

The Mising People to Assamese Society and Culture: The Contribution of Folk Food: An Overview

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Abstract

The Mising people, also known as the Miri, are an important ethnic group belonging to the Man-Tibetan branch of the Mongolian racial stock. While they identify themselves as Mising, people in the plains of Assam commonly call them 'Miri.' According to the Hemkosh Dictionary, 'Miri' refers to a tribe of mountain origin that has lived in the plains for a long time. In the past, the term 'Miri' covered a wider area, including the entire region from the eastern Himalayas in the north to the plains of Assam in the south. This term did not distinguish between mountains and plains but referred to the various hill tribes mostly living within those geographical boundaries. More specifically, it applied to tribes in the border zone of the vast Brahmaputra Valley, stretching from the Dihang (also known as the Chiang) and Dibang Valleys in the east to the western border of the Darang district. Today, the Mising population is mainly located in eight key districts: Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur, and a few others. These areas are central to their settlements and reflect their rich culture and historical presence in the state.

Keywords: Mising, Brahmaputra Valley, folk food, cuisine, culture, culinary traditions, cultural exchange, indigenous food.

Introduction

Since prehistoric times, various species of human beings have flowed into the lush heart of Assam, the playground of nature. These species include the Indo-Mongolian species. According to ethnological analysis, the Miri or Mising are an ethnic group belonging to the Man-Tibetan branch of the Mongolian group.

The Mising are commonly known as '*Miri*'. The word Miri is a name given by the people of the plains of Assam. It is not known exactly when and how the name Miri came about. According to the "*Hemkosh*" Dictionary, the meaning of the word 'Miri' is 'a tribe of mountain people who have lived in the plains for a long time'. The Mising are referred to as Miri in religious scriptures, Ahom history, ethnological texts and official documents. The term Miri refers to the plains of Assam from the eastern Himalayas in the north to the south without distinguishing between mountainous and plain areas. This referred to the hill tribes living mainly in this geographical boundary, especially to the border of the vast Brahmaputra Valley and from the *Dihang* (Chiang) and *Dibang* Valleys in the east to the end of Darang district in the west. Foreign writers have mentioned it with various comments.

However, according to the latest geographical map of Assam, eight (8) districts are the main settlements of the Mising: Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur,

Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. Among these districts, Dhemaji district has the highest population and dense settlement of the Misings.

To live on Earth, people have to adapt to three types of environmental conditions. The first of these three conditions is the geographical environment and the second is the social environment and the third type can be called the supernatural or miraculous environment. Culture is what people do, how they live and what they contribute to live in these three environments from birth to death.

The three basic needs of man are food to eat, shelter to live in and clothing to wear. These three types of basic needs people try to draw from the natural or geographical environment in which they live. In other words, they try to make nature useful to themselves. People influence the development of methods or policies collectively in order to acquire techniques for gathering food and building shelter or the ability to use nature for their own benefits. If the methods or policies are accepted by the whole nation or society, they become part of the culture. It is one of the aspects of the culture of a nation.

Food is prepared by the people in different ways according to their taste depending on the environmental conditions. All ethnic groups have their own foods on which their diets are formed and these foods can be called 'folk foods' of that particular ethnic group. Folk food is a source of information about the religious practices, social system, traditions, etc. ethnic food is a bridge of harmony between one ethnic group and another.

Objectives

The paper aims to achieve the following objectives

1. To study the Folk Food of Mising society.
2. To study the Contribution of Folk food in Assamese society.
3. To study the different ingredients of Mising Folk food.

Methodology

With the help of both Primary and Secondary data of the Folk Food of Mising Society is discussed in this paper. Besides interviews were conducted with Mising people to through light on their Folk Food.

Discussion

The Mising also have some (traditional) 'folk foods', which reflect the religious and cultural aspects of the people in a variety of ways. The Mising have made an unprecedented contribution to the society and culture of Assam through their folk food.

The Mising have a specific list of foods. These foods are used in their daily lives as well as on various occasions such as festivals, pujas, rituals, traditional ceremonies, shraddhas for the dead, etc. as well as medicines for diseases.

Table of Folk Foods

1. ***Apang***: (made from rice)

The first place on the list of folk foods of the Mising people is the beverage '*Apang*'. *Apang* is one of the most popular and favourite drinks of the Mising society. The Misings believe that the use of *apang* makes their rituals meaningful. *Apang*, a drink used by the Misings, is made from rice.

There are two types of drinks available in the society, '*Pahr*' (*Sai Apang*) and *Nagin* or *Nagajin*. It is worth mentioning that almost every ethnic group living in Assam and different parts of India prepares drinks like *Nagin* or *Nagajin* *Apang* in their own way. There are many different types of drinks available in the country. However, the use of '*Pahr*' *Apang* is not seen in any other tribal society except the Mising of Assam and the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

Apang is also used as a remedy for diseases in the Mising community of Agra. For example, if a person suffers from jaundice, he is fed a bowl of the first fruit. It is also used to gain strength in the body. Scientists believe that there is a lot of unknown but valuable ingredient found in *Apang*. In addition, it is a custom in the Mising society that the convicted person has to satisfy the people of a particular Mising society by offering *Apang*. In short, *Apang* is an essential part of the Mising society. *Apang* preserves religious traditions on the one hand and reflects the traditions of folk life on the other.

2. Food made from rice (*ambrin*)

The main food of the Mising people is rice (*Apin*). It is prepared by boiling rice. There is no tradition of drinking tea or snacks in the Mising society. Recently, tea and drinks (made from rice) are also used in some areas of the Mising society. The Misings have adopted the use of *pitha* (snakes made from rice powder) from the non-Mising community, especially the Assamese speaking community. Therefore, the use of *chira* or *pitha* is festival-based in the Mising society; There are many different types of *pitha*, especially *chira* or *karaiguri* during *Kati* or *Magh Bihu* and *pithaguripitha* and *ghilapitha* during *Bohag Bihu* or *Rangali Bihu*. The cake is also made from rice flour. The Mising people celebrate their agricultural festival '*Ali: Ayi Ligang*' with '*Purang*' or '*Purang Apin*' (small packages of brown rice (*Ampi Ambrin* or other *lahiin* star leaves, a kind of rice cooked by tying rice) is used. It is customary to eat '*pikangapin*' (crackly rice) in the morning on days other than festivals. (They provide '*hukam*', a food prepared from a type of rice for use in festivals etc.).

Lists

a) *Rice (apin)* b) *Jalpan* (Mising cuisine, like sticky rice, flattened rice served with curd and jaggery) c) *Chira* d) *Pitha-Gorupitha, ghilapitha* etc e) *Karaiguri (Ambrig)* f) *Purangg) Pincang Apin.*

3. Vegetable foods

The Misings eat wild vegetables instead of vegetable gardens attached to the foundation of their houses. However, with the increasing extent of deforestation, the former wild vegetables are no longer readily available, so the Misings have also adopted the practice of establishing permanent gardens in addition to vegetable cultivation. The wild vegetables they use include *tajug (Dimoru) leaves, takug* (a kind of *Dimoru* tree) *leaf, kupiang* (tree and leaves larger than

takug), *tapiang* (a parched tree of the Dimoru species), *yahbrinda(tiknibarua)*, *chuhmang*(boal),*takkri (uriam)*, *anger*, *Dormih*, *Pandam Takrir*, *Brikam*, *Akal Birig*, *BunkihRipug* (vedai Lota), *Charman DatkehbaChamanAyung*, *Agin Ayut*, *PriagChuhchang*, *Nikung (Naltenga)*, *Akang (Dhekia)*, *Gurban*, *Murni Kahtung*, *Singalih* (A tree with leaves like bean leaves), *Pakkam (Nephafu)*, *Anbeh (Mechaki)*, *Gehnag(Khuttra)*, *Tapehtaneh (Jilmil)*, *Ouwbonyong,PahtangAyung (Mati Kaduri)*, *Agyub (Tengechi)*, *Tangam*, *Mecher Ayung, Marchang(Malkathi)*, *Kaganji (Bihlangni)*, *Champa(Aubergine)*, *Bikung (Urahi)*, *Migam Tapa* (pumpkin), *Parotap* (gourd), *Alih(Asiatic Yam)*, *Takeh (Ginger)*, *Talab* (Garlic), *Mrchu (chilli)*, *Tule: (Lai)* etc. are worth mentioning. These vegetables and root foods are collected from nature and consumed by the Mising people.

There was no use of oil in the Miching cooking process. Oil was used only for festivals, worship, and hospitality. They use only(*para oil*) made by themselves. Spices like oil are rarely used in the Mising society.

In addition, the Mising people also eat bamboo, cane stalks, *kharichha*, *kaldil*, etc and potatoes, sweet potatoes, star potatoes, etc. are eaten on *Magh Bihu*. According to Mising believe everyone should eat this potato food at least once. Otherwise, the Misings believe that they will be reborn as pigs in the next life.”

Fish

Fish is also included in the diet of the Misings. They keep the fish till Bihu festival and dry the fish for eating. They dry the fish and grind it to make '*Namching*' The sauce made with dried fish and ginger is called '*timi*' The fish is roasted and wrapped in leaves and heated on the stove to prepare a dish called '*pamnam*' They are prepared by adding *khudguri*(amn). They eat steamed fish. This is how the fish is prepared by the Miching society to consume.

Meat

Meat is also included in the diet of the Misings. Among the meats, they mainly eat pork, chicken and poultry. However, pigs are also used more frequently. The Mising family is proud to treat guests with pork and *apang*. Meat is used in pujas, rituals, festivals, entertainment of guests, etc. The Misings also dry meat like fish, cook with wild vegetables, dry fry, cook and roast it. The Misings mainly express their satisfaction by eating meat with *apang*.

Milk

The Misings consume milk only once a year. They don't eat the rest of the day. On the day of *Magh Bihu*, those who have ox stalls eat *AmbugAnurnei* (powder) or *Ambug, Alumnau* (Lada) prepared during this Bihu with milk free of cost in every household. Now, however, the Misings are also using milk and the former free distribution practice is disappearing.”

Betel Nut and Leaves

The use of betel nut and leaves is also seen in the Mising society. The use of betel nut and leaves is essential in various social functions, weddings, festivals etc. They offer betel nut and leaves to seek brides, offer betel nut and leaves to ask forgiveness, punish, offer betel nut and

leaves to the gods and accept them as *Muhudi*. They also eat the skin mixed with coconut. After meals, they eat coconut as a *muhudi*. (It is said that if guests are not fed betel nut and leaves after tea or other meals, the Lakshmi of the house will leave).

Conclusion

In summary, the Mising people's vibrant folk food traditions have greatly enriched Assamese society and culture. These culinary practices are not just about nourishment; they express the Mising community's unique identity, values, and characteristics. Food, along with other cultural expressions, clearly defines ethnic groups.

In the Mising community, folk food plays a vital role in shaping their lives. It is deeply connected to their social structure, bringing people together during feasts, celebrations, and daily interactions. Religious ceremonies and traditional rituals include specific dishes made from ancient recipes, reinforcing ties between current and ancestral generations. The act of sharing traditional foods shows the hospitality central to Mising culture, creating a welcoming environment.

Additionally, the Mising people's folk food contributes to their well-being and healthy lifestyle. This benefit comes from the focus on fresh, locally sourced ingredients, often found in the natural surroundings of their villages. These carefully selected and traditionally prepared ingredients are nutritious. The variety of dishes and foods used by the Mising society reflects their deep relationship with Rivers, Forests, and agricultural cycle of Farming seasons. The most favourite drinks of Mising society is *Apang*, which is made from rice. The *Apangis* also used by the Mising society as a medicine for diseases like Jaundice. *Apangis* a inseparable part of Mising society which reflects religious tradition and their folk life.

Notably, the Mising diet lacks artificial ingredients, preservatives, and processed foods. This commitment to natural, unprocessed foods is crucial for their good health and vitality. By avoiding artificial additives, the Mising people uphold a diet that follows nature, supporting their physical and mental well-being.

Ultimately, the Mising people's folk food shows how culinary traditions shape cultural identity, promote social unity, and encourage a healthy lifestyle. Their dedication to preserving these traditions not only enriches Assam's cultural landscape but also offers valuable lessons in sustainable living and the importance of connecting with one's heritage. Their careful focus on natural ingredients and traditional cooking methods reflects the deep wisdom in their culinary heritage, which deserves recognition and ongoing preservation for future generations.

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