

Traditional Agricultural Practices of the Mising Community of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Misings are formerly known as the 'Miris' and second largest tribal group of Assam. They are mostly distributed in the upper Brahmaputra valley of Assam with their rich cultural heritage. The traditional agricultural life of the Mising community has been playing a significant role in their society because most of the tradition, customs and religious beliefs are closely associated with their agricultural system. But due to spread of modern education, science and technology, the gradual transitions have been taking place in their traditional agricultural practices which impact on their core culture. Therefore, an attempt has been made to understand and highlight the traditional agricultural practices of the Mising community of Dhemaji district of Assam.

1. Introduction

The way of life of the tribe and community, their traditional customs, beliefs, festivals etc. are some of the components for the rich cultural diversity of Assam and north-eastern region of India. Misings are formerly known as the 'Miri' and second largest tribal group of Assam. They belong to Mongoloid group while linguistically they are Tibeto-Burman. The Indian constitution has regarded the Mising as a Scheduled tribe (plain) of Assam. They are mostly distributed with their rich cultural heritage in the upper Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The present habitation of Misings are spread in Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Charaideo, Jorhat and Golaghat districts of Assam along with 17.8 per cent of the state's total tribal people (5.9 lakhs population, as per 2001 Census, Govt of India). It is worth mentioning that Dhemaji district alone constitutes the majority Mising population (31.7%) in the state, followed by Lakhimpur (28.2%) and Jorhat (15.7%) districts.

Misings are very pure community without any superiority and complexity of the varna system, no caste distinction and economically they have freedom to perform ritual duties. Their life is very much close with nature and their helpful mind is strongly succinct. They are traditionally egalitarian and always legitimate with royal apparatus. The majority of the Mising people are still living in the flood affected areas with old age traditions. Therefore modern civilization has practically left them almost untouched in many aspects. Agriculture is the primary occupation for their livelihood and paddy is the main crop. They practice different varieties of paddy both in winter and summer. They also produce mustard seeds during the winter season. Most of the Mising households have their own kitchen garden and they practice horticulture in a small scale. Diet is found among the Mising people are non-vegetarian. Rice is their staple food and it consists of boiled rice, fish, meat, vegetables, etc. Apart from these they also prepare traditional food items like- rice beer (*Apong*), dried fish (*Namching*) dried meat etc. Misings are stilted dwellers. A traditional Mising house is constructed on a platform made of rest on some wooden and bamboo post by using woods, bamboos, canes,

reeds etc. Usually the houses are 4-6 feet height from the ground. The Mising women are very expert in weaving. They produce worn silk and weave different colourful dresses. Most of the festivals, ceremonies and religious beliefs and practices are also observed among the Mising society mainly in their life-cycle and agricultural life.

2. Significance of the study

Geographically Dhemaji districts are situated in a remote and flood affected area. Most of the tribe and community of this area are still practicing the traditional agricultural techniques. Different cultural norms as well as occupational patterns also play a vital role in the socio-economic condition of the people. Though the Government of India viz. Assam initiated different programmes to better development for their economic condition as well as agricultural sector, but still unable to cover all the people at desired level for different factors. It is also noted that the agricultural practices of the tribes and communities of this region is very limited. Therefore, such investigation has been undertaken of the Mising tribe of Assam on their traditional agricultural practices, problems relating with agricultural life in their society.

3. Objectives

1. To study about the traditional agricultural practices of the Mising tribe of Dhemaji Districts of Assam.
2. To study about the traditional agricultural tool and technology of the Mising people.

4. Methodology

The present study has been carried out from the two typical Mising villages of Bordoloni development block and one village of under Machkhowa development block of Dhemaji district, Assam. This study paper is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected by conducting extensive field works through in-depth interview. The interview schedule was prepared with questions in keeping mind of the objectives of study. Elderly and expert paddy cultivators were emphasized upon to enquire about the traditional agriculture

practices. The data were collected during the June, 2019 to January, 2020 from the three villages i.e. Berbhanga, Gorpara and Begena Gara village of Dhemaji district. The secondary data were collected from various sources like -Published documents, various books, journals, articles etc.

5. Results and Discussion

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Mising people of Assam and paddy is the principle crop for their livelihood. They practices mainly three types of paddy i.e. *Ahu*, *Bao* and *Sali*. In the North bank of Brahmaputra Valley most of the Mising villages are located near the river-banks where alluvial soils are available for their rice cultivation. They practice cultivating wet and marshy crops called *Ahu*. For *Ahu* paddy they choose lowland and started by using plough and bullock or buffalos during the month of December/January. This work is done by male labour only. Before sowing the seeds, the field is ploughed and puddle four to six times and prepared the field is pulverised with bamboo ladder. They also used the leveller for the purpose of levelling the soil by crushing the solid hard soil. After prepared the soil they sowing the *Ahu* seeds in the month of Mid-February. The Mising people started to sowing seeds in the first Wednesday of *Phalgun* (Mid-February) of Assamese calendar. This first practice of sowing seeds is reflected the festival *Ali-Aye-Ligang* which means '*Āli*' stands for seeds, '*Āyé*' for fruits and '*Ligāng*' for sowing. It should be mentioned that '*Āli-Āyé-Ligāng*' is the main festival of the Misings relating with their agriculture. The first weeding is done after the seeds sprout up. It is done by bullock with a long-handed tool known as *Bindha*. It is a tool made of wood and bamboo having a horizontal portion and formed by teeth thin or thick depending on usage made of bamboo sticks. After some days the second major weeding has to be done by female labour when plants become firmly rooted. Sometimes it is observed that when the plants are growing matured, they constructing a temporary field house and kept the paddy from the wild animals and birds. They start to harvest during the month of May and June.

Bao or deep water rice is also popularly known as red-rice which is an organic and indigenous rice paddy of Assam. Most of the Mising people preferred to cultivate the *Bao* paddy because it can be cultivated on low, swampy lands and flood prone areas in Assam. It should be mentioned that the *Bao* paddy grows fast even if the level of water goes up and can be survive in high flood prone area. The Mising people apply almost the same methods of *Ahu* for *Bao* cultivation during the month of April/May. Just before the Monsoon start they sowed the seeds with the help of broadcast method. The time of harvesting *Bao* crops is done during the months of November and December.

The *Sali* or winter paddy is mostly practices in the alluvial muddy field which are comparatively high level than the *Ahu* and *Bao* field. The Mising people begin their *Sali* paddy cultivation after the celebration of *Bohag Bihu* festival in the month of April. The *Sali* paddy is not directly sown in the land from where it is harvested. Generally, they prepared nurseries in the high land for raised the variety of seedlings. Just starts of the Monsoon they sowing the seedling in the prepared nurseries and also start to plough in the selected paddy field.

Generally they ploughed and puddle four to six times for the better muddy and fertile. It is observed that they making some small plots by muddy dam for storage the standing water in a particular level in their paddy field. According to procedure, after the attains a height of about ten to fourteen centre metre which generally take one months to forty five days, they are transplanted. A day prior to transplantation, the seedlings are pulled out from the seedbed in the evening and kept in the open in the courtyard for the overnight. In the next day, they transplanted the seedling in the prepared field and this work is usually done by female labour. Two or three samplings are put together at equal distance in a line from one another. The transplantation of seedlings is undertaken between the June and August during the period of heavy rains. The weeding is done after the planting of two to three months later which depending upon the nature of wild plants.

Irrigation System: The people of Assam are mostly depending on nature for paddy cultivation during the monsoons seasons. The Mising are no exception in this role. However, there are some of the traditional irrigation systems in Assam. But it is not required using such type of irrigation system for the paddy cultivators of Assam because of the high fertility of the soil and received ample water from heavy rain falls during monsoon season. It is observed that the Mising people making some small plots by muddy dam for storage the standing water in their paddy field. Sometimes they sow water from the nearby streams or waterlog areas to their paddy fields by a tool called '*Lahoni*' wherever it is necessary.

Fertilizer: It is observed that the Mising people not use any type of chemical fertilizer pesticides especially in their paddy cultivation. Occasionally a few farmer used the local cow dung whenever it is necessary.

Agricultural Implements: The Mising community have their own traditional tool and technology which have been using in their agricultural field for various purposes; these can be identified as follows-

1. **E'ging (Axe):** It is the tool used form mainly cutting the shrubs, chopping wood and clearing fields made of soft iron wedge-shaped blade and of wooden handle (Fig. 1.).
2. **Kuyab (Hoe):** The Misings called it as *Kuyab* and mostly used by male farmers. Hoe is a digging tool with a long handle made of bamboo or wood and the working area is made up of iron, it also used for weeds roots, and also to open the soil up for easy water penetration (Fig. 2.).
3. **Jomokang (Rake):** It is a long-handed in shape with handle made of bamboo and wood having a horizontal portion and formed by some thin teeth (Fig. 3.). This type of tool is used in taking out the trash from seedbed.
4. **Nangol (Plough):** Plough is the most essential agricultural implements used by the Misings of Assam. It consists of a beam, a yoke and the body. An iron share is fixed in the anterior end of the body, as bullocks keep moving the sharp iron digs and loosens the soil. The yoke is rests on the necks of a pair of bullocks horizontally (Fig. 5.).

5. **Moi (Harrow):** The *Moi* is made up of bamboo and cane (Fig. 6.). It is tied to its centre with a long cane or rope and the other end is tied to the centre of the yoke and it is pulled by the bullocks for levelling the ploughed field.
6. **Kuyab (Hoe):** The Hoe is also used for weeds roots, to open the soil up for easy water penetration and also for making some small plots by muddy dam.
7. **Doli di'nam (Leveller):** A leveller is looking like a hammer in shape with log handle and much bigger in size. Generally the working area made of a thick wood and it used for levelling soil by crushing the solid hard soil (Fig. 9).
8. **Bindha (Weeding Rake):** The Mising people used this tool during the weeding by bullocks in *Ahu* Cultivation. The tool is looking like a plough which is made of bamboo and wood. It consists of a beam, a yoke and the body. Some of the thin bamboo teethes are fixed in a horizontal wood in the anterior end of the body, as bullocks keep moving, the sharp teethes weeding and loosens the soil (Fig. 4).
9. **Lahoni (Water lifter/shower):** A *Lahoni* is usually made up of a long handle of bamboo with the working area is made of tin (Fig. 7.). They used to sow water from the nearby streams or waterlog areas in their paddy field wherever it is necessary.
10. **Pe'pur (Mask):** The musk is also used during the weeding by bullocks. It is like a small basket which is made of knotted split bamboo. During the weeding time the mask tied it around the neck of the bullocks that it can be protect the growing crops from being eaten away by them(Fig: 8).
11. **Kan'chi (Sickle):** The most important tool for harvesting is sickle (Fig.9.). It is a curved shaped and the handle is made up of wood and the working area is made of iron.
12. **Bi'ra (Carrying stick):** It is a stick of bamboo with pointed ends (Fig. 10.). It is used for carrying bundles of paddy from the field to their granary.

Fig. 1. *Eg'ing*Fig. 2. *Kuyab*Fig. 3. *Jomokang*Fig. 4. *Bindha*Fig. 5. *Nangol*Fig. 6. *Moi*



Fig: 7. Lahoni

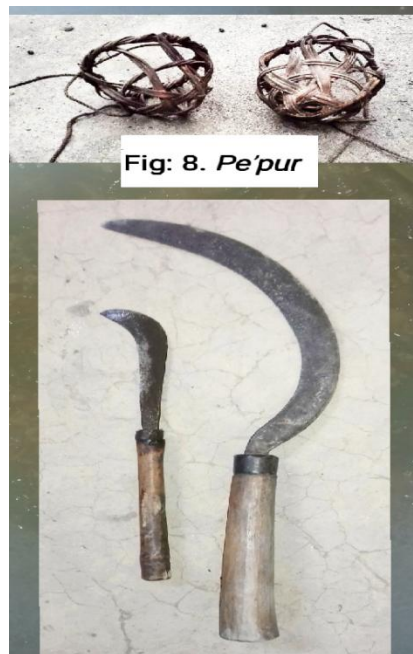


Fig: 8. Pe'pur



Fig: 9. Kan'chi



Fig: 10. Doli di'nam



Fig: 11. Bi'ra

6. Conclusion

The colourful culture of Mising people reflected that they are predominantly agriculturist tribe. The people have faith on their traditional religious beliefs and have been performing different kinds of rituals for bettering agricultural productivities. Though they are beliefs in supernatural, but there are lots of scientific techniques and methods for ecological balanced. The techniques and methods established that they are very close with nature and very conscious in biological preservation through their tradition. But nowadays, due to impact of science and technology and modernization lots of changing has been taking place in their traditional agricultural system as well as in

their core culture. There is growing awareness among the Mising people and they come forward to accept the Governmental development schemes of agriculture. The educated younger section are attracting to modern agricultural practices instead of the traditional practices.

Despite tremendous challenges, the traditional agricultural practices are still prevalent among the Misings especially in the rural areas of Assam. Most of the Mising people have been able to maintain their old traditions, socio-cultural beliefs and practices intact amid various socio-political traits and tribulations through the centuries.

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