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## FOOD, ENVIRONMENT AND GENDER: CULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG THE MISINGS OF ASSAM

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**Abstract:** Food is a cultural construct, symbolism and social marker of a society and it is complex when we understand it within the periphery of ecology, human needs or historically. The economy and environment both are basic component to determine the food ways. The relationship between food and environment is always reciprocal. Thus the term “nature” and “culture” both are abstract binary. Food and nature both are transformation process as food can be transformed from one state to another through natural process. It is the women who always play an important role in the transformation process. Food preparation and gender inequality can be analyzed under the pressure of dominant cultural identity. The destruction of nature and changes in ecology also incorporate to change our food ways. While we consider both the term inside the arena of culture certain significance are emerging. In a marginalized cultural group the understanding of construction and maintenance of tradition is another factor. Women’s relationship with nature and food and how it is distinct from men is analyzed. The issues of nutrition, food symbolism, process of socialization for identity are highly emphasized. This paper will focus the complex relationship between food, environment and gender for the cultural identity of Mising community.

**Key words:** food, environment, gender, cultural identity, Mising community

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**Introduction:** Historically it has been noticing that the primary food provider is referring to women and nature. Based on sustainable flows of fertility the food system includes the both in its processes. In famous Chipko movement women fight primarily as peasant for their forests. The inputs from the forest is basically depend by the women because of the productivity which is directly or indirectly as fertilizer or fodder for fields. Women have to maintain the intimate links between trees, animals and crops is feminine principle of food. It has been a traditional work of women in integrating forestry and animal husbandry with farming. To understand the culture and history value has been given to the study of food. According to Audrey Richards (1932, 1939) in the early part of this century launched the formal acknowledgment of foodways as an effective prism through which to illuminate human life [1]. When we think gender in the context environment the question arise the relationship which women have with nature how it is distinct from men. The growing literature on ecofeminism has explained the links between gender and environment based on ideology. In the developing world there has been an intensifying struggle for survival which focuses on the material basis between the two. It is the women who are always engaged especially in countries like India in middle class as well as in rural households. Even in environmental degradation also it is quite gender specific. For an understanding of gendered social relations as well as cultural identity food preparation and dietary practices both are very important. This cultural activity is playing a natural role by the women. The social construction and understanding in maintaining cultural identity can be analyzed by

the relationship between women and food preparation practices. The idea that food can be a source of empowerment or fulfillment suggests that contemporary cultural understandings of traditional gender norms may be changing. Existing literature suggests that, while gender egalitarian households in the U.S. are increasingly common (Brown and Miller 2002 a or b), gender asymmetries abound [2]. Even though food preparation perpetuates relations of gender inequality in the household, under given circumstances it can provide a valued identity, a source of empowerment for women, and a means to perpetuate group survival (DeVault 1991, 232)[3]. In the present examines the role of women in the household and community as a primary actor. How much women are responsible in food preparation and maintain their tradition will be illuminated.

**Data Sources:** The present study is based on ethnographic data. For collecting data field work has been done based on observation and semi structured interview with two villages of Sonitpur district of Assam. I conducted my field work in the semi rural households based on rice cultivation in that society. The historical and cultural connection of these villages has been examined in the food practices of Mising community. The significance of Mising community’s food practices naturalistic observational data has been collected. Women of different age group from 20- 65 were participated. They shared their experiences and were interested to participate in the interviews. They expressed their opinions and were given opportunity to raise relevant issues. They shared their knowledge on Mising food practices and rituals. The management of food at household and in the community and the role they play for

transmitting their food and related food practices to their next generation. The Mising community inhabits in the riversides of the Brahmaputra in its segment between the upper and the central Assam. They are residing in Dhemaji, Majuli, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar districts of Assam. Misings comprised the second largest ethnic group of Assam.

**Area profile of the field:** District: Sonitpur

Baligaon Village: 58 families (Total Population 2000)

Bokagaon Village: 114 families

Male/ Female Ratio: 50:52

Literacy: 50%

Employed Person: 15

Occupation: Agriculture, Gardening, Weaving, Fishing, Business (Bamboo, Pig, Dairy)

**Women and Nature: Primary producer of Food:**

The violation and marginalization of women these two are linked with the violation of nature. Especially in the third world country like India this has become an issue. It is the women who produce and reproduce life as well as they play an important role in providing substance. Historically it has been noticing that after migration, women continue the link between the life and nature in providing subsistence. That is why historical and cultural linked can be find out because of the privilege access of women for sustaining principle. Several discourses stand for the ecofeminism. The debate of nature and culture, male and female is not universally the same. It is necessary to examine the formulation of gender and environment in the third world countries. The domination and exploitation on nature and domination and oppression on women this argument has paved the idea that women are more closed to nature than men. And men are more closed to culture. But this debatable argument is not universally acceptable because of the role played by women in society. The traditional Mising community is connected with nature. The migration of Misings from hill to plain area it is very clear that they have been shifting from rural to semi rural and urban area. The two major festivals of Mising community *Ali-a:yé Lígang* and *Po:rag* both are connected with agricultural cycle. Both men and women are equally involved in the festivals. Food preparation, processing and distribution all are part and parcel of the festivals. The villagers hold a feast to celebrate. The preparation process starts before two weeks and women always play the major role since the preparation process begins. In every society food related practices are an important part of daily life as well as culture. These practices help us to understand the gender relations in a given social context, the treasure of knowledge in cooking food, food preservation, and also the construction of identities and to signify the communities. Even though food

preparation perpetuates relations of gender inequality in the household, under given circumstances it can provide a valued identity, a source of empowerment for women, and a means to perpetuate group survival (De Vault 1991, 232) [4].

In my fieldwork I tried to find out the staple food rice which is centrally related to rice. The significant way of Misings is that they express their cultural identity. The food practices culture is continuously fostering by women. The Mising dietary practices are linked with the food tradition by the rice cultures. The meal concept of Mising community is mostly described that rice is the central part of the main family meal. Women shared folk tales and stories as well as songs related to rice culture. The festivals are accompanied by traditional dance still perform by women in cultural festivals. Festivals like *Ali-a:yé Lígang* and *Po:rag* is comprised of a feast. In this feast the preparation method begins before two weeks. It is women who prepare the traditional rice beer called 'Apong' by collecting herbs as well as grinding husks. It is very interesting that the recollection and prevailing traditions are described by women. Through their description we can learn that how ethnic cultural groups construct their own identifiable world for themselves in the present globalized world. Because of the dominant cultural setting of different communities now it has become very important to be familiar among different section of people. The collective memory is transmitting to the next generation through the recollection folk tales, stories and songs by the women.

In Mising community certain norms and rules are strictly followed by them in food preparation. Women who cook perpetuate these practices daily. The practices of preparation food involve the selection of food, the amounts to be taken and combination of seasoning food. Thus these practices differentiate the community from others. The cultural boundary of Mising community is controlled by the women by practicing different types of food with unique methods of preparation and preservation. Generally preparation of rice beer is a common tradition among all the ethnic groups of Assam. But if we utter the word "apong" it directly refers to Mising community. Like that dry *ikhu* (bamboo shoot), wet bamboo shoot, Namshing (dried fish), *Pork with owetenga* or *chompa* (*Dillenia indica* L.), pork with various wild plants which are having medicinal value like *mesaki*, *takuk*, *tazik*, *pakkom* all these are part of Mising traditional food. Through daily practices they claim certain food system as their own and they use certain words "we", "ours" thus a familiar and recognizable tradition in the dominant cultural practices is maintained by the women. For food produce and preparation a strong preference is given to natural ingredients which is another norm of

Mising food practices. The daily food they are preparing is growing locally and naturally. The producing and preparation method of food is symbolically significant as the naturally produced sources mark of their difference from other cultures.

**Conclusion:** As women are primary providers of food therefore the daily aspect of household is given much analytical attention. In a dominant culture it views as a 'natural role'. Sometimes this natural role is devalued by the society. On the other hand, analytical attention is given to perpetuate the relations inequality and subordination in society based on gender. The feminist scholarship has given importance on equitable distribution household work among all the family members. The regular preparation and practices of food in family and wider community, the women of Mising community have strongly able to maintain cultural identity and group survival. DeVault advocates pre-serving the essence

of caring that is built into this activity, although in a way that would not maintain relations of inequality for those who perform it (DeVault 1991, 233-35) [5]. Food preparation and practices is important act for cultural preservation perform by women and the judgments are tightly given by women to accept, resist and change. Sometimes due to time pressures Mising women are willing to take short cuts in cooking but they never compromise their feelings about nature and environmental protection. The women in Mising community they use some strategies such as everyday practices, recollection of their past through folk tales, narratives, stories and oral tradition. The women of Mising community have learned from their mothers, grandmothers that learning process underlying principles of their traditions are important for survival, resistance and preservation of their culture.

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