

A GLIMPSE OF IDENTITY THROUGH THE FOOD HABITS OF MISING COMMUNITY IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Mrs. Rashmita Devi*

ABSTRACT

One of the major concerns experience by the tribal societies in North East India is regarding the preservation of their ethnic identity. There are nearly 100 tribal groups in this region. Their population is nearly 25% of the entire population of the region. Since the time India became independent country, different agitations have emerged in the tribal communities demanding exclusive or independent existence and in some cases even sovereignty. The traditional ethnic food of North East India has, of late, witnessed a boom as far as its availability is concerned. The ethnic delicacies of this region, with all its nutritional and culinary values, have started asserting itself as a better food choice, despite the over running impact of globalization. This perhaps has two reasons: It acts as one of the facets of the cultural identity of a community and secondly which is more, fulfilling, it really good and healthy. Since everyone must eat, what we eat becomes a most powerful symbol of who we are. There are as many kinds of food identification. More recently ethnic food is a marker of ethnic and religious identity for south-Asian and middle-eastern immigrant's community. The study of ethnicity and ethnic food is interdisciplinary and includes important historical, sociological and theoretical frame works. This paper try to explores ethnicity and ethnic identity of Mising community (the second largest tribal group of Assam) as they pertain to food.

Key words : Identity, Food habits, Mising community, Indigenous culture, Religious.

* **Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, Guwahati-14**

INTRODUCTION

Identity has many faces. Identity can refer to a social category defined by being a part of a certain community and its characteristics, in which an individual takes pride in being associated with or biological features that an individual takes, which might be naturally endowed, having social consequences. The identities of tribal communities in India have been determined through a historical course of successive change in conceptions related to economic, socio-cultural, ideological and political life. While many identities are forced upon them, many are also developed by the communities indigenously, while articulating their relation with other communities. The Mising, the second largest tribal community in Assam, have over the years been in constant struggle for autonomy(being granted to tribes) under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution, while the community in itself has been battling with various concepts of identity. These identities derived from various processes of assimilation and religious transformations have impacted the ‘ identity struggle’ of the Mising(s) in a major way.

After several reorganizations since independence, North – East India now comprises eight states : Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Most of these states are inhabited by indigenous groups of people categorized as scheduled tribes. Of late, the word tribe has generated a great deal of controversy. In India in particular, communities of tribes, castes, and sub – castes, overlap. The hill peoples of North – East India have not taken kindly to the term because of the connotations that the word carries. The British initially used expressions such as primitive and savage with reference to the people of the North – East. These expressions were later replaced by the term tribe. All these expressions stem from a class-conscious ideology, with the concepts of forward and backward status in the social structure. The deterministic point of view as reflected in the concepts of ‘ great’ and ‘ little’ traditions has also created problems. The hill people of North – East India - at least the political and economic leadership who are very sensitive to the question of cultural identity – refuse to accept the term tribe. They consider the term ‘ derogatory’. Neither do they approve of other terms like ethnic group or indigenous people that are currently used as replacements for the word tribe. They prefer to designate themselves only by their endoethnonym to emphasise their distinct cultural identity.

A food not only satisfies hunger but food system reveals many subtle aspects of society and culture. Structuralists and semioticians regarded food as a symbolic/ sign system. Food convey social differentiation, ethnicity, and national pride. Food observes anthropologist Arjun Appadurai is “ a highly condensed social fact ” and “ a marvelously plastic kind of collective representation”. Food indicates who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be. Sociologist Gary Alan Fine writes : “ Food reveals our souls. Like Marcel Proust reminiscing about a Madeleine or Calvin Trillian astonished at a plate of ribs, we are entangled in our meals. The connection between identity and consumption gives food a central role in the creation of community, and we use our diet to convey images of public identity.

Assam is the meeting ground for many diverse cultures and has a kaleidoscopic population of ethnic and tribal peoples. Originally a hill tribe from North – East China, Tibet and Mongolia, the Mising one of the Assam’s aboriginal communities, travelled down from Manasa Sarovar, the highest fresh water lake in the world and an ancient holy site considered by pilgrims to be the source of the four greatest rivers of Asia (Brahmaputra, Karnali, Indus and Sutlej) and around the 8th century settled in Arunachal Pradesh. Around 700 or more years ago they migrated down the course of tributaries feeding into the Brahmaputra like the Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, Subansiri, Ranganadi, and Dikrong to the Assam plains in search of a less hostile more economically viable life, but as comparative latecomers found the best lands had already been taken. They therefore settled on the fertile riverbanks which also gave them protection against their enemies. After building up such a close affinity with rivers over the centuries it is not surprising that many Mising are accomplished boat and fishermen, however sadly some of the villages are being forced to relocate away from the rivers due to soil erosion

FOOD HABITS AND AREA PROFILE OF THE STUDY

Regional foods to give one a sense of identity. Food is a cultural construction. We grow up and get enculturated as anthropologists like to say , learning from our friends and family what is appropriate to eat. We eat food in particular contexts , creating memories linked to people , places and holidays, all easily conjured by smell or taste or even texture.

The Mising food habit is one of the unique ethnic food cultures of Assam as it represents the identity, process and cultural construction of its own. The food culture is the symbol of identity

of a culture. With the advent of modernization many new techniques have come out, still they carry out the traditional methods of preparation of food. As with the other tribals of Assam, drink is an indispensable part of the life of Misings. The Misings use a regular drink prepared from fermented rice. It is called 'Apong'. They use two varieties of Apong e.g – Nagin Apong and Poro Apong. The preparation methods of food among the Mising community give us deep understanding of cultural identity. They are very active in preparing and preserving their food to maintain food related cultural practices through which they want to show their ethnic identity.

The study is mainly based on the field survey. Field work was mainly concentrated on the Mising villages of Lakhimpur district. During the period of data collection two methods namely interview method and observation method have been applied. Data are collected from the both active and passive bearer of the tradition. Besides the Lakhimpur district, some trade fairs and food festivals held in different parts of the states are also taken into consideration. In some tourist festival like Kaziranga Elephant festival, Dihing Patkai festival, Sobansiri festivals etc. and there are some melas which are associated with some cultural organizations where traditional foods are marketed. The annual conference of Asom Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Mising Sahitya Sabha, Mising Youth festival, Jon – bil mela of Tiwa are remarkable. It was observed that different groups of Mising community participate on the food festival. Though they take it basically for the economic purpose yet through it they want to express their identity. For that they also give importance on food presentation.

CHANGING TRENDS

The Mising's do not even find mention in the Vedas and the other Aryan scriptures. There are descriptions of certain tribes inhabiting the northern Brahmaputra who had traits similar to that of the modern day Misings. The Kalika Purana mentions a tribe with seven heads and yellow skin. They were strong, ferocious, ignorant and addicted to meat and drink, which are but genuinely indicative of the Mising culture.

Literary writings of the medieval period, mainly the Vaishnavite and Ahom Chronicles make frequent mention of the Miris and their relations with Vaishnavite saints and Ahom kings. During the Chutiya kingdom, the Misings were called Chutiya Miris. The Chutiyas were the rulers of before they were defeated by the Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497 – 1539)

in 1523 A. D. The Chutias were devastated and were also chased away which marked the beginning of the Misings plain life. It is believed that the Misings started to reside during the time of Sankardeva and the vaishnavite movement. After migrating from the hills, the Mising people adopted various practices of the plains to “blend well” with the people of the plains and be accepted. With the beginning of the neo – vaishnavism, Sankardeva used a mobilization strategy of uniting all the tribes and communities in Assam under one religion – Ek Sharan Naam Dharma which can be equated with the Hindu religion. The Mising people also accepted Vaishnavism which brought in considerable changes in the animistic nature and practices of the particular community, leading to considerable refinement of food and other cultural habits to adhere to the norms of Vaishnavism. Interestingly, the Misings did not try to leave their identity as a tribe, yet they were attracted towards the liberal policies and relatively easy norms and practices of neo – vaishnavism.

During the British period, Christian missionaries started engaging with the tribes in the North – East. The Misings too were impacted, though not on a larger scale. Today a considerable number of Misings have converted into Christianity. Such conversions have led to an identity crisis as many of those who converted are not yet mentally ready to totally discard traditional practices and belief systems. It also creates some conflict to the rich food culture of Mising community. But besides these threats, it is a good symptom that different types of organizations started to fight to lead their own course of development and protection of their culture. Thus the Misings want to protect their identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When discussing the ethnic food and identity among the Mising, two schools of thought come in to play. The modernist approach justifies the entry of globalization and does not see it as a threat to the indigenous culture. They accept that mutations are a fact of life and maintaining a completely exclusive way of identity in the modern global age is purely impossible. On the other hand, the conservationist approach is wary of too much proximity to the globalized in the world. According to them this proximity has led young Misings to blatantly discard age-old beliefs as “unscientific” and convert into various religions, putting the future of the indigenous culture in danger. Infact, the huge number of conversions of Misings to Christianity in the river island of

Majuli is a serious matter. It is interesting to note that the Misings are neither totally modernist nor entirely conservationist. They seek to adopt a middle path.

The Misings are undergoing a stage of social transition as a consequence of their co – habitation with non – Mising communities in the plains for centuries now: caught up between the waves of modernity and traditionalism, they are in a dilemma where to move – i.e. towards challenges that are brought about by technological advancement and rapid socio – economic development or retreat backwards to be preserved in a museum as specimen of an antique piece. A fear psychosis of being vanished is creeping in the minds of the people of the tribe. Re – establishment of age – old traditions and customs, propagation of traditional cultural activities, cultural heritage and ethnic sentiments are some of the ways in which the concerned persons and organizations of the Misings are reviving the tribal identity and morale.

REFERENCES

- [1] Beardsworth, A and Teresa K. 1997. *Sociology on the Menu : An invitation to the study of Food and society*. Routledge : Tailor & Francis group.
- [2] Levi – Strauss, C. 1996. “ The culinary triangle”, *Partisan Review* 33 : 586 – 95
- [3] Das, Dr. Grindra Nath(ed), *Tribal Development in North- East India*.
- [4] Welz F. (2005) : *Rethinking Identity; The Society: An International journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 1 July 2005, pp. 1 – 25, Varanasi, U.P. India.
- [5] Kuli, J. J(1998) : *The Misings : their history and culture*, North – East printers, Guwahati.
- [6] Mipun, J, 1993 *The Mishing of Assam, Development of a new life style*.
- [7] Bhattacharjee, Kishore, ' Assamese Food' in *Bull. Deptt. Anth., Gauhati University*.
- [8] Counihan, M.C & Esteik, V.P.(ed). 1997. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Routledge.
- [9] Pegu Manoranjan, *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India* ,
- [10] Sen , Soumen , (2005) 'Identity and Folklore' in *Bull. Deptt. of Folklore Research, Gauhati University*.

[11] Clarke S (2008) : Culture and Identity in ‘ The Sage Handbook of Cultural Analysis’, Sage publications USA.

[12] Xaxa V (2005) : Politics of language, Religion and Identity : Tribes in India; Economic and political weekly March 26, 2005.

