

Kitchen and Dining Space: As A Way of Eating Manner in Mising Community

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Abstract: *Food is a prime factor of life and it is a recent area of research which promotes the emphasis on not to study only food but production, nutrition, culinary arts all is part of it. The relationship between human and food is always interesting one. This relationship is not determined from only one perspective rather relationships are examined from a wider perspectives. Food is become more fashionable and new trends of eating concepts are emerging. Eating outside and eating at kitchen is recently developed concept. Ethnic food refers its origin to a heritage and culture. Though the concept of eating at kitchen is changing still eating manner and dining concept is prevailing among the Misings of Assam. In kitchen the basic priority is given to culinary arts and eating manner. Though technology and commercialization in globalize world has changes eating manner still Misings are maintaing eating manner through their rituals and festivals. This paper is analyzing the "space" in the kitchen of Misings and the symbolism of food in their rituals and festivals.*

Key words: *kitchen, dining, space, food, eating, manner*

I. Introduction:

Food and human relations is always looking through the various approaches because of it centrality in human life. Food is not only to eat because it is our prime factor to alive. We can not go beyond food as the whole world is living only because of food. Therefore apart from food, environment is also equally important for our live. As food is related to nature and without this relationship cultural construction is not possible. Food has nutritional value and to obtain sufficient nutrient value human eat food. People are highly choosy to define food to show the richness of their own culture. Falk (1991) throw light on abstract binary oppositions regarding the distinctions made by human being between edible and inedible. In this context he has concentrated on closely related but having difference terms such as, same and other, us and them, good and bad, inside and outside, nature and culture. Here edible is referred to the body's digest capacity and something which feel good and safe while taking. If we take edibility and inedibility from cultural perspective it is not simply function and adaptability of our body based on changing processes and nutritional support (Falk 1991: 55). In every community people are incorporated with their own traditional cultural and maintain it for cultural construction, identity and cultural process. In case of food ways of a community which is flexible as well as the new trend of culture which added new substances to new food and new economy. In present these new resources have diversified the eating pattern of new generation. As a result the outcomes are also not uniform as the experiences may lead to grow up certain bad habits also as the toxic and contaminated items are immensely taken now a days. Food is more fashionable at present and recently it has become a vibrant area of research. Food is not only eating for nutritional purpose but for taste also. We are eating symbols and meanings as diet carries not only nutrition but also symbolic charge.

II. Data Sources And Analysis:

The study is carried out by the researcher based on ethnographic data by using observations and interviews with Mising women. The research is carried out in Baligaon and Bokagaon village of Sonitpur district of Assam. In Baligaon there are fifty eight (58) families and Bokagaon comprised of one hundred and fourteen families (114). The ratio of male and female is 50: 52 and the rate of literacy is 50%. The field work was carried out several times and the main interest which attracted researcher is that both the villages are near about 35 K.M. from Tezpur town but still the villages have given the picture of traditional society by their household pattern, activities and the cultural practices in their society. So it is really interesting for researcher to establish the relation between historical and cultural one. Another interesting part during field work was the occupation of the village people. Agriculture was the main one and apart from it weaving, gardening, fishing, business (bamboo, pig, dairy) are important. The rate of employed person was fifteen (15). Researcher was trying to connect their food practices process with historical and cultural sphere. Researcher selected around twenty families in each village and tied to focus through naturalistic observation. During field work the participation of women was more than the men. Women participation was based on the criteria such as employed, house wives, weavers etc. Researcher was mainly given importance the role of women in household activities and how they are incorporated by the male members of the family in kitchen. The kitchen of Mising which is known as *Sang Ghor* was the prime focus of researcher's study.

III. The Significance Of The Mising Community

Mising community the second largest ethnic group of Assam has distinctive elements to study as it is unique one by its cultural significance. Misings are staying various parts of Assam but still despite of its variants in demography and economic conditions but there is historical and cultural background. The food and its related cultural practices is always a unique and the food preparation practices started at home. Basically food is a cultural symbol and it is an essential element of everyday life. The food preparation and practices start in the kitchen. They regarded it very scarce one and it is always separated from other part of home. The kitchen of Mising community is known as *Sang Ghor*. Therefore there is a very significant importance of kitchen among the Misings of Assam. Because of the topographical location and flood problem which they have to face in every year it is really important to have the structure of household and kitchen like they have. Today the livelihood in these areas is determined by the sources of economic condition. This community is preserving their traditions and culture inspite of every year natural calamities. They are inhabitants of agriculture, gardening, vegetable fields, dairy production, business but they are not able to grow up any tourism spot or industry due to economic problem and flood which ruin their livelihood.

IV. Defining The Kitchen And Dining Space:

The kitchen and dining space concept asserts a group's collective identity, its position in a society as well as hierarchy. The evidence of kinship system is still giving importance to eating away from home and eating as guest of others in their home too. Visser (1993) gave emphasis on "rituals of dinning" and the eating practices how we eat and why we eat. Before discussing about Mising kitchen it is important to mention that there is no caste division among the Misings. So discrimination is not seen in preparation of food. During the field work the researcher has observed the Mising people's dining table manners. The Mising kitchen is traditionally very sacred domestic space. The kitchen of the Mising people is inside the *Sang Ghor* and it is situated in the inner most location of the kitchen. That is why "*Sang Ghor*" is the marker of cultural identity and ethnic identity. It enriches the cultural heritage of Mising community. The *me'ram* (clay oven) which is situated in the centre is used to cook. In Mising community there is an importance in culinary arts and certain rules and regulations are also to maintain their cooking processes. Women are having full authority in the kitchen. The female members of every household have to perform the task of cooking by facing towards the east side of the kitchen. Mising people think the clay oven as holy one. While going outside family members bow down before the clay oven and take the blessings of it. Generally in the *Sang Ghor* there is the provision of one *me'ram* (clay oven). The number of *me'ram* (clay oven) may be increased according to the married male members of a family. The male member (head of the family) sits in the north and east corner of the *me'ram* (clay oven); on the other hand, the female member sits in the south and west side. All the members of a family sit on *Umke* (small wooden tool) while having food. The meal is first serve to the head of the family (male or female) and after that the other members of the family take food. Before taking food all the members pray to God. Mising people offer food in the *Sang Ghor* to their relatives and the guests are not allowed to enter the *Sang Ghor*. Rather they prefer to let them sit in an Assam type house or a place nearby *Sang Ghor*. So from the observation in the field it is found that Mising people have also adopted the dining table manner in a separate room near *Sang Ghor* for the guest which is a new trend in their life style. Even the ethnic kitchen concept is still maintaining by them as rich heritage and culture of the Misings of Assam.

There is one hanging wooden slab known as *perap* above the *me'ram*. Over the *perap* the preserved food and ingredients are kept. The Mising people are till now maintaining their traditional equipments to use in the kitchen like brass metal and the use of aluminum is very new to them. They have been using it since last twenty years. In the kitchen they use pot of various metals like brass, aluminum, clay, bamboo tube (*bahor sunga*), cauldron (*tou*), iron pan (*kerahi*), dish-bowl (*aalom bati*) etc. With the development of technology they have also adopted such technologies with the changes of time. Now a day they are using gas inside *Sang Ghor* (kitchen) apart from the *me'ram* (clay oven). Traditionally ethnic kitchen Mising divides to prepare food and drink which are basically alkaline, boil food and sour food. There are food taboos and restrictions also inside the *Sang Ghor* (kitchen). Though women prepare and cook food but during the menstruation period women are not allowed to enter inside the *Sang Ghor* for five days and during that period the male member of the family have to cook. This incorporation of men and women creates harmony in family life. But women have the responsibility in culinary practices and cooking nutritional food as they always provide good service in culinary arts.

V. Eating Schedule And Food Preferences:

Now a day eating food is not only for hunger but for fashion and taste also. Eating out or eating at home makes differences. Eating inside household asserts the whole preparation and processing process, serving way and maintaing tradition where as eating outside household give complete opposite picture. Eating outside at any moment does not have any social connection and there is no traditional custom. In this reference the

assertions of Zeldin are feasible. Zeldin emphasis on “eating out” from the angle of opportunity and why this culture is emerged and established; though an ongoing issue still these “eating out” opportunities are well experienced and perceived by consumers. In every society this “eating away from home” or “eating out” is a common phenomenon in the context of globalization. Still every community is maintaining and trying to reveal their tradition by eating inside the home or eating with family. Though difference might be there between men and female but this “eating inside household” asserts identity of social contacts. In every family they maintain schedule to prepare, cook and to eat food. The tradition based society maintains such schedule to assert ethnic identity through food. Ethnic food does not mean that they are ethnically distinctive or isolated and new food items can be perceived as ethnic food after the pattern of establishment. Ethnic identity is a recent area of research and this issue has revived the ethnic food, new food and trends are adopted as ethnic with the distinctive characteristic to establish. The eating schedule of the Mising people is quite different from the non tribal people of Assam. They do not use the term “breakfast”, “lunch” or “dinner”. Rather they prefer to say “*Sah tirta*” (breakfast), “*Apin dotoa*” (lunch & dinner). Rice is the staple food of Mising people. Early in the morning they take meal and in lunch as well as in dinner also they like to have the same. The Mising people usually get up early in the morning and they become busy with their household work as well as in the agricultural field. During the fieldwork it was noticed by the researcher that those who worked in the paddy field of others used to go early four o’clock in the morning and they absorb themselves in labor work for rest of the day. As they are very hard worker and their way of earning is very hard therefore they need to consume such foods which have vitamin and nutritious food value. It is well known that the rice beer (*apong*) which Misings prepare has substantial amount of vitamin so after coming from paddy field in morning and evening time the men take *apong* (rice beer) to refresh themselves. They prefer to take heavy diet (especially rice) early in the morning. Earlier they offer their guest *apong* as an honor but with the changes of time now they offer tea, biscuits or *Jolpan* to the guests. In Mising society tea is popular drink next to *apong*.

Mising people are very fond of taking traditional food especially they prefer boil food in their daily diet and the popularity of boil food is still prevailing in their society. Mostly they prefer items like pork, rice beer, the wild *tora gaaj* (cardamom). *Apin* (rice) is the staple food of the villagers. Along with *Apin*, they take boiled edible leaves *lai xak* (mustard green), *dhekia* (fern), *paleng xak* (spinach), *morisa* (Indian spinach), *mula xak* (radish green), *adin* (meat) and *ango* (fish). The traditional rice beer “*apong*” is one of the most popular drinks among the villagers. Basically Mising people prefer pork, chicken more rather they take less mutton, duck, and pigeon meat. *Namshing* (dried fish) is another favorite food item among the villagers. The villagers have their own agricultural field so they never bother to go market for the purpose of buying vegetables. Among vegetables the villagers like mostly *omita* (papaya), *kosu thur* (taro-stem), *kosu* (taro), *kumura* (white guard), *rongalao* (pumpkin), *koldil* (banana flower), *betgaj* (rattan shoot), *bondhakobi* (cabbage), *fulkobi* (cauliflower), *ulkobi* (kohlrabi), *jatilao* (bottle guard), *beñena* (brinjal) etc. *Ikhu* (bamboo shoot) is another popular item among the villagers and they cook *ikhu* in different styles.

In the field work, food preference found among the children is not traditional and they prefer nodules, chocolate, chips, semolina (*suji*), rooti, poori and they take these types of food for school Tiffin. Thus the preferences and choices of people are also changing generation by generation and also by time. The villagers prepare pork, chicken and *apong* especially for their guests and these foods represent the hierarchy (among their foods) and status in the society.

VI. Survey Of The Various Recipes And Their Preparation:

The Misings are self sufficient in food supply which is an important characteristic of this community. They invest a major portion of their income in food and thus the surplus or saving is always less as they spend too much in eating and preparing food. The Mising food habit is one of the unique ethnic food cultures of Assam. With the advent of modernization many new techniques have come out, still they carry out the traditional methods of preparation of food. The kitchen is a unique heritage of the villagers which is well equipped with traditional styles. The preparation methods of food among the Mising community give us deep understanding of cultural identity. The construction and maintenance of tradition based society can be understood better by the relationship of women and food preparation practices. This kind of social relationship analyses the character and significance of women’s household activities as well as source of gender inequality, women’s empowerment and group identity. It is noticed in the fieldwork that the Mising women are very active in managing and preparing food to maintain food related cultural practices to show their ethnic identity. The ingredients of the villagers are still home made and spices are the production of their own paddy field. They use garlic, ginger, onion, cumin, black pepper, coriander, turmeric; *jablang* is a local meat masala which are used while cooking meat. The garlic is used in most of the recipes as they believe that garlic has medicinal value.

In the field work, the researcher has observed that the methods of preparing food items like *oyok* (pork), *apong* (rice beer), *namshing* (dried fish), *ikhu* (bamboo shoot), *porok* (chicken). There are various methods to prepare *oyok* (pork) such as by roasting, boiling, and frying. *Notke khanji* is very popular pork item

among the villagers. At first, pork is fried where *notke* (*mesaki* or *ombe* in Upper Assam) leaves are mixed after boiling it. The ingredients which are included are garlic, ginger, onion, turmeric, coriander, cumin, chili pepper, *jableng* (meat masala) it is a local ingredient cooked with the pork. Pork is also cooked with *maati mah* (urad bean), *pitha guri* (rice powder), *lai xak* (mustard green), *tukpe* or *dimoru xak* (fig tree), *mula xak* (radish green), *migom* (pumpkin), *tapak* (white guard), *aalu* (potato). *Apong* (rice beer) the preparation procedure of it starts with preparation of rice grains. Some people use their stock of rice grains and some buy from the local market. Rice grains are dried in the sun and the seeds are husked to a mill or in an indigenous husking instrument called “*Ural*”. After cleaning rice, it is boiled in the same manner as it is at the time of preparation of the mill. Then, the boiled rice is spread on a flat wide bamboo tray called “*dola*” for “*Por Apong*” or “*Sāi Mad*”. The ash of the paddy is then mixed with it before the *opok* or *pitha* (the source of fermentation) or the medicine is fixed with it. For “*apong*” only the “*pithas*” (*opok*) are mixed. The mixture form is now covered by banana leaves and then kept in a clay pot called “*kalah*” and allowed for further fermentation for a day or two. During the summer period, two days are sufficient but during the winter, it requires about three to four days for full fermentation. Now-a-days many people use plastic vessels instead of clay pot but the quality of the beverage produced in the clay pot is better. In this process the mixture get a decomposing appearance and some bubbles appear which signify that process of fragmentation has taken place. Now the raw form of the “*apong*” is ready but a lot of work has to be done for proper preparation. Before serving, the beverages have to be diluted by adding water. This liquid is filtered though a filter made of bamboo splits called “*shekoni*”. Only for “*sāimad*” or the “*por apong*” the “*shekoni*” is used, basically the raw form of “*apong*” is filtered by using muslin. After the filtration the rice beer becomes ready for serving. The amount of water added to the beverages would determine the strength of the drink. Approximately three liters of rice beer is produced form one kg of rice grains. *Namshing* (dried fish) is one very famous food item among the villagers. People prepare *namshing* as chutney. It is prepared and covered by banana leaves and keep it for burn. While preparing chutney salt, chili pepper, garlic, onion, and coriander are added to make it more delicious. It is also prepared with *mula xak* (radish green), *lai xak* (mustard green) and *enge/ kosu* (taro). *Ikhu* (bamboo shoot) is prepared with *ango* (fish), *migom* (pumpkin), *dail* (pulses). It keeps dried in bamboo tube or bottle to preserve for future. It is used to pour on the mixed curry made of various vegetables even boil or fry too. *Porok* (chicken) is basically prepared with white guard, pumpkin, lentil, mung bean, urad bean and pulses. Mutton, Pigeon, Duck meat is also consumed by the villagers. Mutton is less consumed in comparison with other meat because of its smell. Sometimes pigeon is prepared with pulses especially with pea.

VII. Food In Rituals & Festivals:

The social anthropologists have written monographs on traditional people. The functionalist approach signifies the food and food ways of traditional people. Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe- Brown (1922) highlighted on food related rituals and taboos. Their main emphasis was on two aspects to create consciousness among the young i.e. the social value of food and also to continue the sentiments of the community. The Mising people perform various festivals every year. *Ali-ai-ligang* and *Po: rag* is the most important among them. The *Bohag bihu*, *Magh bihu* and *Kati bihu* these three bihus are also celebrated by them with full enthusiasm. The Assamese bihu songs and *Oinitom* are equally popular among them. *Ali-ai-ligang* is associated with agriculture, with the beginning of the *Ahu* paddy cultivation. The first Wednesday of the month of *Falgun* of Indian calendar the festival is celebrated. The villagers prepare food and drink for this festival in the morning and in the afternoon the heads of the families implant a handful of *ahu*-seed in their respective fields by reciting prayers to the Mother Earth. They have great feast on food and drink such as *purang apin* (boiled rice), *apong* (rice beer), *adin* (meat) and *ango* (fish), eating vegetables are also cooked *porok* (chicken), fried vegetables, and urad bean. They offer few drops of *apong* in the four corners of the *me'ram* (fire place) in their respective households. *Po: rag* festival is arranged by the youth organization of Misings (*Kebang*). The *Murang* (nam ghor) house is renovated. Villagers arrange large number of food and drink in advance. *Oyok* and *por Apong* is essential part of this festival. In the month of *Aghon* of the Indian calendar *No bhat Khua* festival is celebrated individually in the villages. They clean the fire place (*me'ram*) and cook food. First they offer to their ancestors, then Donyee - Po: lo (the Sun and the Moon) after that all the family members sit together and have the food. The main food items of this festival are *apin* (rice), *apong* (rice beer), *oyok* (pork), *porok* (chicken), fried vegetables, and urad bean. The villagers celebrate the “*Nodi Puja*” once in a year near to Jia Bhorali River. In this function *apong*, *porok* and *oyok* are very essential. In the funeral ceremony urad bean is very essential. Till the funeral ceremony is over *enge/kosu* (taro), *kumura* (white guard), *dhekia xak* (fern), *halodhi* (turmeric), *pani lao* (bottle guard), *ango* (fish), *migom/rongalao* (pumpkin) are not taken by family members till the Chandrammah is end. The funeral ceremony is also known “*Dodgang*”. The *Dodgang* ritual is very expensive that is why all the family members perform this ceremony together on the basis of economic condition. There is no hard and fast rule to perform this funeral ceremony; it may be after ten years of the death. For a formal marriage proposal, boy's

party approaches the girl's parents with present *apong* and betel leaves and nuts. While entry in a new house (*griho probesh*) *apong* (rice beer), *adin* (meat), *ango* (fish) are necessary to celebrate the ritual.

VIII. Conclusion:

The area of study covers to understand not only the cultural life but socio-economic life of both the Mising villages. Their culture is basically agro-based. The food habits are kind of representation of unity among the villagers specifically traditional rice beer. The food and drink is regarded as an identity marker of the Mising Society. In every community there is an underlying importance of ethnic kitchen because of food preparation and cooking. As the preparation process and cooking starts at kitchen so we can not deny the importance of kitchen in our every day life. With the changing of time the ethnic kitchen is decorated with modern equipments and the traditional folk elements are replaced by new trends. The preservation and preparation equipments are market oriented and people are using aluminum in extensive range in their kitchens. The tradition based Mising people are maintaining their own customs regarding food preparation still the effect of globalization can be noticed. Now-a-days, the use of *gakir* (milk), *api* (egg), *tulang* (oil) are included in their food habits which is very recent trend. Where as they never prefer these items in the past days. Basically after migrating to plain various areas of Assam changes are happening enormously in Mising society. Food pattern can create social boundaries, social relations with the process of inclusion and exclusion (Douglas 1975). She differentiated between meals and drinks. The key concept she gave on meals is similar to our eating at home. The eating manner which refers to a dining table and according to Douglas meal "frames the gathering". Secondly, meals incorporate significant contrast and taste too. Thirdly, meals which we take must contained nutritious source. Thus Douglas concept creates the picture of ethnic kitchen as well as the "space" in table manner. Elias (1978a) examined table manner to signify the everyday social significance. According to Elias the concept of table manner is apart of "civilizing process". The villagers offer betel nut (tamul-pan) to the guests instead of Apong now-a-days. This shows that Mising people have accepted the regional Assamese culture. Tea is another popular drink next to Apong and Mising people are quite acquaintance with it. The preparation and processing of *apong* begins at kitchen. Thus the kitchen of Mising community asserts the ethnic identity. The rituals and scarce space which signifies the kitchen of Mising community is also very important. That is why; the food preparation of Mising people begins in the kitchen known as *Sang Ghor*. According to the anthropologists the whole notion of the world is symbolically constructed but also the constructions of our culture is also symbolic. Cultural constructions is understood both the world for people and the people for specific world. Food-ways conveying meaning and it also constituted language to all. Eating habit is essential and continuously repeated activity of our daily life. Though the term "food" constitutes different meanings still it is very important to know the customs and rules such as with whom, when and where one should eat, taboos, the prohibitions and restrictions on the consumption of certain food by certain people under certain conditions. The social constructionists have tried to renewed interest in questions of social identity. Constructivism is trying to understand the Indian communities by historicizing the formation of groups and social identities whether they are constituted fully succeeding in doing so. While community may not be any more natural or traditional as there are certain communities based on shared, exclusive identities that emerged from their common culture and history. Still the cultural construction is historically based. In the field, it is noticed that the Mising community sacrifice food as a means of propitiating their gods. The male priests perform the rituals by offering food such as *pork*, *apong*, *chicken* and sacrifice these foods to celebrate religious or social ceremony. After the ceremony or ritual is over all the village members eat together. **Fischler** (1988) gave opinion on symbolic potential of food and said that it is the absolute central to our sense of identity. The collective identity of a group can be asserts by the eating patterns. He also pointed out that food is also central to "individual identity". How the physiology of human body conceived the barrier between the outside world and inside world. We think rarely about the nutritional value of food rather but also we eat in terms of beliefs and collective representation. For example: the idea of human culture is that when people absorption of a food repeatedly symbolize the identity of a group. In case of health sector the villagers have strong believed in traditional medicine but after the development of education they have started relying on medical science. It has been noticed that near to *Sang Ghor* they build up brick house as bamboo and straw are not easily available everywhere for a *Sang Ghor* and this trend has been started since last seven years in both the villages. Still the regular food preparation process is maintaining in rural and semi urban areas but in urban areas it is not possible for them because of narrow sphere so the concept "space" is less appropriate in their way of lives. Cultural preservation is very important in present days as globalization has losses our own tradition and people are more addicted and adjustable towards western attitude. Thus it has affected the cultural heritage of every community. In Mising culture *Sang Ghor* is the cultural heritage and it symbolizes the identity of Mising people. Though due to pressure and time demand people are less willing to go through the process of cooking which connects the relation between nature and culture and they are transmitting to alternative way to feel the connection of culture and environment. But Misings are

maintaining and preserving their culinary culture in “*Sang Ghor*” which is a heritage to survive their culture and to make it vibrant tradition to assert their ethnic identity.

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