ourselves we sat with the Aunt who had offered tea as a starter of the main course.

After one hour she gave us some parantha and apologized for not giving rice (Assamese people are basically rice eater) as she did not have fish or meat at home. Due to absence of my uncle and my cousin, procurement of fish or chicken from the market was also not possible.

The paranthas she served were very tasty but I discovered that, I had never tasted those before. We ate a few paranthas which were more than what we could normally eat. When we finished our unusual lunch, my aunt also took her lunch which was simple rice with one vegetable curry. I told my aunt that she could have given plain rice with the vegetable curry instead of taking so much pain to prepare paranthas. With little worrying voice she asked, 'Did you not enjoy the paranthas?'

'No no, Aunt, we enjoyed thoroughly our lunch and that is why we ate so much!' My assuring words comforted her a little bit. 'However, the taste was unknown to me! It was not a pani pitha(Rice-Water mixed parantha) nor a malpua(sweetened floor cake) nor it was kal-pitha(rice powder mixed with banana). By the way what was it?' I asked my aunt.

After a good laugh she told that, it was SuBa-AtMa-KAlu Parantha. I heard that name for the first time. On seeing my perplexed face she explained, 'Today I did not find anything to prepare for your meal. The flour was not enough for two persons, so is the case for basan. Therefore I made a dough of ata, maida, basan, suji ,banana(kal) (different types of flour) and potato and then prepared this and I named it by using the first or first and second letters of the ingredients.'

While coming back, I was thinking, whoever coined, 'necessity is the mother of invention' had been absolutely correct!

Recently, when my wife was out of station, I prepared some paranthas by mixing ata, maida, suji and basan, naming AtMaSuBa parantha which my younger daughter relished like I did more than thirty years back in that remote village of Assam. Hurrah! This time I am talking of khadya only-no akhadya please!

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)

EPISODE-5

Best food –over persuasion

One of my subordinate officers aged about 50 years at that time, posted at a subordinate office had a good/bad habit of inviting senior officers for lunch or dinner whenever any senior officer from the Hqs visits that office. His hospitality is unparalleled! Even before I visited to that particular office for the first time, one middle level officer warned me, ‘Sir, please visit his residence and enjoy his hospitality by having at least one meal, otherwise you may have to face very awkward situation. He creates lot of drama if, by any chance, any senior officer refuses to visit his residence.’

As expected, after office hours, he invited me for dinner at his residence. To examine the veracity of the warning of my junior officer, I told that it would not be possible to visit his house as I had to attend some other function on that night. The gentleman said, ‘Ok, sir, no problem. However, my family would be happier, if you could visit for the dinner, today itself!’ I felt that his invitation was a genuine one and nothing objectionable was observed. To avoid further request from him, I agreed to his proposal with the request to arrange a dinner with light food only.

At the designated time we reached his residence along with the officer in charge of the subordinate office. He introduced his family members one by one. I apologized to his wife for intruding her precious time in the evening. She had been a very nice lady and told me that she was very happy that I had agreed to have a dinner with them. She further asked me if, though I was a senior officer, being much older in age, could she address me as ‘tumi’ (generally addressed to younger person) instead of ‘Apuni’ (addressed to seniors in age or status). Before I could say ‘yes’ to her decent proposal she was scolded by her husband so strongly that she had no alternative but to leave the place in a huff.

Within five minutes, at least ten different types of sweets along with tea were served. Though, I was used to get some preferential treatment from my subordinates while visiting for lunch or dinner, depending upon time slot available for a visit, to the residence of any subordinate, it was something exceptional. Then, I realized, had I not acceded to his offer, he would have been in trouble as he had already spent so much on sweets only!

I am not a very good sweet eater. I took one of the sweets and took my own time to finish that piece of sweet. The moment I finished, he requested for another one. Reluctantly I took another one. I took maximum possible time to finish the second one. As soon as I finish that one, he requested for another one citing that it was a special sweet imported from another town just for me (though I was later informed by another colleague that the sweet was bought from local market after my confirmation to visit his house!). To satisfy his over enthusiasm I took that sweet also. But finishing that one was not enough, he offered another one with another excuse! With a frowning face I took the sweet and by the time I lost all interest for any more sweet. But he was still insisting!

After one hour we were guided to the Dining hall. The Dining hall was neatly arranged and one has to appreciate the way it was arranged. A special chair was arranged for me which might not be at all necessary. Probably, it was arranged so that the local officer should not think that my status was equal to that of him or it may be done at the instance of the local boss

himself-I do not know! I must appreciate, what a marvellous innovative idea to marginalize your immediate boss before his super boss(if it is host's idea) or show respect to the seniors (if the idea was originated from his boss)! I have seen this at many official dinners attended by me within and outside country- but at a personal dinner I saw it for the first time and hopefully for the last time!

Then one by one different dishes were served. All the dishes were delicious lest to say! I am not a poor eater. The incident was occurred at least twenty five years back, so my appetite for food had been reasonably good in those days. Further, I am not at all a shy person who would be leaving dinning table without a full belly. In those days, I was also a good food lover who relishes good food.

I enjoyed the food which they served for first fifteen minutes or so. Next fifteen minutes, because of their persuasion, I was eating something, without enjoying any taste. The last fifteen minutes due to their over persuasion, I felt I was forced to eat/drink some poison. But even then the host was insisting to take some more dishes. Finally I told, 'Mr. So-n-so, do you want to kill me here or you want me to go home and die there? If you want to kill me here, then put some more food forcibly in my mouth. Or else, let me go home and die peacefully there!' At this point he stopped insisting for some more but showed unhappiness saying that, 'Sir probably preparation of our food was not so good, that is why you did not like those!' I did not answer anything, though I was fuming at rage inside.

I could not sleep whole night because of excessive eating on that evening. Next day, in front all the staff, I mildly told him that, his over persuasion for taking excessive food almost killed me last night.

No, I am neither blaming his hospitality nor doubting his sincerity- but I blame his over persuasive attitude. One should know, where to stop otherwise best food can be 'akhadya' for the guest, whom you want to give best possible food.

Next time, whenever I was invited for a dinner/lunch by him, I told him categorically, I might be honouring his request, if and only if, I would be allowed to eat, what I wanted and what my stomach might be allowing.

I am sure you must have similar experience at least once in your life at the hands of relatives, friends, seniors, juniors, some over enthusiastic attendants of restaurants in some Indian towns and particularly at Chowkidhanis, at Jaipur! I got that type of experiences at some of the places by some of the extremely persuasive people, but compared to that particular host all are 'Lilliput' only!

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)

EPISODE-6

Best food –over eating

Last episode, I had narrated a story, how excellent food could become ‘akhadya’ due to over persuasion on the part of the host. In this episode, I shall tell you how a guest can make excellent food ‘Akhadya’ by his own deeds.

It was summer vacation of 1976. I along with my elder brother went to visit my aunt (a distant cousin of my mother) and another uncle (first cousin of my mother) at a place 76 KM from my home town. Though my uncle was relatively more close to us in blood relation, we used to stay at my aunt’s place as my uncle (who was much younger in age), being an orphan, was staying with some of his relatives.

But that was a special visit for both of us due to two reasons: (1) my uncle got married a few months ago and settled at a different place outside his erstwhile residence and (ii) we had appeared for 10th examination (though my brother was one year elder than I, due to change of education policy in Assam, my batch was promoted to class VIII from class VI whereas my brother’s batch was promoted from class VII to class VIII and both batches were merged) was and expected to move out to a bigger town/ city.

To avoid any controversy (otherwise the aunt might feel overlooked once we had changed our preference for the other relative who is more close in blood relation with us), our mother advised us to stay with our aunt, instead of the new house constructed by her first cousin.

Following the advice of my mother, we first landed at our aunt’s house. Our uncle visited us in the evening, though little bit unhappy, he did not show explicitly, probably understanding that though situation had changed during that time, upto the last visit of ours, he did not even had a house of his own. Nevertheless, he invited us for lunch for the next day.

Next day, when we were about to leave for uncle’s place, at around 12 Noon, the aunt said, ‘You, better take some meal here itself, which is already ready to serve, as in their house lunch has never been ready by 2-30 PM.’

We were advised that if someone offers something to eat in the morning never say ‘no’ to that offer. Following that golden advice, we took semi lunch before proceeding to our uncle’s house.

As soon as we reached our uncle’s house, the newlywed aunt welcomed us with an unexpected statement, ‘Come, come, lunch is already ready, wash your hands and sit on the dining table. Your uncle is waiting for you. He had skipped the breakfast so that he can also take his lunch with you. Normally he takes lunch at around 2-30 PM only.’

My brother saw to my face, so did I. Probably at this age I could have told the truth, but at a tender age of 14-15, it was a catch 22 situation, neither we could tell the truth nor we were ready for another meal. But as disciplined students, we followed the instruction of our aunt and we sat on the dinning table.

Soon lunch was served. Delicious dishes of both fish and mutton were separately served. In rural Assam normally both fish and mutton were not served in those days and thought both should not be taken together. Even in those days in many places of rural Assam, taking both meat and fish was forbidden. But as time passes, even in rural Assam, now-a- days, in special occasion, both are served and expectedly, now people are also expecting for that.

We, despite of our best efforts we were not able to eat properly instead we were eating very slowly. Silently, we blamed ourselves for not able to enjoy those mouth watering deliciously cooked items. We were also sorry for our newlywed aunt who had prepared those dishes from the early morning for us!

The aunt was insisting for taking more, 'You, young chaps are good for nothing! How you can take so little!' Yes, she was very right in her accusations, we were not expected to take so little in normal condition. We were trying our best to take as much as possible. But we failed measurably. Realistically, we made delicious food to 'Akhadya' due to over eating, for which we had to blame ourselves. When, finally we gave up, we were hardly in a position to move around. I told my aunt to arrange a bed for me for a nap. After full two hours napping only, I felt normal and able to gossip with our new little aunt who was only 3-4 years older than us.

I learnt a lesson from that episode, whenever I am invited for a lunch/ dinner/ breakfast, I will not take any heavy food/meal, no matter how long expected time the host would take for serving the lunch/ dinner/ breakfast.

Unfortunately, I could not visit that small town (large village) after that incident due to my busy schedules once I had left my home for higher studies and then after joining to Government service, I am completely short of time for any social visits to my relatives' places.

Tragically, my uncle also expired after few years at a very young age of 38 due to jaundice. My parents visited the family at that time but I could not visit the bereaved family as at that time I was in Delhi for my higher studies.

**AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-7**

Lizard is not poisonous

Never ever try those food items

My association with court is limited, (i) I have to visit Supreme Court of India at an interval of three odd months as a member of National Court Management System (NCMS) Committee (appointed as a member of the Committee by Hon'ble Chief Justice of India,) and (ii) once I had to deliver few lectures at National Judicial Academy, Bhopal though, I do not know how much I am contributing to the system.

But I came to know one thing from different sources that, whenever there is even a slightest possibility of danger to life one has to give necessary advise not to venture those places/ situations. I learnt that, statutory warning is also necessary to avoid any litigation in future. Just like while selling tobacco, you see a legal warning along with a photograph depicting a lung infected by some disease. Photograph is given for those, who cannot read. Following that, I strongly warn that 'Never try these types of food for self or for others. It will be very dangerous for any person who consumes the food I am going to describe.' Hopefully, I need not have to give a photograph of a lizard with a cross sign over it, as my article will be read by those who can read at least simple English!!!

The person who told me about this akhadya was a distantly related grandpa of mine. When he told me this story he was about seventy and I was about twenty. That means, this is more than thirty year old story. Therefore, the story may not have any relevance in today's modern world.

The story goes like this:

The old man was a chronic asthmatic patient for thirty odd years. During winter, he used to suffer more compared to summer season. His wife expired few years back and though he had two sons and both of them were living with him, none of them are looking the old man properly. This is not an unusual story for most part of the world. Both the daughter in laws were busy with their own families and the work relating to looking after the old man had been equally divided. For one month the breakfast and lunch were served by one daughter in law and dinner was served by the other one. After every one month, the duties of the daughter in laws were inter changed. So the poor old fellow had to fend for himself for any other food item in between those stipulated meals. But the old fellow always in praise of the daughter in laws as he was much better off compared to misery of many of the old fellows of his village.

In the winter he used to take a lot of tea to keep warmth of his body to reduce asthma attack. In one of those chilly mornings, after taking his morning tea he felt that he was much relieved of his asthma. He felt that his chest became free of any congestion. Initially, he thought, the quality of tea on that day was better than the earlier ones. But on enquiry he came to know that same tea had been used for last ten-fifteen days. As he did not add any new ingredient in the tea, he became suspicious and inspected the kettle he used for preparation of tea. To his utter disappointment he saw a few dead bodies of cockroaches. Initially, he felt a vomiting tendency but somehow he controlled it.

After few days, when he suffered another asthmatic attack, he told his grandson to kill some cockroaches and boil with his tea. His grandson was amused but due to his tender age he did not raise any objection to that and followed the advice of his grandpa.

The old fellow got lot of relief after that cup of tea and he started taking that akhadya whenever he had been under asthma attack.

When I shared this story with one of my doctor friends, he rubbished the whole idea and advised not tell this type of un-ethical medication! I took his advice and promised not tell this story to anybody!

But while writing this story, another horrible akhadya piped into my mind.

Long thirty three years have passed after that incident happened in my hostel mess. On that fateful day, many of my hostel mates had already taken food and I had also completed half of my meal. I found a small skeleton of a tail. When I show to the cook he coolly told me that it might be of a tail of a mouse or a lizard which might have tried to jump over the boiling dal or rice or curry. He changed my plate and requested me not to raise the issue at that time. To my relief, none had suffered any problem of food poisoning on that day.

I did not raise the issue till the next day. When, I told about the unwanted non vegetarian food on my plate, they tried to tease me for having a mouse fry or lizard fry on my plate. However, I shot back, 'At least for me, the cook had changed my plate! But on the other hand, as all of you have taken other major part of the body along with the gravy. So chill baby, chill!!!!'

So none of has died after having a mouse or lizard on that day. Therefore a question had struck me whether mouse or lizard can be eaten or not??????????

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-8

Birth Day Spoiler

Up to a certain age, parents are interested to throw a birth day party for their little ones without bothering whether they like those or not. After attaining a certain age, little one demands for a lavish birthday party. At the age of sixteen to twenty two/ twenty five, youngsters throw parties to their peers, with or without the permission of their parents/ elders. Then there is a silence of birth party. Then after few years, husbands used to throw parties for their newlywed wives. The wives normally conveniently forget the d- day of their husbands. When children cross their thirties they forcefully organize birth day parties for their parents to show their counterpart, how they are caring their old parent. Normally these are the birthday schedules of middle and upper middle classes of Indian societies in recent times.

The story which I am going to narrate is when my younger daughter was in the first category. It was 2003, I was already under transfer to New Delhi from my Guwahati office. It was her 4th birth day and my wife was of the opinion that, since it might be her last birth day at Guwahati, all her friends and our relatives had to be invited. Her idea was correct as that was her last birth day party we have organized at Guwahati.

Normally whenever there was(is) a party organized at my home, my wife prepares the menu and helps me in cooking. Of late, my daughters also extend their helping hands in preparation of different dishes. But when they were young, I was the chef and my wife was the only helping hand. On that particular birth day it was decided that around 15 children would be invited and total number of guests would be around 30 including children. Our main course would be pulao/fried rice and chicken do piazza. Some snacks will be served which would be purchased from the market.

I do not want to give any recipe for preparation of pulao or fried rice which you can collect from various books written by different experienced and famous chefs. But my recipe is probably simplest for an ordinary non-chef cook. I normally cook two types of pulao or fried rice or mixture of the two.

In the first process, I put oil at hot pressure cooker, fried the chopped onion, add masala (spices), salts according to our taste and then add dry fruits and other vegetables. All these ingredients are fried for some time and then add rice and water. This process is most time saving and that was my favourite process till the disaster on my daughter's birth day.

The second process is simpler as chance of facing any disaster is relatively less. First prepare steamed rice or prepare plain rice using pressure cooker or steam. Then cook your other ingredients on a large pan, large enough to mix your rice with other ingredients comfortably. Now a days, I am preparing fried rice following this system since I made a mess in the birth day of youngest daughter in May,2003.

What went wrong in that particular day? I tried to save my time energy for the day which actually terribly backfired.

We had a pressure cooker of six and half litre capacity. I fried best of the ingredients for the special day and then put rice and water. I miscalculated the amount of rice and water to be put and probably(sic!) I put rice and water more than the capacity of the pressure cooker. The whistle did not sound at the right time and when I tried to open the cover, I could not. After few

attempts when I opened the cover, I found that part of the rice was over cooked and other part of the rice was under cooked. I never experienced such type of dichotomy in cooking.

All the hell broke out! All my close relatives started blaming me from a 'miser to hopeless cook, over-smart to donkey' and tried to give all unsolicited advices. The more advices I had taken, the more mess I had made.

By the time young guests started coming, practically we did not have anything to offer except birthday cakes, wafers and some light food article already taken from bakery. Chicken do piazza was ready, but with which main course it would be served? By the time mentally I was completely exhausted and as usual, other members of my family also could not do anything to salvage the situation. Chicken do piazza was served with over cooked rice to the children. Some of them took those, some left without touching even! Some of the guests were gracious enough to praise the chicken do piazza, which had some soothing effect on my bruised confidence (Till that day, I was confident of having ability to cook for 30 persons without any help from others).

The 'Akhadya' that I prepared, a few guests dared to taste on that day. I could not remember the consoling words, some of the guests uttered to me.

After that horrible birth day party, to my wife's discomfort, I stopped cooking for any such party for the next few years!

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-9

Mutton Keema

Every food item is good for someone / for a group of people and bad for another one/ for another group of people. If you are non-vegetarian, the name of mutton keema itself will give a watering effect in your mouth and if you are not, you may put your hand on your ever sensitive nose. What('s) about a boneless fish pokora for a Gujrati vegetarian? Awaaak, thooo!

Here I want to share a story about a delicious food item for a group of people and 'Akhadya' for another group of people.

The incident took place in 1983, when I was a M. Phil student of Delhi University. One of friends, Nilesh was a pure vegetarian. Both of us could not get hostel seats during our M. Phil course and used to stay in private accommodation adjacent to University campus. Though we were not staying together; he was staying at Mukherjee Nagar and I was staying at Jawahar Nagar, we sometimes used to take meal together after closing of Delhi University Central Library. Why closing of library was so important?

As both of us were from humble economic background, we used to stay in such small accommodations that we could not study at our homes (?) due to space crunch. My room was so small (with a open roof, luckily) that either I could keep my bed properly or my other belongings. In the winter, I used to sleep inside the room by stretching my folding bed and in the summer, I used to sleep outside the room keeping my belonging inside the room. Nilesh's room was little bigger as he was sharing with another classmate who was looking for job after completion of his master degree.

One lucky fellow from my class, Hemanta was able to get a seat in the International Students' Hostel situated on the Ring Road, which was equidistant from my place and from Nilesh's place. Sometimes, therefore we used to take dinner at his place, paying for the guest coupon @Rs.5/- per meal. Considering the price of a single meal outside @Rs.3/-, it was very costly for us. However, for a better quality meal, we occasionally cough up with that extra Rs.2/-.

In one of those such occasions, after taking a delicious meal (as I felt) in the hostel we went to the washroom where Nilesh asked me about the subzi (curry) which was served on that day as he was not very comfortable with the taste. The moment he asked the question, I felt like committing a crime by not stopping Nilesh from taking mutton keema, a hardcore non-vegetarian item. I told him, 'I am so sorry, I should have told you that, it was mutton keema, which you might be knowing, a hardcore non-vegetarian food!'

To my relief, smiling back he told, 'No problem, since I did not vomit at the time of taking the mutton keema, neither I shall die due to food poisoning nor it will be counted as a unforgivable sin for me after my death! It may be the wish of the God! However, I cannot guarantee that you will not be sent to hell for your crime!'

Thus, though he had given me a clean chit, I realised that I was indirectly instrumental for providing Akhadya to my vegetarian friend on that day.

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)

EPISODE-10

Fish Pakoda

When I was posted in a remote place of our country, I happened to visit many remote villages of that area to collect information for providing inputs for National and provincial planning and implementation of different schemes. During one of those visits to a particular village, I had to stay back due to breaking down of my vehicle, though initially I had a plan to come back to the nearest town. After, few months I came to know that the driver managed to win over a damsel from the nearby village, who finally eloped with him. Therefore, I was not sure whether the car was actually broken down or it was a piece of fake information. Whatever, may be the reason, we had to stay in the village for that fateful night.

The village headman was kind enough to arrange our stay for the night. When dinner was served, a crispy item drew my attention. It was of good taste and I took few mouthful of those crispy items.

After dinner when I asked the host about the crispy food, he told me those were silk/ endi worms. After extraction of silk yarns from the cocoon, the worms are fried which is good source of protein. Incidentally, it was my first taste of silk/ endi worms and I thought it was an Akhadya for me. However, afterwards, I came to know through different books and periodicals that different types edible worms are not only sold in many world class cities as delicacies but also are available as packaged meals. These are sold as pickles, jams and other packed food items almost in entire world. Sometimes, lack of proper information/ knowledge leads to a wrong impression about some food items which in turn many people may think that those are Akhadya. Therefore, as I grow older, I have a realization that anything tasty and digestible cannot be an Akhadya. But who cares for my realization! Please read the following paragraphs you will able to understand that how my realization falls flat to many.

A very senior Bengali officer (now retired) invited few of us for a dinner at his NOIDA residence. Incidentally, all the invitees were pure non vegetarian except me (me a fishitarian, as already mentioned earlier). As he was aware of my non-vegetarian status, he told me beforehand that different types of fish will be in the menu along with chicken.

At the designated time, we reached his place by hiring a taxi. We took the driver to the dinner party along with us as advised by the host (He was staying alone and being a very good cook he loves cooking). Before meal, we were served hard drinks with fried chicken. As I do not take chicken, as mentioned above, he loudly said, 'Since Borah is not taking chicken, I specially have prepared these pokora(a kind of fried snacks) for Borah.'

Our driver was a pure vegetarian who thought that I am also pure vegetarian like him and therefore, he shared my fish pakoras thinking vegetable pakoras. When my driver was relishing fish pakoras, I also did not think much about it.

Dinner was a grand affair. A number of dishes of fish and chicken along with vegetarian dishes were served. Expensive drinks were also flowed like water.

While coming back, we all praised the culinary skill of our host. The driver was also gaga over the magnanimity of the host, 'Sir is great, otherwise now-a-days, who calls the driver to join a party! He is also a very good cook. What a pakora he had made!'

On this I commented, 'Yes, knowing that I am not taking chicken, he took the pain to prepare boneless fish pakora for me.'

'What? Those were fish pakoras! Not vegetable pakoras! Sir, I am pure vegetarian-fish is forbidden for me!'

'Relax man, drive cautiously. You have not done a sin. More than 90% population of the world are taking fish. None of them will go to hell after their death only because of eating fish.' I told him coolly.

He was not convinced. According to him he had taken an Akhadya on that day for which he might be going to hell after his death. I consoled him that, he would meet all of us in hell in that case and would be possible to attend another party with our boss.

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-11

Amrit Bhojan

During my field posting I had to visit a hamlet well inside a forest of Assam in 1998/99 as one of my Assistant Superintendents was so impressed with the beauty of the place, he requested me to visit the village once. Normally, we do not go to the same place where a supervisory officer had already visited. On his insistence I had to visit that village for which I shall remain grateful to the Assistant Superintendent for two reasons: one for the beauty of the place and other one for the exceptional hospitality offered by the local Forest officer during my stay in the village little over 10 hours.

The forest was running through the banks of mighty Brahmaputra, the largest river of India. The forest is full of exotic flora and fauna. I could not understand how the human settlement exists well inside the boundary of that forest! I am told that the hamlet, consist of mostly tribal people, is a very old one and therefore they have the right over the minor products of the forest and they are also given the responsibility of protecting the forest animals from the poachers and other antisocial elements of the neighbouring villages. They have normally very cordial relations with the forest department. The Forest officer posted during my visit had also a very good relation with the local people.

The Forest officer, Ramen Saikia sent an invitation to us for the lunch as he was informed well in advance about my visit, not due to courtesy but as per forest rule (Without permission of the forest authority one cannot enter any forest). Had I not got that invitation, I would have left the hamlet without any food as there was not a single eatery within the periphery of 10 KM of the hamlet. The next town where small restaurants are available might be 30-35 KM away from the boundary of the forest.

After completing my official work, I reached the forest bungalow by one O' clock. It was a hot humid summer, therefore cold drinks served by a forest guard just after entering into the drawing room gave us much needed relief. The wife of the Forest Officer, Mrs. Anjana Saikia, a lady of around thirty five, came with a Namaskar (Indian style of saluting) and apologized for the absence of her husband, who had to go to District Head Quarters for an urgent meeting. After few minutes of conversations I came to know that she was from my parental District Head Quarters and her husband was from Guwahati.

After fifteen minutes or so, lunch was served. It was really a good one, may be due to we were too hungry to eat something. Otherwise also, culinary skill of the cook was reflected in all the dishes and even a miser in appreciation has to appreciate the food what we were served. We thanked the host for the beautiful lunch and we were about to stand indicating finishing of our lunch. At this, the lady requested us to take a sweet dish which was specially prepared for us.

It was payas/payasam (sweetened rice in Assamese style) served in well decorated glass ware. I have always weakness for payas for which I am always taunted by family members. But, the moment I put some of payas in my mouth, I felt like spitting it out; taste was horrible lest to say. I had never found such an awful taste of payas in my life before! But somehow I controlled my facial expression and eyebrows to avoid any embarrassment of the host. Mrs. Saikia with a nervous smile said, 'I do not know the taste of the payas. May not be that good! Actually it was prepared by my son, Pritom and he insisted to serve to the guests.'

When I came to know that the payas was prepared by their son, the taste of payas was fast changing in my mouth, I felt, that it was not that bad. I imagined about the feeling when my own children prepare something for me. I always found those items prepared by my children better than any five star hotel delicacies. Taste of food does not depend only upon the taste buds, but sometimes it is controlled by few centimetres above those. I started to like the payas so much that I finished it quickly and requested for little more. At this Mrs. Saikia was extremely delighted and called her son, 'Pritom, your payas is very tasty! Uncle asks for little more. Can you bring some more, my sweetheart?'

A boy with down syndrome (popularly known as mongoloid child) came out from behind the curtains with a grin. It was a moment, I cannot forget in my life time. He was about eight year old. I stood up from my seat and picked him up in my arms and I smacked a kiss on his face and uttered, 'My son, you have prepared amrit (a heavenly legendary sweet food item by eating which a person can be immortal-as per Indian mythology) for all of us.' I could not speak much as my voice was choked with emotions.

A few minutes ago what I thought to be an Akhadya came out to be an amrit-probably that is the irony of life. Sometimes, we fail to understand/ recognize true value of a gem. I left their bungalow with a satisfaction, which was hitherto unknown to me.

As a selfish person, slowly I forget the taste of that Amrit.

After few years, I got a shocking news from a police officer who is a close friend of mine that the boy was killed by a domesticated elephant during the impulse of 'mast'. It is a state of mind of a male elephant/ tuskar during attaining heat (for sex) when it behaves violently towards anybody and everybody. The boy approached the elephant, like any other day, with some banana but the elephant kicked the boy so hard that he succumbed to his injuries immediately. When the elephant came out of 'mast', became very remorseful about his deed and refused take any food item for many days. But by the time damage had already been done.

The face of grinning boy disturbed me for many days after hearing about the incident.

Now, whenever somebody talks about amrit, I remember the grin of that boy, who is no more, my eyes automatically become moist.

(Names, place and situations have been changed to protect the privacy of the bereaved family.)

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-12

OOZING BLOOD

It was 14th August, 2001. During a visit to my field office, I was attending a dinner party hosted by an organisation along with one of my best friend Vinay. As usual, after a drink or so, the petite host, Madhuri, a young lady in her twenties, requested the senior officers to share some unique experiences of 15th August, the Independence Day of India.

All of us one by one shared some experiences of 15th August. When my turn came, I told them about my school days' Independence Day programme where I used to take part in the march past as a cadet scout. I told, how still we cherished the memory of eating water soaked salted grams which were distributed after the parade sitting on the lawn with green grass which was trimmed before any event organised by local administration.

Many of the guests took their turn to tell their experiences. But during all these presentations my friend, Vinay was sitting with a gloomy face, which was uncommon for him being a very jolly person. When his turn came he started with a gloomy note, 'My experience of last Independence Day was something very special but not very rosy, as most of my previous speakers have narrated their beautiful and lively experiences. It was like a story of a person, rather about a young boy, who sacrificed his youthful life for the sake of a ungrateful family though you may dub it as a story of Indian melodrama only.' He paused for a moment.

There was a pin drop silent in the hall. Then he started, 'Last year I was posted as the SP (Superintendent of Police) of XXXXXXXX district. As the jail was also coming under my administrative control, I visited the jail along with some of my staff to distribute sweets to the prisoners. Though I was with them only for few hours, a young prisoner of early twenties caught my attention. He was extremely nice in his behaviour, he was soft and appeared to be very caring.' Vinay again paused for a minute or so.

'The boy was undoubtedly the darling for most of the prisoners and also for most of the staff members including the jailor. On enquiry, the jailor told me that the unfortunate boy has been serving imprisonment for life for killing his own sister in law in the fit of anger. He told me that, killing was so brutal, that the IO (Investing officer), a veteran of twenty years of investigation, was so shocked that he returned to the place where dead body was lying after composing himself for five minutes outside the room. The severed dead body of the lady was lying amidst of pool of blood. The body was severed to a number of pieces.' Vinay stopped again. I was hearing sound of my own breathing.

'Then the boy with blood soaked cloth sitting near the dead body was arrested. The trial did not take a very long course though the motive of the killing was not clear to the investigating team. Whether it was a case of illicit love affairs or some economic reasons led to the heinous crime, neither the prosecutors nor the defending counsel were clear. All along, the boy was insisting that he was late for his classes and his sister in law was not serving his breakfast which led an argument. After few minutes he could not control his anger and at first he chopped off the head and as his anger did not subsided and therefore, he continued to stab her. In the process her body had been severed so badly.' Vinay took a glass of water before starting the story again.

'After distributing sweets to all the prisoner, I called the boy to the room of the jailor and told other persons to leave the place so that I could talk the boy in camera. I asked the boy, why he had killed his sister in law. Initially he repeated the same story. I put my hand on his

shoulders and asked him again. I told him that (though I did not have any) I had specific information that he had a very cordial relation with his sister in law; having such a good relation nobody can kill a person for serving breakfast late or something trivial issues like that. To get the truth, I intentionally hurt his sentiment by asking a question, did he have an illicit relation with his sister in law, as many people had suspected. I noticed, tears were flowing from his eyes, with a choked voice he told me that she was like his own elder sister and she also used to treat him as her younger brother. He was the only person in his family to whom she confides everything. He kept for a few moments. Then he said, this was known to every family member and in wildest dream also, no family member, including his brother suspected her on that accounts. Then, why he killed her?' Vinay waited for a longer time to see the reactions of the audience.

Then he told the story behind the killing of that lady.

Ramala was married to Hemen three years back from a neighbouring village. Hemen is a clerk in a PWD office. Hemen's father died just after the birth of Niloy who happened to be the fourth child of a school teacher Madan, who died in a fatal accident when his bicycle was mowed down by a truck while he was on his way to the school. Many in the village blamed the new born Niloy as a baby with bad omen.

In due course of time, Niloy passed his matriculation with flying colours. However, due to financial constraints, he had to study in the local college in arts stream even though he wanted to be a doctor. Hemen was twelve years elder than Niloy and in between there were two sisters.

After Hemen's marriage their lives became topsy-turvy. There was at least one fight in the family on daily basis, mostly because of financial reasons. The sisters of Hemen had a regular fight with the couple for neglecting them and their mother due to Ramala. Niloy was the only person who was rational and tried to mediate the fights whenever he was around.

Hemen was fed up with all these quarrel between his wife and his family members. Further, their relation soured due to failure to conceive by Ramala even after almost three years of marriage. On that fateful day, there was a big fight between his wife and his mother. He almost dragged his wife to his room and told her to keep mum. Instead of keeping mum, she vented her anger on her husband by accusing him of being partisan to his mother and sisters. At this, Hemen told her as 'BAJI'(Infertile lady who is not capable of conceiving). Ramala again instead of backing down, told him that she was not infertile, contrary to that he was impotent and even was not capable to satisfy her sexual urges. That was too much for Hemen to digest, he picked up the 'Daa' (matchet/dagger) and threaten her to chop off her head. Even then, Ramala was not ready to relent. After that what happened, even Hemen could not recollect, and when he got his senses, he realized that he chopped off her head. Even after killing her, he repeatedly cut her body into pieces. The commotion attracted Niloy to his brother's room and saw the unthinkable. Within no time he snatched the daa from his brother and put all the oozing blood on his shirt and cried out, 'I have killed my na-bou(sister in law). Do not come near to me, I may kill anybody, demon is dancing in my head'.

Why he did it? He did it to save the service of his brother, on whom all the five persons were economically dependent. He understood, if his brother became the accused, he would immediately lose his job. Getting a lower level Government job is tougher than even meeting the real God, in most part of the world, particularly in developing countries. After Niloy's arrest, Hemen met him in the lock up and offered him to tell the truth. Niloy convinced his brother not to tell anybody, including their family members, about the truth for the sake of his job and other economic compulsions.

Whole village, entire relatives condemned Niloy saying that he was not only a bad omen(killed his father indirectly), but actually grown up to be a brutal murderer. Everybody says, he ended a beautiful (what is then ugly???) married life of his brother. He might be also instrumental for not getting any marriage proposal for his sisters. During court proceedings Niloy was attacked by relatives of his sister in law by throwing stones at him. But Niloy was unfazed and consistent about his statements.

Except God, only two persons -one is serving in the jail as a culprit and another one is dragging a burden of selfish uncooperative family and a sin for which his younger brother is languishing a horrible life in jail, knew the truth. It would have been a mystery for Vinay also till his inquisitive nature prevailed over Niloy's determined wall of consistent false statements.

Niloy requested Vinay not to tell the story to anybody. Vinay did not tell the story for last 365 days(Year 2000 was a leap year) but could not carry the burden anymore. From the morning, he was thinking to tell the story to someone, and the young lady host gave him the required opportunity.

For few minutes silence ruled the room.

Dinner was served by the schedule time at 10 PM. But I felt as if the food served to us mixed with oozing blood of that lady. I felt an attack of nausea! I felt the smell of human blood all over! All the food served us became Akhadya to me. I could not take any food. Many of those present in the party left the room without taking food. Vaani, wife of Vinay scolded him for spoiling the party for all. Vinay seems not to be concerned at all! His face became relaxed.

Still some of the guests were drinking hard drinks and gulping food of their choices as if nothing had happened/ nothing had been heard!!!!

(Names of all the characters, place of incidents, situations are changed to honour the privacy of the persons involved.)

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-13

Real Hard drinks

This time I am writing about a person's experience with real akhadya in the hands of his own wife.

A couple of years back, when I noticed absence of a doctor friend in a party I asked his closest friend why he was not present. 'He had to face a tragic incident.' By saying that, my friend laughed like a typical/ stereotype villain of a Hindi film. From his laughter, we all were sure that nothing serious had happened to him, but something funny must have happened to him.

Even after our repeated request he did not reveal anything to us till his third peg. After taking third peg, even without any request from our side, he started to tell the reason for the absence of his friend.

On the eve of new years day some friends sans their families had a gala party at a resort situated at the city boundary. The party went on till 2 AM of the New Year. They left one by one by driving their cars or cars driven by their drivers. Our friend had to come by his own car and he did not have a driver either. But unfortunately, our friend was so drunk that he was not in a position to drive his car at that moment. Some of his friends asked him if he required any assistance which he negated with filthy language. As all the friends had already left, he had no alternative but to drive his car heading towards home. After driving a distance finally he stopped the car at the edge of an over bridge leading to his house, a few kilometres away. Luckily for him, he did not forget to switch on the parking light.

A police party on patrolling duty stopped their vehicle to enquire about the stranded vehicle of our friend. But our friend was not in position to tell anything except showing his identity card to the police. Had he not been a senior surgeon of a reputed Government Hospital, he would have been detained by the police. The police party also had a hearty laugh and put some branches of trees so that his vehicle could be seen from a distance by other passing vehicles to avoid any accidents.

By the time the worried wife, called all his friends to know about his whereabouts. All the friends had to leave the beautiful kick and cosy sleep of four/ five pegs. All of them were abusing him in absentia for giving trouble by saying, 'S—if you cannot digest/ control who told you to drink so much, b—b--!' Nevertheless they started the search operation immediately and finally located his vehicle and drove him back home safely.

After all his friends left for their home, our friend asked his wife for a glass of water. Though he was expecting some fireworks from his wife, his wife coolly handed over a glass of water. After taking a sip or two he stopped drinking the water as he realized the water is not ordinary one and having a very strong pungent smell. But he could not muster the courage to ask his wife why the water was so smelly. Again he fell asleep and got up only at around 10AM. He saw the half glass was still lying there. He tried to smell it and immediately realized what was it.

He peeped into the kitchen and saw his wife was cooking something. Hearing him coming she told him, 'Don't worry, it was not mine, it was your elder son's'.

Afterwards, he had sworn in front of his family members that he would never drink again.

I do not know how long he had kept his promise. After that incident I met many times but I am yet to ask him, what was the taste of elder son's (about twelve year old, at that time) U--- assuming that he had wits (after taking so much hard drinks) to remember the taste.

NB: This article should not be read by our beloved and loyal wives. Even if they read it, they should not follow it in true spirit!!!!

**AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-14**

Tamol-Pan/Kowai

Once upon a time if anybody had to visit Kamrup erstwhile name of Assam, a State/province of India located eastern part of the country, he was warned that he would be made a goat or sheep and he would never be able to come back to his home due to strong magical powers of the people living there, particularly due to black magic performed by the women folk of that place. I do not know, how far those perceptions are from the reality, but I am sure some ladies may/might have the magical power of making their husbands sheep/goats / slaves due their divine or otherwise charms and beauty! May be true for all the ladies in the world! Still my male friends from other regions may rue, why they were also not made sheep/goats / slaves, once they see the beautiful girls of North East with unadulterated giggles in their lips.

North Eastern Regions is famous for its natural beauty, hill stations, waterfalls, National parks, tiger reserves, sanctuaries, cottage industries and of course tea gardens. Nowadays many tourists from other parts of India are thronging North East due to Government of India's LTC(Leave Travel Concession for the employees of the Union) policy and much needed improvement of law and order in these states. So far foreign tourists are concerned, visit to Assam, due its famous National park, Kaziranga, known for one horned rhino, have been steady since independence of India. However, now a good number of tourists from different parts of India are visiting the National park. A good number of budget hotels are coming up in the vicinity of the park. To see the park from inside, one can go by elephants or by gypsy/ jeep/ SUV etc which are provided by the forest department of Assam. This is one of the parks in India where one can see hundreds of elephant and rhinoceros at broad day light from a distance of 20-30 metres. Hordes of small animals are also seen as appetizers only. However, tiger is seen only by the lucky ones. One can hire taxi from Guwahati to visit this park which is around 200 KM from Guwahati. Public transport is also very convenient to this park. There are some other famous tiger reserves, sanctuaries in Assam which can also be visited with proper planning.

At Guwahati, gateway for North Eastern States, many five stars hotels are coming up indicating that number of visits of high end tourists are increasing in last few years. Number of ethnic eateries is also increasing enormously in most of towns in last few years. A good number of modern spa and health care facility are also coming up. Connectivity between two major cities, namely Guwahati and Shillong has improved so much that it takes only two hours now compared to five to six hours a couple of years back. Tourists' spots are made more tourists friendly than few years back. Cab drivers are also becoming more tourists friendly and more informative. General public were always friendly to the tourists but now they have now more professional approach knowing that this one sector (tourism) which has more potential for economic improvement than any other sectors in North Eastern Region.

So if you visit a five star Hotel or attend a high profile meeting, you are always welcome by giving a traditional Gamocha (in Assam), Naga Shawl (In Nagaland), Manipuri Shawl (In Manipur) and so on. You will enjoy the hospitality of these people which is pure in terms simplicity and honesty. People are normally very helpful to the outsiders though there are some occasional complaints from some corners that few selected group of people are not very welcome due to some historical and political reasons. So far so good!

In Assamese culture, if you visit any Assamese family, particularly in rural areas, you may be offered tamol ekhan (betel nut /areca nut with betel leaf- ekhan means one set of ---) or tamol –paan. In Assamese society, tamol paan has maximum possible social value compared to any other items used by Assamese people, particularly in rural areas. To elicit this, suppose somebody commits a crime or hurt the sentiment of seniors/ villagers / society, with folded hands, if he /she offers tamol paan to the aggrieved party, normally the person is pardoned. Otherwise tamol-paan is consumed after meal and addicted persons are chewing tamol-paan at any time. In Northern India and other parts of the country, people use to chew paan where dry areca nut (supari) is used along with betel leaf (paan). I do not know if this type paan has any social value or not. So far, I have not heard anything about that in my interactions with villagers of the most of the states I have visited (31/36) states and Union Territories of India.

But as a food item, main difference between tamol-paan and paan used in other parts of India, is about tamol/ superi used by Assamese people is raw tamol whereas others use the dried one. Another minor difference is the quantity of tamol in tamol-paan is much more compared to paan leaf whereas paan takes the centre stage in paan.

Why I am writing so much on tamol-paan? This is an akhadya for most of the people from outside the North East Region. If without precaution someone takes it, he may feel uneasiness or dizziness or a spate of reeling of head. It becomes very scary for the person who consumes and for those persons who never had an experience of that kind. It is said if someone does not take remedial actions immediately, some damage may happen –from temporary to permanent. If you find yourself in such a situation or your friend faces this problem, do not panic, simply spit it out and take some sugar/ toffee /éclairs, lime or salt water at the first instance and you/he will get relief immediately.

You might be thinking that I am vociferous and ardent lover of tamol paan. Yes, I was but, unfortunately, I left taking tamol paan at a tender age of ten when my new shirt was tarnished by tamol-paan on the first day of Bihu (It is the main festival of Assamese people and falls in middle of April) festival. During our childhood days we were given new dress twice in a year, one at the time of Bihu and next pairs were given during Durga Puja (September/October). After spoiling my shirt I wept a lot and finally I promised to myself on that day, I would never take tamol paan in my life. However, I had to break my promise after joining to service as my second and subsequent two/ three postings demands good public relation. When people offer tamol paan in rural areas, it was not possible for me to refuse to take tamol paan which might have hurt the sentiment of the people, particularly, poor people who were not in a position to offer anything else otherwise.

Visit of North East cannot be completed without visiting Shillong, (from British era known as Scotland of East), Cherapunji, the other important place, known for highest rainfall (now the place Maushinram, some twenty KM from Cherapunji has taken over that distinction), the opencast coal mines, the caves with ancient sculptures and very beautiful all season Bishop-Bidon falls, Elephanta falls. Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, once upon a time combined capital of Assam including Meghalaya and Mizoram, is a large hilly city with population of more than three hundred thousand. The city is full of good hotels, resorts and lodges for night stay. Beautiful Shillong lake is a place for evening stroll for the locals and tourists. The tall pine trees and golf courses give a serene feeling for the first timers to this mystic land.

However, if you visit Meghalaya there is a chance that you will be offered kowai. Kowai is nothing but tamol-paan of Meghalaya. However, it may be little bit stronger version of tamol-paan of Assam. They use more limestone (eatable) along with tobacco which becomes a lethal

combination for the teetotaller. A person who is not sloshed even after five pegs, it may not be lethal, but I have seen even up to four peggers invites trouble after tasting kowai in Shillong.

If you visit, Arunachal, I bet you, you will awestruck by the beautiful orchids. If you are on a pilgrimage you must have to visit Tawang monastery, at 14000 feet above the sea level. But again you have to come across dreaded tamol paan and apong(rice beer). Apong is light but if you do not know the local custom, you may end up with fully sloshed man! Unless you put your glass upside down, apong would be poured in your glass, till you are out of sense!

Names may be different, but whole North Eastern part of India, the use of tamol paan is quite high and intoxication power of these varieties is normally more than simple paan of other parts of India. But one similarity between paan and tamol paan, one cannot ignore, both are nuisance for 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan' launched by the present Government!!!!!!!!!!!! I am told, once, an Assamese millionaire declared if anybody can show him an electric post without stain of limestone throughout the state (province), a prize money would be given. So far nobody could claim the prize money! Similarly, in most part of India (I cannot tell about other countries), you might have noticed photographs of God, Goddess, Mosque, Church, Gurudwara etc. at the corners of hospitals and other public buildings to deter tamol paan or paan chewing brigades from spitting and marking their audacious public behaviour.

Long live tamol-paan chewing brigades sans the bad habit of spitting at public places!

**AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-15**

My lord, it was madhu

Have you ever tasted madhu?

What is madhu? Is it honey? Yes, if you know Sanskrit, madhu means honey.

But this word has different meaning across my lovely country. Sometimes even in same language in different context, meaning of madhu may be different. Anybody can argue, 'this may be true for every other word'. Yes, I do agree with that argument. However, as my topic being akhadya, I must caution you not to take an akhadya thinking as a khadya as per your perception(I always advocate nothing is akhadya as long you can digest it and it is found to be tasty).Therefore, while you say 'yes' for taking madhu, think twice. Or alternatively, ask specifically, 'what is the item/ food' by saying madhu. Otherwise you may invite deep trouble for self and put the offering person in an awkward position unwittingly.

When my posting was at a state capital of a North Eastern Region, a newly acquainted friend asked me whether I would like to take madhu. I was a teetotaller at that time. I told him that I did not have any habit of taking madhu except in the morning that too with bread only. My answer perplexed him. He thought how a person can take madhu with bread that too in the morning only. Somehow, his wife was much wiser and she clarified, madhu, her husband meant was country liquor and madhu I meant was honey. I told him that being a teetotaller, I was not in a position to oblige him. Our friendship did not last for long time, though his wife and my wife became friends and it continued till we left the place on my transfer.

After, few years in another town, during another field visit, I was offered madhu, which I turned down on the same pretext that I was a teetotaller. This time the person who offered me madhu, clarified that he knew that I was a non-drinker, but his offer was not for hard drinks but for a guest of opposite sex for the night. Again I had to turn down his offer as I was a devoted husband in those days (now also, any doubt)! Sometimes, I feel right proposals are not coming to the right person at right time!!!!!!!!!!!!

Again when I was posted in another place, I had some problems in dealing with a dealer of electronic goods, who sold me some electric gadgets which were not working properly. The dealer neither replaced those nor ready to repair. As I was completely new to that place, I asked my landlord about the problem. He assured me that the goods will be replaced by the evening of that day itself. He kept his promise and I thanked him profusely. At this he said, actually he did not do anything, everything was done by Madhu. I thought Madhu must be his daughter or wife(I did not know names of either one). I told him to convey my thanks to her(Madhu). He smiled mysteriously while saying 'ok' to me.

After few days, a huge muscular man of mid twenties saluted me while I was on my way to office, 'Sir, your electrical gadgets are working properly or not?'

'Yes, those are working perfectly fine. But, how do you know that, those were not working?' I asked him with some element of surprise.

'Oh, sorry sir! I have not introduced myself! I am Madhu, nephew of Hari uncle(Hari Singh was my landlord).'

"I am also sorry, I could not recognize you!"

‘It does not matter, you are our guest. Any problem, tell me without any hesitation. Everything will be fixed in no time.’

Later on, I came to know that he was the problem for the entire locality. But he was never been a problem for me as I was a tenant of his own uncle.

So if you come across a ‘Madhu’ be sure, is it a food item or not, if yes, confirm it whether is it in the ‘khadya list’ or in the ‘akhadya list’, as originally prepared by your mother, which is revised time to time at your sweet will. If it is a name of a person, try to find out the gender of the person. If however, it represents a group of persons, you have to take a decision whether you want to remain a good boy or a bad man!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-16

You are invited by the head of the family, wife does not know

Have you ever faced such type of situation when your friend invited for a lunch/dinner, but his wife and his family members were not informed beforehand ? I shall narrate a story when I still feel bad whenever I remember the episode, when I was invited by a relative of us (I do not want to mention from which side, because some people become your relatives after your marriage and vice versa. After your marriage, number of your relatives becomes just double.), for lunch, reportedly without the knowledge of his wife and his college going daughter.

The incident took place in 1994. The gentleman, who was a close relative for both of us(!!!!) invited my family for a lunch. When at the designated time we reached their house, we got shock of the life to know that his wife did not know that we were invited for the lunch. The wife of the gentleman was a nice lady, she defended her husband by commenting that he might have forgotten to inform. I must appreciate the extreme polite behaviour of the lady as in the same situation, my wife would not have taken the faux pa so lightly, even though that particular husband never used to help his wife in cooking as much as I do to my wife. She apologetically told that, the lunch would be little late due to lack of information about the invitation. Though, I offered to leave the place along with my family, but due to insistence of the gentleman and his wife we had to stay back for lunch.

At that time, my two children were seven and five and naturally they were little bit naughty and had the habit of making lot of noises. Noises made by our children might be intolerable to the college going daughter of the host for which she closed the door of her room. For that, I cannot blame the girl, as probably my children disturbed the girl too much! Therefore, at that time, I did not mind about her behaviour towards my children.

When, as expected, lunch was little bit delayed, the girl with a loud voice, which was audible to me very clearly (she might be doing that intentionally so that I could hear those words clearly without iota of ambiguity), said to his mother, ‘why people are coming for lunch without any invitation to disturb others!’

I was stunned to hear those words. I told my wife to leave the place immediately. But as she did not hear those words, or pretended not hear those words, she was not ready to leave the place. The host and the wife of the host also conveniently ignored the caustic remarks of their daughter avoiding admonishment to their pampered daughter. Indifference shown by my wife and the host to the most disgusting remarks hurt my sentiment to the core.

When, after ten-twenty minutes, I was invited to take lunch, I saw a number of dishes were prepared by that nice lady, who unfortunately had no courage or intention to admonish her daughter. It might be that, I was a non-entity for the nice lady and misbehaviour by her daughter might be a non-issue. At the dining table, I tried to take something which otherwise would have been relished by me; but I could not eat those properly. Her statement echoed in my ears again and again. I felt so bad that, I could not push anything beyond my mouth. I left the dining table after five minutes or so. The indifferent host asked me, why I had left the lunch so hurriedly, wasn't I hungry. My wife and children took lunch normally. For me the lunch was akhadya and for other members of my family, the lunch was proper khadya.

I do not know whether it was a coincidence or something else, from the next day I had a severe stomach-ache for which I had to do ultrasound of my stomach (for the first time in my

life) and luckily for me, nothing was found wrong. But I realized, I should have skipped the akhadya lunch then and there itself. Forceful eating of an akhadya is worse than going hungry for a day or two!

Till now whenever, I recall that day, I feel sick about the akhadya and the persons involved!!!!

**AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-17**

Do not take beer, wife will doubt you

‘Do not take beer, wife will doubt you.’

Have you ever get such type of advice from your friend, any time, any place? I got it few years back from a friend who works in defence force. He explained me with little bit of hesitation, ‘you see, if you take lot of beer, you have to go to toilet many times at night.’

‘So what?’ I could not get his point.

‘You see, she will know that you are awake, but not making any move towards her, as she pretends to sleep. The fact of the matter is that you are not making any move as you love her and do not want to disturb her in her sleep.’ He tried to explain; but I could not understand.

‘So what!’ I wanted more explanation.

‘You see, we have a young maid. My wife thought I wanted to go to her room. But since I could not get the courage to do that I was going to bathroom.’

‘Did she confront you on this issue?’ I wanted to know.

‘You see, she did not. But from her behaviour in the next morning I doubted.’ He again tried to explain.

‘I saw enough. I am sure your wife had not doubted you, unless you have a bad previous record. Moreover, do not tell others what you have told to me. Otherwise, some will doubt your character and some will think you are mentally sick. For your information, I do not like beer though I had to take beer sometimes due to different compulsion. Further, I do not have a young maid in my house.’ As I concluded he was looking at me as if had not heard anything.

Why I recall this piece of unwanted foolish advice now? Recently one of my friends had severe stomach pain and was diagnosed that he was suffering from kidney stone. Luckily for him, the size of the stone was not very big. He was advised that he should take lot of water so that stone would flush out.

A lesser mortal like me advised him to take beer as it is thought, beer will give lot of thrust for pushing out the stone from the kidney through urination. But my friend is a teetotalter and refused to take beer even as a medicine.

Normally, Indian wives are very much against drinking of any alcoholic substance by their husbands. But when husband of any lady falls ill, to save him she will insist her husband to take even poison as a medicine. It is a known fact that, to save husband, an Indian lady can go upto any extent! In this case also, wife of my friend insisted her husband, he should take beer as medicine. But my friend was adamant, at any cost he would not take that ‘akhadya’(beer).

Finally, they requested me to come over to their residence to sort out the problem. I, with all my oratory skill tried to convince my friend that beer is not an akhadya as 90% male and more than 50% female have tasted beer at least once in their life time.

‘If stone is not out after taking lot of water, what will happen? I may be operated? I shall prefer for an operation, but I am not going to take beer.’ He finally declared.

I did not have an answer to that. Both husband and wife were not happy with me-husband for insisting to take an akhadya and wife for not able to convince her husband to take beer as medicine! I left their house like a soldier whose army has been defeated at the border.

After reaching home, I opened my whisky bottle telling my wife that doctor had advised me to take a peg everyday as a medicine for having a good heart!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I always address my wife

as 'sweet-heart, darling, most loved one etc' after the second peg, one peg does not open the gate of my precious heart. So, should my wife give permission for the second one? Hope so!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

**AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-18**

Monkey and Crow soup

In 1995, I was transferred from a state capital to New Delhi in the same capacity. As per my wife's version, I am the most foolish person in the service who cannot manage his boss for which I am transferred quite frequently. I do not know whether she is correct or not but I was made a transfer wary person in my service cadre. Someone advised me not to open my holdall fully so that packing would not take time.

On the very first day, 19th January, 1995 after submitting my joining report to the Under Secretary, I tried to meet Umesh Sharma (name changed) who happened to be my class mate as well as my batch-mate of my Service. At first, I tried to meet him, because he was working in the same office in the Ministry where I had to join and he is one of the closest friends of my life with whom I have shared everything in my life; good as well as bad. Further, our bonding is coming from the fact that we were from the same social and economical background. But when I went to his room to meet him, he was at his boss's chamber and therefore, I inquired his PA whether anyone else from our batch was posted and present in that day in the building. He told me the names of few officers, who, according to him, might be from our batch. One of the names he mentioned was one of my classmates, Saraswati (name changed), who happened to be my classmate during my university days, but not my batch-mate- rather, she is one year senior to me in service.

She was sitting in her room alone and she welcomed me with her open arms. I felt, she was on that day not at the best of her health, spirit and mood. She is like a little (because she was very small in size compared to my body size) elder sister to me, though only a few months' older than I.

'What is the matter, my little sister? Are you not well?' I asked her with a genuine concern in my voice.

'You are absolutely right, I was not well for the last three weeks. I was on medical leave for last three weeks and I joined to my duties today only. Now slowly I am recovering, though not fully recovered.' She replied with a faint smile. 'I was suffering from jaundice after taking monkey soup.' She was trying to cut a joke, as I know that she is a perfect vegetarian.

Then she told me the horrific story no one like to share nor remember.

Though her office is located at a central location of New Delhi, the area has been infested by lot of monkeys for last so many years. To rein the menace of the monkeys, Government has been taking lot of steps including hiring of languor, nothing has deterred our cousins (Darwin's theory) from doing all sort of nuisance. While doing their curricular and gymnastic activities, one of the monkeys fell into an overhead water tank and died of drowning (conjecture!). As happened to all Government buildings, there was no full proof overseeing system to detect the dead body of the monkey for next few days till water with rotten smell came out from the water dispensers. In the meantime a few employees of the offices located in that building fell ill and my friend was one of them. Many of them recovered quickly and some could not.

'Anyway, how was the soup?' I jokingly asked.

'Anything tastes good, when it is free of cost.' She retorted.

With my NSSO (the largest data collecting organization in the world) DNA, I started my investigation after a couple of days after assuming my official duties. After my personal inquiry/

investigation, I came to know that most of the persons who fell ill were from the pure vegetarian groups. Hey, I am not saying that the non-vegetarian enjoyed the contaminated water as non-vegetarian (monkey) soup!

This story instigates me to share another similar story when a few years back, all members of a relative of mine (in this case all are non-vegetarian) fell ill when a rooster/hen committed suicide(sic!) in their overhead tank. Since this time, the case pertains to my family (they have been my relatives before my marriage to my beautiful, caring and understanding wife!!!), my wife commented, 'it must be a crow, how a rooster would be there, when there is no poultry farm within the vicinity!' I could not defend my relative's version, as she had a point in her statement!

On the lighter note, we can give a statutory warning, having monkey soup or crow soup without payment is injurious to health! (otherwise it may not be so!!!)

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE) EPISODE-19

If you cannot, do not provide food

It is not my story, it was told by a friend of mine, Kanak who had gone through a traumatic patch of life a few years back. His wife was terribly ill for a period of three months and was hospitalized for two and a half months. His two children were very young at that time, daughter was eight year old and son was only three. Up to this point, I knew the situation Kanak had faced, but beyond this point, it is his version of his experience and therefore, veracity of the facts cannot be guaranteed by me. Rest of the story is he told me in confidence.

For others, he should not have any problem as his in laws were staying in the same town and apparently there was no bad blood between him and his in laws. But what Kanak describes his experiences he gained during those days, shocking and heart breaking. But as I am here discussing about akhadya, I shall try to limit my sharing of his experiences to food provided by the in laws during that period.

Initially for ten twenty days after hospitalization of his wife, food was not provided by the family of in laws to Kanak and Kanak used to take food from the filthy food stalls in front of the hospital. One day, when sister in law of Kanak's mother in law(his wife's aunt from father's side) visited the hospital and came to know about the non-supply of food to him, she virtually abused Kanak's sister in law for not taking minimum care to Kanak's health.

For next few days, homemade food was supplied to Kanak, probably very reluctantly. Why he felt so?

For first few days homemade food for night were supplied by 9 O' clock. After that time of arrival of food fluctuated between 7 PM to 10 PM. One day when, food was not coming even upto 10 PM, he could not take a decision whether, he should take his supper at food stall or to wait some more time(during those days mobile phone was not available in India). He decided to stay for some more time as leaving his wife with the casual maid alone after 10 O'clock was also not to be appropriate. Even by eleven, when food did not arrived, he went to the food stall only to be told that no food was available. Finally, he had to survive on that day on the biscuits available with him. Next day, his sister in law, instead of being apologetic, curtly told Kanak that when upto 10 PM food did not come, he should have gone for the supper outside. Kanak did not tell anything.

For the next few days homemade food was coming in time. But it did not last long. Again the time of delivery of supper oscillated between 8 PM to 10 PM. So long so good!

After a week or so, the food supplied to Kanak had some foul smell. For first two days he did not say anything and on third day, when he could not tolerate the same, he mentioned about the foul odour in the supplied to his sister in law. The reply he got is this, 'Since my sister has been married to you, it is your responsibility to look after her. You should be thankful that we are looking after your children so long and providing food also to you. If you do not like our food you do not take those. But do not complain. We have lot of other works also to do.'

From that day he did not take food from his in laws house. He thought taking akhadya from outside unhygienic food stall is better than akhadya from his in-laws house. The former may have more lasting effect on his health and spirit than taking from the later one.

I consoled him at that time, 'You try to understand their problems. They have to look after your children now along with their own works. Your father in law, as you had mentioned once that, he never helps his wife in their household chores. Your sister in law is still a young girl and engaged for her marriage. The family of the groom is insisting for an early marriage (You have already told me that some rituals are going on though your wife is still in her death bed. Your father in law is busy with the carpenters making furniture for the marriage). You are also not in a position to help in the marriage. With so many constraints they are working, you should appreciate them, why you are complaining man!' Though, I also felt at that time, any sensible person would have postponed the marriage till his wife recovers.

Somehow he was not convinced that day. Today also he might have grudge on that.

Luckily for everybody, the lady survived and she got the necessary strength to fight with Kanak with the original and evergreen dialogue of any normal wife, 'You have spoiled my life/ my career. I have sacrificed everything for you and what have you done for me!'

My friend also survived the onslaught of akhadya till date.

Fight is going on till today who had sacrificed more. The issue is yet to be decided!

**AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)
EPISODE-20**

Working Lunch

Are you in Government sector? Or are you in private sector? Wherever you work, you will be able to answer the following questions, probably except the last one. What is a working lunch? How many people are happy with the working lunch served by a particular agency to a particular office for a long time? How many residents of any hostel are happy with the meals served by the hostel management? A few persons are normally happy when those are tasted for the first time. But most of the people are aghast with the food after few days. Why we are not able to relish food prepared by our cook? Why we are able to relish food prepared by our mothers/wives/sisters/daughters/aunts even for years together? I cannot give an answer to this question, though I have been pondering to find an answer of this question for a pretty long time. If anybody can give me a satisfactory answer, I promise you to give a candle lit dinner with your sweetheart, if you can declare that, the sweetheart is other than your spouse or daughter!!!!!!

Who has discovered/ invented words 'working lunch'? When an International organization provides a working lunch is different from working lunch provided by a National Organization. Some working lunch is heavier than normal lunch. What is the idea of giving a working lunch to the participants? Is it a device to prevent from sleeping in the afternoon session? Or is it because, getting sanction (permission) for a working lunch is easier than getting a sanction for normal lunch from the Competent Authority, irrespective of the organization which is hosting any lunch?

Every organisation shortlists a few number of restaurants / hotels/ eateries to provide lunch/ working lunch, high tea etc. The written conditions for selection or short listing of restaurants / hotels/ eateries are like this: They should provide the best food at the lowest cost for which bill for payment would be raised within one month of delivery of the food items, etc. In reality, best food cannot be bought/ supplied at the lowest cost- the condition of raising bill is ok but when actual payment would be made, except God, nobody knows. Under these contradictory conditions, quality of food is the first casualty. If by chance, any of the participants raise the voice regarding quality, he may be politely told that, 'no supplier is ready to supply food at this rate' or 'no supplier is ready to supply food on lending terms set by our organization', etc. If any lesser mortal criticises a little bit more he may be advised, 'please do not to take the supplied food, if not liked by you sir/ madam, or 'sir/ madam, you kindly arrange by yourself.' If anyone tries to take the second advice and spend the necessary amount from his/her pocket, he will curse himself why he had taken the decision when his life will be made hell by the dealing person!

Therefore, you have to take the akhadya, popularly known as working lunch provided by the host, whether you like it or not! Description about working lunch given above are of general nature. Now let me share a specific episode when working lunch went horribly wrong.

The incident happened a few years ago when I had to visit a city which is known for the best non-vegetarian cuisine. In that tour, I was accompanied by a closed friend of mine who is a total vegan. In those days, putting a red or green sign on food article to

identify vegetarian / non-vegetarian food was not prevalent in India. In those days, people use to put some sign to indicate veg / non- veg items. During lunch time, working lunch was served. I got a vegetarian working lunch packet, which I opened and started eating thinking, 'being a city known for the best of the non-vegetarian cuisines, how mean they are to provide us (at that time I was pure non-vegetarian) vegetarian food to save just a few bucks! It is highly deplorable. Huh!'

My friend who was sitting a few seats away from me who came from toilet few minutes after food was supplied, raised his voice and asked the boy who was distributing the packets, 'I think this is non-vegetarian packet. Give me a vegetarian packet.'

The boy with a perplexed look replied, 'Sir, we had only two packets of vegetarian food, one is given to Barman Sir and other was given to Jainsaab from Delhi.' At his answer I thought, the mistake occurred due to non-identification of the vegetarian packet which was given to me.

This time my friend, Mr. Jain had a perplexed look in his eyes and told him, 'I am Jain. Who is the other Jain in the room?'

The boy pointed his finger to me. This time, it was my turn to be perplexed. Then I realized why he had asked me a question before handing over the packet, 'Are you from Delhi, sir?' But he was short of asking me, 'Are you Jainsaab from Delhi?'

Both of us left the meeting venue in search of a proper lunch leaving behind akhadya- the great working lunch!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE) EPISODE-21

Shy person loses the plot!

Marriage celebration in India is as diversified as diversified people living in the country that one cannot say it is 'Indian marriage' or it is not. Though in most of the Hindi films, which may be dubbed as replica of Indian marriage, is regarded as 'Indian marriage' at least outside India are basically Punjabi marriage ceremonies (barring shown in some art films) as Hindi film is basically dominated by Punjabies for a long time. Probably I am making a controversial statement, may not be liked by many of my North Indian friends. As my topic of discussion is Akhadya so let me only narrate a story of my own marriage when one of my 'Bor Jatri' (Persons accompanying the bride groom to the bride's place on the marriage day), could not take his choicest meal due to shyness on his part.

The story is as old as my marriage as mentioned above. I am narrating a story of Putul Hazarika, we fondly called him, Putul Kakaideo, when and how he could not relish the fish curry which he loves most.

He was a true follower of Srimanta Madhabdev, disciple of Srimanta Sankardev who is widely credited with building on past cultural relics and devising new forms of music (Borgeet), theatrical performance (Ankia Naat, Bhaona), dance (Sattriya), literary language (Brajavali). (Srimanta Sankardev has also left an extensive trans-created scriptures (Bhagavat of Sankardev), poetry and theological works written in Sanskrit, Assamese and Brajavali. He also started Bhagavatic religious movement in Assam, known as Ekasarana Dharma and also called Neo-Vaishnavite movement.) Srimanta Madhabdev, most loved disciple of Srimanta Sankardev, was also known as Keolia Bhakat (unmarried/ bachelor worshiper of God Vishnu).

True followers of Srimanta Madhabdev are also unmarried worshiper of God Vishnu. Putul Kakaideo was one of them. Putul Kakaideo had also a saintly look with a pony tail and clad with dhoti without any shirt or inner to cover his upper portion of body. He normally does not wear any woollen cloths like pullover or jacket etc. even in the winter when temperature hovers around 2-3 degrees Celsius in my village and its surrounding areas. As my marriage was on 7th December, temperature of Guwahati might be around 10-12 degrees Celcius at night and at my place it might be around 2-3 degrees Celcius at night. As usual, he did not wear any woollen cloth except one edi chadar(a typical warm shawl used by Assamese people) which gave him a divine look for all and particularly to the young people of bride's family.

In my earlier articles, I had mentioned that vegetarian and non-vegetarian are not defined in absolute terms and mostly overlapping to each other. Putul Kakaideo was also a vegetarian as per his own definition and a conception he inherited from his fore fathers that fish does not qualify to be a non-vegetarian meal for the rural people of his area. He used to take fish but he never took eggs, chicken and other meat and meat products in his life-we were told. Though, in urban part of Assam, vegetarian means who does not take eggs, chicken and other meat and meat products, fish and fish products. Being from rural Assm, he used to think that a vegetarian can take fish without violating the dictum for becoming a keolia bhakat. We can argue his conception or false notion of vegetarianism but we never doubt his sincerity and integrity on following the teachings of the Gurus he followed.

As requested by mother, Putul Kakaideo accompanied me on my marriage as an en-troupe of the groom. As a groom, I was busy in doing all the sundry rituals as per the unwritten rules evolved over the years in our society and therefore, I was completely unaware what happened to the members of the groom party till marriage celebration was over by fifth day of my marriage. On the fifth day, my mother asked me to go to Putul Kakaideo's home with a 'one KG rahu fish' and told me to say sorry for the vegetarian meal without fish he had to take at bride's place.

In those days in Assam, buffet system was not introduced at marriage parties and meals were served with due diligence by the hosts. On that fateful night at my wife's place, following the prevalent practice, meals were served to the groom's en-troupe by some young friends of my brother in law. After distributing vegetarian items, mutton curry was served to the guests. At this Putul Kakaideo told the boys that being a keolia bhakat, mutton curry was akhadya (forbidden food) to him. After mutton curry, fish curry, mughanta (smashed fish with pulses and white guard) and fried fish were served to the guests. At that time, the boys serving meals had taken sufficient precaution that no fish items should go near to Putul Kakaideo. Now, Putul Kakaideo hesitated to tell the boys that fish is consumed by him or it was not akhadya for a keolia bhakat. The other members enjoyed the dilemma of Putul Kakaideo and nobody came forward to help him out of the mess he had made.

For this however, my mother scolded my cousins who were taking dinner with him. My mother felt very bad about the whole episode and directed me to apologize for the crime which I did not commit, at least intentionally. Anyhow, I followed my mother's advice and begged for apology for akhadya versus khadya story. Putul Kakaideo said, 'Do not worry about that my son, I did not have any bad feeling about anybody. It is my fault, I did not clear to anyone what was akhadya to me explicitly. Tell madam, (my mother was addressed as baidew-madam by all the village people except the relatives, irrespective of their age, being a teacher in school) (that) I am very happy for showing her genuine concern for me. Thank her also for her gift.'

I left the place silently praising my mother's wisdom in solving a social problem so nicely which probably I could not have even thought of.

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)

EPISODE-22

To purify your body and mind you are given an akhadya

I am told by one of my friends that, he was given excreta of a particular animal to eat to purify his body and mind after he committed a heinous crime according to his village people by eating meat of that particular animal. I cannot verify the veracity of the story as he told me long time back, precisely some thirty five years back when I was a student of Cotton College, Guwahati and his remote village was some 400 km from Guwahati.

Story goes like this.

He along with his friends went for a picnic during winter vacation. The picnic spot was few km away from his village, so they went for the picnic by hiring a tempo. After reaching the picnic spot, they could not find the packet of meat for the picnic even after a frantic search. They realized that either they did not bring the packet of meat from the shop itself or they lost the packet on the way to the picnic spot. At first they argued and tried to blame each other and at one time they were about to exchange blows among themselves. However, good sense prevailed and decided to buy some meat from the nearby market. But it was not that easy as in those days money was short supplied. After lot of efforts, they managed to gather Rs.10/- for the purpose. In those days, mutton was available Rs.6 /- per kg, so they had decided to buy one and a half kg of mutton for the picnic which was much less than the original amount of 5KG what they had bought.

They had selected the smartest boy for the task and selected another simpleton (boy) to go with him as his assistant. The other boys started cooking of other material for the picnic during that time.

In the market, the boys discovered that price of a particular meat was Rs.3/- per kg. But there was a problem. The meat which were being sold at Rs.3/- per KG, was not allowed to eat in their village as it was termed as akhadya by the villagers. The smart fellow told the assistant that if they would buy the other type of meat, they would be able to buy double the amount in weight. Only hitch was that, as the meat with lesser price was an akhadya for their community people, if their parents would come to know there might be real problem for them.

After little discussion taking pros and cons on the issue, they decided that they would buy the meat which was available at the rate of Rs.3/- per kg and the facts would not be divulged to anybody including the friends left behind at the picnic spot.

All the friends except one, praised their bargaining power to buy meat at Rs.3/- per kg when price of mutton was about Rs.6/- per kg.

At the time of taking their meal, the boy who did not praise the friends who did the marketing, did not take meat on some pretext. By the evening they returned to the village.

Next day, when my friend came from school, the first thing he got from his father was a hard slap on his face. In the next few minutes he came to know that all the boys who went for picnic were summoned by the village Panchayat (group of village elders) for taking akhadya in the picnic party. My friend and his fellow picnickers did not take much time who might have reported about eating of akhadya by them.

The Panchayat also did not take long time to pronounce their verdict. All the boys except the boy who did not take meat on the picnic day, were given the punishment of taking excreta of the animal of whose meat was taken by them.

This type of punishment is very much prevalent in rural areas. But, I could/cannot understand, whether the punishment of forcing the boys to take animal excreta was to purify their bodies and mind OR the punishment was meted out just to humiliate them to deter them from disobeying social and religious dictum. In those days, a village boy (I was also from a village) was tough enough to digest two akhadya in successive days. But I fear now, some of us may have to be hospitalized after taking two akhadya in consecutive days, one for enjoyment and another one as punishment. Luckily none of the picnic party had fallen ill. But the boy who did not take the akhadya was seriously injured in a friendly football match a few days later.

Whatever may be the actual reason, my friend could not muster the courage to take any akhadya till I met him last time a few years back.

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE) EPISODE-23

Akhadya at 40,000 feet above sea level

The commotion attracted everyone on the board while flying from Guwahati to New Delhi a couple of years back. Everyone tried to find the reason of the commotion. The airhostess was trying to pacify an agitated couple for the mistake they (the crew) had committed. At one point the pilot had to come out of the cockpit (hopefully co-pilot was still in the cockpit) to pacify the couple. They were adamant to lodge their protest in writing. Finally they were handed over a complaint format to lodge their complaint. To relief to everyone, pilot went back to the cockpit though the couple were still grumbling! By the time most of us were also able to find out the reason of irritation of the couple. We also found that their grievance was definitely serious in nature. The reason given by the airhostess was not only unconvincing but also laughable.

The couple who visited North East for the first time had a beautiful time till the airhostess handed over the evening snacks to the couple.

In India there are at least 10% of the people where males are taking one or other types of non-vegetarian meals and their wives are total vegans. For record, there are some families who allow the males to take non-vegetarian food outside home but non-vegetarians food are not allowed to cook inside the kitchens and so on.

This couple is also coming under the 10 % group where husbands are taking non-vegetarian food and wives are not taking. Therefore, the husband ordered for non-vegetarian food and wife asked for a vegetarian meal.

The young airhostess was from a region where everyone is pure non-vegetarian (In reality nobody can be pure non vegetarian- earlier it was thought tiger never eats grass, some recent studies say that even they do eat for medicinal purposes!!) region. She probably thought, the lady did not want to take non- vegetarian by a choice and not as a forbidden food for her. Therefore, she requested the lady, ‘madam, we have finished distribution of vegetarian food due to short supply, therefore, you kindly take non-vegetarian food.’

The request for taking non-vegetarian food in lieu of vegetarian food infuriated the husband of the lady and started abusing the young airhostess. To rescue her, another airhostess intervened, ‘Sir, normally, in this route most of the passengers prefer non-vegetarian food and therefore, number of vegetarian food packets are less. Further, you may kindly appreciate that non-vegetarian people also take vegetarian food due to some or other reasons at any specific time. In this context only, the young lady has requested to take non-vegetarian food without any ill-intention’

But the couple was not ready to hear the other side of the story. ‘How my wife will not be served a dinner, when everybody is enjoying with same air fare?’ (It appeared he was a very caring husband! Otherwise also he had a point!)

When he wanted to register his grievance in writing, the young airhostess called the pilot. The pilot also tried to persuade to couple not to go too far. But they were adamant and finally pilot handed over a copy of the printed form for registering their grievance. Matter ends there without, luckily for all of us, an air crash.

I had faced similar situation when I was travelling from Hongkong to Manila in 2011. I am still grateful to the airhostess who provided me some fruits which were meant for the pilot

and the co-pilot of the flight. While coming back also, another airhostess provided me cuppa noodle as otherwise there was no vegetarian food available for me in the aircraft.

There are two types of hospitality cultures (so far types of food is concerned) in the world, one is supply of non-vegetarian food by default and another one is supply of vegetarian food by default. You have to convey your preference when you are travelling to other territories (in terms of food) well in advance so that, decision making is easier for the provider of food. Otherwise, you may have to settle for an akhadya for your survival!!!!!!!!!!!!

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE) EPISODE-24

When travelling by train in ordinary First Class

In the month of June 1994, I had to travel to different sub regional office (SRO) of National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) to impart training to the field officials under my jurisdiction as Regional Assistant Director, popularly known as RAD. Earlier and afterwards also, training was conducted at regional HQs (for me it was at Guwahati) for all the field staff of the region. But one Director thought that training should be spread over to the SROs and RADs should impart training to all the field staff personally (either he had a special faith on the RADs for their training capabilities or he wanted to give indirect punishment to the kingpin RADs for their so called arrogance. His reputation suggests the second one). However, this practice had been abandoned once he relinquished his post on his promotion and his successor thought otherwise.

At that time, RO Assam had the maximum jurisdiction both in technical-wise and administrative-wise. Since I had four SROs under my administrative control and had five SROs under technical control, I had the maximum workload among the RADs of the entire country. As per the new direction (at that time), I had to impart training in all the SROs within 15 days' time period. Training programmes were scheduled for two days in each SRO and practically I did not have any time for rest for even a single day. During those days, RADs have to travel by ordinary Government transport and even AC-II tier was not allowed for the lesser mortal RADs-forget about hiring of taxies. Irony is that, sometimes direct recruit RAD cannot travel by AC-II tier, but his subordinate officer whose basic pay was more than the RAD, can travel by AC-II tier and he /she(RAD) had to pass the bill as the controlling officer of the subordinate. However after implementation of seventh pay commission of Government of India, these anomalies had been removed.

Those who are from North Eastern Region, they know the summer of Assam, very hot and humid. But to meet up the deadline, I had to travel from Guwahati to Dibrugarh, then Dibrugarh to Jorhat, then Jorhat to Tezpur, then Tezpur to Guwahati and finally Guwahati to Silchar. In the scorching heat my body was taking all the pain (normally no higher officer appreciates the pain of the juniors- in this case also nobody would appreciate). In any set up, whether it is Government, non-Government or even family front, if you do your work nicely nobody appreciates, but if you fail to do even a fraction of your allotted work everyone is going to catch your neck. Since it is true for everyone, I am not blaming anyone-seniors, juniors, family members of any of my friends. So I was also trying my best to complete my job without any complain. Even if I would have complained, would anybody listen to my grievance????

In the last leg, when I had to go to Silchar, I was physically and mentally exhausted. Distance between Guwahati to Silchar is 397 KM by train, but it takes 23 hours to cover the distance as you have wait five to six hours at Lumding which is about only 100 K.M from Guwahati. You may cover this distance within the time limit of 2 hrs. After that, your agony will start (hopefully now things have improved). Lumding to Silchar, if you have a confirm reservation, you will be treated as a traveller and if you do not have a confirmed ticket and if you have sufficient money, you will be treated like a Bengali son in law (best treated person in the world). Thanks to some dishonest officials (definitely all are not dishonest and I am

sure number of honest officers is more than the dishonest officers) for that skewed etiquette. Hope, nowadays, persons with valid tickets are also treated at par with those lucky fellows without valid tickets!

I could not carry any homemade food as my wife used to be busy with my 6 and 4 year old children in those days and therefore, normally I used to take outside food as and when I could get. Here also, as there was a halt of five hours at Lumding, I took my dinner at six in the evening. Otherwise I would not find anything to eat till train reach at Halflong at 12 midnight, that too provided the train would reach in time. The quality of food was not very good, but we were used to get such type of stale food in our tour in those days. As such, I finished the dinner, albeit reluctantly.

At around 11 PM, I got an acute pain initially at the upper abdomen and slowly it extended to the entire abdomen. Within 15 minutes it became unbearable and I did not have any option but to awake the co-passengers of my compartment. Noticing my grimaces on my face they also became worried and one of them went to search for the TTE. But he was nowhere to be seen. The commotion in my compartment broke everybody's sleep and an old person came up with some medicine-probably pain killer. It relieved my pain little bit. But still I was lying on my bed like a caterpillar. Luckily for me, the train reached Halflong in time and one co-passenger went to meet the stationmaster who happened to be a kind person. He personally came along with one compounder who examined me and gave me some strong pain killer. He told me that the dinner, I had taken by me at Lumding might be the culprit. In Bengali he told, 'The restaurant people give all types of akhadya to the passengers and not only passengers suffer, they are nuisance for us as well.'

I did not feel well on the next day even.

After that fateful journey, I stopped eating anything attached cafeteria of railways except tea and biscuits under normal circumstances, though I am not against taking food from the cafeteria as a thumb rule. One must have to appreciate the services provided by these cafeterias to the millions of passengers daily without their participation the life of common passengers would have been more difficult. In any case, one has to take food from those elite trains when price of food is included in the train fare. Further, I think, if strict vigilance on food quality is maintained by the concerned authority, those akhadya will be turned into proper food within a short period of time.

Till then enjoy the akhadya of Indian Railways with all unhappiness!!!!!!!

AKHADYA (NO FOOD/ PROHIBITED FOOD/ FOOD with BAD TASTE)

EPISODE-25

When my uncle was travelling through Middle East

In the early part of sixties, due to political reasons, Suez Canal was closed for passenger and cargo ships for a year or two. During that period, my uncle, after completing his higher studies in England, had to return from London to India via land (no money for air travel) as sea routes via cape of good hope was as expensive as air travel as I am told by my uncle. The remaining story is reproduced as my uncle had told me and therefore veracity of the facts cannot be confirmed or otherwise at my level.

Special trains were arranged for the Indian through many countries of Europe and Asia after crossing English channel by ship. In each country a technical halt was allowed for checking of travel documents and change of trains/drivers etc. The passengers had to purchase eatables and fill their water bottles/ canes as nothing was available to eat and drink on board. It is worth mentioning here that Indian railways allow vendors to travel between two/three stations with issuing necessary licences. Therefore, in India train journey is quite comfortable so far eating and drinking are concerned. The hawkers are also good in entertaining the passengers.

Most of the stations were kept closed for that particular train and there was no scheduled halt at 99% of the stations. Even if there was a halt at some stations for some technicality, shops were ordered to be closed due to security reasons. So those experienced passengers on that route carried (hoarded?) as much food and liquid material as they could carry. My uncle did not have any experience about the route and therefore, he did not carry enough food and drinks. Further, he may not have sufficient money also to purchase those in enough quantity. The financial condition of most of the passengers might also be like that of my uncle.

So long the train was travelling through Europe, food and drinks were abandoned, as most of the countries of Europe are small, the verification of travel documents were coming within few hours. Trains were also fast and clean and train stations were full of amenities for the comfort of the passengers. My uncle could not purchase sufficient food and drinking materials as price at these stations were exorbitant in rupee terms.

As soon as, they got into Asian trains, problems started to crop up. Trains were not comfortable and becoming an oven during day time and at night it became as cold as ice. During those time bed roll was not supplied and the passengers in ordinary bogey have to arrange beddings by themselves. My uncle had a light holdall and a suitcase. When my uncle was shivering on the first night, one of his fellow passengers lent him a blanket— otherwise he would have died on the very first exposure to the cold desert night which was too cold to tolerate by a person from Assam.

Now the countries they were travelling were much bigger in size with less population. Due to hot air they became thirsty and as a result of that water bottles and cans were dried up before they could reach the next station. One of the kind experienced travellers was helping my uncle by providing some water- but the help was as expectedly limited. Even with best planning you may have to face starvation in desert due to many reasons from breakdown of transportation to natural calamity.

After travelling two or three countries, he could not recollect the names of the countries, they entered to a country (again he did not recollect the name of the country). Everyone descended from the train as soon as it halted at the station. He felt that most of the faces became

full of anxiety, though he could not find out the reason, as everybody was tight lipped. As seriousness is also contagious, he also became serious and mentally became ready to face some unknown eventuality. With limited resources he purchased maximum food and filled the bottle he was carrying. His kind hearted co-passenger advised him to purchase at least another bottle and fill it with water. He smelled some feeling of unknown danger lurking over them and he took the advice of the passenger by purchasing two more bottles and filled with water by jostling with other passengers.

Afterwards, he came to know that the country which he was travelling at that time was the nearest to the conflict zone. Thus, he was able to find the reason of all the anxious faces at the boarder of that country. The other reason of anxiety was discovered later, but it was too late to take any remedial steps. The train did not halt for next sixteen –seventeen hours and by the time everyone in the train was exhausted. The water in the overhead tank for toilet was exhausted in the midway. Two bottles water of uncle was exhausted after travelling five to six hours. Good sense prevailed and water in the last bottle was used only to wet his lips. Food he purchased were exhausted after ten-twelve hours. My uncle was without proper food and water for next six seven hours.

Finally the train stopped at the boarder station of the country to the relief of everyone. All rushed to the water sources and to the eateries. Within minutes all water sources were dried up. My uncle somehow managed to fill two out of three bottles and then he rushed to the eateries. By the time he reached the eateries, only one type of item was left. He purchased as much as he could hold by two hands. He ate all the food he purchased and again he purchased for future use and sat on his seat as if he won a battle. Did he become little wiser ?

After checking of travel documents they were shifted to another train though allotted seat numbers remained same. He asked his co-passengers whether they know what he ate. Instead of answering the question, his co-passenger asked him, ‘Are you a Hindu?’

My uncle nodded. The co-passenger replied, ‘The food is a prohibited food for the Hindus, it was camel meat fry? Do Hindus take it?’

My uncle replied with a faint smile, ‘Normally we do not take. But for subsistence anything is eatable. We have a famous guiding statement, *bipade niyamang nasti*, that means at the time of calamity you can do anything, you can eat anything, you can drink anything. No sin committed’

The co-passengers nodded in unison.

He need not have to any other akhadya in next few days and safely reached his home to tell his adventurous stories to his friends. However, my uncle could not escape from performing purifying rituals at his home for taking akhadya at his journey. But his face glows whenever he tells the story with mirch –masala(chilly and spice) to someone. Unfortunately he is no more today to tell the story to my children who are not in position to dream even of travelling 10,000 km by train!!!!!!!!!!



About the Author

The author is a Government servant and a man of vivid experiences derived from his official postings across the country, travels across India and numerous visits outside India. He is presently placed at Delhi but due to his postings in different parts of the country, some of the postings being in the interior of India he came across different ethnic personalities , culture and food. Here in this book he writes to share these experiences and thoughts emanating from encountering different facets of life, handling of problems faced by himself or by his close associates.

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