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Forced to Forage for Food by the Lockdown, and Poisoned by Mushrooms

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Sewali Burman was seen picking *dhekia*, the Assamese name for the fiddlehead fern (*Diplazium esculentum*) in the backyard of her rented room within the municipal limits of North Lakhimpur town in early April. She was foraging for the fern as there was nothing else to cook with the rice she had received from local authorities during the first phase of nationwide lockdown. Her husband,

Nabin Burman, an electrician, had broken his leg just before the lockdown began, and was jobless. A family of four, they have no ration card or bank accounts and so couldn't avail the financial assistance offered by the state government.

Hafeeza Begum is a mother of four. She works as domestic help in Sonitpur district. She had sent her children to forage on the banks of the Mora Bharali river near Paruwa Chariali as their kitchen stock had dwindled emptied by the first week of April. Her husband, who works in road construction in Tipi, Arunachal Pradesh, was stuck there due to the lockdown. Her children used to bring home some shoots and tubers.

On April 30, Ajay and Bikram, two Adivasis from Tinsukia district, were admitted at the Margherita state hospital to be treated for poisoning. The two had had mushrooms, foraged from a nearby jungle inside a tea estate, for lunch. The next day five more people from Joyrampur, across the border in Arunachal Pradesh, were admitted to the same hospital with food poisoning. All of them had resorted to foraging for mushrooms due to the food shortage brought on by the lockdown.

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The sudden imposition of a 21-day nationwide lockdown from March 24 forced shops of all types, the supply of vegetables, poultry and livestock, and income-generating businesses to shut on short notice. The more desperate people needed something to eat, so many of them – including Sewali Baurman and Hafeeza Begum – living in or near urban areas went foraging.

Others weren't so lucky.



A variety of poisonous wild mushrooms found in Assam. Photo: Manoj Kumar Gogoi

Rikheswar Bora, a father of four in Bhogbari village, Charaideo district, went to a bamboo grove and brought some mushrooms for lunch on April 28. In the afternoon, he, his wife Suwala and eldest daughter Himadri developed severe stomach pain and began vomiting. There were no medical facilities nearby, so they visited a local paramedic and subsequently shifted to the state hospital in Rajapukhuri, and finally to the Assam Medical College (AMC) in Dibrugarh. They died there. Postmortem reports revealed the presence of amatoxins in all their bodies. Amatoxin is the collective name for a group of toxins found in poisonous mushrooms.

Ajit Sonar, a daily wage labourer, lives with his wife and son, aged a little over one, under galvanised metal sheets erected in the shape of a tent near the Digboi railway station in Tinsukia. Ajit had lost his job when the lockdown began and was forced to forage for food in a nearby jungle. On April 30, Ajit brought mushrooms home for dinner. The next day his wife and son died at the AMC in Dibrugarh. Ajit survived but his wife and son died; their bodies were also found to contain amatoxins.

In May alone, 18 people from Udaguri, 10 from Sadiya, six from Tinsukia and two from Charaideo fell ill after eating poisonous mushrooms.

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Foraging is not new in India's northeast. Ferns, nettles, berries, shoots, mushrooms and tubers provide for kitchens throughout the year. In upper Assam, many local communities collect wild mushrooms from their backyards in March. Regular foragers distinguish the edible varieties of mushrooms from the toxic ones based on where they grow and on what objects. Mushrooms on ant-hills and on logs of *paroli* (*Stereospermum chelonoides*) trees are considered edible. To test for toxicity, they add eggplants to the curry while cooking. If the curry turns blue, the mushroom is toxic.

In the hill district of Karbi Anglong, western Assam's Goalpara and parts of the state currently governed by the Bodoland Territorial Council, various indigenous communities consume mushrooms foraged from the wild after processing and drying. In neighbouring Meghalaya, some traditional mushrooms are famous. A small, dark brown, round mushroom known as tit tung in Khasi, is handpicked by locals and served in the upscale Mumbai restaurant Masque.

But unlike the diners at Masque, many of those eating mushrooms now – and putting themselves at risk of being poisoned to death – are doing so out of desperation. Communities like the Tai, Sonowal Kachari, Deori, Bodo, Rabha and Karbi that traditionally forage for mushrooms have recorded only one fatality this year.

The Muslim community in Assam also generally doesn't consume mushrooms, and has been spared any accidental deaths. The Adivasi, one of more economically marginalised and landless communities in Assam, make up most victims, especially in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Charaideo and Udaguri. The Mising, another tribe in the Brahmaputra valley, also does not traditionally forage for mushrooms and has reported some deaths.

A [2008 survey](#) found that of 17 states home to 95% of India's people, Assam ranked fourth in level of hunger. India also doesn't fare well in the global context: the 2019 [Global Hunger Index](#) placed India at 102 out of 117 countries in terms of access to nutritious food. Bangladesh and Nepal, its neighbours, fared considerably better (though, at positions 88 and 73, not very well themselves).

Where Ajit Sonar, his wife and their son used to live, in Digboi. Photo: Farhana Ahmed

It's hard to estimate exactly how many people have been forced to forage for lack of food. The OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, an autonomous research institute of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, recently conducted a survey; Saswati Chaudhury, one of the surveyors, said, "The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect an estimated 67 lakh people's livelihoods ... and contribute to worsening of household well-being, with a spillover effect on nutritional deficiency."

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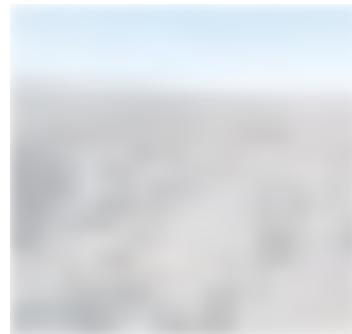
Mushroom poisoning isn't new, nor are the deaths of non-traditional consumers. In 2011, 11 members of the Deori community died in Lakhimpur. Subsequently, a physician named Todd Mitchell from Santa Cruz, California, developed a remedy: to intravenously inject an extract derived from milk thistle seeds. In 2011, doctors at the North Lakhimpur Civil Hospital had Mitchell on the phone to help with their treatment, eventually saving three lives.

On May 9 that year, while he was visiting the survivors in North Lakhimpur, Mitchell said, "Poisoning in this area of the world has been very common since the 1940s as traditionally [mushrooms have been] consumed by most local communities, and due to lack of modern facilities in the health sector, many people were dying every year." This time, however, the victims of mushroom poisoning were hampered by the nationwide lockdown, and couldn't access treatment – or for that matter food – in time.

Farhana Ahmed is a journalist and documentary filmmaker based in North Lakhimpur, Assam.

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