

## Study On The Significance Of Jo:Sag: A Traditional Honorary Cuisine Of The Mising Tribe

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### Abstract

Food is an important marker of the cultural practices of a particular tribal community. Food habit depicts the cultural ethos and the availability of the ingredients of a particular recipe. Cultural practices and livelihood of particular tribe revolves around the extraction of different resources for their daily usage and tribal communities depends on the natural environment in varied activities. Besides agriculture, livestock rearing is an important livelihood option for the people in the community. These animals serves as additional income to meet the day-to-day cash requirement as well as offering during various ritual practices. The meat (pork, Chicken etc.) and fish cuisine are intricate part of the dishes prepared by the tribe. Mising tribe prepares variety of Meat and Fishes dishes during different cultural and ritual practices. However, meat especially pork serves as the major ingredients on special occasion. One such dish is Jo:sag which is specially prepared in honorary cuisine among the tribe. This dish is prepared either with meat (pork, Chicken) or Fish on various occasion.

**Keywords:** Livelihood, Culture, Tribal, Jo:sag, honorary cuisine

### Introduction

Assam has a diverse culture of several ethnic groups and indigenous communities of various origins. The ethnic groups of Assam can be grouped into hill tribes and plain tribes, each with their distinct languages and culture. The cultural diversity of this state is rich in classical religions and tribal heritage. The difference in local culture, languages and cuisine can be experienced across the state.

The Mising, an indigenous (ILO, 1989, No. 169) tribal community in the state of Assam is recognised as a Scheduled Tribe under the provisions of the Constitution of India. With a total population of 6, 79,824<sup>1</sup>, Mising are the second largest tribal group in the state inhabiting in the eight districts of northern and eastern Assam viz., Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sivsagar, Sonitpur, Golaghat, and Tinsukia. Some of them are also found in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Mising tribe is believed to have migrated from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh in 13<sup>th</sup> century through different routes (Dalton, 1879, Reprinted in 1973 ). After migration they stated to have settled predominantly on the bank of various rivers in the plains (Allen, 1905; Mehanzie, 1979; Pegu N. C., 1981). These rivers originated from the neighbouring hills of the Arunachal Pradesh. Living in the riverine areas makes them vulnerable to regular floods causing damages to life and property.

The Misings are predominantly rural settlers with only 2.73<sup>2</sup> % of the total population settled in urban area; the fact that males predominantly make up the urban population, probably implies temporary translocation for livelihood purposes. The traditional house of the community is *Taleng Ukum* or *Chang Ghar* i.e., house with raised platform. These houses are more convenient and

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<sup>1</sup> Census 2011

<sup>2</sup> Tribal (Census 2011)

protected from the rising flood waters. The construction materials used are from the locally available resources like bamboo, wood, plank and thatch etc. The Mising generally do not have permanent settlements or houses as they are forced to relocate periodically by the flood prone rivers that flow past their habitations.

### A Note on the Mising tribe:

The Mising people are the inhabitants of the riverine areas of the districts of eastern Assam. They are affected by the regular flooding during the rainy season. As result, they have to frequently shift their habitats from time to time in search of higher areas due to flood and erosion leading to their displacement from their habitat and livelihood. The Mising are second largest tribal group of Assam with a population of 6, 79,824 (2011 Census). Traditionally they are found in eight districts of the Brahmaputra Valley, viz., Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Golaghat, and Tinsukia. Some of them are also found in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. They mostly inhabit the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries such as Dishang, Subansiri, Dhansiri, and Bharali. After building up such a close affinity with rivers over the centuries, it is not surprising that most of the Mising people are accomplished boatmen and fishermen. Like other tribal groups, agriculture and animal husbandry is the main source of livelihood of the Mising tribe. They are solely dependent on the land which is the only property as well as a livelihood source. Traditionally, farming has been the pre-dominant livelihood option among the Misings. However, many of their habitats have been subject to soil erosion caused by perennial floods and erosion and the inhabitants have been forced to relocate in other areas.

### Culture and festivals:

There are number of festivals celebrated by the Mising tribe. The two main traditional festivals are the *Ali-Ayé-Lígang* and the *Po: rag*. These two festivals are based on the agricultural cycle. *Dobur* is one occasion, which is celebrated as a festival as well as a religious ritual.

### Ali-Ayé-Lígang

*Ali-Ayé-Lígang* is literally a seed sowing festival celebrated to mark the start of the agricultural cycle. Earlier it was celebrated as per convenient date in different villages (Pegu N. C., 1981). But after the resolution of the Takam Mising Porin Kébang (TMPK) in 1972 it is celebrated on the first Wednesday of the Fagun (February) in Assamese calendar in the Mising community. The celebration may last for five day-starting on Wednesday (*Lígang Longé*) of the (*Ginmur po: lo*). *Ali-Ayé-Lígang* is celebrated with great fervour in the community. People seeking blessing from *Do:nyi-Po:lo* (Mother Sun and father Moon), *Sedi-Me:lo* (terrestrial being), *Gumin Soyin* (fore fathers) for successful harvest. This followed by community feasting, *Gurag Soman* and *oi Nitom* by the youths.

The first day *Lígang Longé* (Wednesday) is marked by the ceremonial start of sowing paddy and the festival end with ceremonial closing called the *Lilen*. On the last day few elderly people offer prayer and seek blessing for good health and good harvest for the community. The festival is marked by grand community feasting of various ethnic cousins like- *Poro Apong* or *Nogin Apong* (homemade Rice beer) , '*Purang Apin*' (packed boiled rice) cooked wrapped in an wild leaves called *talíng* (tora pat in Assamese) specially prepared for the occasion.. Variety of dishes prepared with pork and chicken and consume with *Apong* followed by community dance of *gumrag soman* and *oi nitom*. And from evening youths start called *Lotta Soman* (house to house dance) where the household offer cashes, kind, etc. seeking blessing. The youths after completion of visiting all the households in the village, the cash gathered are accounted. They arrange a village community feast called *Dopan Típan* with some amount of the money and rest are kept for the next *Lígang*

### Po: rag

*Po: rag* is another important community festival of the Mising tribe. This is celebrated after harvesting of crops to offers thanksgiving to *Do: nyi-Po: lo*, *Karsing Kartag* etc. for their blessing in the successful accumulation of crops and to freshen up their toil in the field. *Murong Ukum* is a common place for celebration of *Po: rag*. Early this festival was celebrated during the early autumn in the month of August-September. But after changing in agricultural cycle, it is seen celebrating *Po: rag* in the early winter or early spring in the present days (Pegu N. C., 2008. p. 270).

*Po: rag* is a three day very expensive festival and therefore, it is celebrated in two to three years interval. During the festival everyone in the village is a stakeholder and share equal responsibility for successful completion of the same. The organizing village formally invites guests from the neighbouring villages as *Minom dolung* meaning guest village. The customary practice is the festival serves as a platform for the reunion of the women folks of the villages. Every woman from the organizing village married off to different villages are also invited as guests for the celebration. The organising villages must ensure that none of the women be left uninvited. The women along with their family are invited to join in the celebration with great fervour.

The celebration is marked community feast and singing and dancing by different age groups. Celebration is marked by friendly completion of singing and dancing categorized in different age group and gender. Now a days with the changing environment and cultural ethos it is seen that commercial singers are also invited to perform in the festival. The full responsibility for successful completion of the celebration is given to the youths of the village. It is assumed that the youths perform their assigned duties with complete responsibility and good discipline. Violating which may lead to hearing by the community leaders (mostly the elders) and the violators are penalised if found guilty.

### **Dobur:**

*Dobur* is another important festival observed by the Mising community. This is a traditional ritual occasionally in the villages with sacrificing poultry, eggs vegetables etc. It is performed to get rid of the community from adverse effects on crop and harvest. The festival is also observed to keep the community safe from evils and ensure its good health and well-being. The young folks visit every house in the village with sticks and hit the walls of the houses in way that they drive away the bad ghost, which may harm the family. After completing the visit to all the houses, the members of the villages drive the bad or evil ghost to the distance place particularly to the paddy field or the nearby forests where they feast with the offering of the household. The children and the women folks are not permitted in the feast as evil spirit may get into them. During the *Dobur* the approach road to the village is blocked with some special plant and passersby are halted till the completion of the festival or they may be penalised.

It may be mentioned here that, Mising people celebrate their traditional festival with great fervour and aesthetic value. And most of the festivals are connected to their traditional livelihood practices of agriculture. But land loss due flood and subsequent development project in the villages has had consequences for their traditional cultural practices. The gradual shrinking acreage of land and land acquisition for the project related activities have rendered many of the villagers landless which pushed them to different livelihood practices like rickshaw puller, wage labour, menial works, etc, (Sharma C. K., 2012). These people feel dissociated from their traditional festivals.

### **Religion and Rituals:**

The Mising people traditionally follow their own religion named *Donyi Po: lo* (Sun and Moon). Even if many Misings follow Assamese neo-Vaishnavism or Christianity, they simultaneously follow the practices of *Donyi Po: Lo* sect. In the Brahmaputra valley, the Misings have undergone a process of acculturation (Mipun, 1993). They believe in different supernatural beings haunting the earth, usually unseen. These supernatural beings fall into four categories, viz. *uyu* or *ui* (usually malevolent spirits inhabiting the waters, the woods, the skies, etc. capable of causing great harm including physical devastation), *urom po-sum* (hovering spirits of the dead, who may cause illness

or other adverse conditions), *gumeen-soyin* (benevolent ancestral spirits), and *epom-yapom* (spirits inhabiting tall, big trees, who are generally not very harmful, but who may abduct human beings occasionally, cause some physical or mental impairment and release them later).

Barring the *epom-yapom*, all the supernatural beings need to be propitiated with sacrificial offerings (usually domestic fowl), and both periodically and on specific occasions (illness, disaster, etc). Even the benevolent guardian spirits are propitiated from time to time for the all-round wellbeing of a household. Nature worship is also a common practice amongst Misings. The god of thunder is propitiated from time to time, and although not worshipped or propitiated, the Sun (*Ane-Donyi* 'Mother Sun') and the Moon (*Abu Polo* 'Father Moon') are invoked on all auspicious occasions (Mipun, 1993).

The traditional priest of their faith is called a *Mibu* who also acts as a healer. *Mibus* are supposed to be born with special powers of communion with supernatural beings. While *Mibus* are on their way out amongst the Misings owing to the introduction of modern education and healthcare amongst them, propitiation of supernatural beings continues to mark their religious life.

In addition, in the Brahmaputra valley, they have embraced some kind of a monotheistic Hinduism as passed on to them by one of the sects of the Vaishnavism of Sankardeva (1449-1568 A.D.), the saint-poet of Assam. People are seen practicing both their traditional religious practices along with the Vaishnavism way of life. For instance, they consume traditional drinks and pork during festival and different occasion. Their religious life in the valley has thus assumed a fully syncretistic character, as it were, and it has given them homogenous characters of both animistic *Donyi Po:loism* and Vaishnavism. There are sizeable number of Christians, both Roman Catholic and Baptist, among the Misings. The world-famous river island Majuli is a home to large number of Mising Christians.

### **An overview of foods of the Mising tribe:**

The food habits of Mising is the identity marker of the community. Rice is the staple food of the people. It is served with various non-vegetarian like fish and meat cooked with local herbs or leaves. In addition *apong*- a local made beverage is a common traditional drink among the people. Nature is the main source of Mising food i.e. river, jungle, rain, sun, paddy field etc. So the food they eat is mostly what they grow and to be found around the forest.

They are one of the culturally rich ethnic tribes of Assam, mostly depend on their natural surroundings as a reliable source for food. The Mising people are very unique in their cultural life and their food habit is unique because of its relation with nature. Mising people are basically agriculturist and most of their income comes from agriculture. They rear pigs and poultry, which is a part of their custom. Fishing in rivers and beels is another important practice of these people. Besides, they use plenty of wild plants as vegetables in their daily food items from time immemorial. The value of self-sufficiency in food system is an integral aspect of the Mising community.

The Mising people generally take non-vegetarian food items on their choice and taste. The main food of Mising society are rice, pork, bamboo shoot, *apong*, *namshing*, vegetables (green leaf) and various herbs which are available in nearby local areas. They sacrifice pig, hen and duck in their religious custom and ritual practices for the wellbeing of persons, families and the society. They sacrifice pig, hen and duck in their religious custom and ritual practices for the wellbeing of persons, families and the society.

A diverse knowledge system exist among Mising women to prepare the fermented food, boiled food, beverages and nutritionally rich traditional food from various indigenous crop plants, forest products and meat of wild as well as domesticated animals.

Food habits of particular community vary depending on geographical location of that area. They acquired the own traditional food habits as per the availability of food products, climate etc. Because of it the taste of *apong* is quite different in different geographical area of Misings. The

traditional food are not only rich in nutrients but also have certain curative properties against many diseases and disorders.

Acculturation and assimilation took place among the Mising community in their food culture with other communities mostly with the greater Assamese culture. The used of cooking oil, spices etc. are imported from different communities. In the early days Mising people preferred and consumed mostly boil food items but after migrating to plain area of Assam certain changes have been taken place in preparation and preference of foods like uses' of oil, tea with biscuit, different spices items and medium of cooking etc. Earlier they collect or gathered vegetables from jungles only but now a days the green leafs are grown by themselves in their kitchen garden. In the name of spice they used only ginger, garlic, black pepper and chilli but now in some study area we found uses of packed spice are also in their daily diet.

**Beverages of the Mising Tribe:**

Preparation and consumption of traditional beverages in very common among the tribe. These beverages serves as welcoming drinks to the guest and others senior members of the community. Beverages are also an integral part of community feasting, religious and rituals among the tribe. The traditional beverages prepared by the Mising tribe are discuss below:

### 1. NOGIN APONG

Recipes: Boil Rice and **épop**.

Firstly the amount of rice required for preparing nogin apong is boiled. Then it is taken out in a rounded bamboo made dish. And it is left to cool down. After that particular kind of medicine (**épop**) is added and mixed to the cooked rice. After it is mixed properly the mixture is packed in bamboo made container, earthen pitcher or mud pot. In summer it may take 5-6 days for a proper fermentation. In winter it may take little longer .They are covered carefully with *bih-dhekia* (*cyclosorus dentatus*) leaves.

**épop** – Made of rice flour and medicine herbs which are ready made and stored for one season.

### 2. PORO APONG

Recipe: Boil Rice, Burn rice husk, burn paddy hay and **épop**.

First rice is boiled and taken out in a bamboo dish and kept aside to cool down, frequently Rice husk is half burn and dry paddy hay is fully burn after that the burnt rice husk and burn paddy hay is mixed with the rice in proper proportion. After mixing when it is totally cool, a particular kind of medicine (**épop**), prepared for fermentation of the apong is added. Then it is packed in traditional bamboo made container, mud pot or plastic bags. It is preserved for getting fermented. It takes around 10 days for a proper fermentation. Filtration is done by using a conical bamboo basket generally lined on its surface with banana leaves.

### Historical and cultural significance of Jo:sag:

Jo:sag is a traditional dishes offered as an honour to the elders and people during celebration of great achievements since time immoral. The exact time and situation how the practice evolve among the Mising in not recorded. However, the practice of offering Jo:sag is regarded as significant event in almost in every cultural festivals and rituals occasion among the tribe. Besides it was also offer to the bride and groom at the time of wedding ceremony. This is an honorary event offered with meat (pork, Chicken etc.), Fish cooked especially in traditional herbs locally available and served with traditional beverages called *apong*. The people chants in the name of Donyi-polo, whom the tribe regarded as the eternal mother and father respectively, *gumin-soying*, and the ancestral being. They pray for wellbeing of the people and prosperous future. Thus, Jo:sag in a significant event of culture, ritual and historically among the Mising tribe.

### Ingredients and cooking techniques:

As already been mentioned, Jo:sag is a special dishes prepared in honour traditionally among the Mising tribe. The ingredients and cooking techniques are unique for the dishes and the person in expert are invited for the purpose. The ingredients are meats like pork, chicken, Fish. The traditional herbs like *takuk*, *tajik*, *posotia*, *peepoli* etc. are used to cooked specially in large oven-*Kerai* with firewood. The Jo:sag in served with steam rice and traditional beverages. The entire dishes of Jo:sag is prepared in boiled without oil.

### Varieties of Jo:sag dishes:

There are varieties of Jo:sag dishes prepared on different occasion and as per the socio-economics status of the people. The dishes also varies among the inhabitants of different geographical regions. However, the significance and the offering remains intake across the tribe. The method of preparation and serving of the dishes are steamed rice and traditional beverages *apong*. Some of the Jo:sag dishes are mention below:

1. Pork with local herbs, Urad beans, rice flour, etc. served with rice and traditional *apong*
2. Chicken with local herbs, Urad beans, rice flour, etc. served with rice and traditional *apong*
3. Fish with local herbs, Urad beans, rice flour, etc. served with rice and traditional *apong*

### Nutritional value and Health benefits:

Jo:sag dishes are very significant traditionally and it has nutritional value and health benefits for the people. The dishes are prepared with different herbs with traditional medicinal values which are regarded to have many health benefits. The preparation and offering are also ritually significance among the tribal culture. Few of the herbs with its medicinal and health benefits are listed in the table below:

Species	Local name	Part used for starter culture	Uses other than Jo:sag
<i>Hydrocotyle sibthorpioides</i>	LamManimuni	Whole plant	Vegetable, medicine
<i>Spilanthes acmella</i> Murr	Marchang	Aerial part/Young shoot	Vegetable
<i>Leuca aspera</i> Spreng	Durun bon	Aerial part/Young shoot	Medicine
<i>Cinnamomum tamala</i> Fr. Nees	Te-s paat	Leaves	Infusion drink
<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam	Bélang	Fruit, Seed	Vegetable, fodder
<i>Psidium guajava</i> L	Muduri	Fruit	Medicine
<i>Piper longum</i> L	Peepoli	Inflorescence	Spice condiments, medicine
<i>Saccharum officinarum</i> L	Tabad	Stem	Medicine, rituals

### Contemporary relevance and future prospect of Jo:sag:

The tradition of Jo:sag among the Mising tribe marked a significant event both culturally and ritually. Though the historical practices of the event does not have any recorded past, however, the practices has been significance among the community. As already been mentioned, the Mising tribe are dependent on agriculture and allied activities as the primary sources of livelihood. The Jo:sag serves as the marker of the livelihood practices in commemoration of honour, harvest and offering for the future prosperity of the community.

With the advent of the modern technology driven society the Mising society has been witnessing different changes. The shrinking of agricultural land and practice of the same due to development initiatives, flood and erosion, and diminishing of yield are seen as the factors for unpopular practice of Jo:sag in the contemporary time. Moreover, the conversion of the Mising tribe to various religions other the traditionally practice of *Donyi-Polo* has also caused Jo:sag irrelevant as the offering are chanted in traditional way.

**Conclusion:**

The practice of Jo:sag with significance in cultures, rituals are still very popular among the Mising tribe. It is practiced among the tribe almost across people residing in different geographical regions. The practice has been diminishing due to different factors, however still popular event during different cultural and ritual occasions. The Jo:sag with its medicinal and health benefits and the honour of the dishes still remains as an honorary cuisine and relevant among the Mising tribe.

**Figure 1: Jo:sag dish with pork****Figure 2: Jo:sag dish with chicken**



Figure 3: Some image of the herbs with medicinal and nutritional value use in Jo:sag

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