

SCIENTISTS RECORD BLACK SPIDER FOOD TRADITION IN ASSAM

Tarantula in mustard oil: A tribal delicacy

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New Delhi: Scientists have documented the first record of humans collecting, cooking and eating the Indian Black Earth Tiger Spider, a species of tarantula native to the Northeast.

The researchers have observed members of the Rabha tribal community in Assam's Kamrup (rural) district capture the spiders from ground burrows on the fringes of forests, soak them in boiling water, fry them in mustard oil and consume them, typically with locally prepared rice beer.

"This appears to be a long-standing practice in this tribal community," Jyotiprakash Boro, a wildlife biologist and research scholar at the Fergusson College in Pune who has conducted field surveys in the region, told *The Telegraph*.

Boro met the Rabha community members around

Mouman village, around 65km southeast of Guwahati. "The tribal people call the spider *Bhaluk Makara* — *Bhaluk* meaning bear, referring to its black, densely haired body, and *Makara* meaning spider," he said.

The Rabha people told the researchers that the spiders are seasonally abundant during April and May. They are brought out by digging into their burrows or by inserting wooden sticks to coax them out. A typical such spider harvesting attempt may yield up to 30 spiders.

Boro and his colleagues — Kuldeep Boro at Assam University in Karbi Anglong, Chandramita Boro at Gurucharan University in Silchar, and Sameer Terdalkar at Fergusson College — have published their observations last week in the *Proceedings of the Zoological Society*.

After their extraction, the spiders are washed with water, repeatedly soaked



Indian Black Earth Tiger Spider. Picture courtesy: Jyotiprakash Boro

in hot water for several minutes, before being fried in mustard oil for seven to 10 minutes until they turn brown. Only the legs are removed during preparation, and the spiders are eaten whole with garlic powder and salt.

The practice appears to be part of a tradition of eating spiders in parts of the Northeast where indigenous knowledge about edible arachnids has been passed down the generations but remains relatively poorly documented, Boro said.

A separate study published earlier this year had documented the consumption of two orb-weaver spiders among indigenous communities in Nagaland, where both species are locally known as "siyankyü" in the Lotha Naga language.

Zoologist Lobenu Mozhui at Nagaland University and her colleagues, who interviewed 33 people with traditional knowledge, noted that the spiders are preferred in October and November for their plump abdomens, which respondents described as having a nutty flavour after cooking.

In Nagaland, people prepare the spiders by removing the head and legs, washing and soaking them in hot water, and cooking them with oil, salt, and ingredients including ginger, chilli, bamboo shoot extract, or sumac before consuming them as a meat substitute.

The Nagaland study, published in the journal *Frontiers in Sustainable Food*

Systems, also found that knowledge about consuming spiders for food and medicinal purposes is transmitted orally and embedded in traditional ecological knowledge. Earlier ethnographic accounts had documented spider consumption among Naga communities.

Scientists have earlier documented spider consumption across Southeast Asia, parts of central Africa, Madagascar, and South Africa, where spiders are fried, roasted, or cooked over fire.

The Assam researchers caution that the extent of harvesting of the spider remains unclear, as do its abundance and the potential conservation implications of collecting it. The Rabha perceive the local spider population as stable based on their long-term observations.

Boro said: "But we have not independently assessed their abundance or their population status."