

## MOLASSES IN CULTURE AND CUSTOM: THE CASE OF MANIPUR

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### Abstract

*Molasses is very significant ingredients in ritual functions of different ethnic communities in Manipur. No one will deny that traditional culture of using food or making edible or usable products have its own significance whether it may be in terms of cultural or scientific value. So far, none of us have serious for its significance in customary and ritual ceremonies. The present analysis is an attempt to study the relevance of molasses in our culture and its relevance in Manipur. Method of analysis is based on both qualitative and quantitative along with case studies from Thoubal District where molasses trading are done successfully.*

**Keywords:** *Molasses, custom, culture, health, belief*

In the early, molasses began getting imported into United States from the Caribbean Islands. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, molasses remained the most popular sweeteners since it was easily affordable than refined sugar, which was quite expensive at that time. Currently, India, Brazil, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines and the United States are the major producers of molasses.<sup>1</sup> Latin word *melaceres*, meaning honey-like, is thick dark syrup that is a byproduct of sugar refining later known as Molasses. (Fang *et al* 1998) It comes when sugar is crystallized out of sugar cane or sugar beet juice. The pressing of cane to produce cane juice and then boiling the juice until it crystallized was developed in India as early as 500 B.C. (Columbia Encyclopaedia) However, it was slow to move to the rest of the world. Molasses on the other hand used prominently in the infamous slave trade triangles of the late seventeenth century. In general, molasses production in Manipur is somewhat different which is still in traditional method. It is worth to say that molasses is the finished product obtained from sugarcane juice after it has undergone three stages of production process. In the First stage, the sugar juice from sugarcane is extracted through-traditional mechanism, boiling in certain degree. In the second stage, the extracted sugarcane juice is boiled until it forms a thick viscous matter. In the third last stage this thick viscous matter is used as a raw material for obtaining the final product in different shapes and sizes with the help of different wooden and tin frame. Molasses (chini angangba in local name) was produced in the Caribbean, where the cultivation of sugarcane and sugar beet was highest. The existing molasses production in the state is indeed age old methods.

Study on the matter of molasses is very few and even no study in related to the molasses production in Manipur is found. Traditional or indigenous knowledge is generation-wise accumulation of traditional experiences, informal experiments through trial and error method, and ultimate understanding of nature. This is actually related to mode of production that is again dependent on ecological resources, biodiversity and micro-environment. (Dasai 2004) That production system might be pre-agricultural, agricultural, small scale farming, and other agro-based units, and finally trade links of so many types differentiated on the basis of type of the capital. (Taneja 2002; Taneja *et al.*, 2000) Together, these production units postulate division

of labour that again illustrates the entire social system and related belief-faith-fear system or the Supernatural. (Patric 1999) In a sense, we can say that it is a combination of social, economic, political and religious institutions that also organize the society. As a whole, we can treat the cognate of indigenous knowledge of the aboriginal or native people in the form of a system. (Das 2013; Khanka 2003; Kurukshetra 1999) The nutritional content and quality of molasses depends on the method involved in its refining process, the ripeness of the plant from which it is extracted and the quantity of sugar that is extracted. Typically, sugar cane juice undergoes three cycles of boiling and crystallization to extract as much sugar as possible. With each successive cycle, the left over molasses contains less sugar.<sup>2</sup> *Light Molasses*: This is the syrup left over after the first boiling cycle of sugarcane juice. This molasses is the lightest in color, has the highest sugar content, and the least viscous texture. *Dark Molasses*: Dark molasses is the byproduct of the second boiling cycle of sugarcane. This molasses is darker and more viscous than light molasses, and contains less sugar. *Black Strap Molasses*: This is the final byproduct of the third boiling cycle in the sugar making process. This variety of molasses contains the least sugar and has the highest concentration of vitamins and minerals. Black strap molasses has a very dark color and is extremely viscous in texture. Because this type of molasses is highly concentrated, it is also known as final molasses.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the study includes- to understand the significance of molasses in Manipuri culture; to analyse the method of uses in different traditional custom and culture and to evaluate the relevance of the molasses in different ritual functions.

### **Research Design**

The universe of the study is in the entire state of Manipur and Thoubal District in particular as the molasses production is successfully done in this district. The district has a total geographical area of 514 sq. km. The district is inhabited by several ethnic communities such as Meiteis, Meitei-pangals (Muslim), other tribes like Chiru, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kom, Lamkang, Maring, Paite, Simte, Tangkhul, Vaiphei, Zou and others and scheduled caste like Loi and Yaithibi and migrants like Bengalis and Nepalis have also settled in certain parts of this district maintaining their own cultures and traditions. (Habibullah 2010) Of them, scheduled caste women engaged in molasses production. It is an empirical and exploratory research based on primary & secondary data. The population of study covered 14 molasses production units operating at present in Kakching in the Thoubal District of Manipur. The secondary data collected from available literatures maintained by these production units on the one hand and other books and journals on the other. The selected women entrepreneurs and farmers who dealt with molasses production were also studied through different methods. It collected samples from every unit of productions from Thoubal district through unstructured questionnaire. Moreover, this work emphasised participatory method using focused groups, key informants, individual interviews, as well as observation.

### **Molasses in Manipuri culture**

The trading process of the existing molasses at Kakching by the women folk is mainly based on traditional concept and techniques where there is low purchase of hydrated molasses tin, low finished products. The marketing process is also of the traditional

way of selling at usually fixed rate, for systematic marketing of the finished product of molasses. Culture and tradition sometime relates to the inclusive growth. There has been a culture among the women of the Kakching to struggle for livelihood without much depending on the male members of the family. This ideal form of work culture prevails in Kakching. The trade of molasses production indicates lots of prospects and opportunities though no one serious on this matter, only few traders and farmers are engaging. For a successful molasses entrepreneur the talent and necessary skills for production of molasses supposed to earn experience in the field. Womenfolk have been inculcating to the younger generation like daughters, daughter-in-law, younger sister or their granddaughters but they have also emphasised only to serve economic purposes only. That implies, it ignores significance of its scientific and cultural values. Some of the facts may be highlighted as below: In the lifelong process of human beings, it is believed that life is full of risk in the sense that lots of inconvenient and unpredictable suffers (*Dasha*) are knocking at the door of every individuals. Of them, the one who may be associated with *dasha* even in the womb of mother or just after landed on the earth later on. Since long back, as a preventive measure to overcome such *dasha*, people offer molasses accordingly to the Sun and his wife Matangi Devi for Sunday Planet, Narasing and his wife Baglamukhi Devi for March Planet. Planets have names, and stories, and we have relationships with them that last all our lives.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, people have unshakable faith in transcendent truth that unpredictable suffer can be escaped or relief form unpleasant things to be happened if we offer molasses to these four deities. That is why molasses is being considered an indispensable one in human life.<sup>4</sup>; This culture of offering molasses to the deity believes to be one traditional culture of all over the world since transitory period of human beings. In fact, molasses has been taking the valuable responsibilities in customary and ritual ceremonies. Many traditional cultures of different ethnic people used to use molasses in relating to health that signifies relation between culture and health.<sup>5</sup>

Different ethnic groups of people living in this present society have been celebrating various rites, ceremonies, occasions in their respective culture throughout the year with traditional favour and gaiety. In these rites, ceremonies and occasion there is a felt needs to use indigenous products i.e. molasses. In short, the molasses products have become an indispensable part in all the rites and ceremonies of all the existing culture of different ethnic groups of Manipur. On the other hand molasses products are vital for successful ritual ceremonies. Forinstance, *Hawai Kabok*, *Thoiding Kabok*, *rice and Maiže Kabok*, *Chini Khoibak*, and other *Kaboks etc.* are main products made with molasses, but today, it is being treated insignificant products/foods as dominated by junk foods except for ritual purposes. The religious customs and traditions of Manipur are unique. They are organised in such a manner that in temple institutions those reveal the real festivity and reflect the curious character of socio-religious life of the valley. It involves the ethics and aesthetics of Manipuris. Mass propagation of Hindu customs and traditions in Manipuri society is the indicator of their reverence towards the Hindu deities and temples.<sup>6</sup> In Meities the rites and rituals are now on the Hindu pattern but certain traditional rituals are also combined: It is not only believed but also usually done since long back in Manipuri society in particular by Hindu-Meitei community and the other people who profess Hinduism, that molasses is being considered one of the most significant ingredients while they worship / pray to

Bishnu and Mahadeva. It is believed that, if they offer molasses products to Bishnu and Mahadeva they can get maximum expectation/ fulfillment; In general, people who profess Hindu used to use molasses products like “Heingal” in various ritual ceremonies as one of the most essential ingredients. For instance, such molasses products are carrying in the forefront while they go with other materials for athempot (specially arranged edible and vegetable materials for the purpose of devotion / worship); Since long back, indigenous people, Hindu-Metei in particular have been using a practice of devotion with molasses product and other associates like milk, coin, and other edible things to the Bishnudeva at local Hindu Temple (Mandir) to be protected from evil things for a particular family/person.

### **Molasses in ritual ceremonies**

In life cycle, rituals are the ceremonies or events that mark important transitional stages in an individual’s life such as birth, puberty, marriage and death.<sup>7</sup> They are also known as rites of passage. French Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase ‘rites of passage’ in his work *Les rites de passage*, (The Rites of Passage) in 1909 to describe these events.<sup>8</sup> These life cycle rituals are found in every human society and in every religion although their relative importance and degree of elaboration of the rites may varies. Meitei birth rituals are very elaborate in nature. Religion plays a vital role in these rituals.<sup>9</sup> : Usually Manipuri women who profess Hindu, have a culture of praying Bishnu while they understand conceive status. That, on the seventh week of her pregnancy, the woman offer ‘Phola’ [(mix product of dark molasses with milk, banana, and champak (artificial compress flat rice)] to the Bishnu for the grace of God to fulfill their desire baby to be born. On the other hand, it is also believed that such practice is also for the protection of the baby to be born.<sup>10</sup> As it is very crucial period of a woman, most of the parents care of pregnancy.<sup>11</sup> It was firmly believed that if these rituals are properly performed than no unwanted incidents can be happened to the child and mother during childbirth. But nowadays these rituals are becoming very uncommon and most of the households skip these prenatal rituals.

In short, the molasses product has become an indispensable part in all the rites and ceremonies of all the existing culture of different ethnic groups of Manipur. On the other hand, molasses is very vital ingredient in different ritual ceremonies of human life.

*Swasti Puja*: [(*Heisoï Eepan Thaba*) a ritual ceremonies of newly born baby held on the sixth day of birth]<sup>12</sup>, On the fixed day relatives from the child's mother side visit the house. They come in a procession. This procession is a unique one. The women wear saffron, fanek and white chader and woolen enfi/cloth or white silk shawl. They carry presents in round baskets in which molasses products and other Muri Laddos, leaves, nuts, kalasa, fish and clothes for the child and the mother are placed. The procession is arranged in a single file, the women followed by the men. When they reach the house, they keep the gifts around the newly born child.

Chaumba: [(feeding rice, i.e. food) starting day of eating meal/rice which is generally held on the completion of fifth or sixth month of the baby)]<sup>13</sup> The child is yet to



Fig. 1: Molasses products like Kabok

introduce properly to other external foods. This ritual formally introduces the child to the unlimited food reserve of Mother Nature. It is performed when the child is 5 to 8 months old. If the child is a girl, the ritual is performed when she is 5 or 7 months old. For a boy, it is performed when he is 6 or 8 months old.<sup>14</sup> After cooking the meal with offered items it is first offered to the Gods. Mention may be made that molasses products are not mandatory but such products like Heingal are commonly used. The child is held by the mother on her lap and then starts feeding.

*Na-butpa* (a ritual function of Hindu-Meitei to ear-ring gold on the ear of baby about three years completion),<sup>15</sup> Besides, sugarcane and small banana tree is erected on the four corner of the demarcated area of Puja on the eve of Nahutpa (ear-ring) Nogul Thangba (wearing of sacred thread). On the other hand, it may be said that molasses products are also used at the time when a child is ready to attend school (4-5 years of age), he/she is about to mingle with people outside his home away from parents and is starting a new adventure in life. "Mangol-Peeba or a blessing ceremony" is performed. Family and neighborhood elders are invited to bestow upon blessings on the child. The child bows his head in front of grandparents, parents and elders, and each person blesses the child Mangol (wisdom) and Punshi-Nungsang (longevity or full life). In this way, the life of a Manipuri child is celebrated and taken care of by the whole community.

*NokunThangba*, (rituals of adolescence for boys and girls are seen. For boys Nokun Thangba (wearing of sacred thread). This ceremony is mandatorily done for boys before wedding in Hindu Meitei culture. This is also called laiming louba (taking the name of God).<sup>16</sup> After this ceremony according to the tradition, boys should follow the code of conduct as a male in the society. For girls Laiming Louba: when a girl attains the age of menstruation but before the menstruation starts, the mother will take her to the temple or will do the puja at home. This is mainly done for fertility and health. After this ceremony, girls should follow code of conduct as woman in the society. In this ceremony, molasses products, or its plant (sugarcane) are the main ingredients amongst other associates.

*Marriage*, during the days of adulthood all the people have the right to form family. The Meitei concept of marriage implies the sacred and ceremonial union of a man and a woman with due religious rites. The vernacular term for marriage is "Luhongba" which is a combination of two words, "*Lu*" which means "head" in archaic Manipuri and "*Hongba*" to solemnize. Hence *Luhongba* is the ceremonial union of the "Lu" of the man and the woman implying the oneness of their heart and soul rather than the state of their being double.<sup>17</sup> In this special day of life, molasses are very significant in the sense that molasses products<sup>18</sup> are supposed to use in almost all the ritual activities of marriage since engagement of bride and bridegroom until the end of its marriage cycle.

Death related ceremony

All the people are mortal that our life is limited until the moment of last breath. Our right to life is natural; God has given authority to no man to compel another to carry out his order. Certain rights are given to man by nature as gifts. The implication of this



Fig. 2: Molasses products amongst offered items in Heijingpot

assumption is that since the rights have been given by nature, they can be taken back, if at all, only by nature and not by any human being. Jafferson, who drafted the Declaration of American Independence 1776 said, "The God, who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time. The hand of force may destroy but cannot disjoin them".<sup>19</sup> As a culture of Manipuri Hindu-Meitei, dead related ceremonies like *asthi Chandan* (mangani Leihoon) is celebrated on the fifth or sixth day of expire. The Siradha Ceremony is generally celebrated on 12 to 14 days of expire. On these customary and ritual ceremonies, molasses is very common that molasses products are mandatory on different stages of rites. Brahaman starts rites only when molasses is placed on the top of the *Pinda*, which is mandatory. Not only the ritual things it is also commonly used for something edible foods like red-chapatti amongst other food items and sweets to be distributed to the invitees at the end of the ceremony. It is very old-aged practice of Hindu-Meitei, that red-chapatti is prepared for that purpose only since Hinduism started.

### **Concluding observation**

Culture of offering sweets to the Gods and Goddess to prevent or escape unpredictable sorrow or for a healthy life is a common practice since immemorial time. Of which molasses is one indispensable element that cannot bifurcate from traditional culture of Manipuri too. From various traditional practice and methods of using molasses, it shows the scientific and cultural value that it can give different nutrients, and medicinal properties to prevent different ailments, and also still using in different ritual and customary functions. Having its efficiency many astrologers and local pundits/physicians recommend to offer molasses to the deity for fulfilling their requirements. Unlike other artificial sweeteners, molasses provides a variety of nutrients to promote good health with fewer calories. It is particularly important for menstruating women who are at a greater risk for getting iron deficiency and pregnant or lactating women, growing children and adolescents where the requirements are increased. As molasses eliminates toxins from the blood it balances the blood pressure and maintains it at a normal level. If one understands the nutrients and cultural values of using molasses and the way how our forefathers used to use molasses as life saving drugs it will give a very significant impact on the present social chaos. A healthy person may not attempt to do odds which meant they have Molasses as life saving drugs it will give a very significant impact on the present social chaos. A healthy person may not attempt to do odds which meant they have always in of positive thinking and eventually help in building a welfare society.

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<sup>1</sup><http://nutrition.indobase.com/articles/blackstrap-molasses-nutrition.php>

<sup>2</sup><http://foodreference.about.com/od/Sweeteners/a/What-Is-Molasses.htm>

<sup>3</sup>Satina, Waldport, Oregon, 10/31/2008, <http://www.earthclinic.com/remedies/molasses.html>

<sup>4</sup>P. M. Bakshir, Directory Panjika, p. 22

<sup>5</sup>Mention may be made that there is a tradition in Nepal in Newari culture where families give molasses and rice to nursing mothers to enhance breast milk production and aid in post-delivery conditions. Sharada Jnawali and Cibeleh Da Mata, 2014, *Nepali Home cooking and healthy living*, Xlibris LLC, Nepal

<sup>6</sup>Webindia, (Online) available at: <http://www.webindia123.com/MANIPUR/PEOPLE/customs.htm>

<sup>7</sup>Naorem Naokhomba Singh, (2015) Religion and Life Cycle Rituals among the Meiteis of Manipur, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 2, Issue 3, September, pp. 602-33

<sup>8</sup>Van Gennep, Arnold. 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedon & Gabrielle L. Caffee. London: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup>These rituals started even before the birth of a child. The first ritual is performed when the expecting mother attains 3rd month of pregnancy. Then the next one is performed on the 5th month and next on 7th month of pregnancy. By the time she attains 9th month of pregnancy an elaborate ritual known as 'Kokthok-Chamthokpa' is performed. It is a ritual performed to avoid any unwanted complications at the time of child birth.

- <sup>10</sup>Interviewed with Naorem Bhorot Singh, a local physician, Kakching Sumak Leikai, Manipur, on 18 Sept ember 2016
- <sup>11</sup>Once married, a pregnant woman is considered to attain the most beautiful stage of her life just like a flower in full bloom. This provides a woman the internal strength and moral uplifting, which are vital at this very tender stage of hers and the baby's life. During pregnancy, she is also assigned to light household chores and is prohibited from lifting heavy objects.
- <sup>12</sup>Manipuris celebrate the birth of a child on the 6th day, a "Baby-Shower or a Welcome Ceremony" called "Epan Thaba" (Swasti-Puja or Ming-Thonba or naming of the child). Friends and relatives are invited, gifts are presented along with *laining-laishon*, meaning pujas.
- <sup>13</sup>The child needs nothing other than mother's milk at least up to 6 months until the Chak-Umba or Rice-Eating ceremony in which the baby test solid food for the first time. Till now the baby had been living strictly on mother's milk or on a liquid diet. This too is a social gathering with *Laining-Laison*, and a feast for everybody.
- <sup>14</sup>Naorem Naokhomba Singh, (2015) op cit.
- <sup>15</sup>When the baby is about 3 years old, "Nahutpa or ear-ring ceremony" is performed with great festivity. This is performed both for boys and girls. I would presume that at this stage boys and girls think alike and that a boy can't tolerate a special ceremony for girls alone even though he removes his earrings a few years later when he starts schooling. This is a gala festival for the child because at this age he or she enjoys a special attention awarded to them.
- <sup>16</sup>Tineshowri Devi, M. (2013) Meitei Women and culture of Manipur, Journal of Business Management & Social Sciences Research, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 2013
- <sup>17</sup>Basanti Devi, L. Marriage- Its Rules and Practices in Meitei Society, (online) available at: epao net, <http://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur>. *Heijingpot*, this function is the last and most important of all the preliminary stages of marriage. Many kinds of gifts of fruits, sweets, items for God and clothes for the girl will be presented. Among the fruits two particulars fruits *Heikru* (ambalica) and *Heining* (Spondias mangi fera) must necessary be included unlike other preliminaries, *Heijing Kharai Puba* has a deeper social and religious significance. While all the preliminaries of marriage with or without rites have been performed in pre Meitei traditional form, the wedding ceremony as it is now performed is an admixture of both Hindu and non Hindu elements. After their conversion into Hinduism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Meitei marriage has been performed in basic Hindu pattern while at the same time retaining most of their pre Hindu elements.
- <sup>18</sup> *Heingal, Hawaii Kabok, Thoiding Kabok, rice and Maize Kabok, Chini Khoibak, and other Kaboks etc.* are main products made with molasses
- <sup>19</sup> E. Barker, 1951, Political Thought in England (London: Geoffrey Cambridge, Oxford University Press), p. 25.