

Cultural Significance of Mealtime in Vaiphei Families and its Link to Food Security and Sustainable Development Goal 2

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Publication Date: 2026/02/17

Abstract: Among the Vaiphei community of Manipur, mealtime is not merely a routine act of consumption but a deeply embedded socio-cultural institution that reflects kinship solidarity, agricultural coordination, and survival strategies. Rooted in subsistence-based jhum cultivation, Vaiphei food practices are shaped by ecological uncertainty, seasonal variability, and limited infrastructural support. This study examines the cultural significance of mealtime within Vaiphei families and analyzes its relationship to household food security. Drawing on qualitative ethnographic methods, the paper situates indigenous food systems within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger). It argues that culturally grounded food practices contribute to intra-household equity and resilience, yet structural vulnerabilities—such as climate variability and recurring ecological shocks like Mautam—pose persistent threats. The study concludes with policy recommendations specific to Manipur, emphasizing climate-resilient agriculture, institutional strengthening, and integration of indigenous knowledge into state-level food security strategies.

Keywords: Food Security, Indigenous food system, Manipur, Mealtime, SDG 2, Vaiphei.

How to Cite: Dr. Pauchungnung Vaiphei (2026) Cultural Significance of Mealtime in Vaiphei Families and its Link to Food Security and Sustainable Development Goal 2. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(2), 697-699. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26feb605>

I. INTRODUCTION

The Vaiphei are a constitutionally recognized Scheduled Tribe under the Scheduled Tribes Order of 1950 and belong to the Chin–Kuki–Mizo ethnolinguistic group of Northeast India. Concentrated primarily in the hill districts of Manipur, including Churachandpur and Kangpokpi, the Vaiphei historically inhabit transborder areas between India and Myanmar. Their socio-economic life is traditionally organized around jhum (shifting) cultivation, a subsistence agricultural system dependent on rainfall, soil fertility cycles, and ecological balance.

Rice occupies both nutritional and symbolic centrality in Vaiphei society. Agricultural production determines household stability, social prestige, and ritual participation. Despite increasing urban migration and occupational diversification, many Vaiphei households remain dependent on rain-fed agriculture. Within this context, mealtime emerges as a vital socio-cultural institution linking subsistence, authority, kinship, and food distribution.

This study examines how mealtime functions as a mechanism of social organization and household food governance and situates these practices within the global

development framework of Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2): Zero Hunger.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by three interrelated theoretical perspectives:

➤ *Structural Functionalism*

From a structural functionalist perspective (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952), food practices reinforce social order and cohesion. Mealtime among the Vaiphei operates as a regulatory institution that sustains family unity, authority structures, and collective responsibility.

➤ *Food Sovereignty Framework*

The food sovereignty approach emphasizes the right of communities to define their own food systems, respecting cultural traditions and ecological sustainability (Patel, 2009). Vaiphei agricultural practices reflect indigenous autonomy in food production, though increasingly constrained by environmental and policy challenges.

➤ *Political Ecology*

Political ecology highlights the intersection between environment, power, and livelihood vulnerability (Robbins, 2012). Ecological events such as Mautam and climate variability disproportionately affect hill communities with limited infrastructural support, situating food insecurity within broader structural inequities.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Anthropological scholarship recognizes food as a marker of identity and social structure (Douglas, 1972; Goody, 1982). Communal eating reinforces kinship bonds and authority hierarchies (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). In Northeast India, food practices are closely linked to ritual cycles and community solidarity (Kamei, 2019).

However, limited scholarship has connected indigenous food rituals to global development frameworks such as SDG 2. This study addresses that gap by situating Vaiphei mealtime practices within contemporary food security discourse.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design.

➤ *Data Collection*

- Participant observation during mealtimes and jhum cultivation
- In-depth interviews with elders, women, and youth
- Focus group discussions
- Documentary review of tribal agricultural practices

➤ *Sampling*

Six Vaiphei villages in Churachandpur District were selected through purposive sampling to represent both remote hill settlements and semi-urban contexts.

➤ *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns related to:

- Family solidarity
- Ritual significance of rice
- Ecological vulnerability
- Adaptive strategies

➤ *Cultural Significance of Mealtime*

Mealtime represents the only daily occasion when all family members gather together. Given the physically demanding nature of jhum cultivation, able-bodied members spend most of the day in agricultural fields. Shared meals, therefore symbolize reunion, gratitude, and collective endurance.

Rice is a marker of wealth and prestige. Families producing surplus paddy may host *Bu-Aih*, a harvest feast

signifying abundance and social standing (Vaiphei, 1975). Paddy is thus not only sustenance but a symbol of honour.

Meals are traditionally shared from a common plate, reflecting unity and equality. Before eating, the head of the household provides guidance, reinforces cultural norms, and discusses agricultural planning. Mealtime functions as an informal decision-making forum—coordinating labour, resolving conflicts, and reinforcing discipline.

Thus, mealtime serves as:

- A site of intergenerational transmission
- A mechanism of equitable distribution
- A space for governance at the household level

➤ *Food Security and Ecological Vulnerability*

Vaiphei agriculture is rain-dependent and lacks irrigation, chemical inputs, and technological support. Crop yields fluctuate with rainfall variability. Pest infestations, particularly during bamboo flowering cycles (*Mautam*), have historically caused severe famine (Nag, 2008).

The cyclical increase in rodent populations during Mautam devastates standing crops, exposing hill communities to acute food shortages. Limited access to markets, storage infrastructure, and timely government intervention exacerbates vulnerability.

Thus, Vaiphei food security is shaped by:

- Climatic uncertainty
- Ecological shocks
- Infrastructural limitations
- Geographic isolation

➤ *Relevance to Sustainable Development Goal 2*

SDG 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture (United Nations, 2015).

For the Vaiphei community, SDG 2 is relevant in four dimensions:

- Access to sufficient food year-round
- Promotion of sustainable hill agriculture
- Resilience against ecological disasters
- Recognition of indigenous food systems

Mealtime practices reflect internal mechanisms of food equity and shared responsibility, yet structural support is necessary to ensure long-term sustainability.

V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS SPECIFIC TO MANIPUR

To align Vaiphei food systems with SDG 2, the following policy interventions are recommended:

➤ *Climate-Resilient Hill Agriculture Programs*

The Government of Manipur should:

- Introduce drought-resistant and short-duration paddy varieties suitable for hill terrain
- Promote agroforestry models integrating bamboo, fruit trees, and traditional crops
- Establish small-scale community irrigation systems using rainwater harvesting

Integration with the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) should be expanded to hill districts.

➤ *Strengthening Public Distribution System (PDS) in Hill Areas*

- Improve last-mile delivery mechanisms in remote villages
- Establish mobile ration depots for geographically isolated communities
- Ensure digitized transparency to prevent leakage

Special attention should be given to tribal-dominated districts.

➤ *Mautam Early Warning and Rodent Control Strategy*

The state government should develop:

- Scientific bamboo flowering monitoring systems
- Community-based rodent control programs
- Emergency grain buffer stock specifically for hill districts

Coordination with agricultural universities and ICAR institutions in Northeast India is essential.

➤ *Indigenous Knowledge Integration*

Policy frameworks should recognize jhum cultivation as a culturally embedded system rather than dismissing it as primitive. Recommendations include:

- Participatory agricultural extension programs
- Documentation of indigenous soil fertility techniques
- Inclusion of tribal leaders in district-level agricultural planning

➤ *Women-Centered Food Security Initiatives*

Since women play a central role in food preparation and seed preservation:

- Expand Self-Help Group (SHG) support under NRLM
- Provide microcredit for kitchen gardens and poultry farming
- Offer nutrition education programs tailored to tribal contexts

➤ *Community Grain Banks*

Village-level grain banks can reduce seasonal hunger. The state may:

- Provide initial seed grain
- Offer storage infrastructure

- Encourage cooperative management

Such systems align with traditional communal ethics of food sharing.

➤ *Nutrition-Sensitive Development*

Integrate SDG 2 with:

- Mid-Day Meal Scheme improvements
- ICDS strengthening in hill districts
- Biofortified crop introduction

This ensures food security moves beyond calorie sufficiency toward nutritional adequacy.

VI. CONCLUSION

Among the Vaiphei, mealtime represents a culturally embedded institution that integrates subsistence, solidarity, and governance. While indigenous practices promote intra-household equity and resilience, structural vulnerabilities—climate variability, ecological shocks, and infrastructural marginalization—pose persistent challenges.

Achieving SDG 2 in Manipur requires culturally sensitive, ecologically informed, and community-driven interventions. Integrating indigenous knowledge with state policy can create a sustainable pathway toward zero hunger while preserving the cultural integrity of the Vaiphei community.

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