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Traditional Food Habits Among The Mising Tribe Of Assam

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Introduction

India is known for diversity of peoples and their culture. Assam is the most notable state or the beautiful gateway of North East India for a large no. of tribal people. Assam comprises of both tribal and non-tribal populations. Food or food industry plays an important role in the socio-economic life of Assamese people, particularly in rural areas of Assam.

Food is man's first biological necessity. It being the elementary want of man, there is no more fundamental of growth of population than food supply. Human beings and all other obtain the bodily energy and nutrients of their growth, development and sustenance by eating plants and animals. Human engine needs energy, which is procured from food. If food supply is scarce or lacking, the human engine runs down and in the end, it stops working altogether. The body not only needs energy, but also certain substances to ensure its balance. For this, animal products are absolutely essential. The body cannot function properly on one food alone. Without the materials for body building and repair, the organism gradually grows weaker and one's health breaks down. Hunger leads to epidemics and infections, diseases which can decimate whole populations.

Among the three fundamental needs i.e., food, clothing and shelter; without food man cannot live. In the ancient time all human beings are only gathering their food. But now a day, people are very much developed. After that they domesticate the animals. Hunting and fishing is also found in some societies. People cultivate with the help of cow, bullock, and plough and domesticate many animals and birds like cow, bullock, buffalo, hen, duck, pig etc. Depending on the environmental condition different places have different food habits; for example - in Andaman Islanders mostly used to have fish, because in that place it is very easy to get it. In India itself food items may be same in any various cultural groups and communities, but the methods of preparation differ from community to community.

According to Anderson (1976- 77:171), “the kind of food we eat is probably for more a matter of habit and tradition than of deliberate choice of physiologically suitable diets”. The term ‘food habit’ implies the food items, cuisines, system of preparation and preservation, taboos that are prevailed in a particular community. Each and every community is confined with traditional and customary food habits in their own and hence it is also an important element of culture of that community.

Food is the burning questions of society and the whole structure and activities of community are dependent upon question of food supply. Hunting peoples therefore, are generally few in numbers and spread over great stretches of community. Hunter and fisher relying almost exclusively upon what their land produces of itself, need a large area and derive from it only on irregular food supply, which in writer diminishes to the verge of famine. Local families are a symptom of poor adjustment of men’s members and why of life to his local environment.

The Misings, one of the major tribe and second largest scheduled tribe (S/T) of Assam. Majority of them are residing in the plains along with the bank of river Brahmaputra. So, the annual flood problems and soil erosion have always cause displacement and loss of properties keeping their low socio-economic condition. In the plains under favourable conditions, their population spreading over a wide range and they are now inhabited in the Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Darang, Kamrup districts of Assam. The Mising in lesser number are to be found also in East Siang, Lower Dibang valley, Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Few of them have settled themselves permanently in national capital Delhi and few hundred in Mumbai which is the financial capital of India. Presently, the population of the Mising is estimated to be around 13, 00,000 lakhs (50,000 are in Arunachal Pradesh) in according to the National Mising Organization.

Their folk literature suggests that, they migrated down to the plains of Assam in search of a peaceful and economic life in comparatively early times and settled mainly in both the banks of the Brahmaputra between 11th and 13th century A.D. In the plains they have been maintaining some of their traditional customs and practices. They believing the Moon (*Po:lo*) and Sun (*Do:nyi*) as their father God and mother Goddess respectively. In the 17th century even after, they have been influenced by the Vaishnavite tenets of Assam due to which a number of them now practice Vaishnava beliefs and practices, but their traditional tribal beliefs, rituals and customs still predominate their social life. They are cultivators, so agriculture is their main livelihood. Many ceremonies and festivals are associated with agriculture, such as - ‘*Ali-A:ye Ligang*’, ‘*Po:rag*’, etc., where they sacrifice pig and fowls in their socio-religious festivals along with the consumption of rice-beer (*Apong*). Their priest is known as ‘*Mibu*’ who conducts and performs some of their religious functions. They have their own mother tongue which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language group of great Mongoloid race, which different from the Assamese language. The Mising folk society is rich in its oral literature and traditions. They built their traditional dwelling houses in the north-south and east-west direction and raised platforms having thatch roofs.

Methodology

The data for the present study is collected from the Mising villages of Dhemaji district of Assam. The study will be carried out in the selected villages where the Mising peoples are concentrated under the one development block, name Sissibargaon Development Block, based on demographic, anthropogenic and ethnic criteria. The study will be mainly based on primary and secondary data. These are collected from the different sources, like the field and expert persons, books, journals, articles etc.

The primary data shall be collected at the village-level concerning the physiographical, environmental, socio-economic profiles of the sites and surrounding areas. A large amount of secondary information and data will be collect through review and analysis of the available literature. The old person, head of the family and the experts shall be interviewed and observed following a set of lead questions.

Traditional Food Habits of the Mising Tribe

The Misings having their own rich traditions and food habit is one of their distinctive features. In Mising dialect food and drink or food habit is called '*Donam-Tinam*' or '*Doyid Tiyidnam*'. Rice is the staple food of the Mising people and in addition to it they substitute various kinds of vegetables and non-vegetable items. They collect most of the vegetable and non-vegetable items from the nature itself. The home grown and non-home-grown vegetables, they prefer, are mainly those having medicinal properties.

There are various types of rice crops like *Ahu*, *Sali*, *Bora*, *Joha*, etc. Agricultural lands are mainly suitable for cultivation of *Ahu* paddy; hence the people depend mainly on *Ahu* rice. Besides *Ahu* paddy they produce mustard seeds, sweet potatoes, pulse, cotton, maize, banana, etc. as subsidiary crops. From *Bora* rice they make different types of rice cake (*Purang*, *Pitang*, *Ambug*, *Sira*, etc.). They maintain the division of labour transplantation and wedding are traditionally the work of the women folk, while ploughing, threshling and carrying the paddy bundles etc. are done by men folk.

They also prepare with rice powder. In house hold activities mothers are not only engaged the preparation of food, but also traditional milling, housekeeping and take care of the family members including children. But male persons can also involve in kitchen activities. There is no traditional or customary prohibition of using or engagement in kitchen. Interestingly in rare cases male persons are used to see in those activities. For fooding purpose, the Misings always came up with the kitchen gardens, which is very traditional one.

They take rice three times a day (morning, afternoon or evening and night). In the morning some of the old aged peoples drink rice beer, locally called *Apong*. Of course some drinks tea and others only take cold rice (*Pin-kang Apin*) etc. After that they take rice in the morning and then they have again rice in the day or evening time. They usually have the different types of food like rice (*Apin*), dal (*Dayil*), vegetable curry, fish (*Ongo*), dry fish (*Ngosan/Sanne Ongo*), preserved fish powder (*Namsing*), pork (*Eg Adin*), chicken (*Porog Adin*), duck (*Pe'jab Adin*), snail (*Nobiling*) etc. As usually they have boiled vegetable also.

The Misings occasionally eat the special kind of pork curry which is called 'I-Pitang' or 'Ye'kkad Oying'. This is prepared by rice powder, soft banana stem (*Posola*), pork blood, pork meat etc. Another one is called 'Jabor Adin Oying' which is prepared by pork blood or meat, green vegetables, etc.

They cultivate different types of food items according to seasons like in winter cabbage, carrot, beat, water ground, coriander, chilly etc. And in summer they grow palak (*Paleng*), jika, bhul etc.

Some of the wild root and plants which they eat are - sweet potatoes, tapaica, titabhekuri, napaphoo, mossondari, dhekia, arum (*kochu*), podina, manimuni etc. Some of the medicinal plants which they use are -

1. Napaphoo (*napaku*) - for high blood pressure
2. Dupartenga - for urinal trouble, kidney stone etc.
3. Turmeric (*haldi*) - for healing for wounds, jaundice or liver problem
4. Mossondari - for curing dysentery
5. Tulsi (*tuloki*) - for cough, synapsis etc.
6. Liverwort (*Manimuni*)- for cardiac problem, brain problem
7. Tengesi - for blood pressure, brain problem etc.
8. Mahaneem - for itching or skin disease, track problem etc.
9. Pipali (*Pimpoli*) - for blood problem, skin disease etc.

They rarely drink milk. Children are generally fed with milk. The new born child is given mother's milk for 6-12 months. Powdered milk is also brought from the market and given to the baby. They sometime use powdered milk for making tea. The cow or buffaloes milk is boiled in a steel pot for drink.

Many Mising household in Dhemaji has a common pond of fish and dry fish. Fresh is roasted on fire after cleaning when the fish is available in plenty, they dry it on the *Me'rab* (fire place) over the hearth and store for future use. Sometime dried fish is powdered and kept in bamboo tubes.

Different Types of Food Taken by the Misings during Different Occasions and Rituals are as follows:

A. In Festivals and other Ceremonies

In festivals and other ceremonies the Mising peoples of the Dhemaji district have *Apong*, *Adin*, *Ongo* and *Oying*. These four items are the main dishes in their festivals. Without these dishes their festivals and other ritual ceremonies are not complete. The procedure of preparing these items are given below -

1. Apong (Rice Beer):

Rice beer is their traditional drink, which locally called as 'Apong'. It brings the most essential ingredients of the Misings. It is also considered to be the most important and prestigious item for entertaining guests and relatives. *Apong* is mainly two types, namely; *Po:ro* and *Nogin Apong* (black and white rice beer) which prepared by the women folk of the family. It is generally made by rice (like *Hali*, *Bora*, *Joha*, etc.). This is prepared from boiled rice added to it in optimum proportion some medicinal plants called *E'pob*. At first they cook the rice nicely. When the rice becomes cold it is mixed with *E'pob*. After that these are kept wrapped with polythene or plant leaf and after one or two days the mixture is transferred to one big pot. The catch was dried over fire and preserved and after minimum 3 to 7 days the *Apong* gets ready to be consumed when the

people want to drink they washed it or mixed with water and then they drink. The people became very tired after doing hard work; they gave this *Apong* for relaxing.

Apong is a must in many traditional fairs and festival or ceremonies and religious purposes like *Ali-Aye' Lígang*, *Po:rag*, *Do:bur Ui* etc.

The women folk prepare *Po:ro* and *Nogin Apong* (black and white rice beer) in sufficient quantities about one month ahead of the *Ali-Aye' Lígang* festival. On this auspicious day, the womenfolk of the villages busy in the preparation of *Purang*, fish, meat curies, and in filtering *Apong*. The head of each family begins first by having a packet of *Purang* with a bowlful of *Po:ro Apong*. In case the feast is centrally organized, the head of the villages initiates the feast. The guests, irrespective of age, sex, caste and status are served *Purang*, *Apong* and other delicious curries of fish and meat. The feast continues throughout the day. In the evening the village headman, accompanied by the heads of the families pay a visit to each house from one end of the village to other, when they served with *Purang*, *Apong*, meat, fish, etc. They pray to the almighty God, their ancestors and to mother earth to bless them with a good harvest and healthy life.

Po:rag (Assamese term 'Nora Chiga Bihu') is one of the biggest socio-religious festivals of the Mising people. *Po:rag* is post-harvest festival. The Mising celebrate every two, three, four or even five years now (probably every year earlier) after a good harvest. It is a festival of prayers and feast. In *Po:rag* the Mising peoples consume a large quantity of pork and rice beer of the variety called *Po:ro apong*, on the occasion, and also sing and dance for hours together every day during the three days of the festivals, starting on a Wednesday, considered by them, as an auspicious day.

Do:bur Ui (Locally called 'Dobur Puja') is one of the most important rigid festivals of the Mising people. It may be organized by a single family or collected by several families. It is generally performed in the month of Assamese Jeth (May-June) every year. There are certain procedure and system of *Do:bur Ui*.

Rice, *Apong*, curry with meat and vegetables are prepared and they are taken by all, the members taking part in this ritual. There are many kinds of *Do:bur Ui* among the Misings.

2. **Oying (Curry):**

Traditionally the Mising have different type of *Oyings* (curry). The main types are -

a. ***Yumrang/Jabor Oying:***

This traditional dish is prepared with pork or chicken meat, pork's blood, different green vegetables like - napaphoo (*Napaku*), mustard leaf (*Tule/ Pe'tu*), bamboo shoot etc. All these things are fried and roasted with mustard oil and water. They also put these vegetables with dry fish (*Sanne' Ongo/Ngosan*). This type of dish is called *Yumrang* or *Jabor Oying*.

b. ***Pitang Oying:***

This traditional dish is prepared with pork or meat, rice powder etc. All these things are fried and or boiled with water.

c. ***Peret Oying:***

This traditional dish or food item is prepared with pork or chicken meat, or fish, pulse (*Peret*), baking soda or alkaline etc. All these things are boiled with water.

d. *Ye'kkad Oying*:

This traditional dish or food item is prepared with rice powder, pork blood and meat. All these things are fried and roasted with mustard oil and water.

e. *Amin Oying*: This traditional dish is prepared with small pieces of rice (*Amin* or *Khoraiguri*), fish (dry and fresh). In this item some type of green vegetable is mixed. It is also prepared only with small pieces of rice or *khoraiguri*.

f. *Rasor/Lasor Oying* (boiled Curry): Different types of vegetables which are only boiled with water is called *Rasor* or *Lasor Oying*.

g. *Ngeyyin Oying* (flower of arum): It is an important food item of the Misings. It is prepared with alkaline (psosolang khar or pered khar) adding pork or fish.

h. *I-kung Oying* (bamboo shoot): It is one important or favourite traditional food item among the Misings. It is prepared with fish or meat, especially pig meat and fish.

i. *Tahpar Oying* (Mushroom): It is one kind of delicious and protein food item of the Mising community. It is very taste for the Mising people. They collect different species of *tahpar* from the nature.

j. *Enge Oying* (edible sheath or root of arum): It is also one of the most popular food item among the Mising community.

The *Oyings* are also prepared with songe ground (Jati lau), sweet ground, cucumber etc.

3. Adin (Meat): Different types of meat are eaten by the Mising people like - pork, chicken, wild bird, wild buffalo, duck, goat etc.

4. Ongo (Fish): Different types of small and big fishes are eaten by the Mising people, like *Yubior Kunchiang* (a kind of eel fishes), *Limar/Markali*, *Lingum*, *Margang*, *Liyong*, *Ngobi*, *Ngertag*, *Ge'rme*, *Pempelang*, *Bedo:long*, *Kigong*, *Jommang*, *Ingi*, *Magur*, *Borali* etc.

5. Lotang (a kind of worm, Assamese called *leta*): Different kinds of *Lotang* are eaten by the Mising people, like - *ari*, *nuni*, *muga* etc.

They also prefer various kinds of fruit vegetables and are prepared in their own style, as are the tribal society

B. General Patterns of Food

The Misings of Assam take rice, dal, vegetables, fish, meat, etc. They prepare their food in various ways. Sometimes they fry their vegetables and sometime they boil them. Most of the peoples drink *Apong*. It is not only made for festivals but also for regular consumption at home. The *Apong* is served to the guests just like refreshing drink. They also prepare the vegetables either by frying and boiling. Some of their preparation is given below -

1. Vegetable fry :

At first they cut the vegetables in small pieces. After that they give the mustard oil in the pot and after that they put onion, chilly, etc. to it. After one or two minutes they given the vegetables and within 10-20 minutes the vegetable is ready for eating.

2. Boil (Rahnam) :

At first they wash the different types of leafy vegetables nicely and after that they cut in big pieces. After that they boil that with water in 10-20 minutes, when they boil the vegetables they put dry pork or dried or fresh fish. Occasionally they put bamboo shoot (*Ikung*) which very tasty.

C. Food Prescribed during Pregnancy

During pregnancy, the women usually have no restriction of taking food. But they never eat meat of animal or birds that dies to accident. After delivery there are some restrictions of taking food. They are to take food in small quantity. Only chicken or ceel fish (*Kuchiya*) with black pepper is given to the mother. During the period at present they also take different kinds of fish like -*singi*, *magur*, *sengeli* and dry fish. The curry and dry fish is given to the mother after six-seven days of delivery.

D. Food related to Death

When a person dies, the villagers come to his family and co-operates. During this time they prepare rice with only boil vegetables. No oil is used in this time. The rice and vegetables also offered to the dead person. After the burial, the villagers again boil rice and vegetables for the deceased family.

E. Food related to Marriage

In marriage, the villager also serves their traditional items like *Apong*, *Oying*, *Adin*, *Ongo*, etc. If someone is capable, he may offer sweets, *salad* and any other non-traditional food.

F. Food Taboos

There are not many taboos associated with food. As discussed earlier during pregnancy. The woman is not served meat of animal or birds that dies due to accident. After the baby is born the mother is advised to take food in small quantity, but at frequent intervals. When a member of the family is to go outside the village, the family members never kill any domestic or wild animals or bird at home or outside during that period. Partaking of beef, mutton, dog meat, owl etc. are taboo among the Mising peoples of Assam.

The entire family members take their meal together, but it is not acceptable daily. Sometime the women folk eat their meals after their men have finished. The younger children may eat several times a day.

Different traditional faiths and believes relating to food habits are also found prevailing in their day to day social life.

Conclusion

The change is a universal truth concept. The culture always tends to change with due course change of the time. In the contemporary Globalization period, the traditional food habits of the Misings are also starting to change. At present, there is growing impact of science and technology in one or other way in food habits of the Mising society. The necessity to produce vegetables or other things has reduced considerably because of easy availability of variable qualities of vegetables in the market.

The traditional food habits of the Misings are the important elements of their folk culture. The loss of the ethnicity of their food tradition is a great lose for their culture in particular and greater Assamese culture in general. Its preservation is an urgent need. Most of their food traditions are having protein, nutritious, vitamin required for stronger health. It needs a scientific and in-depth study and commercialized. At the same time, patent system should be labeled to deserve their ethnical origin.

So, the different Mising organizations, N.G.O. and the Food and Supply Department of Assam must need to take positive response for preservation and development for this food tradition.

Author's Biography

Dr. Naba Kumar Pegu, is an assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Silapathar Science College, Amritpur, Dhemaji, under Dibrugarh University, Assam, India. He have published many research papers in the various national and international reputed journals, (UGC care listed). He had completed numbers Minor Research Projects under aid of UGC, New Delhi, India (XI & XII Plan). His area of study is applied Socio-Cultural Anthropology.

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