



Food and nutrition: A study of the Misings of Assam

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ABSTRACT

In north east India different tribal people use natural herbs in preparing different recipes. The primary focus of this work is to identify the nutritional support of food in indigenous community like Mising. As we now that food is a nourishing substance and trying to find out the study of food rather than the relationship between food and human experience. Food is always an essential part of human society and people also experience it in different ways in everyday. In the study of food from the times of engagement of animals in agriculture; historians have been exploring the various dimensions of food for its entry into the field of study in social sciences. In Mising community people prefer healthy eating and to effectively promote the growth of people. The present study is trying to analyze the factors of healthy eating and the symbolic representation of food in Mising community.

Keywords: *food, culture, health, nutrition*

IFOOD VIS-À-VIS HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Historians who are working on food try to explain the importance of food studies. The explanation is necessary for the historians as the concept of food and opinions to define food is not uniform rather it is different. In scholarly definition the notion of food is very artistically used; on the contrary the opinion of common people is easily understandable to all. In simple term food means nourishing substance which people consume to promote growth and to sustain life. In food studies research, it focuses on dynamic themes by not only studying on food itself; rather it studies the relationship between food and the human experience. Thus human life has different concepts as food plays an important role in their lives. Food is the mediator between nature and cultural world; it is one of the important cultural symbols. From historical perspective the relationship between food and human experience is new as the historians never cover the hidden layers of meaning in social relationship. Thus food research has become new understanding of social relations and cultural metaphor which human beings experience. Food is always an essential part of human society and people also experience it in different ways in everyday. In the study of food from the times of engagement of animals in agriculture; historians have been exploring the various dimensions of food for its entry into the field of study in social sciences. In the field of science study on food, the scientists work in laboratory to find the nutritional level and food value. Scientists give importance in the nutrition of food and they concentrate on diet and prepare diet charts. In National Institute of Nutrition, Food Engineering and Technology and Department of Food Science studies on food are being done in a scientific way. Basically they concentrate on food industry, its engineering and technological



development, diet, health and manufacturing food products. Study of history of food is of important in social sciences. The legitimacy of food helps to grow the study of food and it becomes a broad field of study for various disciplines. Annals E.S.C. publish a series of articles on food and nutrition. An occasional best seller that drew an immediate and widespread following is Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange* to gather strength and momentum to create the history of food. Such literature helps us to recognize food as an important field of study. The field of food research is growing, crisscross study in the comprehensive of time, space, race, class and society and culture to interpret the meaning of food is not an easy task. In social sciences food studies include the observations, interviews as an important method and these methods are important for opinions of people as well as for people's perception. Food culture gives a direction and contextual richness to studies of diet, health, cooking, manners, social structure, food diffusion, production and distribution and much more.

In Mising community people prefer healthy eating and to effectively promote the growth of people. Perceptions of healthy eating are needed to understand two factors; firstly, a factor that influences the eating behaviours and secondly, factors that influence people's eating habits. Misings are very unique in its cultural life and their food habit is unique because of its relation with nature (they are mainly depending on nature). The symbolic representation of food in Mising community is always significant. As Mising community is migrating from various places it is noticed that they have the capacity to adopt other culture also. They maintain their own culture and also accept culture of others very easily. After migration change in ecology is very distinct but their pattern of adaptation is considerable. It is very interesting that they have been maintain their traditional dress code and their production is famous and have already captured the market with the brand of '*Miri Mekhela Sador*'. This example has proved that their culture is assimilating with local dominant culture. As it is already mentioned that food is a symbolic representation therefore in every community there are food related cultural practices. Mising community is not exceptional in this case. In Mising community food is an identity, process and cultural construction. Food as a metaphoric term; it conveys different meanings to mediate between nature and culture. The relation of nature and culture reveals universality in human thinking. Food as a prime factor of life is very important to prepare and manage food in everyday life. In most of our societies, women become primary actors to carry out the responsibility to manage and prepare food and to continue the traditional cultural practices. These practices reflect values and beliefs of a community. Basically on the basis of food choice perceptions of healthy eating are constructed. To identify the knowledge regarding food this perception is important. Concepts were found out that healthy eating in Mising community is important as people have consistently recognized their eating habits as balanced, nutritious and full of variety and food values. In their diet mostly they consume medicinal plants and for that mostly they are dependent on forest resources. Local communities of northeast India are extremely knowledgeable about the local plant resources and their utilization (Sarmah, 2006, 2010; Sarmah *et al.*, 2006). Livelihood system of Mising community is focusing their knowledge on health practices and their knowledge on utilising on local plants. Based on their perception from the field it is revealed that they are still maintaining their method of food preparation. Even they cure some



diseases by first hand treatment done at home. For example, malaria, small pox, skin diseases, diarrhea, vomiting, cough, gastric, blood purification, urinary discharge, jaundice, dysentery, fever, bronchitis, stomach disorder, blood pressure, nerves, menstruation problem, asthma, epilepsy diseases are cured by medicinal plants. For cuts, burns also they use ornamental plants like *chalkunwuri* (alovera). For de- worming *bet* (rattan shoot) is used as medicine. Even in accidental case like broken fracture they prefer *herhurua lata* (*Cissus quadrangula* L) as a fast track relief. For burning sensation and redness of eyes the leaves of *doron* is used. Thus the perceptions of people found relatively homogenous in different field. In general, people's perceptions on healthy eating are prevailing in Mising community from generation to generation as people of different age groups have the knowledge of traditional medicine. People's perceptions are focused by following points:

- (a) The age of the respondents are not uniform; marital status
- (b) Education, income of the family
- (c) Gender stratified and their related beliefs

Misings are basically agriculturalists and most of their income comes from paddy field. In every society economy matters a lot. Thus education is interrelated with economy. It is hard to educate if the economy is poor. The social background of any community is determined by the economy. In order to survive people frame some kind of psychology to adapt with society is necessary. In the socialization process self knowledge is very important and the value represents the constant notion towards self representation. People's perception is very important to find how self knowledge unfolds. People's perception can be studied by self perception theory which is very essential to know people's own attitudes, behaviours and other internal states. People's behaviour and circumstances are important for their own beliefs and attitudes to infer.

Studies help to find the scope, style and utility of the food habits of the Mising people. Literature of food studies has developed the accurate connection of food and foodways. The study is based on fieldwork and data have been collected from field based on observation and interview methods. The interviews were taken to focus the food habits based on the fieldwork of Baligaon village which is 35 km from Tezpur town of Sonitpur district of Assam. There are 58 families and total population consists of 2000. The male and female ratio is 50:52. Literacy rate of Baligaon is 50% and total employed person is fifteen. The field was visited several times in 2010- 2011. Research was conducted among different age group of people. The historical and cultural connection in that society was tried to locate. The Mising community is very immensely connected with nature. To collect data there was a need to observe the significant practices related to food habits and food practices. The women are too busy in their daily activities therefore it was quite difficult to take time from them. Interviews were taken to know their feelings and experiences from their own point of view. To make the present study useful and authentic, attention was given to special case studies to focus on nutritional food value of Mising community. During the field work special attention was paid to observation, which is a reliable technique for proper understanding of the society. The respondents were given every freedom to narrate incidents and their feelings.



It was a matter of pleasure that inspite of daily busy schedule, the respondents eagerly participated in discussions. It was found that respondents were proud of being Misings and they were very much conscious about their culture and identity.

Case Study 1: Name- Mrs. Dipali Mili, Firiti Mili, Senu Mili

Age: 30- 35 years, Profession: Home maker, Income: Agriculture, Village: Balipara.

They reveal a number of points on nutritional support of Mising food. They gave preference to boiled foods which gives more nutrition and use of oil is very less in their dishes. They are having depth idea on foods particularly on the ante natal and post natal period foods. After delivery mother is suggested to have chicken soup which is prepared with *Bihlangani* leaves (a kind of medicinal plant). *Kochu* or *Ange* (taro, botanical name is *Alocasia acuminata* schott) which is a very common food among Mising society. Girls during puberty period should restrain from taking certain food such as pineapple, banana flower. *Bihlangani* (a kind of fern) leaves are used as medicine for rheumatic pain. Generally they eat shoots, leaves and tubers cooked with acidic fruits like *owetenga* (elephant apple), *bilahi* (tomato) and *nemu tenga* (lemon). It is useful for blood purification also.

Case Study 2: Name: Mrs. Anita Mili, Profession: Home maker, Age: 37 Years, Income: Agriculture, Village: Balipara.

In the fifth month of the pregnancy period of a woman, traditionally *pajap* (duck meat) must be provided with by her parents. There is a strong belief that if the pregnant lady does not eat *pajap* then her baby might be physically handicapped after birth. The meat of pigeon and *phapuk* (banana flower) are essential not only for female but men too as these increase blood. Spadin of Banana is used as medicine for the treatment of eating hair accidentally with food as sometimes one/two hair may be left inside stomach. Therefore, *Spadin of Banana* should be eaten at least one/ two time a year. Even *phapuk* (Spadin of Banana) with pigeon meat is also a nutritious food as it improves blood.

Case Study 3: Name: Shri Najiram Mili, Profession: Agriculturalist, Age: 45 years, Income: Agriculture, Village: Baligaon

Shri Mili who is an inhabitant of Baligaon village gave opinion in support of the nutritional food value of *apong* (rice beer). It is useful for urine as well as for gall bladder problems. If the amount of alkali is more it helps to dissolve stone. It has nutritional as well as medicinal value. Gastric problem can be solved by consuming it early in the morning in empty stomach. Even the formation of stone in kidney can be prevented by having *po:ro apong*. Misings consider *apong* as physical labour tonic and refreshment.

Case Study 4: Name: Kommission Mili, Profession: Social worker, Age: 72 years, Income: Business and agriculture, Village: Baligaon



Shri Mili is an active member and famous as a social worker. People from Assam, across the country and outsiders have been visiting his home and he maintains a diary where his guests have left comments on Mising traditional food. According to him Mising foods are source of vitamins, minerals and fibre. They prefer boiled food with local herbs like medicinal creeper used in curries *vedailata* (*Paederia foetida* L.), *dimoru* (*Ficus glomerata* Roxb), *hati- Khutora* (*Amaranthus spinosus* L.), *nefalu* (*Clerodendrum cloebrookianum* L.), *tenga mora* (*Hibiscus Suddarifa* L.), *mosundori* (*Houttuynia cordata* Thunb) and species of fern used *dhekia* (*fiddlehead fern*) which is nutritious and useful for health. The juice of *vedailata* works as astringent and particularly they use it in diarrhea and dysentery. Use of less oil, less oily food is useful for health. Diseases like gastric is very less compared to other dominant community. In their traditional recipes green spinach and herbs are used to reduce fat.

In northeast region of India the tribal's use different plants and plants products. The traditional knowledge of particular community includes health care, natural resource management and food security particularly in rural areas. From the above discussion it is important to reveal how food practices and health are complex cultural construction. The reference to a variety of health messages, experiences and food choices help others to follow a healthy diet. To understand people and cultures and for applied reasons such as providing culturally appropriate and effective health care and advice; beliefs about food and health are important. Apart from the case studies there are many examples which enable us in understanding Mising community especially the uses of medicinal plants in their life. Diseases are cured by various medicinal plants available in nearby area. The natural herbal drugs are used both in traditional and modern society. The uses of these herbs originated from folklore and rituals. The use of herbs indicates that Mising community has connection with environment which reflects very old interaction. The discussion has revealed that the food is market oriented and impact of market is a new trend in remote areas. Gradually traditional oils and fats failed to satisfy the new hunger of industry and people. It is also noticed that some scarcity of sources are due to migration of people from remotest area to urban and metro hubs. The newly emergence of cooking and the complex relationships associated with food reveal the continuous contact with non- tribal Assamese and connection with market. In the early period, food structure mark the identity and symbolic meaning of expressing thought. Gradually with the time the discussions were not concise within a narrow sphere rather it includes the types of food, methods of preparation, dining room, and kitchen helps to explore the relationship between social group and food. It was possible for them to prepare recipes without some ingredients such as oil in early days but now a day it is difficult to do without it. Respondents are in favour of cultural change for the taste and some are for the development of Mising community. In the cultural market, society tries to meet the other internal needs. Changes have become visible in the context of methods of preparation and consumption of food. Homogenization of eating and practices is gradually disappearing from their society among the present generation. The respondents think that industrialization and commercialization of food have decreased the importance of traditional food. That is why foodways are changing; even the relationship between food and society is also changing as well as the



perceptions too. Even in earlier period while migrating from hill to plain areas, changes in foodways process was visible to find or create a vision of the past to make senses.

II.CONCLUSION

If we look at food studies it is interdisciplinary in subject matter as well as the theoretical and analytical approaches are also different. Food studies are as diverse as food itself. That is why there is importance of theoretical orientation and methodologies. Food has not only material importance but it has cultural and symbolic importance too. Therefore we cannot deny the importance of food studies. Food as a methodological tool paves the way to share stories of migration and works as evidence to find out how society has been changing, it is an expression of personal identity, ethnic identity. While discussing food and memory oral history is important in reaching ethnic history. This is an important source to know people's memory or observation of the past and it can be established by oral history. To do research in ethnic history this method is useful by using interview technique. In food studies historical research is a positivist spectrum. Through historical methods researcher in food studies can predict about their future based on the past. Positivist see history as scientific endeavour therefore theoretical approach is important. The use of lens to focus on gender, race and ethnicity, class theories like post- modernism emphasize on using such methods.

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