



Forest resource depletion and its impact on the Mising Women of Assam

Himajyoti Doley

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, India

Abstract

Assam is a land of cultural heritage embracing several communities and a land of rich natural resources. The Mising community, originally a hill tribe of the Abor hills constitutes the second largest tribe next to the Bodos in terms of population with nature based rich culture and eco-friendly life pattern. The natural environment plays a significant role in shaping their culture and traditional practices. Women play active roles in preserving their cultural identity through their food, dresses and maintaining their households. But the never ending depletion of natural resources has severely affected their socio-economic and cultural life. The paper is based upon participation observation and feminist research methodology which places the situation and experiences of women at the heart of the study. The study limits itself with the study of rural Mising women belonging to the villages surrounding the Poba Reserve Forest, a rain forest located at the Assam-Arunachal border falling under upper Assam district of Dhemaji in northeast India.

Keywords: apong, epob, forest, mising, tradition, women

Introduction

The Mising community, originally a hill tribe of the Abor hills constitute the second largest tribe of Assam with nature based rich culture and eco-friendly traditional life pattern. The natural environment occupies a significant position in each and every aspect of their life. Their habitat, eating habits, dressing, housing etc. is shaped by their natural surroundings. The Mising tribe have been residing in the riverine areas of upper Assam districts since their migration to the plains of Assam. "Misings are riparian and they are mostly found to inhabit the areas which are in the vicinity of rivers/rivulets^[1]." But the devastating earthquake of august 1950 turned out to be a curse for their riparian lifestyle. In addition, extensive erosion and frequent floods damaging crops and their settlements led a good percentage of the population sought rehabilitation close to forest areas among which some are considered to be reserved forests. The natural environment including forest resources play a significant role in determining the socio-economic life of tribal people including the Mising community. "Ecology plays an important role among the tribes living in the vicinity of forest, either directly or indirectly whose way of life is closely related with the forest^[2]." They have been residing in these areas for generations maintaining close relation with nature and depending on it as sources of their life and cultivating different types of crops and collecting non-timber forest produces. Their sustenance and survival are intricately linked to the utilization and conservation of their natural surroundings and the availability of bio-resources around them. Therefore these people have always remained the principal victims of environment and natural resource depletion. Among all the victims, women and children are at a disadvantage and are affected to a greater extent due to their socio-economic roles. "Environmental degradation affects

men and women differently because of their different status in the society^[3]." Women's closeness to nature is different due to their socially assigned roles as collectors and gatherers of food, fuel, fodder and as managers of their homes. But despite their habitation for long time they are subjected to suffer from the effects of eviction and are very often restrained from entry into the reserved forests.

Mising women act as equal partners to their men in terms of household managements and agricultural practices. They are engaged in agricultural activities as unpaid family labours working in their own farms and at the same time take care of the old members of the family and their children's health and education. Therefore existence of home without a woman is almost impossible among the Misings and is like a curse. "Neng Kaman okume, alo kaman oyinge (a home without a wife is like a dinner without salt)^[4]." This indicates the importance of women in the family. Though their status, mobility and socio-economic conditions differ from the women belonging to the other parts of the country which is either due to absence of certain social practices like dowry, purdah and existing caste flexibility and basically the tribal work pattern where village economy largely resolves on women's labour and female entrepreneurship, this does not mean that the Mising women are on equal footing with men. Mising women share equal status only in terms of management of the entire household responsibilities and not in terms of property rights and decision making. In spite of the enactment of the Hindu Succession Act (1956) daughters are not given the rights of succeeding the property of father along with the sons. Their rights are defeated due to Testamentary disposition of property and their decisions and views are sought once in a blue moon. Like the women belonging to other parts of the country, they are also assigned gendered roles which they accept as their duties. "This is particularly so

in countries like India where society and life of people are moulded by traditional and spiritual foundations ^[5]". Like other women in the country Mising women also do all kinds of domestic works such as cleaning, washing, cooking and distribution of food items. The time spent in weaving and taking food is considered to be the time of leisure. Mising men usually abstain from cooking, washing and cleaning works and so even earning women also generally do not get a helping hand from them. The Mising women wake up to work and sleep to work the next day and get engaged in their hazard works ignoring sun, rain and storm. They are required to perform the daily household duties even though they are sick and even during their pregnancy and are to work in the agricultural fields within two months after child delivery. They bear the double burden of reproductive and productive works like fuel, water and food collections from their surrounding environment. Thus the natural environment and its resources play a significant role in performing the household responsibilities of rural Mising women in Assam. Forests play an important role in determining the socio-economic status of the Mising women. They depend on forest resources for their livelihood maintaining a symbiotic relationship and depend upon these resources for their immediate household needs, survival and existence due to their demarcated roles as users, caretakers and managers of their households. Their traditional practices and living patterns also shape their interdependence on forest produces. They are linked to forests through the survival food chain, producing food and fodder from the forests. They collect nutritious food including leaves of wild trees, buds, flowers, mushrooms, seeds, rhizomes etc. Undoubtedly the forest resources provide subsistence basis for both Mising men and women but the relationship of men is different from that of women. Women's perception of life is different which make them realise the necessity and importance of green trees and other plants. Men perceive forest in terms of hunting and commercialization of timbers whereas women gather and collect the dead and dry twigs and branches for fuel wood which reflect a strong bondage between women and forest. "As children they accompanied their mothers and sisters to the forest for collection of produce. As adults they frequented them for sport, hunting particularly ^[6]." Another instance is that men are generally responsible for encroaching and clearing forest lands and get it ready for cultivation and concerned in converting into cash while women are responsible for weeding, harvesting, processing of food, seed storage and thus become the traditional caretakers of species diversity and traditional knowledge bearers. "The elderly people said, the women are the treasurer of food and kitchen is the place where cultural knowledge was passed from one generation to the next ^[7]". During shortages women's traditional knowledge practically helps them in looking for a way to feed their children and they try to invent their last survival manoeuvres. Mising women adopt certain strategies such as fishing in rivers, growing vegetables in the courtyard for household subsistence, rearing and selling live stock resources like pigs, poultry and goats in order to cope with crises. But the increased and never-ending depletion of forest produces accompanied by disappearance of plant varieties affect not only their subsistence and income but also threatens their

traditional knowledge base they have built over ages. They lean towards errand jobs on farms in exchange for rice without wage and work as wage labourers for harvesting crops and plucking leaves in tea estates of their vicinity. They also attempt to repay their informal loans which were taken from farmers during their shortages with their labour during the crop seasons. The objective of this paper is to highlight the relation between forest resource depletion and its impact on the Mising women dwelling in the rural areas who depend on forest resources for their daily lives. There are different aspects where the Mising women have close connection with the natural environment such as food, fuel, fodder, medicines, traditional rituals and festivals, dye and weaving implements, income avenues and shelter for bio-diversity and knowledge base for future progenies. Some of the instances where the Mising women have close links with forest resources are as follows:-

1. **Food:-** Tribal women including the Mising women depend on forest produces for food. The eating habit of the Mising tribe has been basically eco-friendly with less use of oil and spices. Their food items include rice, pork, chicken, fish (both fresh and dry), leafy vegetables available in the jungles, home-made beverages traditionally called 'apong', and various green herbs available in their places. They collect varieties of nutritious food items like roots including yams, arum, tubers and bamboo shoots, leafy vegetables, buds, rhizomes, seeds, mushrooms, fruits etc. from their surrounding forests to feed their family members and themselves. Pork cooked with different leafy vegetables traditionally called as takuk, tajik (*ficus spp.*), ombe (*sarchoclamis pulcherrima*), pakkom (*clerodendron colebrookianum*), nekung (*polygonum assanicum*), jeying tayo (*calamus tenuis*), marsang (*spilanthus acmella*), bilongoni/rukji (*polypodium spp.*), onger, kone oying, mirne katung, okorbiri, gurban (*meliosma simplifolia*), dermi oying (*meliosma pinnata*) etc. and fish cooked with bamboo shoots (ikung) and fern leaves (okang) and sompa/outenga (*dillenia indica*) have been some of their favourite dishes. They collect these necessary edible items without harming the forest and uses different items judiciously taking into account their further utility in the future. Though the Mising people living in the towns and cities have changed their foods habits, they still prefer to buy their traditional food items from the weekly markets whenever and where ever it is available and are trying to maintain and restore their identity through their food. The rural Mising women still continue their traditional boiled foods which they collect from their nearby forests and depend upon those items for their sustenance. Hence forests resources have a very close linkage with the livelihood and economy of the rural Mising women.
2. **Fuel:-** In addition to their collection of food from the jungles, Mising women also move out in groups to gather fuel wood from their surrounding forests. They collect the dead and dry branches for their use instead of felling a living tree which indeed reflects a strong bondage between women and forest. During the dry seasons women seek to gather huge pile of fuel wood as much as possible and stock them for their use in the wet seasons. Fuel wood is a very essential material in the tribal houses for cooking as a

very less Mising women living in village can afford and access cooking gas. A good quality fuel wood would reduce cooking burden and time consumption which would mean more time in the hands of the women for their other household works. Therefore availability of quality fuel wood means quality cooked food.

3. **Fodder:-** Forests also provide essential fodder for feeding the domestic cattle of the tribal people. The health of their domestic animals largely depends on the availability of fodder. Nutrition of the reared cattle like pigs, goats, cows, buffaloes etc. is determined by the availability of the essential fodder around them. Well fed milch cattle would provide milk to a good extent for feeding their children and bring them good money when sold. The Mising women try their best to gather huge heaps and bundles of fodder grass to feed their cattle from their surrounding forests. They gather the arums and cook them to feed their pigs and the leafy twigs of some plants to feed their goats. Therefore, availability of fodder and the health of their cattle depend upon the existence of forest lands.
4. **Medicines:-** Forest resources have been serving as medicinal base of the tribal people for curing different kinds of diseases and ailments. Tribal people use certain herbs, stems, leaves and flesh of tree trunks to cure diseases and illness like dysentery, diarrhoea, cold, cough, jaundice, bone fracture etc. They prepare indigenous medicines which they have been practising since time immemorable. The Mising people also depend upon certain natural resources for performing certain customary rituals and ceremonies. Mising women also use certain creepers and herbs available in the forest as agents of lactation in the post delivery periods and some others as agents for healing. They also use the stems and tendrils of some climbers for manufacturing the medicines important for preparation of their traditional drink i.e. local rice beer known as 'Apong' which have been a common food either during their festive celebration or for performing traditional/customary rituals. Availability of the essential medicinal herbs would therefore lead to production of good quality rice beer.
5. **Traditional Rituals and Festivals:-** The celebration of traditional festivals and customary rituals of the Misings have always remained closely associated with nature. For celebrating those festivals the Misings depend on forest based resources to a great extent. They celebrate the sowing festival known as 'Ali A:ye Ligang' which marks the beginning of their agricultural activities. The special inevitable dish prepared on this occasion is 'Purang' and green leafy vegetables cooked with pork and pork cooked with black pulses. Purang is made of sticky rice wrapped in 'Taling' (a kind of long leaf which gives kind of sweet scents) leaves into sizeable packets and boiled properly. The Misings also celebrate other socio-religious festivals like 'Dobur', 'Porag' etc. and funeral rituals like 'Dodgang' and 'Urom Apin'. Women actively participate in all the celebrations except during the performance of 'Dobur. Apong is the special beverage of all these religious or festive occasions and plays a crucial role in hosting and entertaining the guests. Apong is of two types i.e. 'Nogin' and 'Po:ro'. The 'Nogin' apong is white in

colour and its preparation is easy in comparison to the preparation of 'po:ro' apong which is quite a lengthy process requiring different raw materials—rice, paddy husk, herbal medicines (traditionally known as epob), banana leaves and fern leaves. 'Epob' is round shaped or oval shaped in structure prepared with a mixture of grinded rice and at least fifty medicinal herbs and dried to its optimum and stored carefully for future use. The preparation of a good quality 'apong' depends upon the quality of 'epob'. The Mising women collect the essential herbs from the jungles which needs an expertise in identifying the necessary herbs. The availability of the essential herbs depends only on the existence of forests cover.

6. **Dye and weaving implements:-** The Mising women are well known and famous for dexterity in their weaving. In addition to their laborious task in agricultural activities and household management, they manage time for weaving clothes for themselves and the other members of their family. Girls are taught the art of weaving since their adolescence. They use their traditional loom and hand looms made of either bamboo or wood and spinning wheels to spin yarn as their weaving implements. For making all these weaving implements and accessories the Misings depend on forest resources as their primary source. They also practice the craft of natural dyeing to dye the yarn as required using certain herbs and barks of trees available in the forest.
7. **Housing and household accessories:-** The Mising community generally live in their traditional stilted houses built with raised platform made of bamboo or wooden. Since they are basically dwellers of riverine areas, they build this sort of houses in order to save themselves from recurrent annual flood. Though some Mising people residing in semi-urban and town areas build concrete houses, the poor villagers living in rural areas still living below poverty line cannot afford to built such houses and hence depend on forest resources for housing. They depend on different kinds of forest products for building their houses where some include trees and climbers like Rattan canes (*calamus*), Bamboo (*bambusa tulda*), Nahor (*mesua ferrea*), Hollock (*terminalia myriocarpa*), Simalu (*salmonalia malburycum*), Bola (*morus lavigate*), Titachampa (*michelia champasia*), Gamari (*gimelia arborra*), Gandhsarai (*cinna momum*), Mekai (*shorea assamica*) etc. Tatch and reeds like Ekora and Khagori in assamese which grow abundantly in the alluvial soil of the river banks of Brahmaputra, Subansiri and other tributaries are also used as housing materials. In addition, the Misings women also depend on bio-resources to make household accessories such baskets made of bamboo and cane, manual fans, sieves, mats, trays for cleaning grains or drying things, rain hats to be used in the paddy fields, mortars made of wood for husking and grinding rice and making flours, wooden troughs to feed the pigs etc.
8. **Income avenues:-** Forest resources also provide income avenues for tribal women. So Mising also women value environment in a special way as they look towards environment for food, fodder, fuel, water, medicine and sources of their income. They gather different varieties of leafy vegetables, roots and shoots, yams and arums, berries

and plums and bundles of dry branches of wood and sell them in the market to earn some amount of money. They further depend on plant species available in the forest to prepare the medicines essential for the production of their exceptionally tasteful traditional alcoholic beverage - Apong which is a must in any special occasion or celebration amongst the Misings. So availability of forest resources determines the income of rural Mising women to a good extent.

9. Shelter for biodiversity and knowledge base for future progenies:- Forest have always remained the home of biodiversity which serve as the main source of ecological balance and human survival. Forests harbour many species of plants, animals and micro-organisms the genetic extracts of which are vitally important for preparations of agricultural, industrial and pharmaceutical products. Mising women have vast traditional skill and expertise of using indigenous plants, preserving seed varieties, judicious use and management of natural resources. The ecological knowledge of Mising women is a traditional storehouse which they have inherited and acquired through their interaction with the environment as farmers, producers and household managers. They have a special knowledge and concern for the protection and conservation of the natural environment as they realise that they will have to carry the burden of ecological destruction. They are also aware of the fact their traditional knowledge and forest resources would help them cope with during their shortages and would provide a way to feed their children using diverse indigenous species. Forests serve as shelter for wild animals and helps in maintaining human-wild co-existence. The Mising women also realise the threats arising out of the trespass of wild animals into their villages in search of food and destroying their crops due to dwindling of their food items in the jungles. They are aware that of the fact that their security depends on the existence of wild habitats and biodiversity and its loss would put their security in peril.

But the increased depletion of forest cover has adversely affected the survival and alters the life style of the rural Mising women. It also threatens the very knowledge base they have built over ages and left women with no other choices than exploiting the natural resources for survival in spite of their interest in biodiversity considerations. They lose control over their traditional skills to live with nature and protect the natural resources. As the bio-resources around them gets dwindle, their responsibilities continue to increase. Additional physical burden falls on women as they struggle to survive along with their families by adopting strategies to cope with all odds of nature and the society. Many of the plant and animal species are found to have disappeared. The disappearance of plant varieties hinder women from collecting their traditional food items from the jungles and are bound to resort purchased food creating a good burden on them. Medicinal herbs used for curing certain wounds and ailments are smashed down while felling the big trees which are very often done by men. Some of the women expressed that very often they try to stop men from doing so but their voices are neglected. The traditionally used edible leafy vegetables and plants species essential for preparing their traditional 'Epob'

are hard to be found in their nearby forests and so they move to the hills leaving behind their children. While doing so, they have less demand of time for their agricultural works which again affects their income and crop production. Endangered animal species like pangolin and river dolphins are hard to be seen. Big size fishes are caught by men using chemicals for selling in the markets and the women have no other choices than going for fry. Shrinking of fuel wood very often lead to prolonged exposure to fuming woods while cooking and compel them shift to less nutritious food and even reduce the number of meals eaten per day. They spend longer hours and walk longer distances for collecting wood, water and other edible items which affect their health. Moreover, the existing gender biases within the family lead women to feed themselves on the leftovers and most commonly they seen to sacrifice their own meals to their husbands and children which hit their health status. The dwindling of green pasture and overall reduction of natural resources affect the income of these women and they are left with the option of working as hired labourers for transplanting, weeding and harvesting in the paddy fields, tea estates and suffer low returns and low esteem for their labour. Their indebtedness and low income very often lead them to sell their ancestral jewelleryes and borrow cash from private money lenders at excessive interest rates.

The destruction of forest cover also affects the annual rainfall which in turn affects their vegetables and other agricultural production. They find difficult to consume the vegetables available in the market as they believe that those food items are produced by using chemical fertilizers. Moreover, their poor economic conditions also obstruct them from buying their food items from the market. Another impact of deforestation is the entrance of wild animals in the human habitats in search of food due to scarcity of food in the jungles and breaking down their houses, granaries and destroys their crops, vegetables, banana trees etc. Very often, pythons are seen in their villages swallowing away their piglets, lambs and poultry which would have been their income source during crisis. Forest cover provides protection from strong winds and sun but its depletion creates fear of storms in the minds of Mising women. They are of the view that due reduction of forest cover sun seems to be coming closer to them. From the discussion it is clear that women have a gender specific relation with the environment and forest resources. The plight of Mising women is pitiable as the dwindling of forest based resources and the scarcity of fruits and vegetables from the forest necessarily demands a change in their life pattern, change in the food habits and the changes under the circumstances cannot be for the better. Mising women who depended on forest resources for daily lives are thus getting increasingly marginalised leaving tremendous impact on their socio-economic lives and indigenous traditional practices.

Therefore, efforts are to be made to integrate women in policies and programmes formulated for conservation of natural resources. Forest projects should aim at fostering local community development and reducing rural poverty by re-establishing a balance between women and forest resources. Traditional customs and their indigenous knowledge should also be taken into account womenfolk should be motivated in driving away economic debt and ecological crisis.

Governmental plans should be analysed from a gender perspective and the time consuming restraints of womenfolk should be investigated. The 21st century which is also known as knowledge century with invented tools and methodologies should aim at rejuvenating renewable resources create alternatives, and correct things at both local and global levels. This would help our human race to secure the long life our progenies and live in harmony with the nature.

End Notes

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