

WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION IN FOOD SECURITY  
THROUGH TRADITIONAL KITCHEN GARDENING IN  
NORTH EAST INDIA

Ms. Kamei, Pamei, Roselima\*

**Abstract:**

*Tradition of kitchen gardening has been imbibed in the culture of every Northeastern tribes with its womenfolk laboring at the maximum. In Northeast India Kitchen garden add significant role in the life of every family. This tradition have been practiced as part of their sustainability methods over a long period of time or decade with different types of vegetables, spices, ranging from local indigenous varieties to the universe at large with its numerous values. Women take keen interest in maintaining kitchen garden as cooking remains in their domains and predominantly women decide what to grow, which type and at what time or season. Women enjoys freedom at least when it comes to kitchen gardening. But sometime even at this juncture women are to consult with their men. Women plays an important role in the sustainability of society especially during inflation, famine etc. The paper aims at understanding women's contribution in food security through kitchen gardening tradition in North East India.*

**Keywords:** Kitchen garden, Food security, Northeast, Women, Traditional, Rongmei

\* Center for Indigenous Culture Studies, Central University of Jharkhand, India

## Introduction

Kitchen garden concept amongst Tribal women in common, and predominantly, amongst Rongmei women originates as an indispensable part of life in North Eastern parts of India. Kitchen garden remains within the premise of women as this section of the society is more affluent when it comes to food at least concerning diet. Culturally having kitchen garden in Northeast India region is both socially and culturally considered important. “Historically, gardens which produced vegetables and flavouring plants for human consumption have been known as kitchen gardens, and they have often included small fruiting trees and shrubs which require regular attention. These gardens are usually situated close to the kitchen, and are enclosed by walls, fences and hedges which serve to keep browsing animals away from succulent fruits and vegetables, give shelter to tender plants, and are a visual reminder to outsiders that the contents are the property of the homestead and do not fall into the category of wild vegetables, fruits and herbs free for the taking. The development of kitchen gardens seems to have followed a prolonged period when leafy vegetables grew in association with cereals and legumes, in the fields, around their margins, and in waste ground close to the settlements” (Leach 1982: 1 & 14). The kitchen garden notion is very extremely widespread in north east India especially, among the tribal women folk and it is very highly appreciable. This tradition comes as an indispensable part of life for the family sustenance as well as the society at large.

## Importance of Kitchen Gardening

In North eastern region kitchen gardening generates social enrichment exclusively in the lives of women and their statuses are appraised. The products are used as gifts that exchange between two persons, family and in return it constructs a situation where two families construct family social bonds. The basic ultimate significance of Kitchen Garden is to grow plants for one's own family consumption. Women folk take vested interest in developing kitchen garden because cooking comes under their domain in the socially constructed division of labour. They know what to grow since kitchen management at least in the perspective of cooking remains within their boundary. “Women held deep knowledge on growth habit and utility of each plant, and they devised to allocate plants to make full use of limited space adjusting such plant's tolerance as against water logging, shade, direct sunshine, and drought” (Barooah & Pathak 2009: 36).

Kitchen garden provides domestic vegetable needs while maintaining healthy ecosystems with minimal negative impact to the environment. A sustainable food system as such also encourages local production and distribution infrastructures and makes nutritious food available, accessible, and affordable to all. Women in Northeastern region are found very much interested in maintaining kitchen garden and women contribute extensively to the family in particular and the society at large through this practice. The harvests from such cultivation not only satiate one's taste for the varieties but also benefits as sustainability. Kitchen garden is usually either attached or close to the residence. It is a continuous process which is seen year round with seasonal as well as the immediate needs of plants. It supplies especially the local or the traditional food ranging from indigenous spices, leafy vegetables to therapeutic valued species. For instance spices like coriander, chilly of different varieties, beans, and curry leaf are the most common items found growing in kitchen garden besides various types of vegetables. These plants or herbs are grown in small quantity but their taste and the aromas is quantifies massively. "It is, however, seen that the kitchen garden is controlled by the wife. The pigs, goats and chicken too are owned by her. The sale proceeds of the domesticated animals are retained by the housewife and she makes purchases of her own liking when visiting her parental home. Women are also adept at selling fruits and forest products in the weekly markets. Vegetables and horti-cultural products are usually sold by them in the markets" (Burman 2012: 4).

### **Women's contribution towards food security through kitchen gardening**

This small scale cultivation practices have an established tradition in the region and bid great challenges in improving food security in household income. Gardening sustain the society food security in many positive ways as it is directly accessible to a diversity of nutritionally-rich foods; help in saving family income by providing the fresh products from the garden. "Home gardening contributes to household food security by providing direct access to food that can be harvested, prepared and fed to family members, often on a daily basis" (Marsh n.d: 5). Having Kitchen Garden istaken as tradition in the region rather than one's hobby. In this kind of cultivation women are found to be more enthusiastic and more susceptible to it. It is not to say that men are absent in it. Men also do perform certain work relating to fencing, watering but frequently it is women who are found to be more accustomed with it. Through the practice of kitchen gardening women are able to serve the family with fresh leafy vegetables with different

nutritious values. The primary plants grown in kitchen gardens provide fruits and vegetables which ultimately supply rich vitamins and minerals to the human body. Kitchen garden does contribute to a diet, with different taste rich in essential nutrients where human bodies are in consistent requirement for bodily function through innumerable types of vegetation. And all these primary species are being chosen and decided upon by the women folk of the family, specially the elder of them through the indigenous knowledge system. Though scientifically the majority of the women in the region does not know about the content of the plant but with their long time lives experiences and closeness with nature, their knowledge is enhanced ultimately. Women with their involvement in the kitchen garden contribute immensely towards food security.

### **Kitchen Gardening and women**

In many cultures, women play an important role in food production but their contributions are not mentioned as worthwhile. Though both the sexes do engage in food production but when it comes to small scale productivity like kitchen gardening where productivity is small and sufficient enough for family, women's labour is found to be higher. The tradition of having kitchen garden does not only provide vegetables but it also helps in raising women's status. Mrs. Athuilu Kamei of Manipur states, "A family who owns kitchen garden is more looked at with ideal status; of which automatically credit goes to women". Having kitchen garden raised women's self-reliance and dignity. It gives independence at least to certain extent. Mrs. Kadangamliu Kamei of Tamenglongutters, "In the past it is a tradition where every woman grows something or the other in their small patch of land attached to their home but at present times this tradition seems to be banished and overlooked as people are better off both monetarily and socio-economically compared to the olden days. Instead of planting themselves they go for the items which are readily available in the market. As people also come in contact with the modern erudite life they tend to forget the basic needs of life and instead try to grasp the modern popular culture". More and more people migrate to urban areas in search of better job conditions, education and in the meantime abandoned the good habit that they adapted staying in the rural. Not only that as more people move towards the urban center for their varied satisfaction, space becomes a problematic to carry out such practices. Though there are some women who still

continue maintaining kitchen garden at least of few indigenous species along with flower in the terrace, pots etc., but it is not as common as is found in the rural set-ups. Mrs. LuriangGonmei also adds to the importance of having kitchen garden, “The vegetables or the items that she gets from her garden are tastier and fresh. It not only is healthier but it also brings joys in her family”. Another person Mrs. Lucy who is a government employee adds, “It helps her to refresh her mind from all day long occupied stress. Seeing the plants and her flower she tends to forget all her tensions and worries”.Kitchen garden is not only the source of food but also a place where women relax and dump all worries and tensions.But “With the penetration of market economy and economic globalization, subsistence agriculture to meet family’s daily needs has been oppressed. Under the expansion of cash crop production, there still exists subsistence production such as kitchen gardens or homestead gardens maintained by women” (Keiko 2008: 1).

In Kitchen garden spices of different varieties are mostly grown along with those vegetables which occupy less space and needs short period for its maturity. It is a small scale form of vegetable growing. Traditionally in this plot or divided areas of land more than one type of plants is grown. It is mostly carried out in free spaces wherever available close to the residence. For some this familiarises can be a hobby but for the rest this is part of the culture that has been carried on since time immemorial. Many depend upon the vegetable gardening as a supplement to their family’s diet. This also consumes less labour and the grower knows exactly what to grow and what will be the outcome of it.Walk across any residential premises in the region from all types of background, one will easily find fresh vegetables in the kitchen garden.Women maintaining kitchen garden are perceived as hardworking and ideal women.

### **Kitchen gardening and Health benefits**

Gardening makes availabilityof fresh and tasty foods within one’s reach besidesimmense contribution towards positive health. It can improve health, save money and even boost self-confidence of women. Gardening is an activity that you either enjoy or you don’t, but there is absolute gain and benefits where it is undeniable. Most of the produced vegetables that are being sold in the markets travel thousands of miles and by the time they arrive at the grocery store the freshness is loss. And moreover in order to be more presentable it is packed in man-made materials such as plastic bags which again are harmful for health. Growing own vegetable garden is the easiest way and positive measure to promote good health as well as benefit the

environment by reducing the unwanted chemicals and waste infesting through packing by using different toxic materials. Kitchen gardening is an interesting and rewarding activity directly interlocked to wellbeing and nourishment of family members. By having the fresh vegetables which are free of course from all types of chemicals such as pesticides, insecticides, modern sophisticated manures which posed harmful to human life greatly contribute in improving health status.

### **Kitchen gardening and sustainability**

The efficiency of having kitchen garden is more beneficial for the women in general and mothers in particular. It requires small measure of land but turns out big gain. Instead of investing their whole day long for typical work in case of shifting cultivation or home garden, in kitchen gardening things are more feasible and work is carried out more far reaching. They are mutually competent to baby sit as well as carry out their gardening task within the same precise in a way which saves both time and energy. While doing kitchen gardening one need not much land. It can be carried out in small plot of land at its minimal. In kitchen gardening there is no concept of using all the modern fertilisers which posed harmful to health issues. This kind of low cost agriculture practices need to be taken into consideration with much attention by investing all the positive measures. It has contrast with efficiency quotient in shifting cultivation in a way of land usage minimal for the same kind of productivity. Not only that, in this kind of agricultural practices as minimal land is engage so there is no need of clearing or distracting the natural ecosystem and the manures are managed from domestic refuse, so also eco-friendly.

Products from kitchen garden can be linked with market economy and not only for domestic consumption. If women are encourage with this kind of kitchen gardening tradition by giving lessons with modern inputs to produce bountiful then they can be at least sell the products in the local markets and which in return women folk will be financially encourage and independent to assured opportunity to encounter their everyday basic requirements.

Childrearing, where women spends maximum time with infants at home, the time spent can be invested tending the kitchen garden if women folk are provided with basic provisions. This is convenient because in shifting cultivation, since the field is far off, mother at times spent time with infants at home. For a mother, time is very efficient, especially in case of having infant

child where breast feeding is required often. Mother can alternate both with kitchen gardening and child rearing at the same time.

### Conclusion

We need a healthy and balanced diet so that people stay healthy. It is very important that people consume leafy vegetables as it contains various nutrients which are required for proper body functions especially for pregnant and nursing women. Not only does it provide as supplement for food but it also helps in saving the cost of buying vegetables from the market which contained all unhealthy elements such as pesticides, insecticides which post harmful to one's health. This also becomes very needy during emergency. If one have kitchen garden one need not go far off market to purchase the ingredients needed for the meal. One can easily pop out in the kitchen garden and just collect all the necessaries ingredients within short time. It not only saves money and time but also highly healthy habits to opt for it. The most fundamental social benefits form kitchen garden is household food security by its easily availability and accessibility with its many nutritional values. The social-cultural norms in many Northeasterner cultures determined women's status; though this may not be uniform in all the cases but majority it is so.

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