

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN AND FOOD: A STUDY OF THE MISING COMMUNITY

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Food preparation and its related cultural practices have been studied by historians, sociologists and anthropologists and this kind of exploration has great potential to understand social relations in terms of gender as well as cultural and ethnic identities in communities. The study of food and its related cultural practices have focused the role of gender activity in society. The shift of these practices is happening recently with the impact of globalization. With the arena of global world there is the need to understand the gendered relation with society as well as the cultural identity. While analyzing the cultural identity we must have to broaden our perspective towards every part of our daily life. How it has become a “natural role” for women to understand our society and how they have been maintaining our traditional cultural activity till now is important to know. While analyzing the women’s role in the household activities the inequality of gender role is very distinct. It is important to mention here that both men and women have equal responsibility not only in producing or cooking food but even for preservation as well as processing too. Under the circumstances the value towards women are given more as the empowerment for women is much more among the tribal societies.

This chapter explores key questions concerning the relationship the women of Mising community have with food and kitchen spaces. The relationship between food and kitchen in Mising community is gendered specific. And thus the inquiry needs a broader gender perspective to understand the relation. The signifying role of kitchen and dining space is also discussed in this chapter. Gender based hierarchy is observed through food related practices of women. Attempt is made to understand the status of women in society. Some fundamental questions always arise regarding cooking and serving of food. In response to this cited above woman has always been a victim. Even men always get first preference in taking the food. In most of the Indian

societies it is the women who cook and serve. Women's relationship with food is an indicator of her status in a society. But in a patriarchal society the status can be determined in the power structure. It is the man who always enjoys greater and freer access to food than woman. Social factors sometimes come in the way of a woman access to food. Women serve food to elder persons of the family on "priority" basis thus women maintain etiquette and manner. As such most commonly, women suffer from malnutrition and health hazards. In typical society especially in joint family, women are not supposed to be superseded the male member by declaring her right over food.

Sociologists Ogburn and Nimkoff discussed their view on community as "A community is the total organised social life of a locality" (1964, pp. 247). Community refers to common socio- cultural, religious, economic and political rather than people living in same phenomena within a shared geographical location. The character of a community depends upon the role of the individual of the group as well as on the territorial placement. The experience of "belongingness" also provides physical and psychological sense. This chapter examines how gender operates in this case, concerning with gender and spatial aspects of food culture and "kitchen space" in Mising community. This chapter also demonstrates the way gender is constituted through the role of men and women in the production, processing and distribution. Knowledge concerning gender and identity is communicated through food and food systems. The everyday life of Mising women shows the close connection to food and food spaces. The complex relationship between food and gender relating to women is revealed in the kitchen. A woman has to negotiate gender identity in the spaces of kitchen. Kitchen is the place where concerning knowledge on food and gender is applied, shared and transferred from one generation to the next. An attempt is made to concentrate on the relationships of Mising women with food and kitchen spaces. There is the need of methodological approach to capture and convey women's interaction within the space.

Women and food has not been a traditionally important topic of investigations in the fields of social science research. Even there seems to be relatively little research which focuses particularly on the women of Mising

community. There is a need to formulate the theoretical and conceptual ground to understand the study. To cover the study in the introductory part there is a discussion on the relationship between women and food and the cultural tradition relating to food that are being maintained by the women of Mising community. Food is studied through the lens of gender to analyze the gender relationships and its dynamics.

Goodman and Redclift identify the social processes with the household works which have accompanied increasing commoditization of food and summarize as, “Food into freezers; women into factories” (Goodman and Redclift; 1991, pp.1). The work of women remains valued as the naturalness of food. The modern food system constructs socio- economic divisions in the public domain of paid employment and the private domain of the household. There is an inevitable implication for the gendered division of labour in the home and particularly in relation to food work especially in purchasing, preparation and presentation as the involvement of women is increasing.

Food is a prime factor of life so it is very important to prepare and manage food in everyday life. In most of our society, women become primary actors to carry out the responsibility to manage and prepare food to continue our cultural practices not only in the household but also in the society. The cultural identity is created by women and it is the women who transmit our culture from one generation to next generation. Both men and women play a vital role in preparing and producing food. Field studies reveal a very few examples of men’s activities in household works. It was observed that due to some unavoidable situation men get involved into cooking. During the menstruation period, women are restrained from entering into the kitchen and a male person is supposed to prepare food during those days. The process of preparation of food in Mising community is gender specific in certain case (preparation of *apong*, everyday food). Food provides satisfaction and nutritional support for the body and for pleasure. The role of gender is always influenced by various elements of our society. Woman play vital role not only in preparing food but also in feeding too. It is the duty of women to prepare and serve food but women also have to go for cultivation in the field. The Mising women are self dependent and they have always thrived to work inside

the house as their first priority is family while men are mostly engaged in outside activities like: fishing, gardening, hunting and business. Men though they have the knowledge of cooking, do not take interest in household works. It is very rare that men cook in the household. Women always take the responsibility to cook food and to feed and thus the food rituals and practices of Mising community perpetuate ethnic identity only because of women.

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 in and by communities. Traditionally, a woman's role is not seriously acknowledged and appreciated in society (Smith 1987, pp. 18-9, cited in Counihan, 2002). Women's regular involvement in cultural practices proves that cultural construction and maintenance is gender specific. This is also true in terms of women's relationship with food. Feminist studies show that examination on this aspect of women's work clarifies the character and significance of women's household activities (De Vault, 1991; Oakley, 1974). Food preparation and consumption practices provide us the key to understand the unequal relationship in the domain of the household (De Vault; 1991, pp. 232).

4.2. WHY WOMEN: IMPORTANCE OF GENDER

An understanding of the social construction of gender refers to differences, hierarchies, rankings that exist between two sexes. Gender explains the various roles played by men and women in the society and these are also the construction of society. Gender is a conceptual tool which helps to analyze the structural relationship of inequality existing in society between women and men. This inequality exists also in case of other social life-employment, education and political institutions. Gender is being a complex phenomenon which is socially constructed and culturally determined. Cultural construction of gender determines the socialization process from the context of construction of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity and femininity include gender role, other social role and gender identity. The construction of femininity

and masculinity both can be modified by their participation in institutions such as the politics, religion and economy. Still women are important in gender studies. Meadow and Weiss both have dealt with the eating disorder of women. Meadow and Weiss write as psychologists who work with women for their suffering from eating disorders (1992). Their arguments based on their reading in popular literature and by observing in culture, incorporate their idea that food and eating are “a metaphor for what is required for survival as a woman in today’s society” (Meadow and Weiss 1992: ix). They contrast the contemporary situation with the 1950s and 1960s, when eating disorders were rare and almost unheard of, and magazines showed food as a natural part of life with none of the “romantic, mysterious and forbidden connotations that it has today” (Meadow and Weiss 1992; pp. 60). They argue that women “have always defined themselves in terms of external ideal” which “simply reflects the norms of the times” (1992; pp. 96).

The gender role patriarchy determines the role of men and women. Specific roles are prescribed to men and women by the mode of patriarchy ideology. It is a traditional role of society that majority of women are dependent on men financially as well as emotionally. Thus women confirms the role of caretaking and nurturing which become an integral part of the ‘female psyche’ thus leading them to place particular value on sexual and social relationships. According to Meadow and Weiss, the tension between the demands of personal relationships and those of the market place women in a situation where there is conflict between the desire for dependence and the need for self- expression, a conflict which manifests itself through food (1992). They also try to relate between foods with different feelings. According to them this linkage begins at the time of birth, and food can be the expression of love, comfort, warmth and security. Particularly they are indicating such kind of a society where rates of divorce is high and it does not offer any guarantees of permanent partners and providers and gradually importance arise for encouraging women that they should maintain their independence. While eating, food offers advantages of asking whether they enjoy it and it is an area of life where individual can put one’s own needs. In the words of Meadow and Weiss, “Food is a destructive lover, a double edged sword. At the same time

that it offers immediate gratification and comfort, it insidiously builds up a layer of fat that society states is guaranteed to make one unlovable” (1992; pp.125). As a conclusion the findings of the discussion is that there is a direct link between eating disorders and the powerful emphasis on slimness as the basis of female beauty. The eating disorder problem is now challenging to attain bodily perfection and slimness does not necessarily deliver love and happiness. Charles and Kerr (1986b) discuss about the position of women in capitalist society. Women are powerless and control is exerted over women by ideologies which define beauty of female. These ideologies define female beauty in the context of unnatural slimness and in this definition women are not fitted as most women’s bodies do not approximate. Therefore body and food are regarded as hated enemies. To suppress appetite or to skip meal some women even start smoking. Charles and Kerr have analyzed this issue that these are not the problems of those with identifiable eating disorder; these problems are the products of women’s structural position and are a function of their marginal and powerless situation in society. “Women’s bodies have always been a screen onto which different values, such as receptive sexiness or fecundity, have been projected by men” (Cline 1990; pp.164). The ideal is not uniform over the time but men define the models and it is the women who strive to achieve each in order to obtain men’s approval. If women have to achieve the ideal of extreme slimness, women follow the latest diet and avoid the possibility to become fat. These thoughts make food as a source of danger for women. In Cline’s discussion also we can find out the concerns for eating disorder. In western cultural ideal eating habit of women become destabilized, the weight of women continues to decline and these may raise the possibility of higher levels of clinical disorders. According to Cline, “there is hardly a woman in the West between adolescence and old age who does not desire to alter something about her shape and size” (1990; pp.187). If women are not a success to fulfill their target by changing shapes or by losing weight, they feel themselves to be a failure. Cline asserts the negative aspect of eating disorder of women which is also a cause of tragedy among the women. Cline opines that woman are challenging their own biology, a biology which may be geared to maintaining a certain fat level and which may resist attempts to achieve a permanent reduction in that level (1990). Diamond (1985) discusses, that it is

inappropriate for feminists to engage in discussions about weight and body image, in that involvement in such discussion takes for granted, instead of challenging, the thin/fat opposition and, in particular, the privileging of thin over fat. Diamond emphasizes, feminists should be concerned to develop, collectively, new arrays of identities and alternative body images. Brown and Jasper (1993) edited reports on feminist approaches which present challenges to the conventional pressures on women to police their own bodies through habitual dieting. Brown and Jasper argue that there are women who accept their bodies as they are and denied to use treadmill as it is constant nutritional self-denial. They tried to avoid certain terms such as 'eating disorder', 'anorexia' and 'bulimia' as these terms originated in psychiatric literature and are associated with a medical or diseases model. At the end they retain such terms as they are everyday terms and these terms are readily comprehensible to a wide readership. While recognizing words like 'obese' and 'overweight' implying deviation from some objective standard, editors recommended reclaiming the word *fat* by using pejorative overtones and in simple context to a particular body type. The ideal of the slim body as a product of industrialization and women participation in the labour force as well as with the pressure of feminism have impact to increase social equality.

4.3. GENDER, ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD

Historically women have been regarded as managers of natural resources and men are dependent on them for their livelihood. They possess the quality of using natural resources in a sustainable manner as that determines not only the survival of their families but their own living as well. Thus an imperative study is needed to understand the issues such as division of labour, access to credit or information, rights of ownership, gender understanding for policy prescriptions and development initiatives in the agriculture sector as well as those impacting the environment. Environment and forest development have been crucial concerns for sustainable development. Women are employed in large scale in different sectors of life such as wasteland development, social forestry and desert development programmes. But the perspective like

ecofeminism has put forth people from environmental feminist's struggle to fight against the common cause, i.e. the cause of oppression of both women and environment. In ecofeminism movement women and environment both the elements seemed to be united and raised voice against the dominance of men. French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism in 1974 to represent women's capacity for bringing an ecological movement to challenge the dominant perspective of the west. The author compared this dominance by human beings as dominance over nature as a parallel to man's dominance over women. In western culture both women and nature have been devalued where ecofeminism is a response to the perception of society. Therefore, women and nature both can be elevated and liberated through direct political action or collective struggle. The dominance of industrialization and modern science and technology has exploited earth or nature. Women are being dominated and governed by capitalist patriarchy which is a complex pattern of social institutions. In this institution men's labour is valued by market economy and the labour which women rendered at home is completely devalued and neglected. The perspective of ecofeminism started in the United States during the second wave of feminism. In this peace movement people started to think on the interrelationship between militarism, racism, classism and the environmental damage. Towards late 1980s and early 1990s environmental damage and women's oppression issues have been theorized by the feminists and these two issues are related to in the context of developing countries. Further the development of science and technology was viewed to be patriarchal and masculine in nature. In biotechnology and reproductive technology the developments in these fields denied the freedom of women and nature respectively. Critics like Mies and Shiva criticise these technological developments. According to them technology aimed to dispossess of women for their generative capacity (reproductive) and nature for its productive capacity. In this context women are like instrumental in going against ecological destructions. In Germany and India women peasants actively protested against the construction of nuclear power plants. In the famous *Chipko* movement, women strongly protested against the construction of mega dams. In Kenya's greenbelt movement women came together to plant millions of trees in aid of deforested region. The idea behind the basic argument of

ecofeminists centres that women symbolize nature due to their similar role of biological reproduction. Women are perceived to be closer to nature because they possess certain capacity such as childbearing and therefore, women and nature are subjected to the male- driven technological progress and subjugation. The role of women in defending family and home is a strong source to those who involve in political struggle to defend ecology to conserve ecology for sustainable livelihood. Mies and Shiva both discussed on spiritual and political types of ecofeminism across the world.

Vandana Shiva in her book “*Staying alive*” made significant contributions by analyzing women’s relationship in food chain. Women and nature as the primary providers of food in natural farming also need sustainability of fertility in forestry and farm animals to croplands. According to author food system includes the forest and animal systems in its processes. Already Chipko movement has been mentioned where women fought for protection of their forests. Women’s involvement in agriculture and their productivity centrally depend on forest, direct dependence on fertilizer to the soil, indirectly on cattle, these input helps to fertilize the field. Shiva emphasizes on how feminine principle of food production is based on by linking tree, animal, crops and women’s capacity in maintenance of these links. The important role of women in agriculture by integrating forestry and animal husbandry and women always play a central role in agriculture. Apart from involvement in agriculture, women have to maintain certain other activities related to food production, processing, distribution and marketing. The agriculture model and women’s participation are based on nature and women internally.

The involvement of masculinist in food production in the phase of green revolution, scientific agriculture etc provides how disruption emerged in forestry, agriculture and animal husbandry. The reductionist agriculture has destroyed the green manure and fodder to farms, compost and organic matter to fields which women carry and these renewable sources have been replaced by non- renewable inputs from factories. The work of men has to be incorporated by women by placing women in men’s work to provide inputs so that machine could not produce hazardous agri- chemicals as inputs to green revolution in

agriculture. This paradigm as a result of disruptions of nature's ecological cycles displaces women from their work in maintaining those cycles. This may also lead to the destruction of women's work in keeping the inherent fertility of soils alive. Farming is a process to nurturing the earth, to maintain her capacity to provide food, on the contrary the masculinist shifts takes place to generate profits from farming. This commercialisation is the result of ecological destruction. This outlook has resulted in economic deprivation and production of profit. Women, children and the poor section of people are also entitled to food. In the third world countries, a large number of poor people are deprived of food and they are victims of hunger. The sales and profits as a model of commercialization are indicators of well- being and destroy the real well- being of the people. The ecological perspective focuses on nature and needs but the scientific agriculture and green revolution movement are in reality anti-agriculture in nature. Basically they are based on western patriarchal model. This model shifts the control of food systems from women and peasants to food which disturbs the natural process and its flow. There is an interrelationship between food, forest, water and animal systems. All these are a part of ecological system. There are many examples of women involvement in forest movements to protect nature and food. In *Chipko* movement, to protect forest, women were the protesters as forests provide food for the protection of their families (by providing food, cattle and soils). The women of Reni in 1974 told to the contractors' men:

“This forest is our mother's home. When we have our food scarcity, we come here to collect fruits for our children. We collect herbs and ferns and mushrooms. Do not cut this forest, otherwise we will embrace the trees and protect them with our lives”. (cited in Shiva, 1988; pp. 70)

In 1986 Chipko women of Nahi Kala were protesters to save their forest for food production. In the words of Chamundeyi, ‘We need our forests for growing *mandua*, *jhanjora*, *rajma*, *adrak* and *mirch* to feed our families and ourselves.’ Women sing throughout the hill area, “Give me an oak forest and I will give you pots full of milk and baskets full of grain” (cited in Shiva, 1988; pp. 93).

The reason behind the involvement of rural women to protect forests or rivers is mainly the root cause of protection of their agriculture. Women contribute a significant role towards society through forest and food by producing food in partnership with trees and animals. From the patriarchal model the above link is contradictory. As this model sees the dependency of forestry in agriculture and reduces the multiple outputs into a single one i.e. commercial wood. The role of animal is minimized as they are no longer the provider of fertilizer and energy for agriculture. As a result of 'white revolution' animal husbandry has reduced the production of milk for the centralised dairy production. The importance of the role of forests and animals are no longer seen as mechanisms for conserving soil moisture. The outlook for large dams is the option of patriarchal model to provide water for food production. Organic manure is replaced by fertilizer factories as a source of soil fertility. Pest control mechanism is controlled by poisons for killing pest rather than using rich soil and appropriate cropping patterns which is a patriarchal agricultural method. The patriarchal model has ruptured the internal resources of the farm produced by women and if we evaluate the green and white revolution both have violated nature's balance and women's productivity and people's right to food.

4.3.1. DISPLACEMENT OF WOMEN IN THE NAME OF DEVELOPMENT AND FOOD PRODUCTION

The space to live and work is withdrawn from the urban poor in favour of parking spaces and flyovers. It has become a disturbing aspect. The urban poor women were employed in food, tobacco, textile, and wood, bamboo cane and ceramics industries. Women have been targets for retrenchment and forced to join the unorganized sector. Women are squeezed out of marketing, vending spaces because global traders have made local labour and skill obsolete. To seal the leakages of dis-empower women, gender audits of mega development schemes and programmes have become useful and bring to force in support of women employment, educational opportunities, skill development, entitlement and assets ownership. The eviction of poor people from their work place and

living place by force has created tremendous human miseries. The environmental disaster caused by human activity also affects the physical, economic and environmental sectors which lead to damage in society. As a result, this disaster may affect women by making them unsafe and this leads to stress and anxiety. But because of the different roles occupied by men and women, disasters also affect them differently. According to their capacities, needs and vulnerability, men and women are assigned different responsibilities. Missing community is not exceptional in this case. Since the 1950s, all the villages in the Matmora region have been experiencing floods, triggered earthquakes and displacement, leading to underpinning and living under stress. Missing community women always play an active role from household life (fireplace) to outside life (paddy field). In Matmora, people are displaced and hazards from floods have challenged their lives as they have been displaced from their ancestral places and have to begin a new life after devastation. Even the self-sufficient peasants have to shift their earning source as wage earners. Women's active weaving role is transformed and they are seen in the roads working as labourers in the construction of roads. While commenting on the forced eviction to accommodate mega projects, the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Sixteenth Session, 1997 stated:

“Women and other vulnerable individuals and groups suffering disproportionately from the practice of forced eviction. Women in all groups are essentially vulnerable given the extent of statutory and other forms of discrimination which often apply in relation to property rights (including home ownership) or rights of access to property or accommodation, and their particular vulnerability to acts of violence and sexual abuse when they are rendered homeless”.

As in development, women are also victims in the name of food production. The third world peasants are predominantly women over more than forty centuries. The improvements of crop varieties, rotational and mixed cropping methods have been evolved, crops have crossed the continents; these have fulfilled the needs of crop community and the ecosystem. These innovations in agriculture have been lasting and sustainable. Women stayed as they struck an ecological balance. Women are experts as plant breeders, as soil scientists, and also as water managers to keep the world fed over the years. With the green revolution, the knowledge of agriculture based on forty

centuries has begun to be eroded and erased. The green revolution, designed by malnutrition corporations and western male experts, homogenised nature's diversity and the diversity of human knowledge on a reductionist pattern of agriculture all these have replaced the women innovation in agriculture. The western green revolution paradigm has changed the meaning of agriculture. The new outlook has changed the activity of agriculture by maintaining nature's capital with the notion of fertile soils as well as providing food and nutrition. Now it became an aim of producing agricultural commodities for profit. The nature of the actors has shifted with the shift of nature of the activity. The primary producers' women, nature and peasants were no longer seen as producers of food. The shift has taken place in the context of nature's economy and survival economy which are excluded in the thinking of market economy but included specificity of the hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, mechanisation and large scale irrigation. The motives behind these technologies were to generate maximising profits from agriculture. They were not concern about protecting the soil and maintaining its fertility, not also aiming to provide food in large scale as a basic human right or providing livelihood in food production. The women and peasants known as traditional agricultural experts were displaced by the emergence of new breed of agricultural 'experts' with fragmented knowledge of individual components of the farm systems with the marketing organization. Women were the primary producers of food and play a central role in food production system in the third world. The role of women in agriculture, areas of work in economic activity and the contributions of women in scientific and economic sector has been obscured by the male. The market and profits as a patriarchal base has created significant role for the evaluation of the importance of technology. When transition was happening in human society, from hunting to gathering of agriculture and at the period of nomadic ways of life the women's contribution to plant and animal domestication are focused by feminist writers. They are trying to focus the hidden contributions of women towards society. Alternative perceptions are giving to the paradigm of male dominance, competition, aggression and exploitation by giving alternative notions to allow the recognition the contribution of women, the interdependence of both male and female to make survival possible by cooperative life and nurturing. According

to Lee and De Vore (1968), the women's contribution during hunting society's women provided 80 percent and 20 percent of the yield (cited in Shiva, 1988; pp. 101). To collect food knowledge is required regarding plant and animal growth, maturation, fruition or reproduction and women deserve certain qualities with the discovery of domestication and cultivation of plants and animals. Women possess the qualities of digging stick, the carrying sling, the sickle and other knives. Food processing and preservation methods are still traditional as the using of mortar, pounder, drying, grinding, roasting, fermenting technologies, storage of food in the baskets, clay-lined storage pits etc are still prevailing in societies. In agriculture societies farming was under the domination of women. Women domesticated plants and animals and also invented selective breeding. In the words of Stanley,

“Inventions credited to women in cultivation: the use of ash as fertilizer; the creation of work tool such as the hoe, spade, shovel and simple plough; fallowing and crop rotation; mulching, terracing, contour planting, irrigation and land recuperation through tree planting. She says that the eight most important cereals (wheat, rice, maize, barley, oats, sorghum, millet and rye) were all domesticated by women”

(Shiva; 1988, pp.102).

With the evolution over four to five thousand years, the knowledge of women on agriculture is destructed over the world by handful of white male scientists. They have merely violated women expertise in less than two decades as they are expert in agriculture and their expertise is related to modelling agriculture on nature's methods on renewability. Thus destruction of agriculture happens with the ecological destruction of nature's processes and economic destruction is also seen among the poorer people of rural areas.

Displacements of women are due to natural as well as man-made disasters. The greatest victim of natural disasters is the women. Natural causes like floods, earth quakes and social disasters such as caste, ethnic conflict, communal disturbances and war are related causes of displacement. Economic disasters and displacement of people are happening everywhere in the name of development. Building flyovers, mega plants, shopping malls have displaced people and they need rehabilitation in terms of proper housing, civic amenities,

safe transport and work. ICE (Information, Communication and Entertainment) in favour of economic reforms have offered the common women benefits except deprivation, degradation and dehumanization. Economic reforms based on the free play of market have made majority of Indian women more vulnerable in labour and product markets.

4.4. WOMEN AND FOOD

Food is used as a lens to different societies and culture of each society is accepted in social sciences. Analyzing food offers the understanding the complexities of culture and communities. Counihan (1998, 2008) focuses on “gendered relationships of power and hierarchy are often revealed in how a community distributes or controls food”. The work of food preparation and transformation and spaces where this work is done is also gender specific. In many cultures and communities the division of masculine work and feminine work is separated from the aspect of production and reproduction. Though communities are dynamic with rarely fixed labour division still this separation is clearly visible. It is typically masculine works which are performed for commercial benefits and hard currency and such works are done outside the home. In relation to food, masculine activities are noticeable in cash crops etc. The physical involvement in agricultural labour and in heavy machinery or milling grain by machine is referred to masculine activity. On the contrary, reproductive work is known as feminine work; they perform for direct family benefit or consumption. Feminine work related to women is gardening, cooking and preparing food for the family. Thorstein Veblen in “*Conspicuous Consumption*” expressing his ideas on consumption holds men to be the sole consumers in the ideal scheme of life, to consume only what have been produced by the women folk (Thorstein Veblen, 2000, pp. 187-98, 199-200, 202-4). Veblen’s words provide us with information concerning women’s expertise in cooking; women undertake cooking exercises not for the sake of fun and enjoyment (like men) but because of compulsions that are socially and culturally imposed. Rather it is continuous labour of women. Even unproductive consumption of goods is also valued primarily for expertise; it adds extra income and human dignity. Secondly, those “unproductive

consumptions” are honoured in itself for more desirable things. Gradually this taboo holds women, children and men. Whereas for men cooking is an adventurous pursuit of perfection, for women it is an urgent necessity.

In Mising community food and women’s lives are intimately connected. Mising women have complex relationships to food and the spaces, specifically the kitchen where they spend a significant amount of working with food. The ways in which women interact with food are influenced by cultural assumptions and expectations, local history and tradition and global culture. Through food relationship women learn to negotiate gender identity. In a patriarchal society, a good wife (here the concept good wife is indicating those who perform good works, household works like preparing food everyday) is also expected to be a good cook. Like the Indian society, the concept of “good wife” is also there in Mising community. They are expected to help in the whole process of making *apong* (the traditional rice beer) common among the Mising community, preparing food for the family and also attending to all household chores. Mising women are also negotiating the social changes and their task is important for outdoor works also. It extends from kitchen to modern markets. The food relationships are dynamic and are constantly influenced by the economy, local, global and popular media which introduce women to a more global food culture. Mising women contribute to their families economically either from outside the home or within. Often women have very little chance to go to school. However this is changing with the entry of women in higher institutes with the march of time. Earlier in Mising community people were engaged in agriculture and productions were very limited. But with the changes in time communication is also developing. Now villagers are also engaged in other occupations e.g. government service, business and contact. Women are also the part of the non- traditional occupations. Today women have more opportunities and they are self sufficient. In Assam Mising women are famous for weaving. In this community everyone from a girl to an old lady knows the art of weaving. Their products can be used in everyday life. Ginning and spinning is still done by the women. The most important feature of the Mising women is that the pattern and colour of their weaving products reflect perfect taste. But their production

is not able to compete in the market. Still with the development in socio-economic sector Mising people try to be self-sufficient and they manage their daily expenditure with their income.

4.4.1. BELIEFS AND FOOD PRACTICES RELATED TO PREGNANCY PERIOD

In Mising society there are certain food related beliefs which are prevailing in their community. In the field work the group discussion and interviewing with women some information were found out regarding food. Women are under the domination of beliefs related to food. The discussions and interviews were carried out among the women of 25-65 age groups which are always busy with their household works. The women who took part in the discussions are all housewives belonging to middle class. Their main source of income is agriculture and some of them are earning by business activities. Childbirth is a time of transition and social celebration in many societies, signalling an adjustment of cultural responsibilities (Steinberg, 1996, 43: 1765-1784). During pregnancy period many of the restrictions are related to food. These restrictions are for the well being of mother and baby. To the mother and the baby the traditional practices are beneficial. These restrictions are their own way to concern of nutritious food and for the health. Even some restrictions are universal. Many studies related to traditional beliefs and practices surrounding childbearing have been internationally described. Thus such kinds of restrictions are not only in Mising community but in other communities also. In the study, attempt was made to see the effects of the traditional practices on health and how such practices are beneficial for women. The ante natal and postnatal care is important to provide during pregnancy and after delivery to ensure safe health of mother and infant. The aspects behind these practices are diet, rest and activity, hygiene and infant feeding. The semi structured interviews revealed that most of the family follow the beliefs and traditional practices which their parents and grandparents followed earlier. Basically they follow the diet of eating hot and cold food.

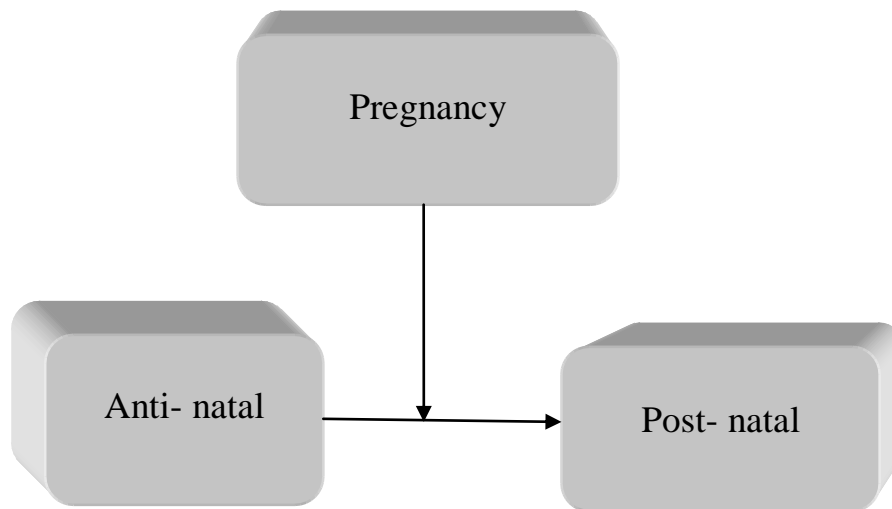


Figure 20

To enrich the food and to help in recovery process mothers have a more variety of diet: *jaluk* (black pepper), boil *chicken*, dried chilli pepper and they believe certain vegetables like *omita* (boiled *papaya*), *kumura* (white guard), *boot dali* (chickpea), *marisa xak* (amaranth) to be cold and prefer to eat such foods during post-natal period. Certain foods are identified as hot or warmer and certain vegetables are associated with it. There are numerous effects of eating such foods. For example women are prohibited from eating eggs. According to their folk beliefs, this may cause miscarriage of pregnant woman or the baby might have cysts inside neck. The practices and beliefs carried out during this period have benefit and no side effect on health. To promote health in the antenatal and postnatal period the traditional practices are important. The earlier concepts of pregnancy in the Mising community were quite different and the modern medical concepts have given a new dimension to their culture.

4.5. CULINARY PRACTICES AS AN APPROACH TO STUDY OF GENDER

With the march of time culinary practices provide new insights. Reckwitz (2002, pp. 243) detects a renewal of interest in theories of practice. As they inform the fundamental disconnect between text and context as

gendered practices are not written in texts as gendered experiences as we get the dominant image of the farmer as a man but more than fifty percent (50%) of the agrarian workforce are women. Culinary practices transgress the academic division of disciplines; it can be a subject of enquiry both in the liberal humanities as well as the sciences. Culinary practices are heterogeneous; further, the aesthetic sense of cooking is not uniform across space and time. The division of labour in the kitchen is clearly marked out if it is observed from the point of view of culinary practices and it reflects the hierarchy and gender relationships in who does the cooking, cleaning, serving and who is disallowed from serving. The beliefs associated with the preservation, processing and presentation of food are indicative of deep-seated gender biases. It can be claimed that difference in terms of culinary practices has become a marker of not just gender identity, but also cultural identity. For example, culinary practices relate chiefly and even only, to consumption. We also find that cultural connections can be re-established and asserted through the medium of culinary practices. For instance, some communities in North East India are culturally connected to South East Asia and this connection is sought to be re-established through culinary practices. The culinary practices of the Tai Ahom community of Assam are quite similar to South East Asian food-preparation processes. Schatzki identifies two central notions of practice: practice as a co-ordinate entity and practice as performance.

“The first notion is of practice as a temporarily unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings. Examples are cooking practices, voting practices, industrial practices, recreational practices, and correctional practices. To say that the doings and sayings forming a practice constitute a nexus is to say that they are linked in certain ways. Three major avenues of linkage are involved: (1) through understandings, for example, of what to say and do; (2) through explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) through what I will call ‘teleoaffective’ structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods” (Schatzki, 1996: 89).

It is true that occasionally, men and women can play a complementary role to each other in the preparation of food. However, it is indubitable that the process of learning (cooking food) is gender-centric. In homes and restaurants both men and women may be recognized as skilled cooks but such divisions of labour are not strict as they are professional depersonalised relationships. Men

most often have done the grilling of meats thus is invested with a sense of masculinity while serving of food and cleaning of dishes is done by the women which is a post masculine job though it is always served in honour of elite men. For example, ethnic groups like Khmu of Lao PDR dependent on hunting prefer to cook all meat by men (Esterik, 2008; pp. 40). For long man has been empirically and symbolically associated with meat.

In Mising community women generally assume the responsibility of cooking. Apart from other activities, Mising women are skilled in cooking and weaving and this is the normative self-image of the Mising women. In the course of the interaction with community members in the field, have come across an interesting division of work among the Mising community's male and female members. Men admit that they do not prefer to cook unless and until it is demanded by the situation as we see that they do harder jobs but those back breaking jobs are invested with a muscular and by extension manly meaning. However, they prefer to cook in ritual and religious ceremonies as it reflects an honour that is directly associated with supernatural or as custodians of the society. Community feast is a good opportunity to cook food collectively (both men and women) as multiple dishes are prepared. Preparation of food during such feasts is a long drawn affair starting with the cutting and chopping of vegetables to the actual process of preparation. Class hierarchy, apart from other forms of social and gender hierarchies, are prevalent among the Misings as elsewhere. Men are considered to be the superior class and women are treated as inferior and this is reinforced in the gendered division of labour as expressed in a Mising saying (The preparation of apong focus the gender division of labour).

Thorstein Veblen, expressing his ideas on consumption holds men to be the sole consumers in the ideal scheme of life, to consume only what have been produced by the women folk (Thorstein Veblen, 2000; pp. 187-98, 199-200, 202-4). Veblen's words provide us with information concerning women's expertise in cooking; women undertake cooking exercises not for the sake of fun and enjoyment (like men) but because of compulsions that are socially and culturally imposed. Rather it is continuous labour of women. Even unproductive consumption of goods is also valued primarily for expertise; it

adds extra income and human dignity. Secondly, those “unproductive consumption” are honoured in itself for more desirable things. Gradually this taboo holds women, children and men. Thus, whereas for men cooking is an adventurous pursuit of perfection, for women it is an urgent necessity. We may say that while cooking for the women leads to the reproduction of the Mising society and for the men it leads to the cultural reproduction of the society and thus the authorship of cultural values is rested in men as evidenced in the process of cooking.

4.5.1. FOOD, GENDER AND SPACE

The concept food and space grapples with questions concerning the gender and spatial aspects of food and culture “kitchen space” in Mising community. It is the kitchen where women’s complex relationships to food and gender identity are revealed. Women negotiate gender identity and specialized knowledge (concerning food and gender) is applied and shared from one to next generation is in the kitchen space. Through food and food systems critical knowledge concerning gender and identity is communicated. It is already mentioned that the food spaces, food production and consumption are gendered specific. Thus we see the key to gender differences in Mising society in the creation of such a space. In the normal course of events the kitchen is a gendered space but in ritual and religious events when men also cook it acquires a masculine dimension and is the scene with a positive value. Men and women are assigned to distinct social role as well as their socio and economic interdependence is distinct by the production and distribution of food. Across cultures, kitchen (based at home) where food is prepared and served a space specific to feminine. The traditional kitchens are modernised in some places with the new technology of kitchens. Women throughout the world are constantly interacting with or within these kitchenspaces. Through interactions with and within this space women negotiate and perform gender (McDowell 1992; Rose 1993; Johnson 2006 and others). Kitchens are simultaneously sites of oppression that reproduce dominant patriarchal discourses as well as sites of empowerment where those same discourses are subverted in that they can never fully embody the social rules and regulations that they espouse (Bennett

2006). In patriarchal social systems kitchens exist in a world where change is possible and inevitable and in which women have power. In this context the concept of kitchen is gender dynamics. It is a complex space for two reasons; for gender identity and cultural expectations. In kitchen spaces food is prepared or getting about daily meal and certain practices seeking pleasure, creativity, nourishing body and women prepare meals to reflect their identity in cultural context. The Mising kitchens are the training ground for the new and young girls where their mothers and grandmothers teach them the cooking process of the community. Thus the traditional Mising food preparation is being continued from generation to generation; grandmothers and mothers teach young girls in a specific community and the perfect bride is seen as a repository of the culinary cultural values and should know to cook the basic dishes (In preparation of *apong* women take active role; the exclusive domain of women is noticeable. To prepare *e'pob* gathering of plants is always done by women. Women are demanding more in preparing traditional foods in Mising community). In this context, kitchen is referred to as a place of women's power and spaces. Often kitchens are the domain of women, where men are specifically or implicitly forbidden and women are in charge of how food is prepared, when it is served and who gets to learn what and when about food (Christie 2006; Robson 2006). There are certain norms to enter into such spaces and even entry into such spaces is restricted due to societal rules and thus the social construction of the self takes place. The concept of domestic kitchen has been changed with the transition from small kitchen to more open space where household work is visible. Modern technology and traditional kitchen both can be observed side by side in juxtaposition. The household activities take place not only within the kitchen space but physical space has serious implications for the constructions of the gender roles and the potential for change.

4.5.2. 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) emphasises on “rituals of dinner” and focused on how we eat and why we eat as we do. Before discussing in the context of Mising kitchen it is important to mention that there is no caste division among the Misings. So there is homogenous food preparation process. The rural women in Mising society are closely connected to local food systems and food spaces. Attempt was made to observe the dining table manners in Mising community. The Mising kitchen is traditionally a very sacred domestic space. The kitchen of the Mising people is inside the *chang ghor* and it is situated in the inner most location of the *chang*. That is why “*chang ghor*” is the marker of cultural and ethnic identities. It enriches the cultural heritage of Mising community.

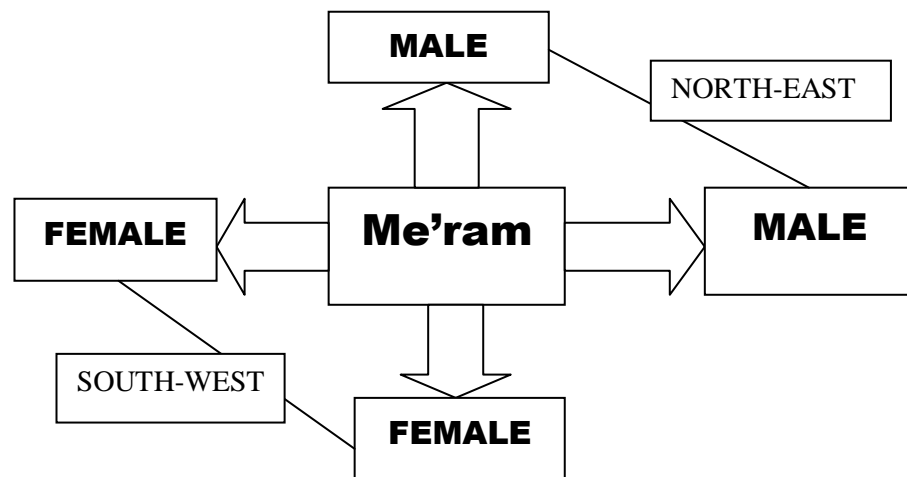


Figure 21

The *me'ram* (clay oven) which is situated in the centre of the *Chang Ghor* is used for cooking. Mising people think the clay oven as holy one. While going outside members of the family bow down before the clay oven and take the blessings of it. Generally in the *Chang 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 members sit in the south and west side. The north east corner is considered as more prestigious than the south west corner. Strauss observes that binary opposition is applied in this sitting arrangement. Thinking

and meanings that are derived from binary oppositions (this notion is seen as a fundamental organizer of human philosophy, culture and language in structuralism). His structuralist theory considers through the relationship of the binary set as well as the opposite generates meaning not only by what each opposites represent. Both man and woman represent a unique idea and the relationship of the man and woman presents additional layers of meaning. A hierarchy of meaning and are central to cultural narratives both are generated by binary distinction. The women use to cook by facing towards the east side of the kitchen. All the members of a family sit on *Umke* (small wooden stool) while having food. The meal is first served 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. In some area it was found that they offer food in the *chang ghor* to their relatives only and the guests are not allowed to enter the *chang ghor*. But such concept is not applicable to over all Mising community. Rather they prefer to let them sit in an Assam type house or a place near the *chang 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 *chang ghor* for the guest which is a new trend in their life style. Even the ethnic kitchen concept maintained by them is a 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 preserve 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 aluminium 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, aluminium, clay, *bahor sunga* (bamboo tube), *tou* (cauldron), *kerahi* (iron pan), *aalom bati* (dish-bowl) etc. With the development of technology they have also adopted such technologies with the changes of time. Now- a-days they are using gas inside *chang ghor* (kitchen) apart from the *me'ram* (clay oven). Traditionally the Misings divide food and drink as alkaline, boiled food and sour food. There are food taboos and restrictions also inside the *chang ghor* (kitchen). During the menstruation period women have certain restrictions such as they are not allowed entering inside the *chang ghor* for five days. 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.

4.6. FOOD, GENDER, POWER AND CULTURE: FOOD PREPARATION AND PROCESSING

In the preceding discussions we had established the connection between food and gender in the sense that the processing, preparation and serving of food are all gendered activities. Proceeding from this we also saw that the spaces where such activities were undertaken also revealed a gender divide that reflected power relations. The question is that how are these power relations not visible to the researcher and also to members of the community at a glance and it can be argued that like all power relations that do not act openly but are encoded in a cultural matrix, so too is the case with food. The dynamics of food, gender, power is domesticated through food production, preparation, processing and consumption. The traditional gender role is expected beyond kitchen. For the functionalist notions of women in public and private space; their reproduction of labour helps us to understand the actual place for women. The spaces of women need reorganization. Collins (2000) expresses, “Furthering our understanding of women’s position in terms of food preparation and consumption also involves attending to their intersectional social positions that add complexities to this discussion” (cited in Counihan & Kaplan, 2005). Food in the context of kitchen it is always indicating towards women. The relationship that women have with food is because of her persisting role. A variety of discourses have been produced by women. In a number of ways women are filled up with their experiences by focusing on the relationship between food, community and family. According to Douglas and Isherwood (1979), “Consumers use goods to construct an intelligible universe and to make and maintain social relationships”. Studies have already been done that link the control of food to political and economic power. In Mising community women assert control over household and they enjoy power at home. Arnold (1988; pp.3) in his historical study *Famine* focuses on “food

was, and continues to be, power in a most basic tangible and inescapable form”, since possession of food signifies possession of money and power as food can be obtained through these exchanges. In the view of Lappé and Collins (1986), “Hunger is the clearest sign of powerlessness, for hunger means one lacks the control to satisfy one’s most basic subsistence need”. Women suffer often from hunger and more severely from famine in comparison to men because of their socio- economic and political subordination across the world (e.g. Arnold 1988, Lappé and Collins 1986, Leghorn and Roodkowsky 1977, Vaughn 1987) which is a clear reflection of the confluence of gender and power in a cultural context where the women prepares the food but is unable to get a reasonable share. Goody (1982) discusses on how class, caste, race and gender hierarchies are maintained as well as differential control over and access to food. Consumption of food is a social act. Different consumption patterns are an act to signify the rich from the poor and men from women (Bennett 1943; Fitchen 1988; Mintz 1985; Weismantel 1988). According to Adam, “The message of male dominance is conveyed through meat eating- both in its symbolism and in its reality” (1990; pp. 189). Mintz (1985) describes in *Sweetness and Power* the way of control of sugar production and consumption contributed to class hierarchy and colonial dominance but neglects and consideration of gender. When food is eaten naturally it only proves the desire for survival. Like sex, food is also meant for pleasure. Food is different in taste, texture, colour, modes of preparation and preservation. In a transcultural context with differing forms, we see the intersection of gender, power and culture at the locus of food.

Exchange of food as a most profound way of making social connection is noticeable in many cultures. Mauss (1967) has discussed about the pervasive cultural power of the gift which keeps individuals constantly indebted to each other and continuously engaged in positive interaction through giving. Food plays important role such as a component of reciprocal exchanges, more so than any other object or substance as the effects of consumption of foodstuff is immediately felt. In view of Sahlins, “By comparison with other stuff, food is more readily or more necessarily shared” (1972; pp. 215). Food is always complex when it is related to different social contexts. The domain of food is

very significant when it is related to gender context. In societies women are primary actors as they have the responsibility for food preparation and distribution (D' Andrade 1974; pp. 18). Whether a society is based on horticulture, agriculture, peasant, village, industry, the contribution of women in food preparation, producing, distribution and preservation is always appreciated. The stereotypical association of women with food grants them a certain degree of agency in the domestic front.

The meaning of food is attached to a wide spectrum of human existence. Food dynamics refer to life and death, profanity and sacredness, an intoxicating aphrodisiac and an addiction, abjection. The experience of material and spiritual is referred by food, embodies the most covert fantasies, fears and passions. Eventually, it transgresses the outside/ inside body limits, but serves as a signifier of clean/ defiled, own/ alien, me/ other that also has gender connotations, which is why we have divisions of food into everyday food, ceremonial food, ritual food, prohibited food and so on (Food has customary use in Mising community and there are norms, folk beliefs related to birth, death, marriage). As a cultural signifier food carries different weight in constructing the values of masculinity and femininity, everyday experiences of men and women, and performs different roles in the process of their representation and self- representation. The women use food to express feminine identity, different meaning attached, cultural stereotypes, feminine identity is articulated. In western culture food has become an inseparable part of modern feminine identity, taken on unconsciously. To be a woman means to consume, to be consumed and constantly fight off her extra weight. Thus being a woman also refers to create using food and food motifs. If we notice not only the heights of culinary art, but also the day- to- day practices; in the Mising society kitchen still remains on the list of feminine duties. The metaphors of table “rituals”, moldings of food products and the products themselves are becoming a very eloquent part of feminine self- expression. In the table rituals, the ordering of who gets to eat first is important and also who eats last reveals the intersection of food, gender, power and culture in a very clear form that is overtly visible (In Mising society food is served to men first then female members eat). The reconstruction of a household “ritual” try to deny the

stereotypical demarcation lines between the official/ private, masculine/ feminine that already anchored in our culture by transferring everyday kitchen reality into an exposition hall. To articulate feminine experience we have to look beyond table and consumerism, rituals and metaphors of kitchen. Even the use of food itself is necessary. There is a deep connection between women and food as woman is considered to be providers of food. Historically both nature and women play decisive roles as food providers. For women food stands for two meanings. Firstly, it is an important material concern and secondly, food as symbol is representative of women in general. D' Andrade expresses his ideas on the relationship between food and women. According to him, women have universal responsibility for food preparation and consumption (1974). Women are considered to be closer to food as they are the first nurturers of men and women alike. Women's role in production and distribution is also universally accepted in all cultures. During pregnancy and lactation period, women are both empirically and symbolically associated with food. For feeding infants, women themselves become food during this period.

Among the ancient and modern Aztecs in Mexico (Taggart 1983), there is a long standing association of women with fertility of the earth and healthy food. Even in the Mising community, the relationship between food and women helps to analyze the activities of women in the household, her empowerment and her assertion of her group identity. It has also come to notice that Mising women are the primary actors in the management and preparation of food. There is no caste division therefore the preparation method of food is homogenous. In Mising society the best and larger part of the food goes to the elder and other members of the family and follows the protocol of social ordering. As women and children are the last to consume therefore, they are suffering from malnutrition, though women are the nearest to food in terms of preparation, they are the farthest in terms of consumption and this distancing is a part of the cultural pattern that emphasises withdrawal as conformity thus privileging gender and power. Thus food is not equitably share. It is only during the menstruation time that women are restrained from cooking and entering inside the kitchen for 3- 5 days showing the spatial restrictions on the women. In the field, interviews were conducted among the women and were

observed the household activities of women including the preparation and processing of food. Women shared their feelings and experiences from their point of view. Mainly interviews focused on participants' knowledge of food practices, rituals, management of food practices in the home and community and their role in preserving and transmitting these practices to next generations.

Case Study: 1.

Name- Firiti Mili, Age: 35, Profession: House maker, Income: Agriculture, Village: Balipara.

Mrs. Mili expresses her feelings in support of women's activities in Mising society. Mili has to start her work at four o'clock early in the morning. First she goes to the paddy field and after that she has to prepare food for her husband and children. These activities reveal her as a provider of food due to the gendered role and relative powerlessness that have overburdened her in terms of work. Every day she cooks for her family. As a local resident Mrs. Mili seemed to be better informed about Mising community. Sometimes local resident seemed more reluctant to talk to outside researcher because of negative experiences in the past.

Case Study: 2.

Name- Senu Mili, Age: 34 years, Profession: House maker, Income: Agriculture, Village: Balipara.

Mrs. Mili being a house maker revealed a number of points regarding preparation and cooking of food. She shared that women of their society are "self taught", it describe her intelligence, strong will and vast knowledge of Mising's tradition and culture. In their society women are hard working. According to her, men in their society are inactive and they are not interested in cooking. Mili has to prepare food everyday and preserves some food every year for the rainy days. Senu Mili shares that now- a- days children are sent school with the changing of time. Earlier women were only house keeper but now there are some women who are employed. This change embodies the change in the gender roles and consequently the power relations which also

brings about the arrival of a new Mising woman who is not confined to the house which is the ideal.

Case Study: 3.

Name: Mrs. Anita Mili, Profession: House maker, Age: 37 Years, Income: Agriculture, Village: Balipara.

According to Mili they depend on their natural surroundings as a reliable source of food. There is belief in their society of their coexistence with other living things. The resources should be moderate and non exploitative. It is worthwhile to note that in the Mising community it is the women who prepare the traditional rice beer known as *apong*. In this case we get an idea of the gathering activities and the processing that are culturally ordained as items such as *apong* have high cultural value as markers of Mising identity. The painstaking and lengthy process of *apong* preparation also shows the intersection of gender, culture, power and food as the consumption patterns show men as privileged. Women collect the necessary elements and start the preparation process one month before the observance of rituals or religious ceremonies. Apart from cooking women are also expert in weaving. They do not have habit of buying daily using cloth from the market. Women are very active and they want an independent life. They do not prefer to be dependent on their husband for anything.

Case Study: 4.

Name: Pradip Pahadi, Profession: Business & agriculture, Age: 45 Years, Income: Agriculture, Village: Dhepak (Majuli).

In Mising society women are more active in cooking than men. Mr. Pahadi accepts that he never cooked. Men have less knowledge about cooking than women. The above statement reveals that a man not having knowledge of cooking is not seen as incomplete but a woman is supposed to be culturally literate in this aspect as the labour relations are also mirrored in the power relations where gendered division of labour and the prerequisite knowledge is essential. He revealed that in their society women are traditionally expected to take up cooking. It is only in an unavoidable situation that man cooks. He also

expresses that the resources are common and shared by both men and women. In natural environment their society has belief system, emphasizes on living in harmony and social exchange between the human and the natural world.

Case Study: 5.

Name: Nageswar Pegu, Profession: Agriculturist, Age: 42 Years, Income: Agriculture, Village: Dhepak (Majuli).

According to Mr. Pegu, “Men know the preservation methods but they never do it. Women not only prepare, process, and preserve food; they are also the identity bearers of society who speak for the food habits, culture and all... During summer season we eat the preserved food as flood causes heavy destruction ...”

Almost all the people of the villages were in support of women’s traditional association with food. Women’s work has social value as food is considered to be both “her” work and it is also seen to be a language for women that enables them to speak in an alternative voice. Though traditionally women’s role in the kitchen grants her social prestige, there are also occasions when she is forced to cook.

Farming is a process of nurturing the earth to extract food. However, the tendency to look at natural resource as a potential profit-earner is reflective of the hegemony of patriarchal ways of thinking. The patriarchal/commercial outlook has wrought ecological destruction. This profit-oriented production which is used with the sole intention of earning profit does not reward women for her role. It has disrupted the very basis of women- nature relationship and displaced women from certain ecological cycles.

In Mising society there are proverbs that focus on the involvement of women in the production of food. For example, “*Miblong amme ne': ng apin mokolo du: pa:ma adjiyoun'e' imurde'm sin: ka len kanga', la du: la ge': min sudo*”

Men should not sit near the fire while women are cooking food. If men find small mistakes in cooking, it may be the cause of debate among them.

These are representative case study. A vast numbers of case study were taken to study the role of man and women in food preparation. But these case studies summarise that the study is applicable in greater Mising society. This is an expressive role played by women in cooking and preparing food for the family. They are always active in household works. On the other hand, there are proverbs to be found on the involvement of men in production. For example, “*Milbong amme amgo apine'm dopa: ma asinange monba: do*”

This proverb refers to the time of harvesting when men folks go to the paddy fields for collecting the rice grain. There is a belief that the first fruit of the harvest should not be consumed by the men, as this can turn him into an unwise being.

Thus in this context food forms a line that demarcates gendered work and is difficult for outsiders to discern as it is embedded in the cultural matrix which in the above example is revealed through a gendered reading of the proverbs. The insider view about proposed normative reading focussing on culture whereas an extrinsic gendered reading would also involve seeing culture as layers of power and food as an expression of such power structures that are culturally patterned. This is an expressive role played by women in cooking and preparing food for the family. They are always active in household works. On the other hand, there are proverbs to be found on the involvement of men in production. Food preparation and presentation are a part of women’s daily life. The food that is gathered and processed and served is produced by a gendered division of labour and this is the base for the Mising food culture. However, the final approval is given by the men as they are the first to ritually partake of the food and thus reflect their super ordinate gendered role in the Mising society which is an essential part of the Mising culture. In contrast, men play an active role in rituals and ceremonial occasions by offering and consuming foods without any restrictions. In many societies man has been playing the role of priests and hosts the ceremonies and communicates with the other members. Food is the symbolic representation of a society’s culture. Its various dimensions can shed light on the myriad aspects of society and culture.

4.7. FOOD SECURITY AND THE LINKAGE TO NATURE

World Food Summit defines as, “Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO. 1996. Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food Summit Plan of Action. World Food Summit 13-17 November 1996. Rome). The top priorities in the international agenda include food security and hunger eradication. The responsible factors are the impact of agricultural productivity of global economic crises, food price spikes, and climate change. This resultant as gender inequalities, in general, gender gaps in agriculture, in particular which create concern to attain the goals of these twin priority to concentrate on the vital role of women smallholders in household and community food and nutrition security. Across Asia and Pacific region rural women assume critical roles in attaining each of the pillars of food security; especially availability, access and utilization. Thus the role of women is crucial throughout the chain of agriculture; from production, food preparation and distribution within the household. On the contrary, their role is undervalued and constrained by limitations on their access to resources, services and labour market opportunities. Most rural households and communities in the region manage their agricultural production systems based on social norms and practices that determine the gender division of labour. Due to unavailability of data, combined with gender biased perceptions, it has limited awareness and appreciations of rural women’s productive roles and contributions to food security in the region. Food security is influenced by a number of factors such as climate, urbanization, globally rising food prices etc. And these causes are also affecting population as a result easily access food is not possible for the whole population.

Study of food indicates socio- cultural dimensions to take cultural/ structural or semiotic approach. The cultural or structural approach treats food as “good to think” within same environment. On the contrary semiotic approach refers food that people manipulate it to make statements about and to challenge social relations.

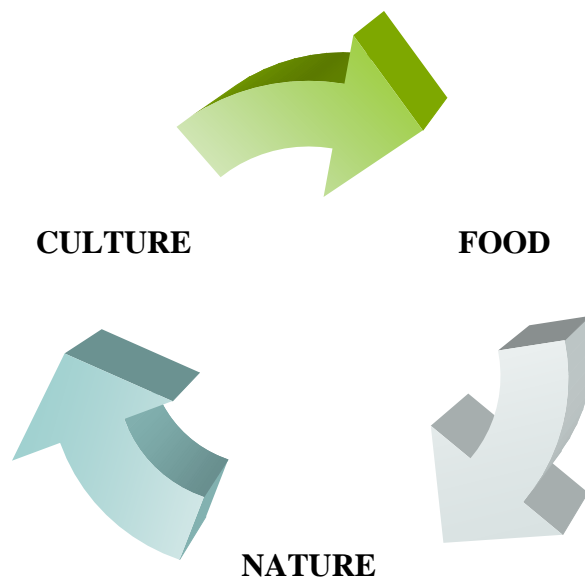


Figure 22

Fischler on notion food says it is the symbolic potential of food and it is absolutely central to our sense of identity. He also points out that food is central to individual identity (1988). Food is poised between the “natural” and the “cultural” worlds (Lévi- Strauss, Volume 1, and Chapter 9, cited in Inglis & et. al, Volume 1, 2008; pp. 5). It is simultaneously a material- physical entity, a product of human activity, and a very powerful carrier and reservoir of symbolism (Barthes, Volume 1., Chapters 10 & 11, cited in Inglis & et. al, Volume I, 2008; pp. 5). Thus these dimensions create complexities and the study regarding food should be more analytical and it requires empirical investigation. Food stands at the crossroads of the “external” nature and “internal” nature. External nature indicates the physical environment and internal nature refers the nature of human biological and physiological functioning. Pitte (Volume 5, Chapter 70, cited in Inglis & et. al, volume I, 2008; pp. 5) expressing his ideas, the foodstuffs we take to be characteristic of a particular country or geographical region within it are in fact the results of complex interrelations between ‘natural’ environments on the one hand, and human praxis on the other.

The value of self sufficiency in food system is an integral aspect of the Mising community. Men and women collect food and engage themselves in

fishing, business and agriculture. In Matmora the villagers have lost their paddy field in devastated floods. Agriculture is now a past concept for the villagers. Their traditional foods are related to nature. To talk of any purely “natural” environment food products of a region or a community is (that of Misings) like finding of talking their own way of preparation, processing, cooking and preserving food. The nature of foodways and food production in the present day; if we examine it in current human intervention into the physical environment it is complex. Tarakanti Doley, a woman in her mid 40s a key participant in the study herself is an inhabitant of Matmora, became emotional. She expresses her feelings how nature had destroyed the whole Matmora region by floods. The settled agriculture, domestication of animals was part of their life. People of Matmora utilized nature in such a way that they rendered most of their food production from local sites. Now it is a complex human – environmental action as the utilization of nature is not possible after the flood. Misings are well experienced in survival skills including natural resources, for their subsistence and medicine. They know how and from where to collect medicinal herbs and for what purpose they should use the medicine. Mising women have learned various folk remedies that have been passed down in their society from generation to generation. The Mising community depend on their natural surroundings as a reliable source for food; they have connection with natural environment and deep understanding with nature. This emphasizes harmony between the society and natural world. The social exchange of Mising community centred and involved a set of relationship involving with nature. In this complex system of relationships, individual existence is very important. Some aspects of the community were reflected during the interviews taken in the field. In Matmora the food related practices of Mising community were traditional before 1998. The foods were collected from natural environment. They cultivate their foods from agricultural fields. The main foods of Mising society are rice, bamboo shoot, pork, apong, namshing, vegetables and various herbs which are available in nearby locale areas. The nature based foods were easily available in Matmora but now it is like “past agriculture society”. These foods represent the cultural meaning and shared associations. The symbolic potential of food and eating is virtually limitless and food items and food consumption events can be imbued with

meanings of great significance according to the occasion and context. In particular cultures, food and food related production is associated with rituals, festivals, ceremonies which mark the status in society. In cultural and historical context particular food items are regarded as symbolic charges carrying meanings, pleasure and develop association with health. If we study the underlying dimensions including class, age, gender, ethnicity it is clear that food plays an important role for social differentiation and also play crucial role in symbolizing and demonstrating social differentiation.

4.7.1. MISINGS AND RIVER

All the states of North East India in production, distribution and food supply depend with the nature. Government aid in North East India involves rural development, agricultural sector and management of natural resources. These strategies are not implemented sometimes on the poorest of the poor, minority groups in remotest region. These regions are facing environmental degradation resulting in losses of biodiversity. Those groups depend on forest for food or on nature for foods are particularly facing problems. Not all people of this region are food secured or getting proper meal. In some marginalized areas, there are food insecurity problems that are quite resistant to change. The settlement of the Mising community is their location near the river is one of the unique characteristics. For resources and communications water bodies are important. In the daily living of the people their serving sources are based on these two. Flood, destruction of forest disrupts food security as well as the lives of people. This environmental degradation problem for some community has left scars, including the experience of hunger.

Human life has close relationship with nature. River Brahmaputra and its tributaries flowing through Assam is a part and parcel of Assam. In the life and culture of Assam Brahmaputra and its tributaries contribute a lot. The economic, social and cultural life of Assam is enriched by rivers. As it is well known that river is the most useful resource for livelihood. Unlike other tribe of Assam traditionally Mising community prefer river banks for settlement to high land. In shaping their tradition, customs and culture, rivers have been

playing vital roles. Matmora is located on the bank of Brahmaputra under the Dhakuakhana Development block. This area is under the vulnerability of water induced hazards, floods, flash flood, deforestation, erosion where food insecurity problem has been going on more than a decade (since 1998). The increasingly devastating problem and the natural hazards affect all aspects of the life of the community. These hazards leave people homeless, destroy crops, displaced. The frequent shifting has affected hundreds of villages' infrastructure and settlements due to river course and erosion of the river. Problems like insufficient food consumption, food scarcity have emerged in Matmora after the devastated flood. These primary causes create problems like poor diets which can contribute to other problem like vitamin deficiency diseases. After 1998 flood, food insecurity problem became more critical. Food scarcity became more prominent and people are having poor diets in their daily food habits. Management in agricultural field became more critical as the whole area was affected by the flood. Insufficient food consumption is the primary cause of malnutrition. Food is not equitable share. People do not have enough income to buy the necessary food to meet their minimum energy daily required. The people in this region depend more on natural resources than food purchase but now the food sources are threatened in this region day by day. After the flood rice production was not possible in Matmora and people started to buy rice from market. The traditional food of Mising community is not possible in the same way they were prepared, process and preserved earlier. Dimbeswar Doley, a man who is at the mid of sixty expressed his feelings how he had seen the ruining of the whole area. After the flood people have to buy food from outside; the preservation of foods are no more possible because of their economic condition. Huge expenditure is required for preservation method. Now it is very difficult to prepare traditional items such as *apong* in every festival. Earlier rice was produced in their paddy field but now it is very difficult to buy a large amount of rice to prepare *apong*. People buy *namshing* (dried fish) and *ikhu* (bamboo shoot) from market. Bamboo plantation is also not possible because of annual floods. The entire food system of traditional Mising community is completely found to be opposite to the present scenario. Food system is defined as a set of interaction with human environment which result in the production, processing, preparation, distribution and consumption

of food. Availability, accessibility and utilization of food are important components of food system. In Matmora landless people are forced to work in others paddy field. The agricultural based community is facing the increasing food insecurity problem and this problem is responsible for natural destruction and climate and environmental changes. Kunjalata Pegu who is an inhabitant of Matmora shared that “the food habits of Matmora has undergone changes because of the regular flood. We buy traditional food items from market to maintain our culture. There is no artificial glittering in our culture..... We are celebrating the culture in a very simple way. But there is no food security for us and no initiative has been taken from government.” During rainy season scarcity of drinking water occur in this area. People suffer from diseases like malaria, diarrhea. *Namshing* (dried fish) the one of their favourite foods is preserved for rainy season. During these rainy days there is shortage of food and it is necessary to cure disease like malaria and people for purpose of living near the river banks and to preserve certain food for summer season. Misings are accessing certain foods which are culturally acceptable in their community or for its procurement. Due to environmental changes or degradation of nature many natural plants or herbs have been lost in course of time. Bamboo shoots, rattan shoots, leafy vegetables, herbs (to prepare *E'pob*), agricultural production have diminished from this area with the changes of time due to natural destruction. Jayanta Doley, a young man around 28 years who is graduated from a local college participated in the discussion. According to Doley, “the whole area is far from the modern amenities of life... our life in the village is contradictory to what we see in the town as we have not been touched by the glamour of a developed livelihood...we are not getting the justice...still we are deprived of our own livelihood rights. Matmora is no more like the earlier one...we celebrate our festivals just to maintain the tradition but not in a proper way as the economic condition is not sound.” Pabitra Doley a graduate student who is around 28 years shared his opinion that “the life in Matmora is beyond imagination. We are suffering from flood problem since 1998. People are running short of food. Really hard to manage our proper diet and we have to buy everything from the market. We do not have our own agricultural field.” An old lady near about sixty five years shared her emotion that she is not able to prepare the traditional food and drink such as rice beer “*apong*” as she has

lost her land and the cost of everything is increasing day by day. To prepare “*E’pob*” (starter cakes) she needs to collect herbs which are not any more available in Matmora. The people of Matmora specially man are jobless as there is no agricultural field, business of bamboo, dairy, pig all were completely destroyed by the flood. Now the men are wasting their time by playing cards and gossiping like as if they are passing leisure time. In the field basically the participants describe their changing situation where natural calamities and hazards have been focused to specify the responsible causes leading to the drastic changes. This assessment focused on biophysical aspects of production; provide little insight into the food accessibility and utilization dimension of food security. Economic and sustainable development agendas are central concern of food security. Climate variation often affects food security as well as the whole food system. Food insecurity is experienced at the level of household to region. As a result shortages of food problem may lead more burdens to increase food security problem.

Climate change has enormous influences on food security not only in a community but in the whole world. Thus the impact is noticeable on health as well as food sector and both are not equitably distributed. People are compelled to go in a public system like PDS (Public Distribution System) and they are adjusting with the system. Due to flood, deforestation Mising community is depriving from their own production. As we know that their food is based on nature thus from PDS system they are not getting the proper food. As the quality of food provided by PDS is not as good as they get food from their own paddy field. Nutritional support is not proportionate and it is a very sensitive question due to climate change. The level of malnutrition will be degraded because of climate change. Food security and climate change both are related differently. It has shown the decrease of crop yields gradually; even both the quality and quantity are decreasing of the grains. The increase cost of fertilizer and growing bio fuels leading to reduce food crops and thus lead to increase in food price. Those who have low level of adaptive capacity experience more with severe burden though the effects of climate change will be experienced by all the people. The Brahmaputra is the major river of Assam and ecological and hydrological change is associated with climate change as well as floods are

associated with it. The cultivable land becomes less and less and scarcity of irrigation water has been a big problem. The topographical location of Assam and climate change both are major challenges to ensuring food security. Another factor relating to food security is urbanization. The rate of population living in urban area is cause of major change across the globe. The migration is happening due to erratic weather, liberal economy and global trade have enhanced migration from rural to urban areas. As a result, land in urban areas has become scarce and agricultural production is neglected. These factors have lead to food insecurity globally. The waste management in urban area is poor. Even it is experienced that the urban poor are more food insecure than the rural poor.

Studies on women are current issue of research. These issues have caught attentions of many. The discussion in this chapter presents the active role of women in Mising community. The status of women is determined by the role played by them naturally. Women's role is given value as their increase involvement in labour market as well as gender division in the home has become quite conspicuous. Gender division of labour in relation to food production, preparation, distribution and preservation is also discussed. Food is discussed in everyday life, ritual and ceremony but it is quite interesting to find that in Mising community there is no caste system. In economic side, though women an active role but unequal status is still prevailing in Mising community. Women don't have any right to claim property after getting married. As it is discussed that Mising community are immensely connected with nature and living close to river bank but due to natural calamities they have engaged in different fields. With the changes in new circumstances they have demanded new marketing for distribution they need this process. For production and growing purpose they need firms as shortage of agricultural land due to flood. There are some major problems which have affected them every year; (i) economic back down due to flood (ii) they are facing problems like poor market, poor communication (iii) due to food insecurity problem people are suffering from malnutrition specially women are the worst sufferer.



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31 (Photography by Yamini Gogoi)



Figure 32



Figure 33